

*The Different Dimensions of Gay Fatherhood*  
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<b>1. Summary</b>
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## **INTRODUCTION**

This study builds upon a long tradition in British social research which sets out to investigate continuity and change in family life. It locates itself in the broader enquiry into new emergent family and household formations, which has, until recently, been limited to heterosexual contexts. The greater visibility and tolerance of lesbian and gay people has enabled increasing numbers of people construct non-heterosexual lifestyles, many of whom are or plan to be parents. There has been a small amount of research on lesbian motherhood, but no published British academic research on gay fatherhood. While gay fathers attract much media and political interest, lack of academic research ensures that stereotypes abound and debate remains anecdotal and speculative.

The main objective of this exploratory study is to contribute to academic and popular debate on new emergent families by illuminating the circumstances of a hitherto un-researched population of parents, gay fathers.

## **METHODS**

Key to accomplishing the objectives of the study was the inclusion of as many gay fathers as possible. However, their invisibility in both mainstream and gay culture poses difficulties for recruitment. Consequently, much effort was devoted to publicising the study and working with user-groups to achieve a relatively large sample of 100 participants.

An aim of the research was to develop a research strategy which was rigorous, sensitive and inclusive. It therefore employed a range of interlinking methodologies (qualitative and quantitative, conventional and innovative). The approach focussed on respondents as active agents and recognized their expertise by including them in the process of analysis through several stages of interactive feedback. I am confident that the care taken in conducting the research has both strengthened the findings and added to the overall enjoyment and value of the enterprise for participants.

## **PARENTING CIRCUMSTANCES**

A central finding was the diversity of gay fathers, in terms of age (ranging from early twenties to late seventies), stage in family formation, but most importantly, parenting context. While this is a relatively small study, I am confident that most dimensions of gay fatherhood are represented in the research, although gay fathers may not necessarily be spread across categories in the same way as participants.

*Married gay fathers:* Given the secrecy surrounding their sexual identity, married gay men are an extremely difficult population to recruit and will be under-represented in any research. However, the study was successful in recruiting 11 married gay fathers.

Of particular interest is the extent to which married respondents were open about their sexuality to their wives (73%), who are usually reported to be supportive about their husband's gayness. Most married respondents describe their marriages as happy and say that they remain married because they love their wives and/or wish to maintain a stable family environment. Often marriages accommodate the husband's sexuality by being 'open'. When not 'out' married respondents tend to negotiate their sexuality in secrecy. Like most divorced respondents, married men were usually unaware of their sexuality before marriage or thought it was 'a passing phase'. However, several had been openly gay before marriage and had surprised themselves by falling in love with a woman.

*Divorced gay fathers:* These respondents represent 39% of the sample. Contrary to my expectations only eight (21%) reported severe difficulties in relation to access to their children. They were particularly distraught about their circumstances. Surprisingly, most divorced respondents remained involved in their children's lives - nine (23%) were actively co-parenting with ex-wives and nine (23%) were main carers. Again, most divorced gay fathers reported good or excellent relationships with ex-wives, often describing them as 'best friends'. Both the extent of their involvement in parenting post-divorce and their positive relationships with ex-wives contrasts with findings on divorced fathers more generally. Their parenting commitments often resulted in their feeling different and isolated from wider gay culture, they usually had a preference for relationships with other gay fathers or nurturing men.

*Parenting in a Non-Heterosexual Context:* Of particular note is the extent to which gay men have

become (n=40) or are planning to become parents (n=14) in non-heterosexual contexts. Thirteen respondents were **foster-carers** (all openly gay), fourteen were **fathers via donor insemination**, four had become fathers via **surrogacy** or the **adoption of babies**. Of those planning or in the process of becoming fathers, most expected to experience donor insemination, and three were planning surrogacy or the adoption of a baby. Surprisingly, respondents who were, or were planning to become, fathers favoured active involvement in childcare - either as co-parents or main carers. Like many divorced gay fathers, their lives were constrained and enhanced by the commitments and pleasures of childcare.

## **CONCLUSION**

These findings suggest that gay men represent a very interesting population of fathers, not least because many are actively engaged parents. In these times of change, parents more generally may have much to learn from their strategies for sharing parenting, within and between households. It appears that the 'gayby' boom (a situation, first identified in the USA, whereby lesbian women are opting into motherhood in increasing numbers) is beginning to have a major impact on the lives of a growing population of gay men. Often gay fathers felt marginalised from both mainstream and gay society. However, greater visibility of actively involved fathers who have transcended the reproductive limitations of their sexuality is likely to encourage others to become parents. This suggests that gay culture may have to adapt as the horizons of more gay men expand to include parenthood.

