Constructing Gay and Lesbian Parent Families "Beyond the Closet"

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Abstract This paper provides a multilayered analysis of how lesbian mothers and gay fathers construct their families in a social context that has been described by Steven Seidman (2004) as "beyond the closet." We stress how our participants' family-building experiences are comparable to other non-biologically related families, but distinct due to heterosexual dominance. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with 18 lesbian birth mothers and 22 gay fathers, the authors discuss how participants navigate heterosexual dominance in institutions and in personal interactions.

Keywords Gay · Lesbian · Family · Heterosexism · Homophobia

Gay men and lesbians today have more opportunities to create families than ever before (Berkowitz 2008). Such opportunities are an amalgamation of the modern gay and lesbian movement (Bernstein and Reimann 2001; Lewin 1993), transformations in cultural ideologies, broad changes in families (Coontz 2000; Stacey 1996), and revolutions in medical technology (Lev 2006; Stacey 1996). Still, the creation of a gay or lesbian parent family inevitably requires the reproductive assistance of parties outside of the same-sex couples who wish to create families. This paper provides a multilayered analysis of how lesbian mothers and gay fathers construct their families where negotiating non-biological relatedness is a necessary aspect of their endeavors. We highlight that while such negotiations also hold true for many infertile and adoptive heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian parents differ in that they face an added layer of complexity as they confront heterosexism in family-building bureaucracies and traverse a social terrain where they are visible as non-biologically related families.

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To explain this, we employ our 40 interviews with lesbian mothers and gay fathers as another piece of empirical evidence that sustains Seidman's (2004) notion that for many gay and lesbian individuals, subjectivities and experiences are forged "beyond the closet," in that many gays and lesbians do not have to live closeted lives anymore, but where their lives are defined by minority sexual orientation status in a system of heterosexual dominance. We stress how our participants' family-building experiences are somewhat similar to other non-biologically related families, but qualitatively distinct due to heterosexual dominance.

Gay and lesbian parents offer a unique opportunity to think about how some parents must juggle the limitations of their physiologies *and* homophobia in child-granting bureaucracies *and* a constant response to their visibly non-biological family. Relying on a qualitative methodology of in-depth interviews with 18 lesbian mothers and 22 gay fathers who constructed their families through non-hetero-normative means, we generate new insights about how the privileging of biological relatedness coupled with heterosexual dominance shapes the family experiences of lesbian mothers and gay fathers in institutional settings and interpersonal interactions.

Standard North American families (SNAF) and non-biologically related families

The idealized notion of the standard nuclear family holds a sanctified place in the hearts and minds of the American public and it is embedded in our social, religious, and legal institutions (Bernstein and Reimann 2001). The hegemonic standard North American family (SNAF) of two heterosexual married persons parenting their biologically produced children is more than a privileged model for families; it has become an "ideological code" (Smith 1993). Despite the heterogeneity of families in contemporary Western society, those that deviate from the norm are judged to be deficient and inadequate (Bernstein and Reimann 2001; Smith 1993; Stacey 2003; Stacey and Biblarz 2001).

The past decades' culture wars over homosexuality have meant that both popular media pundits and policy makers concern themselves with the rights granted (or not granted) to gay and lesbian citizens. In recent years the political attention directed at gays and lesbians has been particularly concerned with issues of gay headed families, focusing on gay marriage and same-sex adoption (Stein 2005). Despite these legal obstacles lesbians and gay men have continued to build families and consequently the definition of "the family" has changed to incorporate them (Dunne 2000; Mallon 2000). Over the past two decades, some gay men and lesbians have "turned the adoption world on its head" while others are utilizing their own physiological capabilities and employing the assistance of surrogate mothers and sperm donors in unprecedented numbers (Lev 2006, p. 73). By using these emerging opportunities and creating planned families, lesbians and gay men challenge normative definitions of family and parenthood (Dalton and Bielby 2000).

A key dimension of SNAF's ideological code is the presence of biologically related children. Although many factions of society might disagree that biological relatedness is enough to constitute a family, the ideological code of SNAF has historically defined a real family as such. Schneider's (1980) classic research confirms that the majority of Americans consider the crucial defining elements of kinship to be genetic. More recently, Bartholet (1999) has referred to the privileging of biological relatedness as a "blood bias" or "the assumption that blood relationship is central to what family is all about" (p. 7). Similarly, Nelkin and Lindee (1995) have argued that America's recently burgeoning fascination with genetics has allowed the biological family to gain unheralded strength. Thus, the ideology of genetic family

superiority has had significant consequences for the institution of adoption in that all non-biological family forms are rendered pathological and deviant (Wegar 2000). Adoptive families are viewed as second-best and infertile couples are urged to seek treatment so that they can have the opportunity to conceive a child who is a part of their genetic union.

It is this genetically-biased portrait of family that has led to the "social construction of infertility as a problem requiring high technology medical treatments to produce a biologically related child" (Miall 1996, p. 310). The question of whether or not gay and lesbian couples (and individuals) should be regarded as infertile is a controversial philosophical and political matter (for a nuanced discussion of this debate and lesbians see Murphy 2001). Nevertheless, we argue that a "relational infertility" does accompany gay and lesbian relationships to a certain extent (Murphy 2001, p. 182).

Similar to many heterosexual infertile women (Parry 2005), heterosexual adoptive parents (Miall 1989), and single mothers-by-choice (Hertz 2002; Mannis 1999), gay and lesbian parents often carefully labor to construct families that mirror dominant families (Dalton and Bielby 2000; Jones 2005). Oftentimes this includes a focus on a genetic link. After all, "genetics is both an idea and a roadmap of identity" (Hertz 2002, p. 3) and for many gay and lesbian parents, genetics is one of the few blueprints they have to work with as they mentally sketch their future families. Drawing upon the stories of 40 lesbian mothers and gay fathers, we attend to the nuanced parallels and distinctions between gay and lesbian parents, adoptive heterosexual parents and infertile heterosexual couples. Hereafter, we emphasize the simultaneous importance of institutional heterosexism and the interactional dynamics of constructing gay and lesbian headed families beyond the closet.

