GAY MEN AND FATHERHOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA: A DISCURSIVE STUDY[i]

BACKGROUND

Today I'm presenting the preliminary findings a qualitative investigation of South African gay men's thoughts, feelings and perspectives toward parenthood, their reproductive decision-making, and experiences of pathways to parenthood or to non-parenthood. In South Africa highly progressive legislation offers *de jure* protection of reproductive rights and the promise of reproductive freedom to all; yet there is still widespread antipathy toward queer parents and families (Swain & Frizelle, 2013), with many still believing that homosexuality and parenthood are incompatible. This is especially true as it concerns gay men (Stacey, 2006) who are frequently stereotyped as promiscuous, unable to commit or sexual predators. Such negative characterisations, along with the strong connection of motherhood with female gender roles must come to bear on queer men's reproductive decision-making (Mallon, 2004; Tasker, 2002). However, there is, to date no published South African work around reproductive decision-making or family formation that explicitly focuses on gay men. Our aim was to explore how these experiences are shaped by our particular socio-cultural space.

DATA GENERATION

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews
- 24 self-identified gay men, 'out' except 2
- Class-race overlap

DATA ANALYSIS

The work I present today is a preliminary analysis using discursive methodology. I focus on the ways that participants positioned themselves and others within their talk. In this presentation, I examine talk about disclosure and managing discrimination in relation to parenthood because it was within these instances of talk that participants highlighted the various intersecting identity positions that came into play.

➔ The possibility of having children was described as creating visibility and necessitating 'coming out' in ways that might previously not have been necessary: "…two men living together and [then] a child comes into the frame … for me it was like telling the world about my life, and I was very private about my sexuality" (John) / "…it's almost as if you have to 'come out' all the time and you have to EXPLAIN yourself…" (Martin)
➔ Participants constructed their disclosure of their sexual identities as a strategic and calculated process
➔ They described this process as one that needed to be managed carefully in order to avoid other people's prejudice, especially because this might negatively impact upon children

I present the discussion of the findings according to the major themes that were identified and then discursively analysed.

"IT'S VERY EASY TO BLEND IN"

Participants often highlighted the potential negative consequences for the children of queer parents in the form of heterosexist responses and homophobic bullying. A discourse of children's best interests was therefore a significant discursive resource. For some this was drawn on to explain why minimising one's sexuality might be important in certain instances. Parents described the ways that they attempted to minimise visibility in order to ensure that their children did not experience discrimination.

> **Geoffrey:** The reason why they went to a private school was they were terrified of what would happen in a government school if it was discovered they had a gay father and they would be picked on unmercifully. […] it was a very **progressive private** school. [..] And because they were so far away there was a gap between their home and their school and their school friends, which I think made it possible, because the biggest problem boys have […] being brought up by a gay parent is actually peer pressure and it can make their lives an

absolute misery. […] bullying and saying "you're a fag" and that sort of thing. […] I don't think anyone in the college even realised they came from a gay home, including the principal. Just that their father took them to school and signed the forms and paid the fees and that sort of thing. […] we coped (.) and **we kept things very private**.

Karl: But I mean, ja, in terms of having had gay parenting issues? ((Shakes his head)) […] You don't make a big deal, you JUST don't apologise. And that is why we just go with the flow. YES, we're not going to any of the events dressed in tiaras and waving gay flags and whatever. We are completely part of the community there. It is so important for the kids to learn that, because it gives them a sense of normalcy too. So we're not standing out. If people LOOK, yes, then we will stand out […] it has allowed both of them to stand on their own without having this target of "Oh gosh, gay parents!" […] You can't rock the boat all the time because the children will have (.) fall out from it. [...] you can't just do things and scream at teachers and all the rest, because it's not about that, it's about your child.

These extracts illustrate how men positioned themselves as needing to 'pass' or to minimise their visibility as gay fathers for the sake of the children. Children were positioned as vulnerable and needing their parents' protection, as well as intensive energy, time, and money to ensure their psychological welfare. This is a very particular contemporary Middle Class ideology of parenthood and childhood in which children's needs are placed front and centre and seen as more important than those of their parents. It was central to all participants' accounts and is clearly evident in Karl's quote.