The extent to which gay fathers collaborate with women in parenting or in their quest to become fathers is also fascinating, as well as the good relationships many reported having with the mothers of their children (ex-wives, lesbian women, and sometimes heterosexual friends). Gay fathers appear to be particularly interested in extending their masculine identity to embrace nurturing qualities, and are likely to report challenging traditional gender roles when married and beyond. Almost without fail respondents felt that children had much to gain from growing up with a gay dad, an important gift being tolerance.

## **2. FULL REPORT**

## 2.1 Background

Gay fatherhood has become an issue with one of the greatest mis-matches between the strength of popular and political fascination with the topic and the availability of sound academic research. The media relish the 'outing' of yet another prominent member of parliament or cabinet minister, and appear confounded by the 'good family man' image these men may hold, and by the intention of wives to 'stand by their man' (see for example *The Express*, 31.1.99, and *The Daily Mail* 1.2.99 on Tory Euro MP Tom Spence). The media has also noticed the advent of a 'gayby boom' - a situation whereby lesbian and gay people are opting into parenthood in increasing numbers [1,2], with stories about wealthy gay men 'purchasing babies' or combining with lesbians to become fathers appearing the Press (see *Daily Record* 20.7.99). A number of talk shows and phone-ins have debated the pros and cons of gay parenting. Lack of academic research does little to create informed debate - myths and stereotypes abound with sometimes tragic consequences.

The invisibility of gay fathers in the academic literature may be the result of two main tendencies: research on parenthood has favoured the experience of mothers and research on gay men has favoured the lifestyles of young 'single' gay men. There is important research on gay men's families [3], but this explores a more innovative construction of kinship namely 'families of choice'.

My interest in gay fatherhood stems from an earlier ESRC-funded in-depth study of divisions of labour between lesbian parents. The majority had collaborated with gay men in their quest to have children via donor insemination [1] which supports the view that the 'gayby' boom, first identified in the USA [2], is occurring here. Rather than mirroring the polarisation of work and family-life that generally characterises arrangements in heterosexual households, the research found that lesbian and gay people may be constructing more creative and egalitarian approaches. I was curious to explore this from the perspective of gay fathers.

## 2.2 Objectives

The main objective of this study is to contribute to and extend debates on emergent family formations

and on contemporary fatherhood by furnishing new knowledge on a hitherto under-researched and invisible population, gay fathers. Aims, which have not been changed, are as follows:

- ◆ To furnish baseline data on the range of parenting circumstances of gay men and their routes into parenthood.
- ◆ To ascertain the degree and type of responsibility gay men have for the care of their children, with whom this may be shared, and any socio-legal constraints experienced. A particular interest is to explore their strategies for parenting within and between households.
- ◆ To illuminate the socio-economic and employment circumstances of gay fathers. A concern is to gain a sense of how they balance the demands of childcare and employment and assess their situation in relation to childcare provision.

The accomplishment of these aims required a research strategy that could both generate a fairly large sample and respond to diversity and complexity by retaining some of the richness of a qualitative approach.

## **2.3 Research Process**

### **LOCATING THE SAMPLE**

Gay fathers are a generally invisible population - marginalised in both mainstream and gay culture, with many keeping their sexuality secret so I was well aware of the recruitment difficulties associated with exploring this sensitive topic. Much time and effort was devoted to gaining the trust of and establishing contacts with gatekeepers, user-groups and potential participants. Given the lack of research and the extent to which the topic was in the political domain, the research was enthusiastically welcomed by all user-groups contacted. Full support came from STONEWALL (a national campaign for lesbian and gay rights), and they agreed to distribute publicity leaflets through their National Lesbian and Gay Parenting Network and publish details in their magazine. The Albert Kennedy Trust (which provides

homes for young lesbian and gay people) distributed leaflets through their networks of gay foster carers. Smaller gay parenting networks were contacted and agreed to help publicize the study. Participants were excellent propagandists for the research. In this way hundreds of leaflets were distributed nationally. So that people could contact me anonymously, my telephone number and e.mail address was included in the publicity.