Gays and lesbians: Beyond the closet

The closet has been a structured part of many gay lives since the 1940s. Following WWII, the increased opportunities to lead gay lives and national visibility helped to construct gays as the social and moral menace of modern times. The closet and the need for it established gays as "outsiders, as moral, social, and political aliens" (Seidman 2004, p. 173). Gay rights social movements and a series of legal reforms since the 1960s have helped lessen the homophobic constraints that made the closet necessary for so many gays and lesbians. Although some gays still exist in the closet, it may no longer be the defining structure that organizes gay life (Seidman 2004). Instead, the solidification of gays as a minority and the reification of heterosexual dominance have replaced the closet. For instance, Seidman (2004) points out that liberal society's inclusion of gays stops at core institutions like marriage and open military service. Further, it is only "normal gays"—gays who conform to other cultural standards of gender normativity, integration into society, and dedication to success, family, and the nation—who are offered access to liberal society as gay minorities.

This move toward inclusion of "normal gays" as minority citizens serves to solidify heterosexuality as normal, dominant, and preferred. In short, being a minority is still not a preferred status and recognizing gays as a minority further validates heterosexual domination. Seidman (2004) asserts:

> The ideal citizen, the citizen we most deeply respect, trust, and honor, is still white, male, abled, and straight. There is today surely more tolerance of difference; many outsiders are now 'at the table,' but they are there only as guests, playing by the rules of the hosts. America is a long way from realizing, even approximating, a multicultural ideal (p. 204).

Seidman argues that modern gay and lesbian life often occurs "beyond the closet." Today, there is an increased opportunity for gays and lesbians to lead lives as out gay people and often these lives resemble those of heterosexuals. While this may be so, Seidman claims, gay and lesbian lives continue to be characterized by heterosexual dominance. When this theoretical framework is situated in the current study, it illuminates the paradox of the broadening of rights for gays and lesbians in the U.S. and the simultaneous constraints of heterosexual domination. We therefore employ Seidman's idea of gay life beyond the closet as a contextualizing tool to understand our participants' experiences with parenting. Understanding gay and lesbian opportunities for building families is especially important if we hope to understand the practical consequences of heterosexual dominance. According to Bourdieu (1998) family, as a classificatory construct is both descriptive and prescriptive; yet it is not perceived as such due to its almost universal acceptance. In its legitimate definition, "the family is a privilege instituted into a universal norm: a de facto privilege that implies a symbolic privilege—the privilege of being *comme il faut*, conforming to the norm, and therefore enjoying a symbolic profit of normality" (Bourdieu 1998, p. 69).

Using Seidman's idea that many gay lives resemble heterosexual lives in important ways, we begin by arguing that our participants' family experiences overlap with the documented experiences of non-biologically linked heterosexual families. We also argue, as Seidman might, that our participants' family experiences are complicated by the institutional and interpersonal privileging of heterosexuality.

Data collection

Our analysis draws on audiotaped, in-depth interviews conducted with a sample of 18 lesbian birth mothers and 22 gay fathers. Throughout 2004 and 2006 Ryan conducted a research project on lesbian motherhood through pregnancy, focusing on decision-making in pregnancy decisions and mothering experiences for biological lesbian mothers; during the same time period Berkowitz conducted a research project on gay men's father identities, focusing on how they decided to become fathers, their process toward becoming fathers, and their current fathering situations.

The participants for both projects were recruited through a variety of methods in diverse locales. Ryan began recruitment of lesbian participants in Central and North Central Florida by e-mailing gay parent organizations, such as playgroups for children of gays and lesbians. Through snowball sampling, Ryan's initial participants provided her with lesbian birth mother participants in the following areas: Seattle, WA; San Francisco, CA; Santa Cruz, CA; Vancouver, BC; New Hampshire; Virginia; and Maryland. Berkowitz recruited gay fathers in Florida and New York by posting flyers in areas frequented by gay men and by volunteering with New York City gay organizations. Snowball sampling provided her with interviewees in New Jersey and Massachusetts as well.

Although many of this project's participants live in gay-friendly cities like San Francisco, Seattle, or New York City, many other participants live in the unfriendly state of Florida, a state with a ban on gay adoption. While our participants recognized the importance of their local surroundings, (e.g. Floridians mentioned the impossibility of adoption for them as a reason for pregnancy while our San Franciscan participant theorized that if you are a lesbian living in a liberal city you might feel more apt to begin a parenting endeavor), we maintain that heterosexual domination is a foundational, structured, and routined aspect of gay and lesbian life, regardless of

place. The difference of city means that heterosexual dominance is played out differently. For instance, a lesbian participant living in Florida was denied insemination services, but even participants in more liberal states told Ryan that they made it a point to search for a lesbian-friendly doctor.

Semi-structured open-ended face-to-face interviews were conducted with one of the 18 lesbian mothers and 18 of the 22 gay fathers; the rest were conducted over the telephone (please see Appendix 1 for both interview guides).

This paper is the result of analyzing both authors' interview data with new research questions in mind. Being that we were then colleagues at the same university, we often discussed our separate projects. Through our various conversations, we found that there seemed to be similarities in the mothering and fathering experiences of our participants—a possibility that surprised us, given our separate projects with different foci, research questions, and gendered groups of lesbians and gay men. Because most research projects on gay or lesbian parents provide data on either gay fathers or lesbian mothers, we believed it would be innovative to combine our data and explore the parallel experiences of gays and lesbians who wish to construct families. We decided to analyze both sets of data together, this time asking two new general research questions: (1) "How do these lesbians and gay men navigate the task of building a family?"; (2) "Are there specific strategies for building families that these lesbians and gay men employ that are unique to their sexual social positions?"

Both authors read and reread transcripts from the interviews they conducted and the transcripts of interviews conducted by the other author. Textual material of transcripts from tape recorded interviews were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) outline of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to develop a theoretical explanation of how gay fathers and lesbian mothers strategically construct families through non-heteronormative means. Through our participants' regular reflection on how they navigated institutional and social settings as lesbian and gay parents, a pattern emerged that was similar to Seidman's (2004) notion of heterosexual dominance beyond the closet.

