Gay men as adoptive fathers, hegemonic heteronormativity, and the advent of the queer family

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Abstract

Although queer families have become recognised over time, same-sex couples striving to become parents through adoption still represent a small percentage of the overall number of couples approved each year. Pathways to adoption have been shown to differ between heterosexual people, lesbians, and gay men. While many gay male couples report their interactions with social care systems have for the most part been positive, instances surface whereby gay men describe social care actors as lacking in a fundamental understanding of sexual identities. Heteronormativity has exercised a profound influence on scholarly research and social work practice, leading to a privileging of heterosexual couples as adopters. This article explores the experiences of gay men seeking to become adoptive fathers, and through an analysis of the decentering heteronormativity model, it challenges social workers to recognise the role played by heteronormative assumptions concerning queer families. Assumptions that include fears regarding the child's developing sense of self, and the conviction that a child parented by a gay male couple can anticipate a less optimal outcome.

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Introduction

Most heterosexual couples anticipate becoming parents at some point in their lives, but for same-sex couples this is not an automatic expectation. Gay men in particular might consider their sexuality to be incompatible with parenting, yet for those who do seek to become fathers, adoption is the first choice. Studies suggest there are a number of interrelated reasons why gay men prefer to adopt, such as an uneasiness with surrogacy as the alternative; moral issues that can arise; genetic imbalance where one partner is the biological father; the emotional challenges involved; cost implications (Goldberg *at al*., 2012; Jennings *et al*., 2014; Blake *et al*., 2017). Notwithstanding, the majority of empirical research on families and family life, explore the topic within the boundaries of heterosexuality. Scholars who focus on same-sex families often do so within the limits of children's experiences such as observing their interactions with peers (Goldberg and Byard, 2020). Other themes cover attitudes towards homosexuality, and how children explain their family structure. Results from these studies indicate that children of same-sex parents can face discrimination in the form of homophobic bullying (Prendergast and MacPhee, 2018; Charlton 2022). In addition, apprehension about gay men as parents is reinforced by drawing attention to their uniformity as men, advocating that two people of the opposite sex parent differently. Accordingly, the inference is that children need the contribution from both sexes, so that the child successfully develops an assured sense of self, along with good mental and physical wellbeing (Hicks, 2006; Pistella *et al*., 2018; Charlton 2022). Such reasoning authorises a hierarchy of sexuality in which gay people are seen as inferior to their heterosexual counterparts. Nonetheless, the growing number of gay men as adopters has brought about a new and significant facet to contemporary family life (Charlton 2022). But it is against a backdrop of regulations developed within the context of heteronormativity, and normative gender roles, that gay men pursuing adoption encounter prejudice. Although diversity is encouraged by local authorities and their partnership agencies, it remains the case that the recruitment, assessment, panel and post adoption support were designed to operate within heteronormative structures (see Keating, 2008). Moreover, in an exploratory study conducted by Schaub *et al*., (2017) evaluating social workers' views about sexuality in relation to everyday interactions, the researchers discovered a link between social workers who held strong conservative religious beliefs and an endorsement of heteronormativity. The results concluded that heterosexuality is perceived by religious social workers as natural, moral, and superior. One participant declared: 'My religion does not approve of this. But I will talk if needed with service users … Personally at home I will tell my family and friends that being a gay or lesbian is wrong' (p.438). The authors note that some social workers felt it necessary to 'bracket off' parts of themselves when interacting with gay clients and colleagues. This calls into question their capability to enter into non-discriminatory practice. Viewpoints like this create tensions which are not easily reconciled to critical thinking. Put simply, it can impede the support social workers offer while simultaneously facilitating bigotry and discriminatory practice. Hence, it comes as little surprise that gay men report judgements being made about their private lives, they believe would not have occurred had they been heterosexual. Bias contravenes the principles of The Adoption and Children Act 2002, and the protections afforded to LGBT+ people under the Equality Act 2010, where

agencies must use the same criteria to assess all applicants. Despite the introduction of legislation aimed at outlawing discrimination, however well intended, it is powerless to avert prejudice operating at a local level where it can be embedded in organisational cultures (Hicks and Jeyasingham, 2016).

