

## **THE DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF GAY FATHERHOOD: EXPLODING THE MYTHS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

My curiosity about gay fathers stems from a more general interest in social reproduction (Dunne 1997), and gender and the organization of work and family life (Dunne 1997, 1998a&b, forthcoming) take the view that sexuality is socially and materially constructed (Jackson 1995, Plummer 1981, Rich 1984, Rubin 1975, Weeks 1989, 1991) and that the significance of hegemonic interpretations of sexuality for the reproduction of inequality has yet to be fully appreciated within sociology and mainstream feminism (Dunne 1997, 1998a, Forthcoming, Jackson 1995). Through a variety of projects I have used theoretical samples to chart the way that gender and sexuality interact to construct particular forms of expectations and practice which sustain or challenge the status quo. In an earlier life-history study, I have explored the impact of moving beyond heterosexuality on women's employment strategies and domestic lives (Dunne 1997). In comparative research I have focused on the possibilities for the radical re-interpretation of conventional work and caring strategies when women parent together in lesbian partnerships (Dunne 1998a). I extend conceptions of gender as

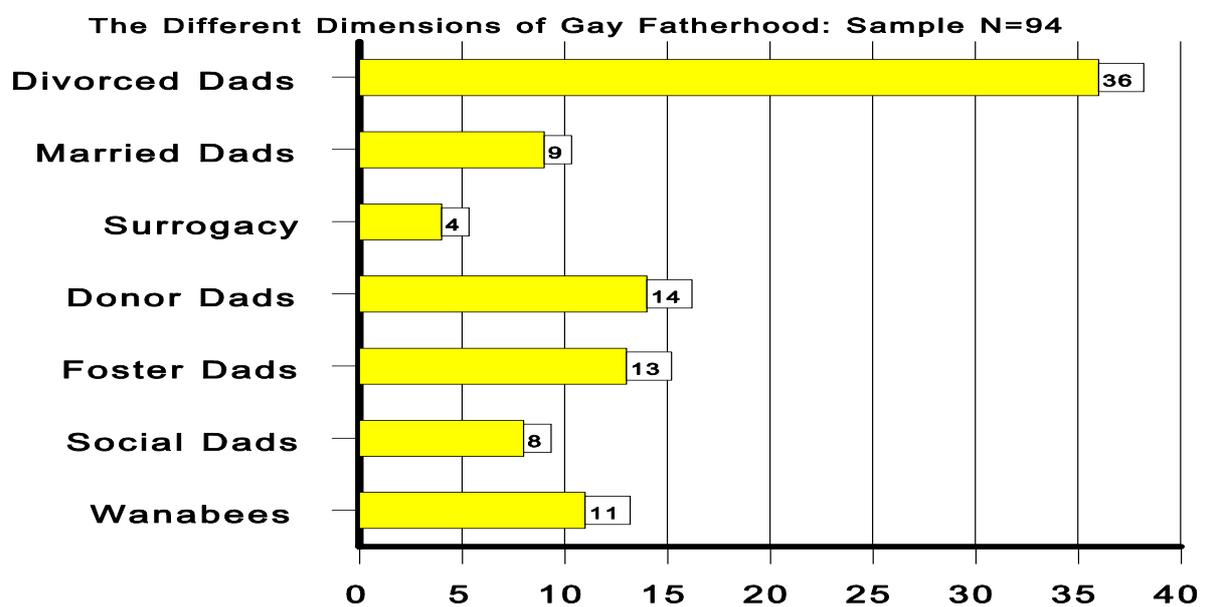
actively accomplished (Connell 1987, Fenstermaker et al. 1991) by showing that the 'doing of gender' is mediated by sexuality. For example, women managing and financing a household with women have greater scope to critique conventional gender scripts and refashion them to better meet their egalitarian ideals (Dunne 1998a,b).

The fresh thinking and creative strategies for resolving the contradiction between time to earn a living and time to care for children found in lesbian partnerships led me to wonder about the solutions that men might construct when doing gender in a non-heterosexual context. I was however, unable to feel confident in designing a study of divisions of labour between men with children because of the lack of research on any aspect of gay fathers' experience. Scanning the literature on gay men, and on fatherhood more generally, revealed little mention of the experiences of gay fathers. Their invisibility reflecting perhaps a preoccupation with the experience of mothers in the mainstream parenting literature, and a focus on specific forms of gay-centred lifestyles in the work on sexualities<sup>1</sup>. So while gay fathers attract much media interest, and stereotypes abound, there is very little academic research on their circumstances to enable informed debate.

In consequence, I am engaged in a short exploratory study<sup>2</sup> with more simple aims - to map out the different dimensions of gay fatherhood. I am currently in dialogue with 94 gay dads. The study extends beyond national boundaries<sup>3</sup> - while most live in the UK, I am also in contact with four respondents living in New Zealand, eight in Canada and thirteen in the USA.

The research has been fascinating on a number of levels, one being their very diverse circumstance, see Figure 1.

In many respects this diversity and the complexity of their experience blow apart dominant stereotypes. The labels attached to each of my organizational categories belie the unusualness of the circumstances of each of the men grouped within. Every category could generate a fascinating paper, and will hopefully do so. I want to bring the different dimensions of gay fatherhood to life by drawing on some of their stories.

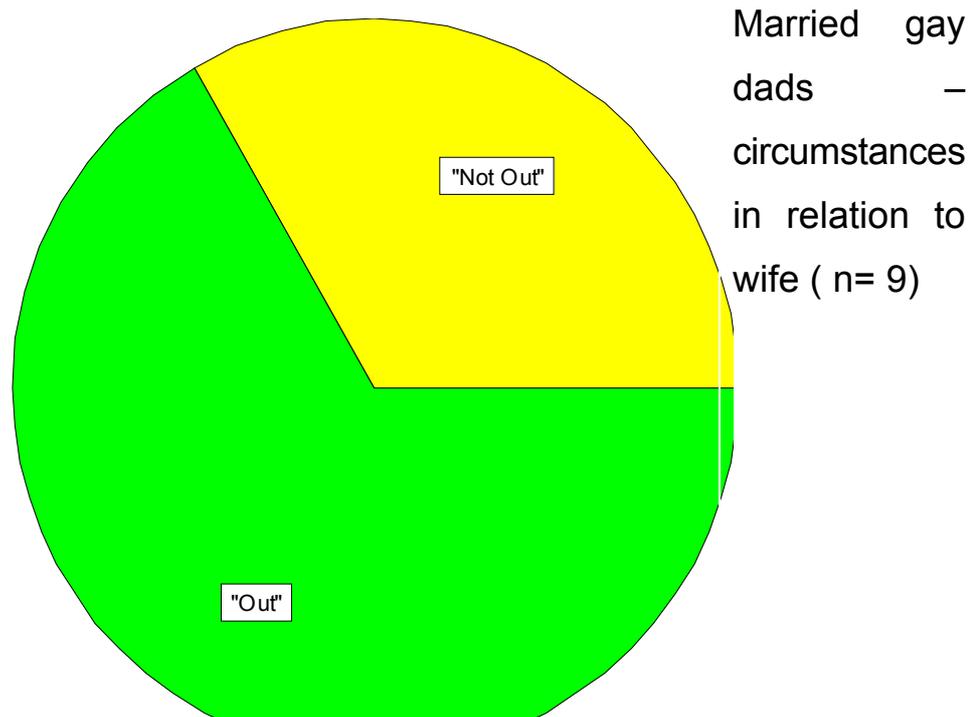


The main focus of this paper will be the stories of currently married gay fathers because they exemplify some central themes that have emerged across much of the sample, particularly in relation to those men who are now currently separated or divorced. I will then draw on the whole sample to explore some of these themes in the second half of the paper. Although the nine men who comprise this group represent a fairly small proportion of the total sample, the courage they exhibited in coming forward and our ensuing conversations leads me to believe that the great majority of gay fathers are indeed married. Although I also feel that the existence of so many never-married gay men who are, or are planning to be, fathers

suggests that the desire and ability to transform the reproductive limitation of their sexuality is not confined to lesbian mothers (Dunne 1999). In many respects it is the radical and radicalizing potential of these men which fascinates me most. A key interest being the creative possibilities for collaboration between women (usually lesbian but sometimes heterosexual) and men in the quest to become parents beyond the confines of heterosexual romance and the traditional nuclear family. However, as we will see, the possibility of constructing friendly and rewarding collaborations with women was not confined to never married gay dads. I will argue that in a contemporary context whereby increasing numbers of people are questioning and rejecting conventional forms of family life and gender roles the exploration of non-heterosexual experience provides an important opportunity to consider alternative models of parenting, gender, and relations across and within gender categories.