Significantly, the Middle Class participants constructed their "blending in" as consciously chosen. This did not necessary mean passing for straight, but passing for what is considered to be a normal family in that space. For Black participants the opposite was described. The 2 Black fathers in the study had had their children in a heterosexual relationship in order to pass as straight and one Black participant was still hoping to have children for this very reason. Only one of these three men has disclosed his sexuality to his family. The Black participants described higher stakes related to disclosure within their families and communities, the consequences of which were potentially more severe than those of the MC participants. Fear of social ostracization of themselves or their children was constructed as a major obstacle to disclosing one's sexuality, and in turn to the possibility of having children as an openly gay man. Other South African researchers have also pointed to the ways that race and class shape discrimination with middle-class, generally White queers experiencing non-violent "mundane heterosexism" (Hicks, 2005) and working class and Black queers often facing severe social sanction, sometimes in the form of brutal violence (Distiller, 2011).

CONSCIOUSLY MANOEUVRING SPACES

The participants constructed liberal, private spaces as safer spaces for the children of gay parents. The White and Mixed Race participants constructed the conscious manoeuvring of spaces as a central way of avoiding or minimising discrimination. This was eloquently described by Tim: "though we could assume that we were part of these spaces anyway before… I'm now manoeuvring these a little bit more consciously I would say, so that I stay away from people who I feel- (.) I don't necessarily stay away, but I make a conscious effort to expose him to a greater diversity." Middle class participants were able to avoid spaces that they perceived to be intolerant.

Fernel: We've had no direct prejudices from anybody, [not] that we can tell. […] I mean we were very (.) I suppose we were strategic. We chose […] the school that he went to, because they are a diverse mix. They promote diversity and there [are] people with same-sex parents there and those kinds of things there. And even we chose [the primary school] because of its diversity as well. And so we've (.) not SHELTERED him (.) maybe we have, which could lead to a bit of entitlement in later years…

Like Geoffrey and Fernel, most of these Middle Class participants discussed how they strategically chose the neighbourhoods, schools, churches and other spaces, opting for private and progressive spaces, usually in larger urban centres and formerly White areas. These spaces were constructed as allowing queer families to avoid discrimination more easily. As Martin put it: "it's very easy to live in a bubble, it's very easy to move in an area where you DON'T get questioned and it's very easy to blend in…" Again, the need to protect their children from prejudice was provided as one of the primary reasons for these choices, as well as to instil particular kinds of values. This wasn't a straightforward

or unproblematic position, however. There were moments, when this particular rendition of 'good parenting', which rests on the privileging of children's best interests created troubled positioning for parents, potentially casting them as politically apathetic or as elitist by allowing their children to 'live in a bubble' or a 'White world'.

"IT'S VERY OPRAH WINFREY"… FOR SOME

Significantly the White and Mixed-race participants overwhelmingly maintained that they had not encountered much discrimination related to their gender and sexual identities overall. Several, like Clive, apologised that they didn't "have more gory stories to tell". While they did recount incidents of discrimination and prejudice, these were characterised as isolated incidents or occurrences of 'misguided' or benevolent discrimination. In contrast Black participants who told stories of struggle and conflict, which resonates with my earlier point about the raced and classed nature of discrimination. This is illustrated by Asanda's story. He has disclosed his sexuality to his family and currently has no children.

> **Asanda**: … in our communities where we grow up, where we as gay people—which is in a peri-urban (.) like, ghetto—so there'll be a lot of homophobia going on. I never wanted to have a kid while there is so much going on. […] I was like: I don't want to be father. It's OK for other people to be a father, but for me, I don't want to be a father [due to] factors that gay people are facing in communities, such as homophobic attacks, hate crimes, you name it. Such factors you know? Like getting (.) being brutally killed for being openly gay, you know? So I thought about those things. Whenever someone is talking about me being a father I'm like, I don't want to [bring] a child in this vile world where there is so much negativity. I don't want to see my child going through what I went through.

Asanda's story is similar to those of the other childfree men in the study, who were all Middle Class in that he attributes his ambivalence or reluctance to have children as related to protecting children from "this vile world" and societal heterosexism. Like these other young men, it was also not immediately obvious to him that he could even be a parent. However, for Asanda it had not even occurred to him that he *could* be a father as an openly gay man *living in his community*. His narrative highlights the untenable nature of even thinking of having children as a gay man within a working class, 'township' setting. It was characterised by having to negotiate the constraints arising from his social location, both in terms of finances and potential danger.

"IT'S MORE ABOUT RACE"

Significantly, their racial positioning was constructed as more of a concern than their sexuality by most White and Coloured participants, who were more likely to become parents through trans-racial adoption. Karl said, for example, "…we OFTEN spend our life talking about race, not about the same-sex thing. It just seems to be a bigger issue". Joe echoed this, "it is a very difficult thing to have a mixed-race family, I think that that you know being gay parents and having kids it's not such a big problem as having White parents and Black kids. That to me is the bigger issue." For many participants, racial differences were constructed as adding another axis of difference that could potentially have negative consequences for children.