Even with marked shifts in family forms in much of the western world, the standard portrayal of the family continues to be a married woman and man parenting their biological children. Heteronormativity refers to a fixed moral order that validates the practice of heterosexuality. Consequently, it is through a complex milieu of values, rewards, freedoms and restraints that people are compelled to reproduce heteronormativity—those who do not are ostracised. (Oswald *et al.*, 2005). Within this milieu, gay men pursuing adoption are open to hostility founded on a conviction that all children need a mother and father. Furthermore, many will judge homosexuality as immoral, and argue that gay people cannot, and should not, be parents (Ryan and Berkowitz, 2009). Destructive misconceptions about gay men, based on stereotypes, see them represented as psychologically unbalanced, incapable of, yet craving, long-term relationships, and inept for the responsibilities of parenthood (Ryan, 2007; Gianino, 2008). What's more gay men deciding on parenthood outside the context of a biological relationship with a female, are likely to encounter unique pressures that will be different from lesbian mothers and heterosexual fathers (Ryan and Berkowitz, 2009; Jennings *et al.*, 2014; Vinjamuri, 2015; Blake *et al.*, 2017). As more gay men become fathers, a fundamental understanding as to how they negotiate their visibility in an everchanging socio-political environment (Goldberg, 2012) benefits social policy and social work practice. For that reason, through a systematic review of the literature, this study focuses on gay men pursuing adoption. The article critiques hegemonic heteronormativity to expose social work practitioners and educators, to the mechanics of heteronormativity operating in the fabric of everyday society. The study contains illustrations of subtle ways heteronormativity affects the lives of gay men on their pathway to fatherhood.

(Re)considering men, masculinity, and family

Queer theorists place heteronormativity at the core of social and political modern day life. It permeates the fabric of society to the point where heterosexuality is observed as the natural, superior, and for many, only acceptable expression of human sexuality (Berlant and Warner, 1998; Habarth, 2015; Weeks, 2017; Schaub *et al.*, 2017). Queer theory includes the culturally manufactured 'otherness' of heterosexual and homosexual divides, that have underscored social work practice on sexualities (McPhail, 2004; Concannon, 2009). The notion of 'family' within the context of queer theory is one that contends families are formed through social interaction, instead of exclusively across biological kinships (Weeks, 2017). Various scholars maintain the prevailing arena of traditional marriage and biological families reinforces heteronormativity, and is endorsed by means of institutional practices that legitimise heterosexuality via assessments on normalcy (Donovan *et al.*, 2001; Allen and Mendez, 2018; Lasio *et al.*, 2019). By contrast, the model of decentering heteronormativity introduced by Oswald, Blume and Marks (2005) supports the idea of family relationships that are outside customary gender boundaries. This requires a re-evaluation of conventional approaches to men and masculinity in relation to the restraints assigned to gender, sexuality, and family forms.

These socially constructed ideologies are not inert, rather they are produced through interaction and commitment. In this sense 'family' is best determined as something people 'do' rather than 'have' (Daly, 2003; Hudak and Giammattei, 2014). Theories on the family, like other scientific concepts, strive to explain observed phenomena. Thus theorising queer families—as an observable phenomena—offers a narrative for the development of knowledge on new family configurations. Tudge *et al*., (2009) claim family theories act as a 'rubric' by which different empirical studies can be uniformly evaluated as family units evolve and diversify. Oswald *et al.,* (2005) put forward the ground-breaking theoretical model of decentering heteronormativity to help unravel the complexities, and pervasive principles of heteronormativity. The authors considered heteronormativity to comprise of three interconnected and methodically inseparable binaries those of gender, sexuality, and family. For example, the gender binary of heteronormativity locates 'real' males and females in opposition to 'gender deviants.' Hegemonic heteronormativity presents a threat to the endeavours of LGBT+ activists as they seek to broaden the concept of family. Hegemony is the idea that one or more group has dominance over others and can be made up of social, political, cultural and institutional structures. Activities designed to resist hegemonic heteronormativity do so by challenging fixed ideas on gender, sexuality, and family (Diego *et al*., 2018; Lasio *et al*., 2019). Hegemonic masculinity is fundamental to heteronormativity, and positions itself within the sphere of 'natural sexualities, and genuine families [which] are diametrically opposed to their deviant, unnatural, and pseudo-counterparts' (Allen and Mendez, 2018: 74). Decentering heteronormativity has been used by Hudak and Giammattei (2014) to critique syllabi and training based on family theory. Goldberg (2007) also used decentering heteronormativity in her work to frame research questions, interpret the results, and debate the implications about ways in which having gay, lesbian, or bisexual parents impacts a child's outlook on gender sexuality, and family.