## **MARRIED DADS IN THE CLOSET**

I will start by focusing on those respondents who were not 'out' about their sexuality to their wives, of whom there were three, Figure 2. So lets turn to their stories.



### John's Story - 'I'm deeply in love with all of them'

I met John last December in his small flat in the Gay Village of Manchester. This was the first of the six in-depth, face-to-face interviews which I conducted with dads in each of my main categories. John is 41 years old and has been married for 11 years. He has 3 children, a girl aged five, and twins - a boy and a girl aged two and a quarter.

Like most of the men in the study he described early feelings of difference and an awareness of same-sex attraction. For John, these feelings generated disgust, and his main preoccupation was to be normal and to conform. He came from a working-class background, was the first member of his family to go to university, and describes a strong desire to please his parents:

So at 21 - so this was during my university time - And I think I was desperately trying to fulfil [mum and Dad's] expectations. And they were ambitious for me and I sort of picked up some of that. And sort of in this period - in terms of my emotional development - I became aware of gay tendencies, but despised them and serviced them occasionally, but really felt they were perverted and disgusting. And needed to be held at bay.

*I: Why do you think you felt so sort of shocked by it all?*

Because I didn't come from a very liberal family. My family were very conservative, with both big and small 'C's and Mum, in particular - I think fitting-in was very important to Mum - and that transmitted itself to me. It was very important to fit in. And so this sort of stuff rearing its head wasn't fitting-in and wasn't wanted.'

During his twenties John had a number of romantic sexual relationships with women. I asked him what had led him on the pathway to marriage:

I was 31 when I married - I was looking for someone, I think, to settle down with. I think I was thirty years old and had played the field a bit and wanted - I remember wanting to feel the warmth and security of the love of one person. And that suddenly overtook the thrill of the chase. We met on a skiing holiday and 18 months - yeah, it took me a little while - that was our period of courtship... When I first met her, when we were on the coach coming back from the day's skiing, we sat next to each other on these coach seats and I can remember the scene now. My very first thought was that here was someone who had been hurt. She struck me as nervous and vulnerable and tender and someone who'd been through a lot. That was slightly wrong, she hadn't been through a lot - she hadn't had a lot of relationships with boyfriends that had gone disastrously wrong - but she had been through a lot... Her step-father, who was bordering on cruel to her...

*I: And did you mention anything about your feelings about men?*

No, no, I didn't, I was in love and I still am in love with her ... my wife has the sweetest nature of anyone I've ever met ... and she's lovely. Got married and bought a house

Like many married and divorced respondents he talked about feeling intense social pressure to settle down and marry:

`I get the feeling now it was more to do with realising that success in my chosen career would elude me if I was single, if I continued to be single. Because there would be questions asked. So that was one of the factors... It would also make me more normal and acceptable to the job that I was in and would smooth a path to promotion. (26)

In common with most of the many respondents who had an awareness of same-sex attraction before they married, he believed that marriage would be a solution to these unwanted desires:

Also I was looking to get married because getting married was finally going to help me achieve this pushing- down of these revolting, disgusting, perverted feelings back to where they needed to be. Battered down in a box. And getting married would help me do that.

He describes the first four years of marriage as being very happy. His job in civil engineering (an occupational choice that he now regretted and which he felt was inspired by his earlier desire to please his parents) gave him the opportunity to live and work away from his marital home, and he still had questions about his sexuality<sup>4</sup>. At age 35 he bought the flat in Manchester so that he could work there during the week and return home at the weekends. As his wife disliked cities she had only visited the flat once (which helped explain his confidence in being able to decorate the place to reflect his gay identity). So I wondered what she felt about their living arrangements:

She's not really content with that - but looked at as a whole package, I get very long, generous, holidays, it's a very good wage - I mean the job requires me to be here, but it provides the wherewithal to have a little place in Manchester. I'm home every weekend, I never bring work home at weekends. So all in all, it's not too bad. But she doesn't like - she really wants - she really would like me to come home every night, for her sake and for the children. And this subject comes up just about every weekend. We go round and discuss it and have arguments - the benefits of living where we live in terms of safety and it's a nice

area.

When at home with his wife, he described himself as being an actively involved father who plays a full part in domestic life, doing most of the weekend cooking and shopping. His income provided a network of childcare support for his wife during the week as he was keen that she should have some free time for leisure activities, which she appeared reluctant to pursue. They spoke most evenings on the phone, and to my intense embarrassment, she phoned during our interview.

Having time to himself in Manchester enabled John to explore the gay scene and soon he met Paul, who has become his partner for the past four years. Paul played a crucial role in helping him to establish a positive sense of identity:

And then at 35 I decided to go to Manchester and then began the week-end commuting. And it was during that period, I was 37 - 37 is when I began to feel anonymous sex with men was not enough. At the age of 37 or thereabouts, I met Paul at a gay Christian meeting group. And started having a relationship really... well I think at the age of 37 I came out to myself. At that age I felt I could put my hand up and say 'Hey, I am a gay man' and that's actually okay - it actually makes me special - and that's actually what I am and it's nothing to be ashamed about. And Paul helped me do that. And probably three or four months after meeting him, I was able to do that. I was able to sort of come out to myself. And then after that you start coming out to other people.

Paul soon became a firm family friend:

Perhaps I should say at this point that Paul is a very, very good family friend and he regularly comes down at the weekends and we've needed his - he's a nurse in a children's ward - and he's incredibly good with children. And very warm and soft and loving and they all love him. In fact my kids, they've got two fathers really. And he comes on all our holidays with us and often comes down on the weekends and it's wonderful. Except that as far as she's concerned, he's just a very, very good friend of the family's and a very good friend of mine. She does not know that we are intimate.

Their family home was in the heart of picturesque country-side, the haunt of many ramblers. John and Paul shared a passion for fell walking and his wife appeared to think that there was nothing unusual in her husband having a friend to share this leisure activity. I asked whether he thought his wife might have suspicions:

While we're on that point, there's a very small circle of people who know the full story, because each extra person who knows obviously increases the risk, but they all without fail draw the conclusion that my wife must really know. She must really know, you know. In her heart of hearts, she must really know - perhaps she does. But we have event after event that leads me to believe, in fact, that she doesn't know. And just what you said, about hearing you coughing, would be a red-rag to a bull. She's far, far more worried that I'll go off the beaten track with a woman. There is no hint at all of her being worried about my having relationships with men.

I wondered how he and Paul managed to disguise their relationship when the three of them were together:

*I: And that must be difficult, mustn't it? I mean just going from being lovers to friends - do you sometimes forget what role you're playing?*

Not any more Gill. That was very difficult to begin with and I think he found it not only practically difficult, but emotionally difficult as well. Because I'm not the same person with him here as I am there. But actually, this is a testament to human flexibility, it actually works incredibly well.

Passing as friends rather than lovers required a major transformation in Paul's presentation of self:

... that was very difficult - I said he's noticeably gay - we had to go out and buy him a complete new wardrobe. And we had to sort of take out the earrings and change his whole persona really. And that was enormously difficult because he's come from quite a repressed background and has struggled for years to find his own identity, and part of his identity now is dressing quite - outrageously is too strong a word - but, very noticeably. So to suddenly go back into the closet, if you like, back into ordinary clothes, was very difficult. But he did. I mean for

his love of me - and he was just introduced as a very close friend, who was actually there to help as well, to help with looking after - I mean it's enormously hard work looking after three small children.

He spoke of the impact of becoming a father and how much he loved his children:

It's been a revelation to me how much I enjoy my fatherhood. And how important that is to me. And I had this - I think I was in a semi-dream like state the other day and the thought sort of arose - and it was around my death - sort of who I loved most - who was most important to me, who would I miss most. Who would miss me most. And that was Lilly, my eldest daughter. And how she is - in some ways I love her more deeply - well, yeah, I suppose more deeply than anyone else. I love her sweetness and her innocence and her - I mean it just moves me to tears when she runs along the platform and meets me - it's wonderful.

Given his love for his children, and his feelings of affection, loyalty for and responsibility to his wife there seemed to be no way out:

This is why I go to counselling weekly. It's a lot for me to bear as well. The deceit I find very difficult to bear. But, knowing my wife as I do, my greatest fear is that if all this all came out - and certainly if all this came out in a uncontrolled way - it might seriously unhinge her. It would be like ripping open the stomach of a goat in this room and having all the entrails and everything fall out on the carpet and trying to clear that one up. It would be uncontrollable - and she has not had good relationships with men in her life in terms of her father and then her step-father.... And I think, I mean I only realised this last week, but I think there's actually a bit of father and daughter going on between me and my wife. I bear the knowledge that she has had bad relationships with men in her life. I sort of am more aware of that, almost more than she is. And I wonder at a very deep level whether I'm trying to make up for that.