Including my email address and space to note theirs in publicity leaflets proved advantageous as I discovered that many could be contacted electronically. I was curious about this and learnt that gay fathers are drawn to this medium as they can transcend geographical limitations and communicate with other gay fathers through, for example, on-line gay parenting discussion groups. These groups offered an alternative way of locating potential participants.

A great advantage of the media interest in the previous research was that news of the study reached a far wider audience than usual. Reference was made to the study in the Popular Press as well as the Gay Media here and abroad. Thus the research includes respondents who contacted me electronically from other English speaking countries. The inclusion of gay fathers in the US was fortunate as I gained access to men who had adopted babies or experienced surrogacy - legal in some States. To provide insights into earlier stages of negotiation and planning, I extended the study to include gay men who were in the process of becoming fathers. Recruitment continued throughout the life of the project (unfortunately many more have contacted me since). A relatively large sample of 100 was achieved.

## **METHODS**

Originally, the research would employ fairly conventional methods - range established through the deployment of an anonymous questionnaire survey; complexity through focus group discussion, depth through strategic interviews with respondents in six different parenting situations. However, a short exploratory study has to be flexible enough to respond to circumstances as they present.

### **First Contact: Mini-Questionnaire**

The publicity leaflet included a mini-questionnaire asking for information on their circumstances. This proved useful as returned leaflets quickly revealed great diversity in their parenting situations. This brought the problem of how to construct a manageable questionnaire which could be distributed

anonymously as it would have to be exceptionally long to cover all eventualities. Proceeding in this manner would yield a poor response rate and ambiguous data so I elected to wait and see whether enough men contacted me directly to provide a large enough sample.

### **The Development of a new research strategy**

During the early stages of fieldwork it became clear that respondents had fascinating stories to tell and were keen to tell them. Given this willingness, I decided that by collecting as many individual stories as possible I could exceed my expectations for the research by not only mapping the different dimensions of gay fatherhood but bringing them to life. Although this would generate far more work than originally planned I was reassured of manageability because a large proportion of respondents had email addresses (finally 74%) which facilitated data collection and avoided the need for transcription. To ensure that this additional qualitative dimension was not overly biased towards men with computers (although income did not appear a factor as the majority of unemployed fathers in the study had email access) those who were not on e.mail were interviewed by telephone or in person. It was possible for men to contact me anonymously by phone, which some did, and their stories were collected.

A framework of questions geared towards different situations was constructed to help guide discussion.

**Married and divorced respondents** were asked, for example: What led you on the pathway to marriage? \* Had you any queries about your sexuality before marriage? \* Did you tell your wife? \* How did she respond? \* How did you negotiate your sexuality when married? \* Was your divorce/separation related to gay issues? \*

**Donor fathers**: Can you describe your pathway to becoming a father? \* Did you initiate the process? \* How long did the process of negotiation take prior to insemination? \* What were the main considerations \* Is your relationship with the child legally recognized? \* What does your child call you? \* Who are the main people supporting you in your parenting?

**Fathers** were asked about contact time, how satisfied they were with arrangements, and how they balanced childcare and their employment responsibilities. Additionally they were asked \*

whether the experience of being a father had changed them \* whether they thought their children experienced advantages from having a gay father \* how far being a father influenced their participation in the gay community or the formation of gay partnerships.

**All** respondents were asked about their \* coming out history \* how open they were about their sexuality \* details of gay partnerships and the involvement of partners in parenting.

This was a truly interactive research approach which treated respondents as experts on their own lives. E.mail contact was particularly useful for feeding back ideas and developing themes as they immersed. As, for example, divorced/married men talked about the positive responses of wives, new questions could be included, such as: What might wives gain from being in a relationship with a man who is not entirely heterosexual? This led on to questions about divisions of labour and opportunities to extend conceptions of masculinity. E.mail dialogues often extended over the course of the entire project (and I suspect beyond). Additionally they afforded time for reflection, clarification and elaboration on both sides. Messages were usually long and respondents often remarked on the time they had taken reflecting upon and writing responses. Periodic up-dates and draft publications were sent to respondents for comment. Many told me that they gained much from the process.