Although 'authentic' family compositions have previously signified married heterosexuals with biological children, of late gay men have sought assimilation into hegemonic heteronormative structures, through domesticity and consumption (Rabun and Oswald, 2009). Social and economic capital allows gay men to benefit from integration into the privileges of heteronormativity. Allen and Mendez (2018) argues 'participation in such a culture necessitates wealth, and is often hallmarked by gay identities, maleness, Whiteness and cisgender' (p.76). Conversely, Goldberg (2012) believes gay fathers cannot be categorised as either adhering to or opposing heteronormativity, rather they contest these simplistic classifications. Instead, gay men are transforming notions about men, masculinity, and family by challenging dominant discourses on parenting. This is inevitable since gay men as parents means their sexuality is more visible. A family with two fathers stands out as atypical and in so doing spotlights their sexual identity. Even so, heteronormativity persists in creating and maintaining inequality through subjugating family compositions that fail to conform to social, political and legal hegemonies, that otherwise should be worthy of acknowledgement (Vinjamuri, 2015). Arrangements such as single gay men and lesbians, or polyamorous parenting that continue to be judged as deviant, and undergo political and social subordination (Pallotta-Chiarolli, Hayden and Hunter, 2013). To counter this, practitioners and social work educators must think past the confines of heterosexual, lesbian, gay and bisexual identities, since they limit the development of a broader understanding of human sexuality (Hicks, 2008).

Nevertheless, the hegemony of heterosexuality remains a challenge for gay men as they resist being judged as a 'deviant' form of parenthood in contrast to male and female unions. While scholars argue heteronormativity is rooted in family structures, and highlight the effect it has on shaping the experiences of same-sex parents (Donovan *et al*., 2001; Charlton, 2022) it is also important to recognise the diverse queer family forms that have been emerging over the past thirty years.

Changing family patterns, individualism, and fatherhood

From the early 1990s, the idea of what constituted a family underwent a transformation to include diverse non-normative forms, based on sexual orientation and gender nonconformity (Donovan *et al*., 2001; McAlister, 2014; Weeks, 2017). In 1983, for example, fifty per cent agreed that, 'sexual relations between two adults of the same sex [was] always wrong' (Park *et al*., 2013: viii). After the discovery of AIDS and the widely reported connection to male homosexual activity, this figure steadily increased until by 1987, it had reached sixty-four per cent. Regarding gay men's relations with children, it was recorded in the same year that eighty-seven per cent were against 'gay adoption.' By the early 2000s, attitudes had significantly changed in that eighty-three per cent of the British public accepted an openly gay man as a teacher. Nevertheless opposition remained. Fifty-two per cent of the population did not agree with the statement: 'homosexual couples should be permitted to adopt a baby under the same conditions as other couples' (Park *et al*., 2013: ix). Much of the change in opinion since the 1990s has signalled a growth in individualism and freedom to self-realisation (see Wood, 2021). This is apparent with a moving away from fixed approaches to gender roles and marriage, together with a decline in traditional religious and moral beliefs. Previous reasoning for the 'institution' of marriage, argued it was a commitment between a man and a woman, with biological offspring framed within an ethical and sacred code (Keating, 2008; Park *et al*., 2013; Hicks, 2016; Weeks, 2017). Yet the reality is considerably more ambivalent. The Office of National Statistics released figures in 2019 demonstrating a noteworthy decline in nuclear family compositions. For instance, 14.9 per cent of households in the UK are made up of single-parent families. Moreover, the Office for National Statistics estimates there are approximately 212,000 same-sex families representing a growth of 40 per cent since 2015 (ONS, 2019).