Part of his worry was that she might attempt suicide. Yet there was no doubt about the strength of his feelings for Paul. At every mention of his name, John's eyes sparkled and often welled up with tears. There seemed no way out of this double life. While it may be easy to condemn his dishonesty, one could not help but get a sense of him as a committed,

loving father, and as a domesticated and attentive husband.

### **Bob's story 'walking a tight line'**

Bob contacted me in March and we conducted a telephone interview. He is 55 and has been married for 25 years, and has two children in their late teens. Like John, Bob describes himself as always having known he was attracted to men. He even told his wife about this before they married. He thinks that she did not take this very seriously and held the view that 'she could convert' him. He describes his reasons for marrying thus:

I wanted a permanent, stable loving relationship and didn't think, at that time, I could find that in a gay relationship. I loved her, and in those days there was an awful lot of pressure, you were supposed to marry.

I asked him how he had managed to negotiate his sexuality once married, and he told me that 'I just put all thoughts about it on backburner. I was just too busy being a traditional dad'. Two years ago, however, thoughts about his feelings for men began to flood back into his mind, and he felt he 'had to tackle it'. Without giving his reasons he suggested a separation on the basis 'of needing some space.' She begged him to stay, telling him that he was her very best friend. He felt he could not leave her.

For the past two years he has been leading a double life, 'walking a tight line' as he describes it - seeing men and having casual sex in the spaces that he has negotiated within his marriage. He realises that this situation would be untenable if he formed a serious relationship, yet he also feels unable to leave. His wife has been seriously ill with cancer, although in remission, and he wants to support her. Like John, he feels unwilling to

hurt her, telling me that he still loves her, and that they have a bond like brother and sister.

### **Tim's Story - 'Staying in the closet for the sake of the kids'**

Tim has been telling me his story over the past three months through a series of email dialogues. In contrast to John and Bob, he feels that he is locked into a loveless marriage. He is in the Fire Service, is 39, has been married for 16 years and has two children in their early teens. Tim came from a skilled-manual background and grew-up in a working class neighbourhood. Although, in childhood he felt attracted to other boys, he could not reconcile the limited images of homosexuality available to him with his own sense of self:

I was born in 1958 in Corby, a working class area and my father worked in the steelworks, my mother as a machinist. We moved to an estate on the outskirts of the town when I was 10. I was aware through secondary school and college that I preferred the company of and was attracted to boys rather than girls. But I never had any physical contact with either. I went through the stages of looking up homosexuality in encyclopaedias etc, and later while at college buying a gay magazine from a shop. The only other gay person who I was aware of, through the media and local gossip was a guy (transvestite) called 'Candy' who lived locally, in the next town. This kept my sexuality still in turmoil because I wanted to be with other males but I did not want to dress as a female or act camp in any way.

He left college and joined the Fire Service at 18 and was still a virgin. Living away from home enabled him to have the opportunity to discover cottaging and he had his first (anonymous) sexual relationship with a man when he was 19. At this point he felt pressure to date women, and one of his colleagues arranged for him to go out with the woman who was to become his wife:

It was at this time I met my wife, she was 16 and [worked locally]. Some of the other staff arranged dates etc and it just went on. I suppose I was very naive. The relationship with my wife continued and progressed to engagement and then marriage. Mainly because I did not have access to other Gay men apart from loitering in toilets, but also because that was what was expected by my family, workmates and society.

Once married he continued 'cottaging and anonymous contacts with other men'. Finally ten years later he came to terms with the idea that he was gay. He had become a volunteer worker on an AIDS/HIV project and in the context of meeting a wider range of 'ordinary' gay men he was able to challenge the stereotypes. Since then he has had two long-term relationships with men, but is not currently in a gay partnership.

As he began to come out to himself ten years ago, he felt torn between wanting to leave his marriage, and not wanting to hurt his wife or lose his children, aged two and six at the time. His compromise was to encourage his wife to become more independent, and to enable this by taking on a more equal role in parenting and domestic life:

I had realised I needed to get out of the relationship for my own good, but was torn between selfishness and the two girls and my wife. I thought it through and came to the conclusion that I could not just dump them. I tried to prepare the ground for making a break. I persuaded my wife to get a job. I pushed her onto college courses, this worked really well because she managed to get on an access course and is now working as a staff nurse. I was really pleased about this because it gave her some independence from me..... She works full time now. [And in terms of childcare and domestic life] I feel I did more than most fathers.

Unfortunately, just at the point when he had built up the courage to tell his wife and ask for a separation, she contracted a serious illness, and he felt unable to broach the subject. Recently, he has become more and more convinced that she knows that he is gay - she seems to have asked him

out-right in a letter which he in turn denied. He remains in a 'difficult' marriage - 'she is hanging on to me as an accessory. She needs to be married and needs the icon of a husband' - and leads a double life. Recently he told me that he is looking for accommodation, with the view to 'making the break':

I have still to get over the hurdle of saying to my wife that I am gay, and that I need to look again at how I want to live out the rest of my life. I feel very close to this point now. I think that when my emotional state settles I will be doing it soon.

## **'OUT' MARRIED GAY DADS**

### **Roy's Story 'I hate broken marriages'**

The experience of being locked into a loveless marriage for the sake of the children, was not confined to dads who were 'in the closet' with their wives. Roy, rang me up anonymously to tell me his story last November. He is a working-class man from the North of England. He is in his early 50s and is a proud grandfather. He fell in love with his wife thirty years ago and married when he was 21 - 'I loved her and the sex was great. Everyone had to marry in those days, its different now'.

He claims to have 'always been gay. I was cottaging when I was 14'. He continued to have sexual experiences with men throughout his marriage 'lots of casual sex' and several long-term relationships. In many respects he fits well with the popular stereotype of a married gay man, and he certainly believes his experience is common - 'after you have had sex you get talking and they're all married'.

However, 23 years ago he came out to his wife. At first she laughed at him, and then she was angry, often violent, and now he thinks she has come to terms with it. There was a time when he thinks she was fairly accepting, and she even went with him gay bars. Then she decided she did not want know anything about that side of his life. He tells me that he thinks it is hard for women to accept that their husbands are gay, that it undermines their sense of femininity - 'feeling that they can't satisfy their man' and that there needs to be support groups for women whose husbands come out.

He describes his marriage as 'rocky'. His wife had made several attempts at suicide and he fears what might happen if he were to leave. He suggests that the main reason that they stay together is for the sake of the children, although he has not told them about his sexuality:

'... what they don't know can't hurt 'em. I want to be a good father, I hate broken marriages. I adore my children and grandchildren and they adore me - if you really love you can do anything - me and the children have always been happy together'.

## Chris's story - coming out late

Most of the married/divorced dads in the study described an early awareness of their attraction to other men, while some had no idea that they might be gay until well into their married life. Chris, aged 45, is an example of a man in this latter situation. He is a director of a manufacturing company and has been married for 25 years and has three teenage children. He told me his story in a telephone interview. Chris met and fell in love with his wife when they were at university together:

'I had no inclination that I was attracted to men. I had had several relationships with women during adolescence, was perhaps a bit shy. When I met my wife we were blissfully happy together, the sex was great, and getting married felt like the right thing to do.'

It was not until shortly after his youngest child was born that he began to question his sexuality. In common with several other men in the sample this thinking was stimulated by a particular configuration of life events. Money was tight, and there were difficulties at work and he became depressed - wondering what he had done with his life, who he was and where he was going. At this time his wife's uncle surprised them both by announcing that he was gay. Chris began to notice that his sexual attraction towards women began to diminish as his awareness of other men's bodies increased. Five years ago he met and fell in love with Ric, and decided to tell his wife:

'After 6 months I decided to tell my wife everything - I couldn't live a lie. She said, 'Thank God its not another woman'. I guess she felt that it was something in my make up and nothing could be done about it. She said, 'you must continue your relationship with Ric. But this doesn't change my wanting to be with you!'

His wife has met Ric on several occasions, and for his part Ric is very understanding about the situation - although Chris would not describe them as friends. He and Ric see each other regularly - spending a night a week together. He is now out to his children and he tells me that they are fine about this, and he is open about his sexuality in the workplace. He too recognises that he walks a tight line:

'I know we'll have to have a re-think in the future if it doesn't work out. One day we'll want to move in together, but I don't want to hurt people and let my children down. I would hate for them to think I wasn't a good father. I love my wife and have lots of respect for her, and I love family life, its comfortable, its familiar. My wife is an amazing person, very loyal and has given everything to her marriage - she's not the kind of woman who would easily start over with someone else.'