### **Main Questionnaire**

Originally the project was designed to illuminate range of experience through a large scale anonymous survey. However, diversity was already apparent in the mini questionnaire. As I became confident that I would eventually achieve a respectable sample I decided to restrict the main questionnaire to those who contacted me. This would improve the quality of the information gathered by giving the option of recontact for clarification. Additionally, I thought it would enable the main questionnaire to be geared towards the circumstances of individual respondents. However, I soon learnt the danger of making too many assumptions as it was quite possible for an individual respondent to experience several dimensions of fatherhood. Consequently, respondents received a fairly long questionnaire, which was divided into thematic sections including one with detailed demographic/socio-economic questions. Those sent via e.mail included a series of open-ended questions: for example: 'Some men have told me that being a father makes them feel somewhat marginalised from gay culture, does this have any resonances for you?' \* 'The issue of the inflexibility of employers towards parents has come up. How

easy would/has it be/been to take on a more major role in routine childcare?' \* `Are there any ways that being a father/carer influences how you approach, think about and plan your employment life?'

Questionnaires were sent to 81 respondents. Interestingly and understandably the response rate varied considerably depending on whether the questionnaire was to be completed by hand (n=18) a low 39% response rate, or by email (n=63) a considerably higher 73% response rate. This bore out my initial reservations about investigating this topic in a survey. Many mentioned their irritation at the number of questions that were not relevant to their experience and/or did not see the point of socio-economic and employment questions. Given this resistance and the fact that the dialogues were proving much more interesting and revealing, I decided not to send questionnaires to the later portion of the sample.

### **Face-to-face Interviews**

As the data accumulated, patterns emerged and a range of broad categories of parenting situations were identified. Interviews were conducted with men in each of these main groupings. As most respondents were already engaged in lengthy email dialogues, where possible, men who were not on e.mail were interviewed. Interviews were conducted with men in the following situations: 1. Married - not `out' to wife; 2. Divorced - main carer of child; 3. Divorced - actively co-parenting; 4. Divorced - access problematic; 5. Foster Carer; 6. Donor father - co-parenting lesbian couple; 7. Donor experiencing IVF treatment with heterosexual friend. The taped in-depth semi-structured interviews lasted about three hours and were transcribed in full. A life-history approach was taken.

### **Researching Men**

I have heard from other researchers that it is often difficult to interview men and encourage them to elaborate on their personal lives and emotions. My experience of interviewing gay fathers is quite the reverse. Even at first contact, telephone conversations could last an hour, with the men opening up about their intimate lives. Many were disappointed that I could not interview them. I therefore met an additional five respondents informally. Communication via e.mail allowed for some fairly chatty and humorous exchanges. Alternatively, if a respondent was feeling low he might contact me for support.

I was often able to put respondents in contact with other men (with permission) in similar situations, which was welcomed all round. None of the sample appeared to be surprised that a woman had initiated and was conducting this research, although I suspect some of the North American respondents originally thought I was a man, because the name 'Gil' is a man's name there. I feel that a strong rapport was established, and that the use of a feminist approach was appreciated by most and played a major role in achieving a good sized sample and ease of communication.

### **Data Analysis**

An exciting aspect of this study is the way that it combines a qualitative and quantitative approach. Consequently, data analysis was exceptionally overlapping in nature.

*Questionnaires* - Information from the 46 returned questionnaire was coded and mounted onto SPSS. However, the poor overall response together with the diversity of their parenting situations and age of children made it difficult to identify patterns from these data alone. Cases were increased by extracting relevant information from the mini questionnaire and dialogues, and provided a useful contextual framework.

*Qualitative analysis* All information gathered was loaded onto the qualitative computer analysis package *ATLAS.ti*. A range of 'family' groupings (variables) were identified and several rounds of coding has been carried out. Given the volume of data collected coding has been, by necessity, strategic. Analysis has been guided by a variety of themes including: pathways to marriage; relationships with (ex-)wives; coming out history; conceptions of masculinity; becoming fathers in non-heterosexual contexts; domestic and childcare arrangements; balancing paid-work and childcare. As the data collected is extremely rich and extensive, additional coding and analysis will continue and other avenues of enquiry explored.