Notwithstanding important advances in attitudes towards the LGBT+ populace, gay men are often considered a homogeneous group—even though gay men are as varied from one another as heterosexual men. Likewise, gay fathers and their families vary in ways that are individual to them (Goldberg, 2013). Pathways to parenthood differ considerably in the present-day, where constructs can be found among gay men who married a female partner, prior to coming out. Other gay men may be raising children alone as the result of a divorce. Still others will have children within the boundary of their identity as a same-sex couple, and their experiences as adoptive or surrogate parents will differ in many ways from the other gay fathers (Goldberg, 2013; Tornello and Patterson, 2015). Regardless, sanctioning 'families of difference' has been intensely contested in public and media debates. While topics such as same-sex marriage, employment protection, and care of LGBT+ seniors, have received little negative attention in public forums, past discourses led by religious and moral thinking, inevitably impacted the pace at which legislative changes regarding same-sex parenting have

come about. Northern Ireland is a case in point where equality legislation has traditionally been resisted. It has been slower than the rest of the UK to implement supportive policies due partly to Northern Ireland having a devolved government. The province was last to decriminalise same-sex activity, last to permit same-sex marriage, the last to implement blood donations, and strong opposition came from the Northern Ireland Assembly to reducing the age of consent to sixteen (Duggan, 2017). It was also the last part of the UK to implement change allowing same-sex couples to legally adopt. The Health and Social Care Trusts released data demonstrating that five years after the changes to adoption law, of the thirty gay couples who had applied to adopt a child, only two had a child placed with them. This figure represents a rate of one in fifteen (Fenton, 2018). Mark and Ciaran are a gay couple living in Northern Ireland who were approved by the adoption agency almost five years after beginning the process. Reflecting on their experience Mark described it as:

> a learning process for both of us [and our social worker] because we were her first homosexual couple, so for her it was a learning curve and for us it was a learning curve as well … I have friends who adopted but they adopted from London … so we thought, this might not happen, or it will be harder than for most straight couples. But we talked to a lot of straight couples, and they went through exactly the same as what we went through, so we were treated in a way that was quite equal (Fenton, 2018).

An analysis of trends throughout the UK indicate figures for adoption by same-sex couples reached a high in 2020, with *one in every six* adoptions being made to a same-sex couple. This signifies an increase for the third successive year. It is in stark contrast to 2012 when the numbers stood at *one in twenty-two* (DfE, 2021−2). These figures however fail to take account of the sexuality of single adopters, and as a consequence, it is probable the number of gay men adopting is actually higher (Wakefield, 2019). The statistical breakdown shown in the table below establishes the prominence of gay men amongst same-sex family types.

Family Type	Number of adoptions 2019/20 by same-sex couples
Male married same-sex couples	170
Female married same-sex couples	120
Male civil partnership couples	70
Female civil partnership couples	30
Male couple/not married or in a civil partnership	120
Female couple/not married or in a civil partnership	60

Source: New Family Social. (May 2022). https://newfamilysocial.org.uk/

Still, it remains the case when questioned, gay men will recall encountering some level of scrutiny, or disapproval, designed to remind them of their place in a society dominated by hegemonic heteronormativity. This not only relates to everyday social interactions, but equally to incidents concerning professionals. One man acknowledges: 'Being a gay father, I have learned, involves a constant process of facing a wide range of reactions from others and integrating these experiences into one's life' (Vinjamuri, 2015: 268).