### **Dave's Story - menage a trois**

The generosity and understanding shown by many of the wives of the married and divorced dads in the study was a great source of amazement and interest to me. A particularly fascinating example of this is Dave's situation which he has described to me over the course of a series of email dialogues. He is 36, and has been married 13 years. He is a nurse and for several years has been at home full time caring for their four children - two of whom have severe learning difficulties. In Dave's case his early attraction to men was experienced positively and he had relatively little difficulty identifying as gay:

I was aware I was different and that I found boys 'interesting' from at least 4 years of age. Way before I could have known what homosexuality was. The first game of 'you show me and I'll show you' was with a boy called [\*] in Infants when I was 5, the next such encounter was with [\*] in 3rd year Juniors at about age 9, then, alas, a gap of many years until my first adult encounter when I was 20. So, in short, I was well aware of my sexuality when I married and had no doubt I was gay and not bi.

His life took a change of course when he got chatting to a woman sitting opposite to him on a long train journey:

*I wondered about what led you on the pathway to marriage?*

The 17:15 train from Fenchurch Street to Basildon to be quite honest with you. My wife (Sis) looked like a nice person and I was in need of someone to keep me awake on the journey home. I discovered that when she got off the stop before my stop and this was a match made in heaven... My intent was to doze off during the journey and she could wake me up just as she was getting off. What happened was quite different and surprised me no end. We talked all the way and I loved it! For the first time... ever... I had found someone I really got along with and I liked it. I was certainly not thinking marriage... The thing was we talked endlessly, Sis had had many disasters with men, abortions, miscarriages, rapes.. oh the whole bag, loads of shite from men that you can have, she said she felt 'safe' with me. She, after a month or so, said she found gay men really exciting and felt they were the best kind of men. We got to a point where I decided that I could not live without this person so I asked her to marry me. I had a deep feeling too that I really wanted children, I truly loved Sis by now and knew this was really not very likely to happen again.

Shortly after they were married he came out to her:

I never spoke to Sis about it until we had been married for 6 months and already had a child. She said fine! She thought it was fun talking about attractive men to me! She started throwing things at me! She hit me a few times! After a year or so, we went back to fine.

I wondered how he had managed to negotiate his sexuality within his marriage:

We came to the conclusion that there was no way we could pretend we were compatible between the sheets. We simply were not and it was driving a wedge between us. We decided after the fourth child was conceived that sex would stop and we would have separate beds. This moved onto separate rooms a year later in 1995 and then last year we decided we were ready to allow the possibility of other people in our lives. *What do you think is the secret of maintaining a relationship in marriage?* No excuses, no blaming sexuality for everything that goes wrong, always hugging and not going silent, always talking about problems,

even if it means a major argument, it's better than not doing anything.

Dave met his current male partner, Simon, seven months ago. Three months later Simon moved in with Dave and Sis. Dave describes their living arrangements as very harmonious. Sis and Simon have become close friends and Sis has been able to explore the possibility of her own bisexuality. He tells me that he cannot imagine living without his wife, who he sees as his 'soul-mate':

*What do you think are the main reasons for remaining in your marriage? Love, it is the only reason. We could blame the kids and say they hold us together but it would not be true. We simply love each other but just happen to be sexually incompatible.*

### **Frank's Story - falling for a woman**

It was not unusual for out gay men in the study to have discovered that their 'soul-mate' was a woman. When Frank, who lives in the U.S.A., married at the age of 29, he had already made a firm identification as gay:

I had several long-term relationships [with men] during which I also played the field, I was promiscuous, and I'm astounded to this day that I remain HIV-free. Unfortunately, I do have hepatitis C, which must definitely be a consequence of unprotected relations during that sexual golden age, the period after birth control and before AIDS.....Now understand that all during this time between ohhhh, I should say 1966 to 1979, I enjoyed relationships with women too.. In any case, though there were intensely satisfying relations with some women, I always felt more drawn to boys.

His main concern was to 'find "my soul mate" which I think is rather typical in the life of any sensitive late adolescent or young man'. Out of the blue he discovered he had found the 'right woman' rather than the 'right man'.

He married thirty years ago and has three children aged 25, 21 and 6. He describes his pathway to marriage:

My meeting with my soul-mate was spectacularly on the level of Hollywood. Hazel came backstage after the premiere of a play I both wrote and performed, and I was astounded when I found myself falling for her. Some months later, when we "got serious," I told her I liked boys, slept with them, asked her if she could handle that, and we agreed "love's the thing." 29 years later we're together, in love, and I'm satisfied as I can be - a loving mate and adoring children... I've told people I was as astonished as anyone could be... that I always expected to live out my life with a male lover. Indeed, my longest relationship prior to Hazel was with a man who was 12 years older than I, and I loved him deeply. Alas, he died in my arms of a heart attack at age 37.

He abhors the categorization of sexuality:

When I fill in a questionnaire I tick yes to sexuality and yes to sexual preference - love is the thing. When each of my children comes to me to ask about sex and homosexuality, I've told them I've loved men too, and I suggest they reject the categories. So. At least my own children won't be hung up. And when Dougal asks, "You really won't care if I'm gay," I can look deep in his eyes and say, "No I will care, because I know you loving other boys will invite some hurt and danger to your life that doesn't exist in the straight world, so I'll worry about you. But the only thing that matters is your love, and if you find love and happiness with another boy, I'm all for it. I'd rather have you mate with a boy you love than with a girl because you think that's what society expects of you.'

## **DISCUSSION**

This outline touches on many complex issues and themes that were often reflected across the sample, particularly in relation to divorced men's experience. As a woman and a feminist one cannot help but hold some ambivalent feelings about the deceit and infidelity that we have born witness to (which gives some insights into why gay men have tended to favour genetic/innate theories of sexuality). However, I would like to turn now to considering several key questions that have intrigued me from the very early stages of fieldwork: i) What might these findings tell us about

the way that sexuality is constructed; ii) How are we to understand the responses/generosity of wives; and iii) What does this tell us about the creative possibilities for parenting beyond a romantic heterosexual relationship?

### **The social construction of sexuality**

Clearly these stories raise fascinating questions about sexuality and sexual meanings. At one level one cannot doubt the human cost of those powerful social processes of legitimation (Dunne 1997, Rich. 1984, Steinberg 1997) which support institutional heterosexuality by limiting our imaginations to the straight and narrow, and stigmatizing other forms of living and loving. Those men who had an early awareness of their sexual attraction to men often interpreted this as disgusting, or believed what they were told about it being just a passing phase. Often divorced and currently married dads were angry and saddened about the hurt that had been caused and the years that had been wasted through the social denial of homosexuality as a positive, valid and indeed 'normal' lifestyle. At a policy level, their experiences show the ill-conceived nature of attempts to silence discussion of homosexuality in schools, such as the implementation of Section 28 (actually 2 (a)) of the Local Government Act.

While the idea of being a victim of circumstances implied in this reading rests more easily with the notion of 'always being gay' and has obviously helped soften the blow of deceit and infidelity, I believe that it is a too simplistic an interpretation of their stories. Many of the married/divorced men in the study would not wish to deny the validity of their relationships with wives, and their opportunity to father children in a loving relationship

with a woman. That so many currently married gay-identified men reported having 'fallen in love' or 'being in love' with their wives (see Figure 3), and *enjoying* or having *enjoyed* full sexual relationships with female partners, and, as this was a dominant theme in the accounts of divorced gay dads, far more compelling questions are raised about the geography of our emotional landscapes, and the problematic nature of definitions of sexuality.

In addition, their stories about the difficulties of gay identification reveal evident contradictions between individual and societal meanings attached to sexuality - the resolution of which is what coming out is mostly about (see Dunne 1997). Interestingly, many respondents remarked about what seems to be a common experience, of straight men being willing to have sex with other men without veering from an identification as '100% heterosexual'. The clear mismatch between the complexity and ambiguity of individual experience and wider more concrete conceptions of sexuality is important, *because the very capacity to police sexuality rests on the notion that we actually know what we are talking about*. My research on the lives of non-heterosexual women and now gay fathers leads me to believe that this assurance is absolutely misplaced. This knowledge can be deeply unsettling because of the confidence that can be drawn from the belief in an imaginary line dividing the human attributes, gender characteristics, sexual and emotional interpretations/responses of those on one side who are heterosexual and those on the other who are gay. Indeed, some divorced dads commented on being viewed by other gay men as not truly gay because they had been married. There is a powerful widespread belief in the existence of a simple, exclusive and restrictive check list of indicators of homosexuality (and heterosexuality - but then

this is rarely acknowledged unless, ironically, one is questioning one's sexuality, which - like the idea that one only knows what it is to be English when one lives elsewhere - is why non-heterosexual people are such experts on heterosexuality).