> **Clive**: …sometimes, even now, [I wonder] what have (.) what are we doing? What kind of experiment are we in, you know? … the layers, trans-race, two dads and how do you hold the child through that journey? I suppose my own experience of bullying, of being outed, being you know... and the desperate need to protect your child and yet we've created this journey for a child, which is not gonna be easy, which is gonna be complex. That does become something to be conscious of.

Baxter constructed this additional "layer" of difference as such a significant concern, that he felt it was fairer on his future child if he opted for surrogacy as the path to parenthood, and thus to minimise the discrimination that the child might face. Most men pointed out that this route was inordinately expensive, even for fairly affluent South Africans. They also pointed to some other social reasons that adoption was preferable, despite, and in a few instances because of, the likely mixed race composition of the family.

Racial positioning was presented as an almost insurmountable obstacle, because it could not be minimised in the same ways as other identity markers. Having a child with a different skin colour from one's own calls attention to the

lack of a bio-genetic connection and belongingness, as Time put it: "they don't see this man and his child; they see this man and the ADOPTED child". As a result, participants with children frequently described being asked by strangers, "Where's the mother?" It is significant too of course, that it is the MOTHER that is asked after, because this also speaks to participants' contravention of the normative expectation that children, especially young children, will be cared for by women. This is illustrated by Charles's story.

> **Charles**: Some people stare at you to such an extent that they (.) come up to you and they'll ask you. I had a few instances where people ask you "Is it your child?" […] they look at you, and they look at your child, and they look at your partner, and then they speak to the other staff in their language, (.) but I pick up [what they're saying], and then they would actually ask you, "Where did you get the child? Did you steal the child?" And then I had one woman who came up to me and said to me "Which hospital did you steal the child from?" […] THAT for me was the worst when I was asked, where did I steal this child.

This account illustrates some of the ways that participants described how people discredited their relationships and feelings for their children, and sometimes even their motives for having children. For example some participants recounted people suggesting that they might give back their children if parenting became too much for them.

DISCUSSION

It is possible to see that the participants emphasised that sexuality was not the only or always the most significant factor with respect to the barriers and challenges that they faced in relation to parenthood decisions. The analysis highlights multiple, intersecting positions that are negotiated in participants' talk; these simultaneously accord privilege and disadvantage; allow participants to threaten or be threatened; and both challenge and reinforce norms. These findings, point to the contextual and located nature of disclosure of sexual identity as a strategic and reflexive process, as researchers have identified in other contexts. This process was presented as constrained by the prior identity positions that participants occupied.

Our analysis also begins to paint a picture of the nuanced power relations that surround gay men's experiences of potentially becoming and being parents. I have chosen to focus here on the intersection of sexuality, race, and class, but gender was also undoubtedly a key part of participants' experiences. The findings highlight the classed and racial differences *among gay men*, suggesting a variability experiences. Although White and Coloured participants in mixed-race families construed the their racial positioning as significant in that it potentially makes them vulnerable to discrimination, yet, unlike Black participants the privilege accorded by Whiteness and by a Middle Class social location meant that they could frame their experiences of doing family as positive overall, or express optimism for future fatherhood.

It is possible to see how race-class positions in particular interconnect in the accounts as apartheid-generated social categorisations and geography become salient in constructions of 'safe' and 'unsafe' spaces. These were constructed along racialized and class-based lines, drawing on existing constructions of race, particularly the construction of White spaces as 'liberal' or progressive and Black spaces as conservative or dangerous. Likewise, used in conjunction with the discourse of children's best interests, 'good parenthood' was clearly associated with particular kinds of middle class values. These discourses provided the participants with a means of justifying the ways that they chose to make themselves and their families in/visible at certain times and in particular ways. Yet, at the same time, they potentially reinforce the power disparities that exist among queer men in relation to their possibilities for parenthood and the pathways that are available to them. Being aware of these power relations is important in relation to the ways that we think about politics around reproductive justice. Black feminists have pointed out that reproductive rights discourses have been centred around Middle Class concerns and chiefly the right to choose not to have a child, overlooking the struggles of women of colour, indigenous women, and other marginalised groups' right to have children and to control their own fertility. Looking beyond notions of discrimination primarily on the basis of sexuality to the intersecting power relations around queer people's reproduction allows us to recognise the differences among them. Rather than fracturing our politics, this should allow us to form coalitional politics and to seek chains of equivalence with the struggles of other groups and to think through carefully how we engage with and support queer men in respect of their reproductive decision-making and family formation.

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