Profile of participants

All of the lesbian birth mothers and gay fathers in our studies identified themselves as white. They were also overwhelmingly middle-class and upper-middle-class. This is certainly a weakness in our research collection and further studies should explore the experiences of both working-class/working poor gay and lesbian parents and gay and lesbian parent families of color. Our participants' familial narratives and parenting identities are shaped by their social location as privileged white and middle-class people who experience domination in the arena of sexual orientation and thus shed light on the specificity of those experiences. Although it is disconcerting to reproduce the problem of whiteness in studies on gays and lesbians, these participants give us particular insights into their social context of white, middle-class gay parenthood.

Although all of our participants were white, some of them had constructed multi-racial families. Of the 18 birth mothers, three of them were in interracial relationships during their pregnancies (two with African American women and one with a Latina woman). The white woman with a Latina partner and one of the women with an African American partner chose a sperm donor who was Latino/African American, respectively, in order to reproduce bi-racial children. Of the 22 fathers, eight (three couples and two single fathers) were raising children of color, all of whom were adopted.

A major shortcoming in our project is that all of the lesbian participants are biological mothers and/or carried their children to term through pregnancy (one interviewed mother experienced pregnancy, but she and her partner employed the use of a purchased embryo). This is due to the parameters of Ryan's original project on lesbian women and pregnancy experiences. In combining Ryan's and Berkowitz's projects in order to explore gay and lesbian parent family construction, we are not able to speak to the family construction motivations of these non-biological mothers. We realize this is especially problematic because of the ideological tendency to dismiss the parenthood of non-biological mothers in lesbian parent relationships where one parent is the biological mother (see Sullivan 2001; for an example of research that includes non-biological lesbian mothers in their sample, see also Dalton and Bielby 2000).

Although the lesbian participants' intentions toward and experiences with becoming pregnant varied slightly, the majority of them—14 of 18—acquired sperm (or in one case, an embryo) from a sperm bank. Two of the birth mothers became pregnant using a known donor's sperm, with whom they do not currently share a parenting relationship and one of the birth mothers (although identifying as a lesbian at the time) became pregnant during an ongoing sexual relationship with a male partner. One of the mothers is an employed surrogate for a heterosexual couple—she is the birth mother of two children she is currently raising, has been employed as a surrogate for a single gay man, and at the time of the interview was a pregnant surrogate for a heterosexual couple. Lesbian participants were raising an average of 1.2 children, excluding the future children of the two participants who were pregnant with children they intended to raise at the time of the interview. To arrive at the mean age of children of lesbian and gay participants, we counted children as 1 year old even if they were an infant who had not yet reached the age of 1 year; the ages of the children in the lesbian headed families ranged from newly born infants to 17 years old, with a mean of approximately 6 years of age. Among the 18 mothers interviewed, two women were raising their children as single mothers, the other 16 were partnered (please see Appendix 2 for a table of participant demographics).

Gay participants became fathers in the following diverse ways: 12 through adopting or fostering; five through employment of a surrogate; three through co-parenting with lesbian couples; and two (one couple) through both the employment of a surrogate and an egg donor. The variability in the routes that the gay fathers used to construct their families shaped how they inevitably constructed issues of biological relatedness and kinship (a phenomenon we address in the findings section). Gay participants were raising an average of 1.5 children. The ages of the children in the gay headed families ranged from newly born infants to 16 years old, with a mean of approximately 6 years of age. Among the 22 fathers interviewed, five men were raising their children as single fathers, 17 total men were partnered, and eight of these partnered men were coupled with one another (Drew and Nico; Billy and Elliot; Simon and Theo, and Art and Rick; please see Appendix 2 for a table of participant demographics).

Findings: Institutional and interactional heterosexual dominance

Our findings are organized into separate yet related sections. First, we detail how gay and lesbian families navigate institutional arenas laden with heterosexist assumptions and overt homophobia. In the second section, we first explore the relationship between heterosexual dominance and the privileging of biological relatedness and conclude by detailing why biological relatedness is privileged in our participants' families.

According to Herek (1990), heterosexism is an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community; it occurs at the cultural and individual level and can be observed in institutions and customs. Similarly, Seidman (2004) refers to heterosexual dominance as the legal, cultural, and social privileging of heterosexuality and persons who are defined as heterosexual. As he notes, even though gays and lesbians enjoy unprecedented freedom to live un-closeted gay lives, they are still controlled by the idea of heterosexual superiority. The heterosexist ideal that different sex attraction is more preferable creates an atmosphere of sexuality marginalization for gays and lesbians. Here, we argue that heterosexual dominance exists at both the institutional and interactional levels of social relations. We emphasize that while we discuss the themes of institutional and interactional heterosexual dominance separately to maintain the clarity of our argument, these patterns and processes are all shaped by and connected through the common thread of heterosexual dominance.

The institutional dimensions of heterosexual dominance: Navigating institutions that privilege biology and heterosexuality

All participants were concerned with the extent that their reproductive pathways would be impeded by homophobic individuals and heterosexist norms and as such, navigated fertility clinics and adoption agencies with caution. Although not every participant experienced homophobia and heterosexism in their family-building paths, most did report encountering an experience with at least one of these. Importantly, heterosexism is more than a benign oversight of gay and lesbian experiences resulting from the great number of heterosexual people in society; it is a form of social control which can negatively affect the life chances of gays and lesbians. In family building bureaucracies, heterosexism has the potential to block gay and lesbian opportunities to have children. For example, consider the ways in which the following stories illuminate institutionalized heterosexism in participants' paths to creating families with children:

When Leonard, his partner Ariel, and two women embarked on their co-parenting agreement, the first step was a known-donor insemination process at the neighborhood sperm bank in a suburb of Boston. Leonard was escorted into a small room and given a Playboy magazine as a visual aid to assist him in the masturbation process. He laughed at the heteronormativity of the process and managed to find his own way of filling the plastic cup. However, after completing this process, he was told to fill out a form about his personal, familial, and sexual history. On the last page, was a question that read, *have you ever had sex with a man?* And, *might you ever have been exposed to a person with AIDS?* He was honest on the application and, although Leonard has tested negative for HIV multiple times, the next day his application was denied. Denied access to the clinic's procedures, the four future co-parents resigned themselves to insemination at home.