We have already seen the effects of this mismatch between myth and reality in Tim's account of early difficulties in reconciling his sense of self as a man who felt sexually attracted and emotionally connected with other men with popular conceptions of what constitutes gayness. To illustrate this point further I want to draw on Greg's story, given to me in a telephone interview. He is in his late 40s, was married for 15 years and has a son aged nine and twin daughters aged six and a half. He has been divorced for 3 years. He told me that he had 'grown up in a family where sex was not discussed'. He fell in love, married, and fertility problems delayed the arrival of children. Like Chris, the lead up to the questioning of sexuality was a configuration of other unrelated life events, including an accident and stresses at work. He was a left-wing school teacher who was a passionate defender of Equal Opportunities for women and minority groups. He found himself greatly enraged, on a political level, by the introduction of Section 28. This perceived injustice made him curious to find out more about gay men, and in secret he decided to attend a gay men's outward bound gathering. He described his shock at discovering that the men who he met were just like him - 'the club demolished the stereotypes, it was a real eye opener'. Their non-compliance with the stereotypes that Greg held undermined his assurance of his own heterosexuality and enabled him to acknowledge and re-interpret his feelings for other men - 'I realised that I had been sold propaganda about what gay men are and do!'. He told me of the anger and frustration that

he felt and still feels at the time lost and the hurt caused by the existence of dominant definitions of gay sexuality/identity which act to pre-empt the evaluation heterosexuality.

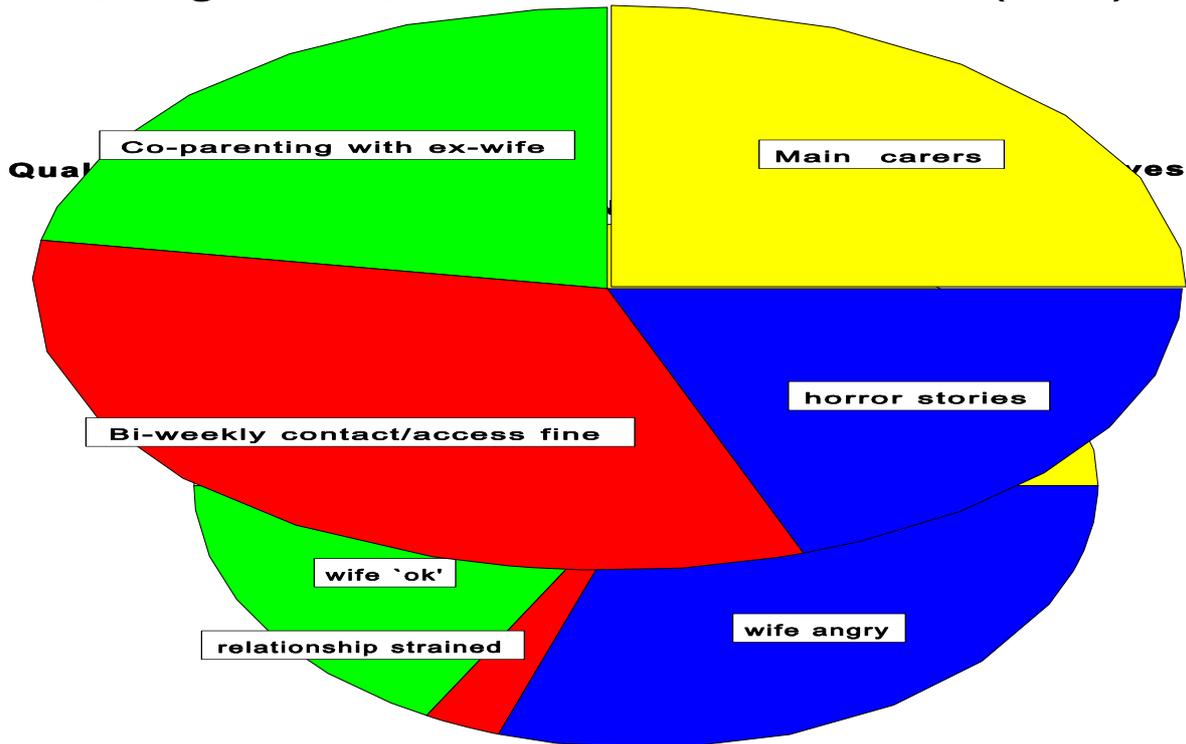
There is much in the accounts of married/divorced gay dads to support a social constructionist argument, even if, as it happens, the men themselves were likely to adhere to genetic, biological or psychological explanations. The notion of innate sexuality is understandable in light of the early awareness of 'difference' and attraction towards other boys that they almost always reported (their emphasis on sexual awareness is something that one does not feature to the same extent in lesbian accounts (Dunne 1997)). This could be, of course, the product of retrospective/selective memory (Kitzinger 1987, Plummer 1995, Ross, M. 1980) - when making sense of ones gayness the idea of always being different, always knowing, fits well with dominant explanations, both within and beyond the gay community. However, I increasingly wonder whether the feeling of difference in childhood and youth is an exclusively gay phenomenon, or more of a human condition, born out of the clash between individual and collective will, in short, the process of socialization. Also, given the intensity of the social construction of gender difference, hierarchies and boundaries which gives rise to the homo-social childhood worlds of boys and girls, might it not be common for boys to love other boys and feel awkward and strange in the company of girls? Finally, might not boys' admiration of and preoccupation with the masculine body (Prendergast and Forrest 1996) and the 'you show me and I'll show you' games of genital exploration which, according to my participants, feature prominently in interaction between boys, lead to an early awareness that the touch of a boy can bring sexual and erotic pleasure? Additionally, might, in the

context of hegemonic definitions of masculinity as always heterosexual (Connell 1987), this experiential insight help explain male homophobia, and would this knowledge account for why gay men tend to have a sense of the sexual possibilities of same-gender encounters at a much earlier age than women.

### **The flexibility and generosity of wives**

A second question relates to the flexibility and generosity of wives which both my married and divorced gay dads reported. It appears common for wives to be exceptionally understanding, and sometimes supportive of their husband's sexuality. There were of course, horror stories, where wives and/or children felt deceived, hurt and angry - severing all contact. However, more usually, after an initial period of shock and anger, wives came to accept their husband's sexuality. Some marriages - like Chris's, and like Dave's - continued in a transformed state where spaces were created to incorporate their gayness, while other marriages came to an end with the loving relationship in tact, perhaps after existing for several years as 'open marriages'. The extent to which my divorced dads described their relations with their ex-wives as ok to excellent (often improving on separation) was a great source of surprise to me: as many as half referred to their ex-wives in loving ways, often describing them as best friends, see Figure 4.

Parenting Circumstances of Divorced Fathers (n=36)



This contrasts with the accounts of divorced non-heterosexual women (who associated coming out as a liberation from gender oppression, Dunne (1997)) and must be, at some level, an indication of the gendered nature of marriage - 'his' marriage and 'her' marriage (Bernard 1972).

Their positive experiences were also reflected in the extent to which most continued to actively engaged in their children's lives and most were happy with this the arrangements negotiated, Figure 5. Almost half are parenting, as co-parents and main-carers. (I define arrangements as co-parenting when respondents both applied the term, and where contact was at least two days a week, including overnights). For most co-parenting dads, however, contact was not confined to weekends, with many having routine care during the working week. To facilitate contact they usually lived within a few miles of the marital home. One dad had recently shifted to a co-parent situation with his ex-wife after being the main-carer because

he thought it was important for the children to maintain a relationship with their mother. To balance the demands of childcare with earning a living he had part-time employment. Another unusual co-parent was Pete, aged 41, with a 10 year old daughter. He got married 16 years ago despite knowing he was gay:

I was out when I met the woman I then married. It seemed that gender wasn't a big thing for me and I guess I wanted love, closeness, pride, passion and thought I could get it from this woman. I was surprised to be with a woman, and felt very Tom Robinson!

