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## Fatherhood settings and stories of gay men

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### Abstract

This paper examines the fatherhood settings and fatherhood stories of fourteen Australian gay men aged 33–75 who were interviewed 2001–2003 as part of a larger study. Two fatherhood settings and two principal fatherhood stories were revealed in the men's interviews. The fatherhood settings consisted of men (a) who had children when married to or in a relationship with a woman and (b) whose fatherhood came about not as a result of a relationship with a woman. The men's fatherhood stories comprised two principal narratives concerning care and contact. Fatherhood settings and stories are examined in the context of generational difference and in light of gender assumptions about masculinity and care.

### Introduction

The fourteen men who comprise this non-representative sample were interviewed between 2001 and 2003 as part of a larger study.<sup>1</sup> Recruited from capital cities, country towns and districts in south-eastern Australia, the interviewees were aged between 75 and 33. Two men were in their 70s, four men were in their 60s, three men were in their 50s, two men were in their 40s, and the remaining three men were in their 30s. With the exception of one Aboriginal man, the men were of Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic descent and, with the exception of one man who had a working-class job in the hospitality sector, all were tertiary educated and had middle-class jobs in occupations such as law, care professions, education, or the public service. Each man was asked the same set of questions about his social, affective and sexual lives, the answers to which form the basis of this paper.

The method used to collect the data for this study—structured, in-depth interviews—elicited narrative responses or life stories from the interviewees. One of the advantages of in-depth interviews is that they allow the researcher to investigate the subjective meanings and interpretations individuals apply to their own lived experience. In the case of the men interviewed for this study, their personal narratives reveal something of how they understood their relationship with their children in the context of larger public narratives, which for them include public debates about traditional fatherhood and the new, emerging models of fatherhood that some of their experiences represent.

### Fatherhood settings

Two fatherhood settings were identified in the stories the fourteen men told about their experiences of being fathers. The first setting was that which occurred when eleven of the men were married to or in a relationship with a woman, later transforming when the men came out and, in the case of most, embarked on gay relationships. This fatherhood setting, which I have called heterosexual fatherhood, and which represents the experience of the majority of men interviewed for this study, was also the usual means by which gay men experienced fatherhood for the greater part of the twentieth century—as a result of the double life many led in response to widespread homophobia in the West (Chauncey, 1994; McLaren, 1999; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). The marriages or heterosexual relationships of these eleven men ranged in duration from seven to forty years.

The second fatherhood setting occurred in the case of three men whose fatherhood was not as a result of a heterosexual relationship and I have called this non-heterosexual fatherhood. In the case of the three men interviewed for this study who experienced fatherhood in a non-heterosexual setting, one became a father when he, his partner, and a lesbian couple arranged to have a child; the other two men

did so as foster parents. Similar fatherhood settings have been discussed in British men (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001) and North American men (D'Emilio, 2002).

### *Heterosexual fatherhood*

Eleven men experienced fatherhood in a setting that began when they were married or in a relationship with a woman, that is, as a result of sexual intercourse with a woman and then childbirth. The families of choice the men then established varied according to how and when they came out, the nature of the gay relationship(s) they created, and their children's place in them.

Aged between 75 and 45 at the time of interview, the heterosexual relationship histories of these eleven men can be divided into three groups. The first group comprises men who were married for more than 30 years and they are Gerald (75) was married for 31 years and had a male partner of 9 years; John (65) was married for 40 years and had a male partner of 20 years; and Douglas (63) had been married for 39 years, had a male lover and kept a household with his second wife.<sup>2</sup>

The second group comprises men who were married for between 20 and 29 years and they are Leslie (74) was married for 22 years and had a male partner of 20 years; Terrence (64) was married for 20 years and had a male partner of 24 years; and Henry (50) was married for 20 years and had a male partner of 10 years.

And the third group comprising men married less than 20 years, who are Clive (64) was married for 11 years and had been single for 17 years; Roy (58) was married for 8 years and had been single for 9 months; Ross (54) was married for 13 years and had a male partner of more than 6 years; Trevor (49) was married for 8 years and had a male partner of 19 years; and Scott (45) was married for 7 years and had a male partner of 8 years.

Two questions arise from these data. The first is, Why did the men marry in the first place? And the second is, When and how did they cease being married and begin their gay intimate life?

In answer to the first question, the men drew on social pressure as the principal narrative to explain why they married or entered into a heterosexual relationship. It is significant that men from all classes said it social pressure caused them to conduct heterosexual relationships in their youth, which in many cases lasted into middle age. It is significant also that the period when they did so stretched from the early 1950s<sup>3</sup> until the early 1980s.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the compulsion the men felt who came out later in life to enter into a heterosexual relationship was not confined to the period of acute homophobia in the West that historians associate with the late 1940s and 1950s (McLaren, 1999) but extended well beyond it, underlining Norbert Elias's argument (2000) that a reduction in shame affect and increased social tolerance do not occur uniformly but in spurts.