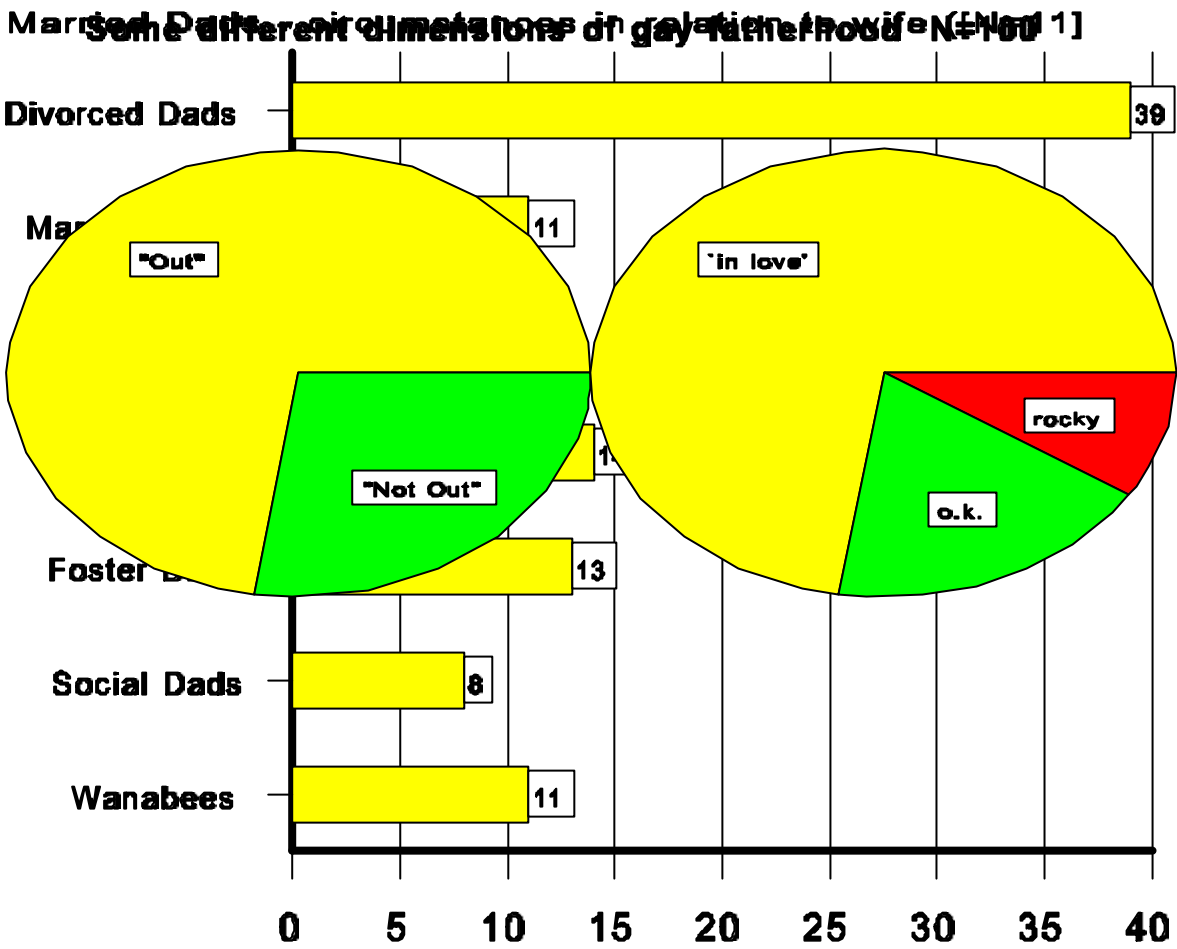
I am confident that by raising a relatively large sample, and developing an innovative and thorough approach to data collection, much of the diversity of gay fathers' parenting circumstances has been both

identified and illustrated. From the early stages of fieldwork, the heterogeneity of their circumstances became clearly apparent. I note that in the first up-date (distributed to participants at the half-way stage) all but two dimensions (surrogacy, and the adoption of small children) of gay fatherhood were apparent. I know of only one situation (from dialogues with respondents) which is not reflected in this study , this is where a donor father and the lesbian mother marry and live together - either for convenience or because the experience of parenting has drawn them into a loving bond. My only reservation with respect to these findings is that gay fathers may not be distributed across the categories in the same way as the sample: for example, married gay fathers are likely to be under-represented in the study, likewise fathers who have been instrumental in losing contact with their children.

## **2.4 Findings**

### **THE DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF GAY FATHERHOOD**

As figure 1 shows, respondents parented in a variety of contexts which I shall briefly outline below. The nominated publication provides greater detail and explores the qualitative material. .