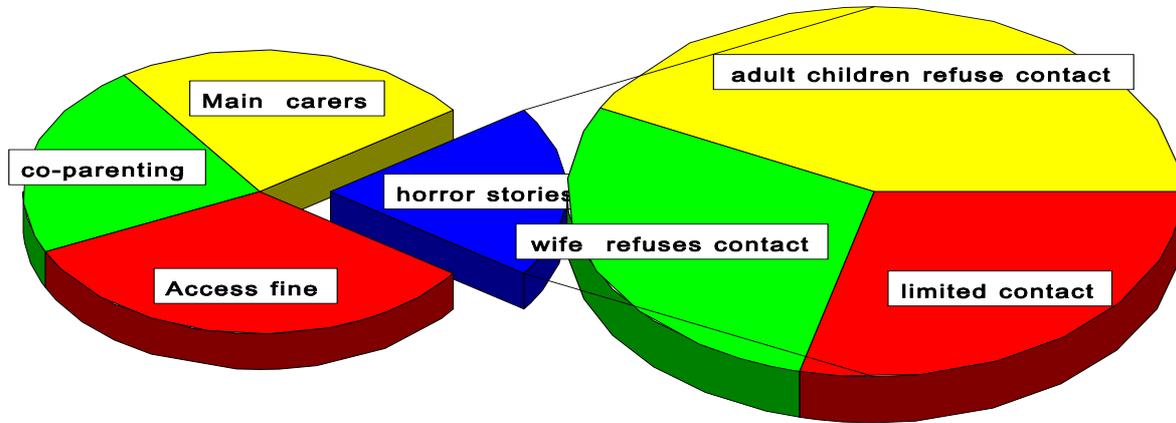
The marriage ran into trouble and just as they were about to get a divorce they discovered that they were going to have a baby. They decided to stay together for the first year of their daughter's life and then separate. For the past nine years they have shared care by Pete has spending three days a week in the marital home:

So I would share the care - in America they call it "nesting" - the child stays in the nest and the two parents deliver their care etc to the child, while living apart, rather than have the parents swop the child from one of their homes to the other. This has continued, our daughter is now ten years old, and I feel as though I have two homes. We still holiday together and I often take her to school. I get to do all the genuinely lovely things like take her to Guides etc. The huge commitment has made it difficult for either of us to start new relationships and to some extent we are both holding that off until our daughter needs less from us.

Their relationship is excellent and interestingly, he recently told me that he is contemplating moving back into the marital home full-time. I was also surprised at finding so many main carers amongst divorced dads, nine, and will elaborate on this later.

The positive circumstances of the majority of divorced gay dads with respect to their good relationships with ex-wives, involvement in parenting,

**Divorced fathers parenting circumstances: 'horror' stories n=7**



and willingness to remain actively engaged in their children's lives appears to be most unusual when compared with the situation for divorced couples more generally - men are much more likely to be hostile to their wives and reluctant carers or absent fathers (Sclater and Piper 1999, Smart and Neale).

### **Horror Stories**

When I embarked upon the research I had anticipated that a large proportion of the gay dads who would contact me would have horror stories to tell. I had assumed that a range of factors, including homophobia and contemporary preoccupations with paedophilia (often incorrectly associated with gay men) would lead to their getting a raw deal on divorce. Additionally, I had expected that those who would be most motivated to have their voices heard would be men who had experienced the most injustice. However, while heart rendering, there were only seven, Figure 6.

Four of these horror stories involved accusations of paedophilia, or the belief that child abuse was an inevitable outcome of contact with gay men. Greg, mentioned earlier, has found himself in this situation and has recently been to Court and won the right to see his children alternate weekends. He continues in his battle to extend contact. Another divorced man, Rod, has been fighting to clear his name for the past five years. Three horror stories related to what was described as the heart breaking experience of adult children refusing to have any contact with their fathers - returning letters and gifts unopened. One of these men told me of the pain of not being allowed to see his recently born grandchild. These adult children were usually male. What was particularly hurtful for these fathers was that they described their earlier relationships with their children and exceptionally close. Also they felt that they had not had the opportunity to explain themselves to the children. Jerry's words tell us something of this pain. He was divorced two years ago after 40 years of marriage and has two grown-up children:

I was not prepared for the total rejection I faced from my children. I made several attempts to reconcile the situation after their mother and I parted but received nothing but hostility and abuse. I find this heartbreaking. We had always had a close relationship and often went out together and they had gay friends so I expected at least a small measure of understanding. I knew they would be hurt by the fact that their parents had parted after so long a marriage; but the feeling of hopelessness is indescribable. I once sent a change of address card to my daughter when I moved house - it was returned to me with certain amendments. Where I had written "Dad" she added (biologically only) and on the blank reverse side she wrote "what makes you think we give a shit where you live anyway! I felt completely humiliated as you can probably imagine. I hope against desperate hope that one day they will at least understand and allow me some contact with them again. I miss them so much and no words can truly describe how I feel. My love for them is totally without condition and if I am an embarrassment to them, then of course I will stay out of their lives. The pain I feel, the loss of their love and respect is part of my daily life; but it is something I have to bear and to live with. I have to do the best I can in my new life otherwise I will have paid an

exorbitant price for nothing.

Finally, one dad experienced a problem of contact, where he was not allowed to spend time alone with his young daughter. On interview it transpired that this difficulty had less to do with sexuality - although the Court Welfare Officer seems to have taken a great interest in his living in a gay partnership and raised the issue of child sexual abuse - and more to do with the traditional roles taken in marriage. His wife viewed him as an inept and untrustworthy carer. The Courts took the view that this assessment was overly exaggerated and ruled his favour, allowing him to have his daughter to stay every other weekend. He continues in his battle to increase contact.

Initially, I was concerned at the smaller proportion of 'horror' stories in my sample than expected. Also when presenting these findings there have been queries about whether participants are presenting an overly rosy picture of their relationships with women, or had felt constrained in how they talked about women because they were communicating with a female researcher. However, it must be noted that divorced heterosexual fathers appear not to suffer from these inhibitions when discussing their circumstances with female researchers such as Smart and Neale (1999). I then considered the possibility of interviewing some of the ex-wives (several respondents had indicated that their wives/ex-wives would be interested in talking to me), but rejected the idea on the basis of financial and time constraints and because I would be likely to gain access to an even more selective sample. Fortunately, an American study conducted by Jean Gochros (1989) has been brought to my attention, which has focussed precisely on the experience of wives whose husbands come out

to them. This research was carried out in the early 1980s in four different locations in the USA. It involved in-depth interviews with 33 married/divorced women, and the collection of questionnaire data on an additional 70. Despite many of these women feeling or having felt angry and hurt by the disclosure, much to Gochros's surprise, the great majority of the women spoke highly of their husbands/ex-husbands, emphasising the love that continued to exist between them, and most had 'coped remarkably well with learning of their husbands homosexual needs, showing understanding, flexibility, and the ability to grow in their acceptance of homosexuality' (1989:254). She also noted that only 6 of the 103 women had attempted to restrict their ex-husbands access to their children, and this were either on the basis of the father's emotional/psychological unpredictability or fears of violence or child abuse.

I do not wish to deny the evident pain and injustice suffered by gay fathers who are forced to absent themselves from their children's lives because of prejudice and ignorance about what it means to be a gay man. However, Gochros's research (1989) adds to my own confidence in the more positive conclusions that can suggested by these findings. This leads me to critique my earlier assumptions and to wonder whether we have mythologised the idea that when husbands come out to their wives it will inevitably 'end in tears'. I think that there are a range of interconnected underlying reasons for why friendly or loving relationships continue post-marriage. Firstly, because these men had formed, or were going to form, primary relationships with other men, wives could interpret a situation whereby her position was not being replaced. One divorced dad, who has been in a gay partnership for the past seven years, told me about a

situation where his ex-wife continued to play 'happy families' as a regular visitor to their home and by joining them for family holidays. A year ago they had to have a serious talk about what sometimes appeared to be her lack of awareness of the significance of his gay relationship. It was not unusual for an ex-wife to have become close friends to their husband's partner, or to council an ex-husband on his love life. Secondly, wives did not have to worry about the possibility of the ex-husbands starting new families and losing interest in the children of their first marriage. Thirdly, as one of my respondents suggested, the prevailing belief that being gay is an act of nature means that the end of a marriage does not have to be perceived as an individual failure. Furthermore, the marriages usually had not ended because a husband no longer loved his wife. Many of the marriages were described as being built on a bedrock of friendship rather than romance, and friendship may well have a more enduring quality than romance.

## **Creative possibilities for collaboration between gay men and women**

I think there may be another important reason for these positive post-marriage relationships. I am reminded of the fact that the lesbian mothers in my earlier study (1999) had a strong preference for involving gay men in their children's lives as fathers and as friends, because they saw these men as positive role models of masculinity - that the gay men that they knew were more reflexive about masculinity, less concerned about the penalties for embracing human qualities that are perceived as more feminine, and were therefore more rounded and caring individuals than the male norm. This assessment may not be confined to lesbian women. For example, one of my respondents is undergoing IVF treatment with a heterosexual friend. She has chosen him over heterosexual lovers to be the father of her child. They plan to co-parent together, and to facilitate this they hope to live close together, either in the same building or on the same street.