Donna, a lesbian residing in a small city in Florida, attempted to receive insemination at the only local clinic in the city that provided such a service. Forewarned by friends that the physicians would not inseminate lesbian women she concealed her sexual identity (and her partnered status) by describing herself as a single woman. However, the physicians still denied her request claiming that, "they did not inseminate single women." Such restricted access to fertility treatments is neither uncommon nor undocumented (Robinson 1997). With few options left, Donna chose to have heterosexual intercourse with a male friend and ultimately became pregnant.

Where these stories represent extreme cases, in that Leonard was only one of four fathers who resigned themselves to at home insemination and Donna was the only lesbian mother who chose to have heterosexual intercourse to get pregnant because she had no other options, we share these anecdotes to elucidate how gay men and lesbians seeking parenthood via fertility clinics navigate an arena laden with homophobia and institution-alized heterosexism. For example, although not all of our lesbian participants experienced discrimination, as Donna did in being denied insemination procedures, all of them anticipated institutional discrimination and took steps to avoid it. Cassandra said she was "afraid of finding a doctor who would work with her and her partner." Many other participants cautiously interviewed doctor's or toured hospitals before they embarked on pregnancy so that they could guarantee fair treatment during their pregnancies and births.

Although many individuals today can choose to live beyond the closet, they must still reside in a world where most institutions maintain heterosexual domination. Heterosexual dominance is deeply rooted in the institutions and culture of American society and must be understood as not simply a product of laws or individual prejudice, but institutionalized pervasive dominance (Seidman 2004; Herek 1990).

Those men and women who choose not to navigate fertility clinics can employ various forms of adoption to construct their families (for in-depth discussions of lesbian and gay adoptive parents see Goldberg et al. 2007; Matthews and Cramer 2006). However, the field of foster care and adoption remains one in which homophobic practices frequently surface (Goldberg et al. 2007; Hicks 2006a, b). Yet, 39% of all adoption agencies in the United States did report placing a child with gay or lesbian adopters in 1999–2000 (Brodzinsky et al. 2003). 12 men in author's Berkowitz's sample took advantage of such opportunities in adoption and employed private or public adoption agencies to construct their families. Akin to many adoptive parents, gay adoptive fathers have the dilemma of negotiating bonds with their future children when a birth parent or institutional agent could decide to back out of the pre-birth agreement of their adoption. Often, because of these considerations, gay fathers-to-be discover innovative ways of securing their emotional investment.

Craig and Darrel, an interracial couple who became fathers of their two young girls through fostering by use of the public adoption system discussed the risks involved in this route that surfaced as a direct consequence of biogenetic dominance. Although biogenetic dominance affects all non-biologically related families, the privileging of biological ties is a consequence of the heterosexist arrangements that naturalize heterosexuality. Because of legal privileges granted to the biological mother, Craig and Darrel did not have any law-binding tie to their first daughter until after they fathered her for 2 years; at the time of the interview they still did not have legal rights to their second daughter who they had been fathering for two and a half months. Like many foster parents, regardless of sexuality, they choose to deal with the impending risk of the birth mother returning to claim her children, yet traversed their way through the foster care system in a highly cognizant and conscientious manner. Their first daughter was the eighth child in succession placed in adoptive homes by her biological mother and their second child is the third. By consciously choosing to foster daughters who have mothers that have relinquished their other biological children, these men believe they are minimizing the chances of their parental rights being challenged by their children's biological parents. Similarly, Drew and Nico discussed their apprehensions of creating a family through adoption because of the risks of the birth mother returning:

> The thing about adoption is…that even though that child or those children are legally yours, they are never your children. And that is very frightening to me. That [we]

would have this wonderful child or children through adoption and then at some point, something could happen, either through the courts or a change of the birth mother's mind…it is very unsettling to me and scared me. It scared me that the family we would create would be shaken by the birth mother or the genetic father coming back into our lives or the baby's life.

Because of this fear, and because their privileged class status permitted them to do so, Drew and Nico chose to construct their family through the employment of a surrogate mother. With the legal authenticity of a blood-tie, the couple felt more able to invest affection into their children without concern that they could one day be taken from them. All families interested in adoption or foster care must navigate the legal privileges granted to biological families. However, gays and lesbians enter into such investments differently than heterosexual families because of the conscious efforts to juggle the limitations of physiology and discriminatory legal practices.

For instance, Josie, who would later become the birth mother of two boys, experienced a failed adoption before deciding to get pregnant. An acquaintance of hers became pregnant with a child she neither wanted to abort nor raise. Josie's pregnant friend agreed to let her adopt the future child. Much later in the pregnancy, Josie's pregnant friend had a chance encounter with the biological father and told him she was pregnant with his child. He was willing to relinquish his genetic rights to the child, but his parents were not. On the grounds that the child should not go to *someone like* Josie, based on her sexual orientation, she had a failed adoption which propelled her to become pregnant herself. Although Josie is the only birth mother Ryan interviewed who had a failed adoption, the possibility of legal difficulties and fear of the eventual loss of child custody were cited by other lesbian participants as the foremost reason in the decision to produce a biological child. Because of the institutional privileging of biology and the homophobic discrimination against many gay couples adopting, the underlying rationale in deciding to become pregnant rather than adopting was legal reasoning. Susan explains:

> I guess I just always thought I would get pregnant; however, I was not against adoption at the time…The idea of doing adoption—even out-of-the-country adoption —was not an option as far as finances were concerned. But…um…I would have been open to adoption had it been okay. Yeah, I'm a lesbian, this is the situation and that would have been fine, but most likely it would not have been.