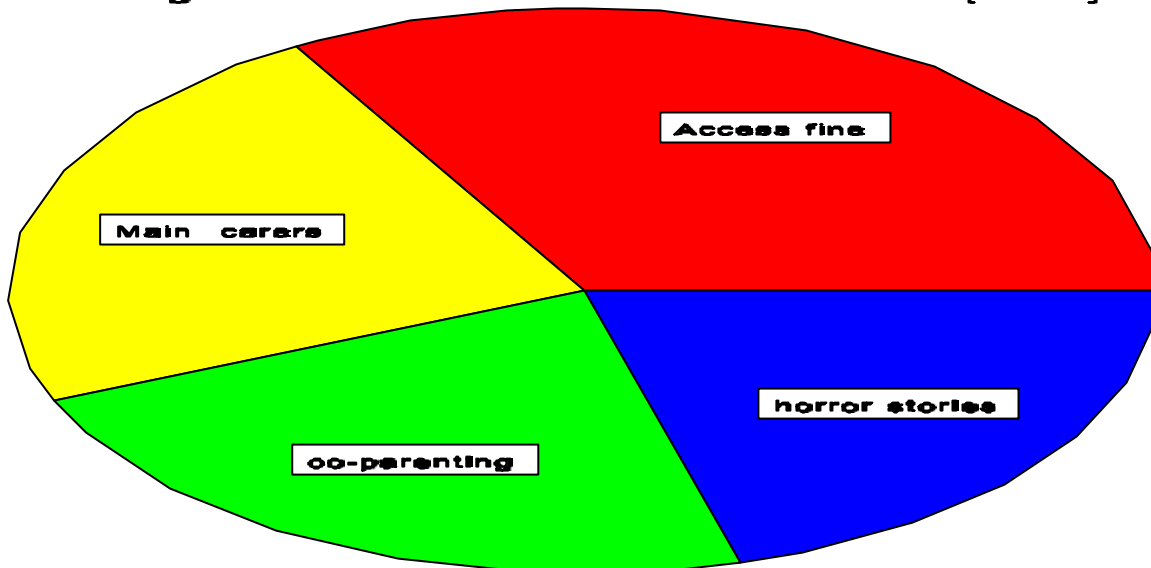
**Married Gay Fathers**

Although the research was successful in including men in the most invisible group- married gay fathers - it is safe to assume that the particularities of the situation of married gay men means that they are under-represented in the study.

I was surprised to find that eight of the eleven currently married fathers were `out` to their wives, interestingly they usually commented that ( after a period of adjustment) their wives were very supportive of their sexuality. Out married fathers often had `open relationships`, and in one case a respondent lived with his wife and male lover (who had become a close friend to his wife). Overall, married gay fathers usually remained in their marriages because they loved their wives and described their marriages as happy (figure 2).

In common with divorced respondents, most married respondents were either unaware of their gay sexuality before marriage or had felt it a passing phase or something to be suppressed. Like divorced

### **Parenting Circumstances of Divorced Fathers [N=39]**



respondents, most described feeling a huge amount of pressure to marry when younger. Interestingly, there were three examples of men who had happily embraced a gay lifestyle prior to meeting their wives. They described their surprise at finding that they had fallen in love with a woman. One of these men, who describes himself as gay, has been happily married for 30 years, has adult children and tells me that he has been faithful to his wife.