Thus, the positive nature of respondents' accounts about their relationships with their wives and children led me to wonder about the advantages that women may gain in loving and being loved by a gay man. I explored this question in my dialogues with the men in the study. In describing why his wife, Sis, wanted to remain married, Dave makes explicit some of the reasons that were eluded to across much of the sample:

*Why do you think she sticks with it?* Well, Sis said that right at the start of our relationship after being abused by many straight men. She said that the perfect partner would be gay as they would really want to be with her, rather than with her for what they can get. I think this is very much the case for us. Yes there was a long period of adjustment and shock but we worked through it and came out stronger for it.

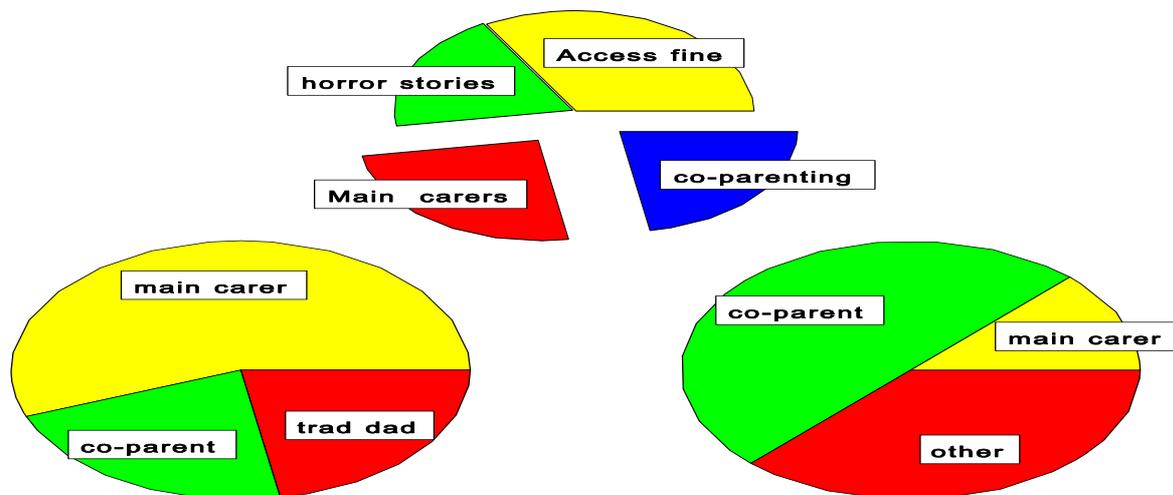
*What do you think wives, or women in general might gain in their relationships with gay men?* Better wallpaper! No seriously... A genuine friend I would think is the main gain, certainly not a demanding sex life which I'm sure some women would appreciate. Probably more understanding of family issues, especially in relation to the children. I think it is possible gay men are more in touch with their feelings. I don't want to say that as a blanket comment though as a lot of gay men could not give a monkey's about anything other than themselves. It has to be the sort of guy that wants children.

Certainly the women in Gochros' study suggested that their grief was for the loss of a husband who they experienced as exceptionally caring and sensitive (1989:165). Part of the process of coming out can liberate men from the constraints of stereotypical masculinity. Ironically, by being less compelled to affirm their differences from women than heterosexual men (see Dunne 1998b), I think that gay men may be particularly appealing to many women. The wives in Gochros's study often spoke of their liberation from oppressive gender roles in their marriages to gay men (1989:165). When I discussed respondents' inputs into domestic life when married, some admitted to traditional roles, but the majority described themselves as domestically competent and 'better than most men'.

In a similar vein, I think it is no accident that many divorced gay dads are currently main carers or actively co-parenting. When I asked them to describe their involvement in childcare when married, it was not unusual for these men to have been active carers earlier, Figure 7. For example, six of the nine men who are currently main/sole-carers, and one of the eight men in co-parenting situations had taken on the bulk of childcare responsibility when married. Currently co-parenting fathers usually described themselves as having been consistently involved in caring - with some having put their caring responsibilities before career advancement.

The main reasons given for the reversal of parenting roles in marriage included: being less career orientated than their wives; the demands of a wife's employment/shift-work; a desire to be egalitarian; the impetus for having children having coming from the man and the wife being less interested in mothering; and an underlying awareness of being gay and the

**Parenting Circumstances of Divorced Fathers N=36  
Current and during marriage**



wish to establish an enduring bond with the child. It was not unusual for divorced men to have become main carers because their children had chosen to live with their father - sometimes because they did not get on with their mother's new partner. The practicalities of being a main carer usually led to the father, or in one case his male partner, not participating in paid employment. Main carers were very conscious of their difference from other fathers, straight or gay, in terms of the way that their lives had been transformed by the routine everyday responsibilities and pleasures of child-rearing. Their parenting circumstances limited their capacity to socialize, and in common with many of the dads who were actively co-parenting, it shaped their thinking about partnerships - which was usually governed by a

preference for having a relationship with a man who was also an involved father.

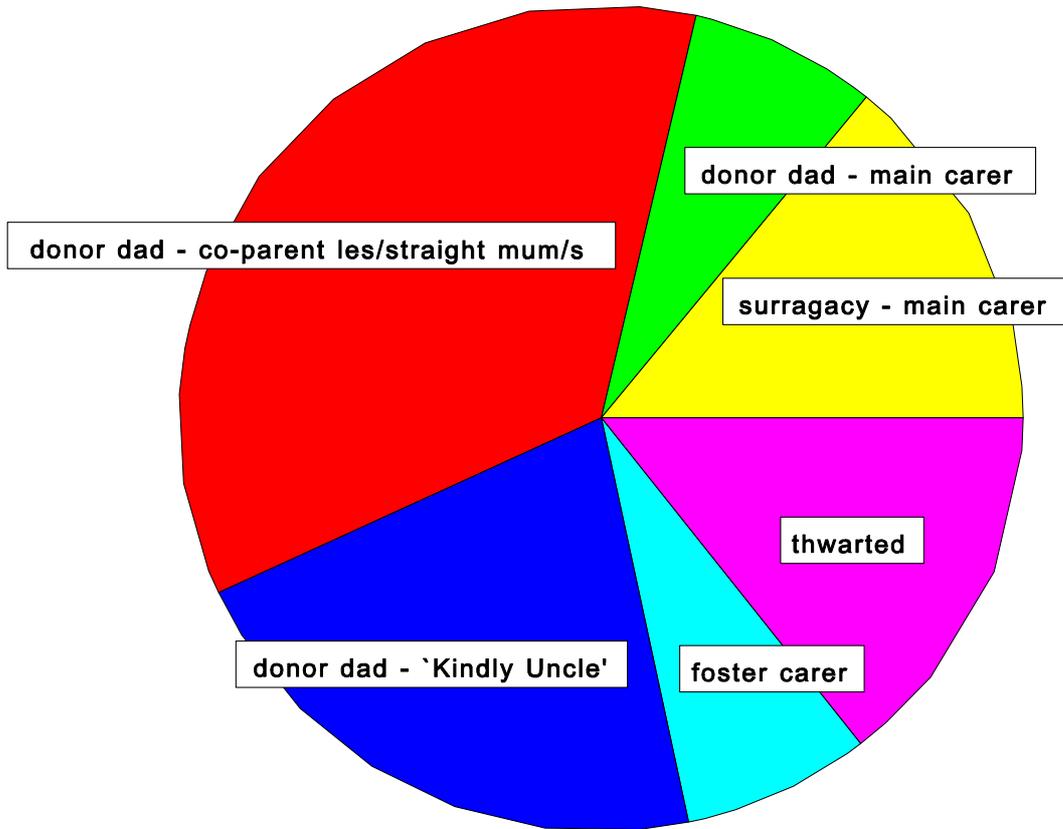
Over all, married and divorced respondents felt that their experience of responsibility in marriage and parenting led them to feel somewhat different from gay men who had no experience of this kind. In interviews and in some of the e.mail dialogues, divorced respondents commented on the insights about power that they had gained in their marriage. In their relationships with men they felt liberated from gender roles and were keen to have more equal relationships and freer emotional communication (see also Weeks et al 2000).

### **Non-Heterosexual Pathways to fatherhood**

We have seen that there are all sorts of creative possibilities for positive collaboration between gay men and their wives/ex-wives. At a time of increasing divorce, the mainstream has much to learn from these men and their wives. However, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a heterosexual relationship was not the only route to parenting. Fifty-two respondents had become or were in the process of becoming fathers/carers in a non-heterosexual context, Figures 8 and 9.