For Susan, pregnancy may have been exciting, but the prospect of attaining the goal of having children overshadowed her view of pregnancy. A recent study on heterosexual and lesbian women who were inseminated by anonymous sperm donation uncovered that many of these women chose to get pregnant rather than adopt because they had a desire to experience the embodied sensations of pregnancy (Parry 2005). While many of Ryan's participants also discussed excitement regarding the bodily experiences of pregnancy, this was secondary to the perceived legal protection of one parent having biological ties to their child. Note, for example, Blanche and Maura (Ryan)'s conversation below:

> *Maura*: Why was it that you and your partner thought about having children through pregnancy rather than other options?

> *Blanche*: Adoption. We've talked about adoption, but in Florida, it's impossible. If it ever became legal for us to adopt in Florida, we'd do it in a heartbeat.

> *Maura*: So it wasn't really that you wanted to experience pregnancy, but that it was the most—

Blanche: Yeah, I guess we did. We both wanted to know what it was like to be pregnant and to give birth and to be able to hold that against people when they say something—to say, I've given birth! [laughs] I'm kidding. We did definitely wanted that whole experience.

Notice that although Blanche and her partner wanted to experience pregnancy, their investment in experiencing pregnancy was secondary to the legal restraints posed by Florida's ban on gay adoption. For Ryan's lesbian participants, the "whole experience" includes the experience of pregnancy, a biological connection between one parent and the couple's child, and a legal claim to their children.

Because of the nature of their families, lesbian mothers and gay fathers often base interpersonal ties on social rather than biological relationships. However, many of the narratives discussed here illuminate how the men and women we spoke with still greatly value biogenetic ties. Importantly, we reiterate that the valuing of biogenetic ties was common amongst *our* participants: where by virtue of Ryan's project on lesbian pregnancy, all of her participants were biological mothers and where only 13 of Berkowitz's 22 participants chose to foster or adopt children; a group of lesbian and gay male participants who solely chose adoptive paths to parenthood may have felt differently about biological connections in families. Although there was a great deal of innovative negotiation within the families of our participants, it is significant to recognize that many of these negotiations were regulated with the conventional privileging of biological relatedness (Berkowitz and Marsiglio 2007). Where biological ties may be preferable for these gay and lesbian parents because of the idea that it would be more legally difficult to refute the legitimacy of their family, many of our participants' narratives suggest that their partiality toward blood ties runs more deeply than these examples would have us believe.

Interaction dimensions of heterosexual dominance: Navigating social situations that privilege biology and heterosexuality

The everyday production of family life in the US privileges biological relatedness and blood-ties in institutional and symbolic ways. Whereas the previous section focused on the ways in which our participants navigated institutions that privilege biology and/or heterosexuality, we now divert our attention to the ideological aspects of prioritizing biological family relations (or at least, the appearance of this) and its specific consequences for gay and lesbian parent families. Although we argue that our participants' use of biological ties in creating their families is a strategic reconciliation of homophobic discriminatory legal practices, we also maintain that it points to ideological preferences for blood-ties. For instance, all of Ryan's participants who have more than one child decided to use the same sperm donor for their children so that the children would be fully biologically related to one another.

Recall that many lesbian participants expressed that they opted for pregnancy as an avenue to motherhood because of the institutional legal privileges of biological ties. Similarly, many gay fathers opted to construct their families via surrogacy because of this same institutional and legal privilege. However, participants' narratives also served as a testament to the symbolic power of biological relatedness. Drew, a known donor to a lesbian couple who lived in a different city explained the way that his partner, Nico, felt about being a biological father:

What it came down to was that he wanted biological children and I had that experience, and I didn't care whether our kids were biologically mine or not. This is

why I wanted to adopt in the first place. Nico had some issues whether or not he could feel a bond with an adoptive child….I understood his urge to want to see what his own biological children would be like so we found out a way to do it.

Dominant family ideology establishes biological relatedness as critical for defining family. As such, being a parent is often understood as being a *biological* parent. Billy and Elliot, recent fathers of a set of twins decided to mix their sperm before inseminating their chosen egg donor. They maintain that because there are two children and two "fathers," each man is the biological father of a twin. Although these men are uncertain about their biological paternity status for each twin, their story illuminates how meanings associated with aspects of the reproductive sphere emerge out of a social process with the "blood bias" at the forefront of these men's consciousness. Further, their explanation allows their family to appear like other "normal" families: They are both biological parents.

It is perhaps true that biology can contribute to an individual's physical and mental health, the way they look, or the way they behave. Still, its strongest power lies in what people believe it can do. Folk knowledge understandings of biology posit that biology is nearly fully responsible for making people who they are and that on its own it can create bonds between people (Bartholet 1999; Nelkin and Lindee 1995). For this reason—because of the things society believes it to be—biology is also social. The social aspect also becomes salient in our participants' description of manipulating biology for an audience who is judging the authenticity of their families. When constructing their families, our participants chose characteristics that would make them look genetically linked when that option was available to them. In short, biology can be finessed in order to procure better social treatment.

Using biology to symbolize family

Individuals or couples who construct non-biological families have a unique opportunity to consciously create what their families will look like. In her study on British lesbian donor choices, Jones (2005) found that her participants preferred donors who resembled the non-biological mother in racial and ethnic characteristics. Similarly, when the choice was available, all of our participants focused on reproducing children who would blend into their families. Many participants evaluated paper or web-based documents about potential donors, and others engaged in face-to-face interactions with the future donor or co-parent(s) before embarking on constructing their families. Billy spoke about how he and his partner, Elliot, evaluated a series of egg donors from a catalog. He explains, "It's funny how you can read these profiles. After you read a couple of them, you sort of really hear the voice of the person...it was like a yearbook. You know a photograph with a site description." Similarly, Aaron explains the dinner where he met Raquel and Abby, the two women who would ultimately conceive and rear his daughter:

Well, at the dinner, we were really just socially getting to know one another and realized that we all come from very similar backgrounds….I grew up in New Jersey and the others were from Connecticut and Long Island, sort of middle- and upper-middle-class families, private school….They have similar interests in music, classical music…similar in age, race, economic background, social background.