When explaining why their heterosexual relationships came to an end, the men drew on two principal narratives, which were either a break down in the relationships or a gradual drifting apart that led to separation and/or divorce. Four men made no mention of how or why their marriage or de facto relationship ended. Of the remaining seven, three separated amicably, one man was still married at the time of interview, and the accounts of only three suggested a break down, two of which follow. Gerald (aged 75) said: 'We were married for 31 years until various circumstances broke that marriage irretrievably' and Henry (aged 50) explained that he and his wife had, 'a series of family deaths and traumas and the combination of these and my [sexual] ambiguity ... was enough to break up the marriage'.

The impact these separations had on the men's female partners or wives are the untold stories in these accounts and my analysis of them. On occasions the men did refer to the emotional impact of their separation or divorce but because I was chiefly interested in their accounts of coming out and/or gay relationship experience and history, I rarely asked follow-up questions about the effect the termination of their heterosexual relationships had on their former female partners or wives. There is more discussion in the section below on fatherhood stories, however, on the extent to which the men kept in

touch with their former female partners after coming out, and in the context of the relationships they maintained with their children.

### *Non-heterosexual fatherhood*

Three men from the sample experienced fatherhood in two different settings that came about *not* as a result of sexual relations with a woman. The first non-heterosexual fatherhood setting was the gay-lesbian parenting experience of a man, his partner, and a lesbian couple; the second setting occurred in foster-parent relationships two men and their partners had with children in their care. The non-heterosexual fatherhood experiences of the three men, all of whom were in their 30s, are discussed in turn.

The first non-heterosexual fatherhood settings is the ‘everyday experiment’ that Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) identify as one of the ‘stories of choice’ available to gays and lesbians today—where a gay couple and a lesbian couple conceive a child by insemination (other stories of choice include surrogacy). In this sample, one man, Tony (aged 33) and his partner, aged 38, who had been together 9 years, arranged to have a child with a lesbian couple they met socially. As I discuss elsewhere, Tony, his partner and the lesbian couple with whom they made their parenting arrangement extensively prepared for conception, birth and the upbringing of their daughter (Robinson, 2008). The second non-heterosexual fatherhood setting was that which two men and their partners had as foster parents. The first man was Joseph (aged 35). Together with his ex-partner, Joseph had looked after two teenage boys for three and a half years. The nature of the parenting and the manner of the care they provided the boys is discussed in the next section on fatherhood stories.

The fatherhood experience of Neville (aged 37) was similar to the foster-parent relationship of Joseph, except that the children Neville and his partner were fathering were related by birth.

I tend to have a lot of my family living with me at various points of time. We have got a couple of young girls that have lived with us for most of their lives, from when they were three years old ... The oldest girl spends every second weekend with us, and it’s essentially a parental relationship. They are my nieces.

As an Aboriginal man, Neville explained his relationship with his nieces, and other relatives, as being familial but ‘not in a white-fella sense’. He did not describe it as foster parenting (my term), simply as ‘parental’ and where he was able to provide for his nieces in a relatively conventional family setting. Elsewhere I have described as ‘gay nuclear’ the type of family Joseph and his ex-partner and Neville and his partner provided the children living with them (Robinson, 2008).

### Fatherhood stories

I have divided the men’s fatherhood stories into four types according to their closeness to their children. The first is a group of six men who by their own admission maintained very relationships with their children,<sup>5</sup> and in doing so demonstrated what Jo Lindsay and Deb Dempsey call ‘involved fathering’ (2009, 155). The second group of four men was in regular contact with their children.<sup>6</sup> A third group of two men spoke of fairly distant relationships with their children.<sup>7</sup> And a fourth group of two men made no mention of their children at all.<sup>8</sup> None of the interviewees expressed their parenting closeness in quantitative terms (daily, weekly, three-monthly contact, etc.) and I did not ask them to quantify their relationships.

The group of six men whose stories revealed very close parenting relationships included all three men who were non-heterosexual fathers, at least one of whom (Tony) showed strong signs of having fallen in love with his new-born child, exhibiting what Anthony McMahon terms the ‘joys of fatherhood’ (1999, 125). For Tony, familial relationships were always important and he, ‘never imagined ... [he] could not be a parent’. Joseph too valued familial relationships, as experienced in his birth family and his ‘family of choice’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

My biological family, that is, my parents and my sisters have always been important people to me ... But I see my family as broader than that. I include in it some of the heterosexual friends I have had for decades.