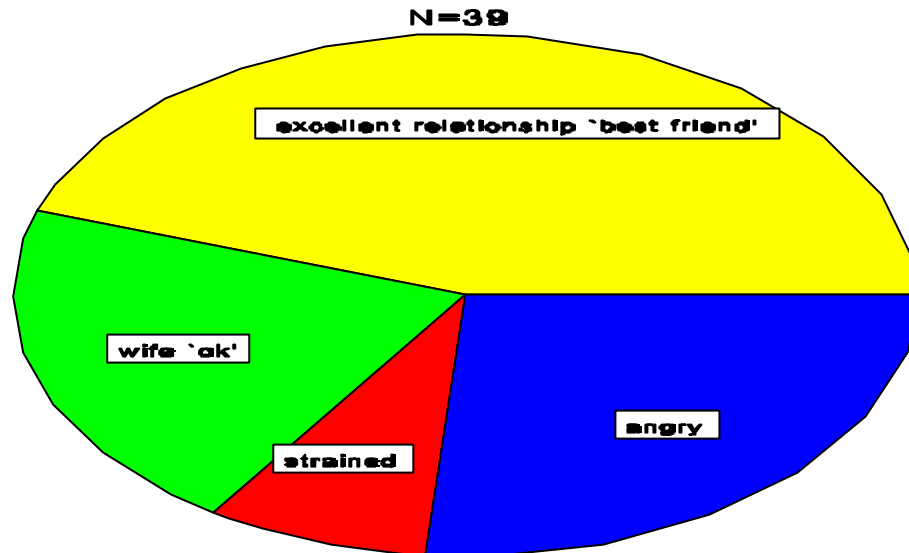
### **Divorced fathers**

As anticipated a large proportion (39%) of the sample are divorced. I had assumed that most of would have problems with access but was surprised to find this a minority situation (figure 3). Indeed a high proportion are main carers or actively co-parenting with their ex-wives.

The eight 'horror stories' include fathers with very limited or no contact with their children. Two older men with grandchildren described being disowned by their adult children. Several situations came as

the result of custody decisions informed by the erroneous link between paedophilia and gay men. Others may relate to more general issues of a father's competency to care for a small child, and one stemmed from marital violence. All of these fathers were distraught by their circumstances, and several were fighting long court battles over access.

**Quality of Relationship between divorced gay dads and ex-wives**

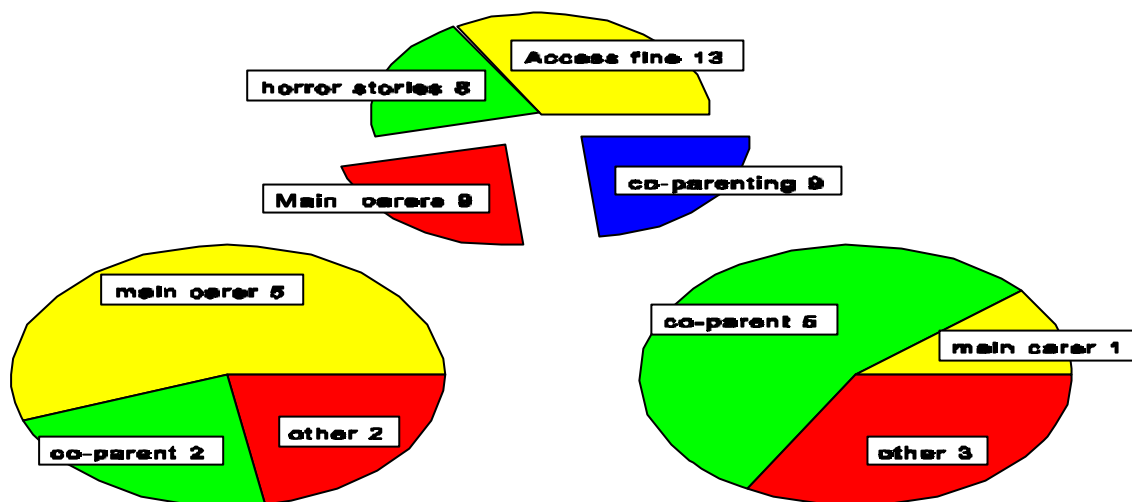


The positive parenting circumstances described by most can be partially explained by the unusually good relationships with ex-wives that the majority reported (figure 4). Like married respondents, many viewed their ex-wives as `best friends`.

A reason why so many remained active carers is that they had often been so when married (figure 5). Over half of the nine main carers took this role when married. Of those nine actively co-parenting with ex-wives, five had done so when married and one had been the main carer.. Reasons given for the sharing or reversal of parenting roles in marriage included: being less career orientated than their wives; the demands of her employment/shift-work; a desire to be egalitarian; the impetus for having children having come from the father and the wife being less interested in mothering.. It was not unusual for divorced respondents to have become main carers on the instigation of their children - usually

because the children disliked their mother's new partner.

**Parenting Situation: Divorced Dads - now and when married**  
**N=39**



The demands of caring for young children often led a father, or in one case his male partner, to withdraw from paid employment. Main carers were very conscious of their difference from other fathers, straight or gay, because their lives were transformed by the everyday responsibilities and pleasures of child-rearing. They felt limited in their capacity to socialize, and, like many respondents who were actively co-parenting, had a preference for relationships with other fathers.