Social interactions, ambiguity and control

Examples of gay men's interaction with adoption agencies highlight the need for practitioners to be mindful of distressing situations same-sex couples can find themselves in, during the process. Charlton (2022) points to the importance of having clear communication, so as to avoid feelings of anxiety and a lack of control. The emotions and self-doubt gay men can undergo is illustrated by the experience of Lewis and his partner Gareth. The uncertainties they faced called for support, information and guidance to be made available, yet this was not always forthcoming. Their adoption journey lasted for two years which Lewis described as difficult psychologically and legally. On the day of the introductory meeting with their son, the meeting was cancelled at the last moment while they were waiting outside the offices. Lewis recalled:

> So we were just standing in the car park waiting to go in, and we got a phone call from the social worker saying you can't come in and meet him, and the panel didn't go the way we wanted it to go, and it's been rescheduled and that was heartbreaking … I went home and cried. It was horrible (p.11).

Ambiguity together with the absence of control can leave same-sex couples doubting themselves. While not overtly linked to their sexuality, reflecting on the event, Lewis felt uneasy as to the reason behind the panel's behaviour. He continued:

> There was just a point that we got to thinking, is this so hard and are we facing these issues because we are a male same-sex couple and some of these panel members have unconscious bias? (p.13).

Similarly, Max and Karl spoke about things not going to plan. Max describes how the overall lack of inclusion in the decision making-process, not only impacted them as a couple, but had repercussions for his work.

> We actually didn't meet him until September, which was brutal, it was really really bad. Imagine finishing up at work, having balloons, gifts, cards, all of that and then your work colleagues have been seconded into your job then this happened, so it was very very difficult (p.11).

Kevin H and his husband Kevin E, an Irish couple, lived and worked in the UK during which time they were striving to adopt a child. 'I was well aware how many kids were in the care system and I knew we could provide a loving home for a child,' said Kevin E (Keane, 2021).

Although the couples' experience was mostly positive, they came across aspects of the process that demonstrates society is not yet fully inclusive of gay men as adoptive parents. Kevin H gives an example.

> We reached milestones that we thought we never would, from coming out of the closet to entering a civil partnership. Having a child felt like the next important step to take … We were definitely the first handful of couples to adopt as a gay couple in the area of England we were living in at the time. When we were filling out forms we'd have to scratch out the 'mother' titles or leave a note. In most cases you'd get a lovely email back saying we're really sorry about the form (Keane, 2021).

Social interactions permit activities whereby dominant heterosexual beliefs are re-enforced. Demonstrations of curiosity, confusion or surprise happen because same-sex families are seen as running counter to ideas about 'authentic' family structures. A man deciding to parent without a woman contradicts the principle that a woman, as the primary caregiver, is an essential part of parenting. Miall and March (2003) refer to this as the 'intensive mothering ideology' (p.30). Also considered in the overall discourse are the profound transformations that have taken place for women since the inception of the feminist movement. But gay men continue to feel compelled to explain themselves in a way that heterosexual families are unlikely to. A gay father who takes the decision not to explain what his relationship is to his partner or child, is resisting an obligation that requires those outside the heterosexual order to validate their associations. To opt for silence is to exercise control (Fivush, 2010; Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). However, apparent routine activities, such as filling in a form, can be profoundly meaningful, acting to re-enforce the hegemony of heteronormativity by denying silence (Vinjamuri, 2015). Gay fathers' understanding of their relationship to a society in which their families are not broadly reflected, is fortified through these simple interactions. Having left the UK and returned to Ireland in 2016, the fathers faced such a situation. Kevin H said:

> For me it's like you're coming out every time because you're having to explain yourself each time … even if you go for a random medical appointment. You might arrive in, and you're saying it's Daddy and Dad. There's a sense of coming out every time. An adoption cert has both names on it [which] replaces the birth cert, but one day one of us was told to pick who was going to be mother to complete the registration process for our children's PPS numbers. This was done in front of our sons (Keane, 2021).