Aaron was assessing this couple in terms of ensuring a family with similarities in class and racial background and one that could participate in similar activities with one another.

Regardless of whether this evaluation process occurs from a distance through a catalog or website, a phenomenon Hertz (2002) refers to as evaluating the paper parent, or in person at a casual dinner meeting, the significance of forming a homogeneous family was a critical consideration for many of the men and women we interviewed.

This same phenomenon of a preference for homogeneity also manifests itself in the context of planned lesbian headed families. Sameness in lesbian planned families refers to the idea that the donor is preferably very similar to either the birth mother or the non-biological mother in the characteristics of race, ethnicity, hair color, eye color, complexion, and other physical characteristics. Amongst participants who looked for similar characteristics of the non-biological mother in their chosen donors, it was evident that *intra*racial white couples chose ethnic markers (e.g. a donor who was Irish if the non-biological mother was Irish) and hair color preferences which matched the non-biological mother; however, this preference was more salient for participants in interracial partnerships. Interracial lesbian couples face the double burden of sanctions for their sexual orientation and their interracial romantic commitment (Long 2003; Pearlman 1997). When having children, some research suggests that interracial lesbian couples may choose to incorporate the race of the non-biological mother in their donor decision so that their family oppression may be lessened slightly by their resemblance to each other (Jones 2005). This was true for two of our three lesbian participants in interracial relationships. For example, Susan, a white participant who had an African American partner said, "We're together, we're a biracial couple, doesn't it make sense for the child to be more a representation of us than just of me?" As with Jones' (2005) participants in an interracial couple, Susan and her partner chose to reproduce a biracial child to reflect the non-biological mother's race. Importantly, while the non-biological mother is *not* genetically related to the child, the choice of an African American donor allows their family to *look* genetically linked.

While it was far more common for birth mothers to choose a sperm donor who resembled their partners, some mothers chose donors who looked like them. For instance, Carol, another white birth mother in an interracial relationship, chose a white sperm donor even though she was going to be raising the child with an African American woman. While she had finalized the donor decision before meeting her partner, she was adamant in her decision to use a donor who resembled her features. She elaborated:

> I want when he's going through school, you know, I want…I don't know. I might be selfish I guess. But I just wanted him to look like me to say, *Oh, yeah, he looks like you*, you know? Like I wanted someone to know that he is mine.

Whether the desired characteristics of the sperm donor lie in the sameness of the non-biological mother or the birth mother, the guiding reason is analogous: to create the appearance of a genetic family. Birth mothers who chose donors akin to them wanted others to recognize their children as their genetic offspring. Birth mothers who chose donors resembling their partners wanted other people to recognize their children as a combination of both partners and possibly make the origin of the child, in terms of which one carried him/her, undetectable. For instance, Lydia, birth mother of one young son, said that although she knew there would be no interweaving biological tie between her, her partner, and their child, they could create the appearance of a genetic link. She said, "We're a family and if we have the chance to increase our chances of our kid looking like both partners, of course we would do that." Rhonda, birth mother of one young daughter, similarly said that the decision to make their child characteristically similar to her and her partner might make them "a little bit more of a close family." In these ways, our lesbian participants are responding to culturally pervasive heterosexist family understandings. If the leading

mainstream logic is that families must look similar to be taken as families (because children are products of the two heterosexual people involved in creating the child), lesbian mothers may negotiate this assumption by striving to construct families that appear genetically linked. Further, the manipulation of biology—making a family appear genetically linked when it is evident that they are not—is a particular strategy in softening meso-level heterosexual domination. For example, Drew and Nico spoke to Berkowitz about the conversations that occurred as they navigated their surrogacy agency of choice's website that depicted hundreds of potential surrogate mothers. Drew explained:

> Well, on the website a lot of the women were 4 foot 2, Guatemalan women; it just wasn't going to work for us….We wanted to find a surrogate who was white and like get rid of one other problem that these children, or child would have to deal with, you know, to be mixed race….We wanted someone who was fairly young, who had done it before and who was remotely attractive.

Drew and Nico did not explicitly state that they needed their child to resemble them (e.g. we wanted her to have a nose like Drew and eyes like Nico); however, in explicitly stating the importance of a white surrogate mother (who would produce a white child) they highlight how their child's whiteness would help their family appear more like the ideological code of SNAF. In this case it is not only family similarity that is a norm, but whiteness surfaces as an ideological family norm as well. In terms of daily interactions with other people, both similarity and whiteness help planned, white (and in this case, upper-middle-class) gay parent families blend in with other dominant families, releasing them slightly from the effects of heterosexual domination.

Carol, the white birth mother who chose to raise a white child with an African American woman, explained to Ryan that when her African American partner is out alone with their white child she is regularly asked if she is the child's nanny. When family compositions deviate from the ideological code of SNAF whether it be because the family is multi-racial or headed by same-sex parents, the family is more susceptible to questions about its formation. For this reason, the doing of family becomes more of a performative accomplishment (Rothman 2005). Craig, a white gay father in an interracial relationship, is raising a child of color. He explains how he has trained himself to raise his daughter:

> I've done a lot of reading about it, and you know there's a great book called, "I'm chocolate, you're vanilla," and it's about raising black kids, and you know one of the things you do is you really just sort of instill a sense of confidence around issues of color, you know….I'm prepared for the questions when they start to come up, like why are you white and stuff like that. You know because I've taken the time to read about that.

Craig simultaneously invests in creating a connection with his daughter of color, while constructing a bond based on his understanding of white privilege. His measures are preemptive—he knows that he has to prepare for questions about their legitimacy as parent and child because they occupy different race categories. The fact that parents who chose avenues of sameness to create their families did not describe having to go to these formal lengths following the birth of their children highlights the extent to which gays and lesbians believe that outside actors are willing to acknowledge a family as such only if they look like a family. In this way, utilizing biological connection or the semblance of it through reproductive technologies can be understood as a method by which gay men and lesbians ensure the most legitimacy possible in creating and caring for their families.