Expectations: respondents planning/in process of becoming dads

N=14



## Parenting in a non-heterosexual context: circumstances



### Foster Carers

I am in contact with 13 men who were foster carers, all of whom were openly gay, and had been caring for boys and girls for between 8 and 25 years. Their involvement ranges from long-term, short-term to respite care, and two couples were in the process of adopting sons. Although as foster carers their role was not to replace existing parents, one recently told me of his pleasure in being told by a boy in his care that he was more of a father than his natural father had ever been, and could he call him Dad. Usually foster carers were in long term partnerships, and they often had a background in social work. One couple had parented a boy with severe

learning difficulties from when he was a small boy, he is now an adult, living independently and pursuing a career. Another couple provided short and long term care for boys who were questioning their sexuality and were in conflict with their family of origin. Often when these boys moved away from home they were able to re-establish a good relationship with their parents. Several of foster carers were in the process of adopting children in their care.

They all shared a strong desire to nurture and to give something back to society (see detailed treatment of this topic in Hicks and McDermott (1999)). I believe that their commitment to young people deserves our respect and admiration. They give the children in their care an important gift - the opportunity to learn to accept and embrace difference.

## **Donor Dads**

The majority of never married respondents were, or were in the process of becoming, fathers via donor insemination. In all but one case, where a respondent was participating in IVF treatment with a straight friend, this was informally arranged between the donor and the lesbian mother/s.

I was surprised by the high proportion (60%) of donor dads who were taking or planned to take an active co-parenting role (ranging from routine weekly overnight contact to a 50% split) as opposed to the more limited 'kindly-uncle' role that lesbian's often prefer (Dunne 1999). Interestingly many had initiated the process of becoming fathers by advertising or by broaching the topic with a lesbian friend. In addition, one respondent, was actively co-parenting with a disabled lesbian friend who had been deserted

by the biological father who had been her ex-lover. As donor fathers had almost always experienced an extended period of negotiation with the would-be mother/s to establish a mutuality in expectations with respect to contact, and perspectives on child-rearing before embarking, few were unhappy about their parenting arrangements, and all but one described their relationship with the mother/s as good or excellent. However, one father was unhappy.

The mother had become a Radical Revolutionary Lesbian Separatist and moved to Wales when their child was three years old. Until then they had worked hard to achieve a fairly equal parenting arrangement. The distance and her hostility towards him means that he now has infrequent contact. Conversely, another had been content with limited contact from the outset, but as his child, now seven years old, began to grow up he was surprised to find himself regretting this arrangement - wishing that he could take a bigger role in his son's life. There was also an example of a dad moving from the agreed limited involvement to taking on a co-parenting role when one of the mothers died.

It could be argued, as some of my divorced main carers have, that when gay men collaborate with lesbians in becoming parents they reproduce the heterosexual norm in so far as it is women whose lives are changed by the responsibilities of child rearing. While this may well be the case for men who take on a 'kindly uncle' (which is what the mother/s concerned probably wanted). I think that many of the men who are in co-parenting situations with lesbian mothers have had their lives changed in fundamental ways - and they have commented on this to me. While the balance of responsibility will almost inevitably lie with the mother/s, respondents interpreted co-parenting as meaning the sharing of

nurturing/ `mothering' - with fathers having sole charge of the child when living in their home. The experience of nurturing can change people. For example, because of geographical constraints, one respondent currently plays a more limited `kindly-uncle' role in his four-year old son's life. However, he has found nurturing such a fulfilling experience that he wants to bring up a child on his own. He and the lesbian mother have decided that they will have a second child and that he will be the main carer. He has savings to enable him to take some time out from paid employment to live with the mother when the child is being breast fed, and then plans to adjust his working situation to being home-based.

I believe that there are wider changes afoot - flowing inevitably from the United States of America. This month a national gay and lesbian news-magazine (The Advocate) in the USA was devoted to lesbian and gay parenting. There were features discussing ways that gay men were extending their imaginations to embrace the idea of fatherhood, and challenging the 'proscription against parenting' (p64). There were examples of men giving up high powered jobs in order to become main carers on the adoption of babies. In this study, there were several examples of respondents who were or planned to bring up children in their gay partnerships and be main carers. They had either adopted a baby (the mother was the daughter of a lesbian couple), experienced surrogacy or were in the process of becoming parents in this way (with the sister of one partner carrying the child and the other partner donating sperm). In addition, one dad had adopted a teenage girl who asked if she could live with him. She had been a wild child who felt unloved by parents. To his amazement and sorrow (on her behalf), the parents agreed to this and a subsequent move across America. Several years later her parents changed their mind. This led to a legal battle where the Courts too a view that the young woman had thrived in her home and ruled in favour of my respondent, despite his being openly gay. She is now an adult and has children of her own. All of these men lived in the USA, where certain States hold more liberal Equal Opportunity Policies in relation to Lesbian and Gay Rights in fostering and adoption.

## CONCLUDING COMMENT

In summary, the experience of most of the gay fathers in this study challenges several assumptions about both gayness and masculinity more generally. The capacity for gay men to co-operate with women in active parenting contradicts stereotypes of gay men as irresponsible and hedonistic, it also confounds the notion that men are unwilling or unable to take a full or equal part in nurturing/mothering. The existence of powerful bonds of affection and respect between gay men and their wives/ex-wives - and indeed never-married gay fathers and lesbian mothers/ heterosexual women friends - and their capacity to collaborate in raising children provides an interesting alternative purchase for the critique of romantic heterosexuality as the ideal basis for parenting relationships. It may well be that the enduring quality of friendship may provide the kind of emotional consistency that can incorporate flexibility demand in times of change. In relation to children, almost without fail respondents believed that there were major advantages growing up with a gay parent. The process of coming out required inordinate amounts of self reflection on what constituted masculinity, personhood and the landscape of sexual and emotional ways of being. As one of my respondents told me in interview the thinking involved in coming out 'is a Ph.D on life'. In their view, the experiential insights gained in dealing with homophobia enabled them to be more tolerant individuals. They hoped that their children would grow up to 'be themselves' and be less constrained by parental expectations. They also thought that their children would have fewer fears about difference. Respondents' experience of collaboration and of pushing forward the boundaries of masculinity also indicate the possibilities for the negotiation and establishment of more egalitarian, inclusive gender relations. It offers

some insight into why coming out to a wife does not have to end in tears.

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## Endnotes

1. See for example the excellent work of Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy (2000) on alternative forms of kinship and families that are being constructed within lesbian and gay communities.

2. I am grateful to the ESRC for funding this one-year project (R000 22 2557).

3. The methods used in this research are interesting. The study was widely publicized, hundreds of information sheets - which included a basic questionnaire asking for parenting details - were distributed within lesbian and gay parenting and fostering groups nationally. Following the global media interest in the findings from my earlier study of lesbian parents, the current project received much interest in the gay press in this country and abroad. Originally I had intended to chart the different dimensions of gay fatherhood via a questionnaire survey, informed by focus group discussion. Greater depth was to be gained in interviews with dads in each of the different situational groupings. However, when I had heard from the first half-dozen informants (who were each in very interesting and different situations) it became clear that this would be a difficult topic to explore in a survey. Fortunately, as more of the background questionnaires arrived the majority had given an e.mail address. In order to bring to life the different dimensions of gay fatherhood I decided to shift my research strategy to take advantage of the possibility of exploring respondents' lives through e.mail dialogues. So as not to limit discussion to those who had access to a computer, telephone interviews were conducted. All completed a short introductory questionnaire, and about half completed an extended questionnaire - focussing particularly on demographic information. Respondents were very keen to have their voices heard, but time and financial constraints limited face-to-face interviews to the strategic six. Thus, a great deal of very rich data has been collected.

The e.mail dialogues were very revealing and as such proved to be an exceptionally rewarding and affective research tool. It allowed me to extend the study beyond the confines of a single nation - although very similar patterns were found. There was the added advantage of time. Respondents and myself had time to reflect in the exchange of questions and answers, enabling clarification and elaboration - often respondents commented upon spending several hours writing their replies. As I was viewing these men as experts on their own lives, I was able to feed back ideas and insights as they crystallized to see if they held broader relevance. There were also opportunities for brainstorming around particular findings, such as why wives had been so generous in their support. Respondents often spoke of the value of our dialogues for helping them to make sense of their lives. I was able to put some in contact with men in similar

situations, and could act as a soundboard when they were going through difficult periods. Our usually extensive and intimate exchanges over the past year has meant that we have often become close. This has led to respondents becoming curious about me. Consequently, aside from the more formal interviews (which were life-history oriented) I had meetings with an additional five dads.

4. On moving from research on women to men, I was struck by the greater possibilities for extensive periods away from home afforded by men's jobs. For many respondents this freedom from the surveillance of friends and family enabled them to explore their sexuality.



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