School settings can be environments that not merely make allowances for same-sex families, but actively create positive conditions that welcome, respect, and celebrate their diversity (McDonald and Morgan, 2019; Goldberg, 2020). The fathers discovered this when enrolling their children in school. Educate Together is an educational charity operating in Ireland that describes itself as: equality-based, co-educational, child-centered, and democratically run. The motto is: *Learn Together to Live Together - No Child an Outsider*. Speaking about their acceptance and visibility as adoptive fathers in the school, Kevin H continued:

> Our kids school really put their arms around everyone. If it wasn't for Educate Together, I don't know how we would have coped. In other schools, we might stick out like a sore thumb … When people think about schools, sometimes they think about the top performing schools, and academia, whereas we prioritise neutrality. If we moved to a different part of Ireland, we might not have had the Educate Together schools. It would be great to see that change (Keane, 2021).

These examples underline the importance for social workers involved in adoption, to offer adequate and appropriate resources aimed at informing and supporting couples from the outset. Charlton (2022) suggests a method for achieving this is focus groups, whereby same-sex couples who have gone through the journey to adoption, can share their experiences. Accounts from participants could be made available to gay couples considering adoption, as a useful tool to help inform their decisions. Thus providing innovative ways in which same-sex couples are fully included and regularly updated throughout the process. The information should also be accessible to social workers to help direct their practice.

Conclusion

This article illustrates ways in which hegemonic heteronormativity is interwoven into everyday social activities on multiple levels. The article elucidates parenting outside the boundaries of heterosexual and biological kinship to offer an insight into ordinary social and public interactions, demonstrating the emotional impact these can have on gay fathers. In particular, the present study contributes to the body of literature exploring the lives of gay men as adoptive fathers with the key aim of enhancing the knowledge of practitioners working with them, as they move through the adoption process. Even though the findings are consistent with previous studies, the narratives of the men included in this study bring a fresh insight. Illuminated is the frequent situations encountered where their sexual identity is under scrutiny. Seeing two men together, for example, rather than a man and a woman as parents is often met with a degree of alarm. Gay parents have to justify their relationship with their children, since they are not derived from biological kinship and therefore not deemed 'authentic' (Donovan *et al*., 2001; Vinjamuri, 2015). In a similar way to other ideologies heteronormativity is a multifaceted system that manifests in diverse spheres of everyday life. Unlike heterosexual couples, same-sex couples must confirm their identity to those in authority. This derives from a power grounded in morality, social, and culture values wherein same-sex couples are denied the liberty to be silent (Fivush, 2010; Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). Mindful of this, for social workers to challenge hostility towards gay men as adopters, and effectively advocate on their behalf, they first need to recognise their own innate beliefs about gay people, questioning how these might influence their practice. Schaub *et al*., (2017) found that for some social workers homosexuality and interactions with gay people is problematic. There are a number of reasons practitioners find it arduous to engage with gay people but significantly the study exposed religious beliefs as playing a key role. To negate this, social work educators can facilitate students to consolidate their personal views in line with the ethics and principles of social work practice. Students can benefit from training that includes resources exploring the lives of gay people. Of particular worth is considering the challenges gay men encounter when interacting

with public bodies and professionals. This can involve a reassessment about what constitutes sexual and social 'norms.' Yet it is imperative for students and practitioners alike, to expand their awareness of the lives of gay men as fathers, and consider how they are disputed in environments that constantly authenticates or refutes them as parents (Vinjamuri, 2015).

This article explores by what means decentering heteronormativity proposed by Oswald *et al*., (2005) encourages thinking about family structures that are outside the traditional limits of gender and sexuality. Oswald's argument compels practitioners to re-evaluate their opinions about men, masculinity and family forms. Social policy, social work education and practice are surrounded by cautious thinking on what is best for the child with a foundation in 'naturalness' (Jennings *et al*., 2014; Vinjamuri, 2015). Practitioners involved in adoption are in a position to profoundly challenge deep-rooted misconstructions in straightforward ways. For example, validating non-heterosexual identities by having forms that include more than two gender categories. Equally important is raising awareness through the integration of material into the curricula on social work courses, providing knowledge about same-sex families. The various experiences described in the present study can develop understanding on how gay fathers are submerged in hegemonic heteronormativity in mundane everyday interactions. Decentering heteronormativity is a model that can be used to enable practitioners to deconstruct their own approaches to sexuality, masculinity, parenting, and family forms.

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