The visual fallacy of biological relatedness is not simply a strategy to make gay and lesbian parent families feel closer and more connected to each other. Rather, it is a carefully constructed tactic to negotiate the mainstream assumptions of the ideological code of SNAF. Our participants' narratives highlight how the illusory appearance of biological relatedness within their families lessens the imagined retribution for being "artificially" created by same-gender parents. Consequently, sameness, because it is a ruling criterion for family, serves to legitimize gay and lesbian families. The pattern of physical sameness surfaced time and again in our participants' stories as a way to minimize anticipated negative interactions and exchanges with outsiders.

Discussion

Today the choice of having a child is available to those lesbian women and gay men who are able to financially and interpersonally navigate the bureaucratic apparatus of insemination clinics, surrogacy, adoption and fostering agencies, or who choose to traverse co-parenting arrangements. They can choose to be single parents, coupled co-parents, or co-parents with platonic friends. Lesbian mothers and gay fathers have more choices than ever before in constructing their families (Berkowitz 2008; Stacey 2004). Hicks (2006b) maintains that without social scripts for their families, there are a series of "empty spaces" that gays and lesbians must go about filling in their own ways, wherein they can create new relational possibilities and opportunities. Although lesbian and gay parent families clearly push the boundaries of SNAF, it is pertinent to keep in mind that gay and lesbian parent families do not occur in isolation. To a large extent, these new options for gays and lesbians to build families are still shaped by social institutions and by dominant ideologies about families. Gay headed families are resisting dominant constructions of family by their very existence (Stacey 2003; Dunne 2000; Lewin 1993). However, in this article we have suggested that the larger social processes that surround gay and lesbian parent families, independent of their individual will, construct their knowledge about how to appropriately do family. The binary categorization of gender, heteronormativity, and the ideological code of SNAF compose some of these larger processes. The complex ways that these socio-cultural institutions shape society and the individuals in them are critical in shaping gay and lesbian procreative consciousnesses, reproductive decision-making, and parenting experiences.

Dalton and Bielby (2000) found that their lesbian participants both drew from and transformed institutionalized scripts for doing family in that they challenged social and institutional heteronormative conceptions of gender in families, but reinscribed gendered expectations of what it means to be a mother. In a related sense, our participants' narratives show that the strategic construction of their families has been shaped by continued heterosexual dominance in family-building institutions and by the social expectation of what families should look like. Their similarity to other non-biological families yet significant departure from them because of heterosexual dominance gives familial empirical credence to Seidman's (2004) description of modern gay life beyond the closet. Whether our participants chose to build families through adoption, fostering, co-parenting, or pregnancy, they were cognizant of the heterosexist dimensions of family bureaucracies. Often, their choices (like making sure that they were biologically related to their children) were made to preserve their legal institutional rights to their children. However, their

strategies in creating families also reflect an investment in everyday social relations. Many of our participants chose to construct families that would look similar—creating a visual cue of biological connectedness where there was not one. Importantly, this decision was often meant to include non-biological parents by relying on a traditional assumption that families look similar because they are biologically connected. For instance, although it must be difficult to be the non-biological mother in a partnership with the biological mother of your child (because of legitimacy granted to biological ties), some couples chose to create a visual portrait of relatedness by producing a child who *could* be biologically related to either mother. Doing family in a way that minimizes visual difference can grant gay and lesbian families the greatest amount of social legitimacy possible. Fitting as closely into dominant family ideology as possible simultaneously serves as a real strategy to keep families in tact and as a symbolic feeling of doing family "correctly."

The stories of the 40 women and men we interviewed form a collective story of family marginalization due to sexuality oppression. The ways in which our participants strategized familial arrangements illuminate the bureaucratic and social repression of their family forms; the specific repression of their family forms are unique to lesbian and gay experiences. In this way, our participants' narratives help crystallize a new understanding of heterosexual dominance in family relations. However, it is necessary to insert that their ability to construct families (especially in the manner that they have) is due to their social location as white, middle-class gays and lesbians. In fact, leading lives beyond the closet is more possible for white and middle-class people (Collins 2005). In family life, the limited social legitimacy that is available for white, middle-class gays and lesbians is available because of their race and class similarity to the dominant family model.

In the arena of family life, we have contributed a double-tiered dimension to thinking about heterosexual dominance and the ways in which gays and lesbians construct families "beyond the closet." Modern gay life, beyond the closet but not beyond heterosexual dominance, begs social researchers to ask questions about how the disappearance of the closet and the solidification of gays as a minority are reacted to by gays and lesbians. For instance, social researchers might begin to look at different social contexts, asking if gays will find solace in being considered "normal gay" minorities or if they will choose to challenge heterosexual dominance. In the context of family life we might ask, is it a radical shift in the heterosexual institution of family that many gays and lesbians are having children? Or is it one way that some gays (particularly those who are white, middle-class, and gender conventional) manage to gain more tolerance as a minority?

Understanding heterosexual dominance at the institutional and interactional level advances our knowledge of the relationship between homophobia, heterosexism, and the family arrangements and practices of gays and lesbians. Focusing on the multilayered dynamics of heterosexual dominance in gay and lesbian parent families furthers understanding on how gays and lesbians function within heteronormative systems and helps to elucidate the stronghold of dominant family ideology. What is more, we hope that we have provided a new way to think about the complexity of possible similarities between dominant and alternative families and of differences between them due to power and privilege. Deconstructing these socially constructed ideologies of sameness and difference in families should reveal nuanced understandings of how dominant ideology and social control operate to shape family, gender, and sexualities in individual subjectivities.

Appendix 1: Sample of semi-structured interview guides

Interview guide sample: Interviews with lesbian birth mothers

Can we begin with you telling me the story of your becoming a parent?

- [If partnered] How would your partner tell this story?
- How would your mother tell the story of your becoming a parent?
- What story do you tell your children about how your family started?

Tell me your thoughts on motherhood

- Did you always want to have children?
- Was there a specific moment in your life where you decided to have children?
- Did coming out as a lesbian make you think differently about your ability to have children? In what ways?
- [If partnered] What kind of conversations did you and your partner have when you were deciding to have children?