The remaining three men who had very close relationships with their children were a man in his 50s who despite the break up of his 20-year marriage, 'had really nice relationships with ... [his] kids', and two men who not only had very close relationships with their children but also maintained good relations with their former wives. Clive (aged 64), for example, said the following of his merged family.

It's curious because ... my wife from whom I have been separated for many years now, is a lesbian and living in a lesbian relationship. We have between us five children ... [and] having seen aspects of my life ... they seem to be remarkable and accepting of it.

What the fatherhood stories of these men revealed who maintained very close parenting relationships with their children were (a) their ordinary, everyday nature, and (b) the men's explicit understanding of what fatherhood entailed and their determination to do it as well as they could—for the good of their children or the children in their care.

Four men maintained regular contact with their children and two men did so at a distance. The four men who had regular contact with their children included two men who had each been married for more than 35 years and had been in same-sex relationships for 20 years respectively (John, aged 65 and Leslie, aged 74). Leslie described his relationship with his children as positive and supportive, which he attributed to 'coming out over a number of years'. John was still in touch with his wife and children: 'I am very lucky because ... there is a lot of friendship there'. If the relationships these men had with their children were less close than those of the men from the previous group, this could partly be explained by the men's age. Their children were adults and in the natural course of events, adult children are more removed from their parents than are young children, teenagers, and children in their 20s. As well, the relationship with their grandchildren often affects the parent-child relationship of men in their 60s and 70s.

The men who saw their children only occasionally included one man, Gerald (aged 75), who told of his children's mixed reaction to his homosexuality. On discovering that he was gay, one of Gerald's daughters responded aggressively. 'She cross-examined me, "Am I gay? How long have I been gay? Why did I not tell the family? And, if I was gay, how could I father children?" And questions like that, which was unbelievable'. In the end, and after more acute difficulties with his son, Gerald reconciled with all three of his children. The response of Gerald's daughter underlines the fatherhood difficulties of earlier generations of gay men, many of whom were forced to choose between a double life and marriage in order to maintain relations with their children or separation and divorce and the risk that they might see their children only occasionally—life choices that Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan call 'stories of impossibilities' (2001).

## Conclusion

Heterosexual fatherhood represented the experience of the large majority of gay men interviewed for this paper. The relationships on which they embarked when they were young men occurred as the result of social pressure to conform to heteronormative values, most likely as the conventional means for the channelling of sexual desire (Stone, 1977). No interviewee explicitly stated that he married or embarked on a heterosexual relationship when young in order to have children. Non-heterosexual fatherhood represented the experience of three men from this sample, all of whom were in their 30s. In line with other published research, it is reasonable to assume that the incidence of non-heterosexual fatherhood will increase, representing as it does the everyday experiments on which young gay and lesbian people are increasingly prepared to embark in advanced, western democracies like Australia, Great Britain, and the United States.

The fatherhood stories the men interviewed for this paper related ranged from accounts of intense, involved fathering—including all three non-heterosexual fathers, as well as men in their 50s and one

in his 60s—to relationships that were regular and close, to more distant relationships. The accounts the men recounted of intense, involved fathering had in common the men's explicit dedication and willingness to commit to fathering, which is in contrast to prevailing stereotypes of men's propensity to care, and their casual acceptance of the ordinariness of this involvement and commitment. What the stories considered here show is that the growing number of successful non-heterosexual fatherhood experiments are opening up all sorts of gay fatherhood possibilities that were simply not available to gay men from earlier generations.

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<sup>1</sup> The larger study is the author's PhD, which was later published as *The Changing World of Gay Men* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2008). Some of the data on which this paper rely were discussed in the context of the gay family (*The Changing World*, pp. 143–50). They have not previously been analysed, however, for what they reveal about (a) fatherhood settings or (b) fatherhood stories. Seven of the men from this sample of fourteen were from Melbourne, four were from Hobart and the remaining three men were from Albury, Adelaide, and Canberra.

<sup>2</sup> While Douglas described himself as gay, his sexual and intimate life more strongly resembled that of a bisexual person.

<sup>3</sup> This was the case for two men in their 70s (Gerald, aged 75 and Leslie, aged 74) and three men in their 60s (John, aged 65, Clive, aged 64, and Terrence, aged 64).

<sup>4</sup> This was the case for Scott, aged 45 whose relationship with his wife coincided with the onset of HIV-AIDS epidemic in the West.

<sup>5</sup> Clive (64), Ross (54), Henry (50), Neville (37), Joseph (35), and Tony (33).

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<sup>6</sup> Leslie (74), John (65), Terrence (64), and Scott (45).

<sup>7</sup> Gerald (75) and Douglas (63).

<sup>8</sup> Roy (58) and Trevor (49).