What made you want to go through a pregnancy versus other ways of acquiring children?

- How did you feel when you were pregnant? How did you feel about your body?
- Did you feel differently in public when you were pregnant? How so?
- What were your fears surrounding pregnancy? What did you look forward to?
- Do you think that your experiences during pregnancy were the same as a heterosexual woman's experiences?
- In what ways do you think lesbians have unique experiences with reproduction?

Interview guide sample: Interviews with gay fathers

Can you talk to me about any thoughts you had about becoming a father prior to your parenting experiences?

- What sorts of things influenced these thoughts?
- Can you talk to me about a time when you first thought about fatherhood?
- Can you tell me about some of these thoughts?
- To what extent did these thoughts changed with your sexuality once you discovered or declared your sexual orientation?

Are you involved in a romantic relationship at the present time?

- Is this the relationship you were in when you decided to father?
- What role does fatherhood currently play in the context of this relationship?
- To what extent did you or do you discuss fatherhood with your romantic partner?
- How was this conversation initiated?
- How did this make you feel?
- What kind of issues come up?
- To what extent have conversations about fatherhood come up in any other relationships? Gay relationships? Heterosexual relationships?

Can you talk to me about your experiences that led you to becoming a father?

- What are or were your thoughts on being a biological father?
- What are or were your thoughts on adoption?
- What are or were your thoughts on modern techniques such as surrogacy, sperm donation, in vitro fertilization and others that allow individuals to have children without having sex?
- To what extent have you ever contemplated either of these?
- To what extent did you use any of these means to become a father?
- If you do want another child, how would you go about obtaining him or her?

To what extent do you think your experience as a father is different from the experience of a heterosexual couple or a single-parent raising a child?

Appendix 2: Tables of participant demographics

Table 1 Descriptive characteristics of lesbian mother participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Occupation	Living in state	Current relationship	Family pathway	Number of children, and ages of children
Anna	36	W	911 operator	FL	Partnered	Known sperm donation	2 children; 17 and 10 years old (and currently pregnant as a surrogate)
Blanche	33	W	Homemaker and reserve police officer	FL	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	2 children; 4 and 2 years old
Rhonda	31	W	Internet marketing specialist	FL	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 3 years old
Lydia	34	W	Registered nurse	WA	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 1 year old
Donna	41	W	Business manager	FL	Partnered	Known sperm donation	1 child; 9 years old
Sandy	39	W	Mental health counselor	FL	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 9 years old and pregnant at the time of interview
Cassandra	42	W	Graphic designer	FL	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 2 years old
Dot	46	W	Accountant	MD	Partnered	Purchased embryo	1 child; 5 years old
Isabelle	45	W	Pediatric physical therapist	VA	Partnered	Known sperm donation	1 child; 6 years old
Nancy	31	W	Registered nurse	FL	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; less than 1 year old
Josie	39	W	Professor	NH	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	2 children; 4 and 2 years old
Teresa	41	W	Physical therapist	CA	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	2 children; 4 and 2 years old
Roslyn	40	W	Homemaker	FL	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 3 years old
Susan	37	W	Guidance counselor	FL	Single	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 2 years old
Michelle	34	W	Writer and university instructor	BC, Canada	Single	Resulted from a sexual relationship with the biological father	1 child; 5 years old
Carol	41	W	Ultrasound technician	FL	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 1 year old
Valerie	42	W	Business owner	FL	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 5 years old
Noelle	27	W	Pre-school teacher	CA	Partnered	Anonymous sperm donation	1 child; 9 years old and pregnant at the time of interview

Table 2 Descriptive characteristics of gay father participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Occupation	Living in state	Current relationship	Family pathway	Number of children and ages of children
Andrew	37	W	Graphic artist	NY	Partnered	Adopt (foster)	1 child; 6 years old
Craig	34	W	Homemaker	NY	Partnered	Adopt (foster)	2 children; 2 and less than 1 year old
Laurence	51	W	Statistician	NY	Partnered	Adopt	2 children; 16 and 13 years old
Parker	37	W	Information Technician	MA	Partnered	Adopt	2 children; 2 and 1 year old
Gus	48	W	Consultant	NJ	Partnered	Co-parent	2 children; 6 and 3 years old
Spencer	47	W	Headhunter	MA	Single	Co-parent and foster	1 child; 12 years old
Leonard	43	W	Information Technician	MA	Single	Co-parent	1 child; 10 years old
Randy	47	W	Realtor	NY	Single	Adopt	2 children; 16 and 13 years old
Tommy	36	W	Psychologist	MA	Partnered	Adopt	1 child; 1 year old
Aaron	45	W	Realtor	NJ	Single	Co-parent	1 child; 10 years old
Robin	45	W	Information Technician	NJ	Partnered	Co-parent	2 children; 6 and 3 years old
Brian	47	W	Politician; Realtor	FL	Partnered	Adopt	1 child; 4 years old
Drew[a]	35	W	Television Production	NY	Partnered	Surrogacy and sperm donor	2 children; 2 year old twins
Nico[a]	33	W	Homemaker	NY	Partnered	Surrogacy	2 children; 2 year old twins
Ethan	55	W	Teacher	NY	Partnered	Adopt	1 child; 13 year old
Elliot[b]	37	W	Physician	NY	Partnered	Surrogacy (gestational)	2 children; twin infants
Billy[b]	47	W	Event coordinator	NY	Partnered	Surrogacy (gestational)	2 children; twin infants
Marc	45	W	Physician	FL	Single	Surrogacy	1 child; 4 years old
Art[c]	48	W	Party decorator	NY	Partnered	Adopt	1 child; 3 years old
Rick[c]	53	W	Hospital administrator	NY	Partnered	Adopt	1 child; 3 years old
Simon[i]	53	W	Television production	CA	Partnered	Adopt	2 children; 7 and 4 years old
Theo[d]	54	W	Actor	CA	Partnered	Adopt	2 children; 7 and 4 years old

Participants with the same lower-case superscripts are members of the same couple

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