Comparison with research on divorced fathers more generally [5] suggests that these respondents are very different from the norm: *divorce had usually transformed rather than ended good relationships with ex-wives and a large proportion remained actively involved parents*. In reflecting upon why their wives/ex-wives were so supportive, a common response was that these women valued the more 'feminine' qualities (such as emotionality, aesthetic interest, and domestic competence) that the men often felt they possessed.

This is a relatively small study. However, my confidence in these unexpectedly positive findings is strengthened by American research on the wives and ex-wives of gay men [6]. With equal surprise, it

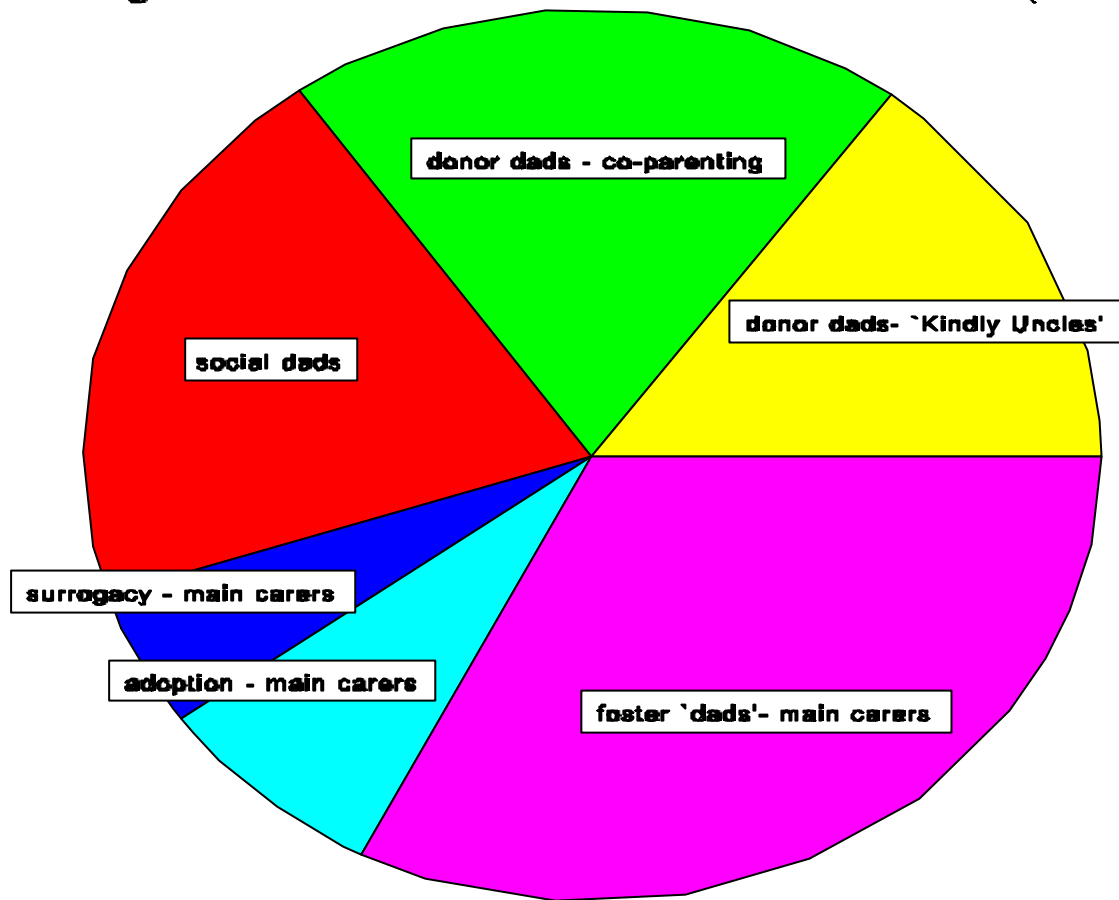
reports that the majority of women described these men in glowing terms, remarking on their sensitivity and more egalitarian approach to relationships, with few limiting access to children.

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

A striking finding is the extent to which respondents experience or hope to experience fatherhood in a non-heterosexual context (51%). The majority of donor fathers/wannabees' had or expected to combine with lesbian women, although one was experiencing IVF treatment with a heterosexual woman friend, he planned to be an active co-parent. All except the last example organized insemination informally. Interestingly many had initiated the process of becoming fathers.

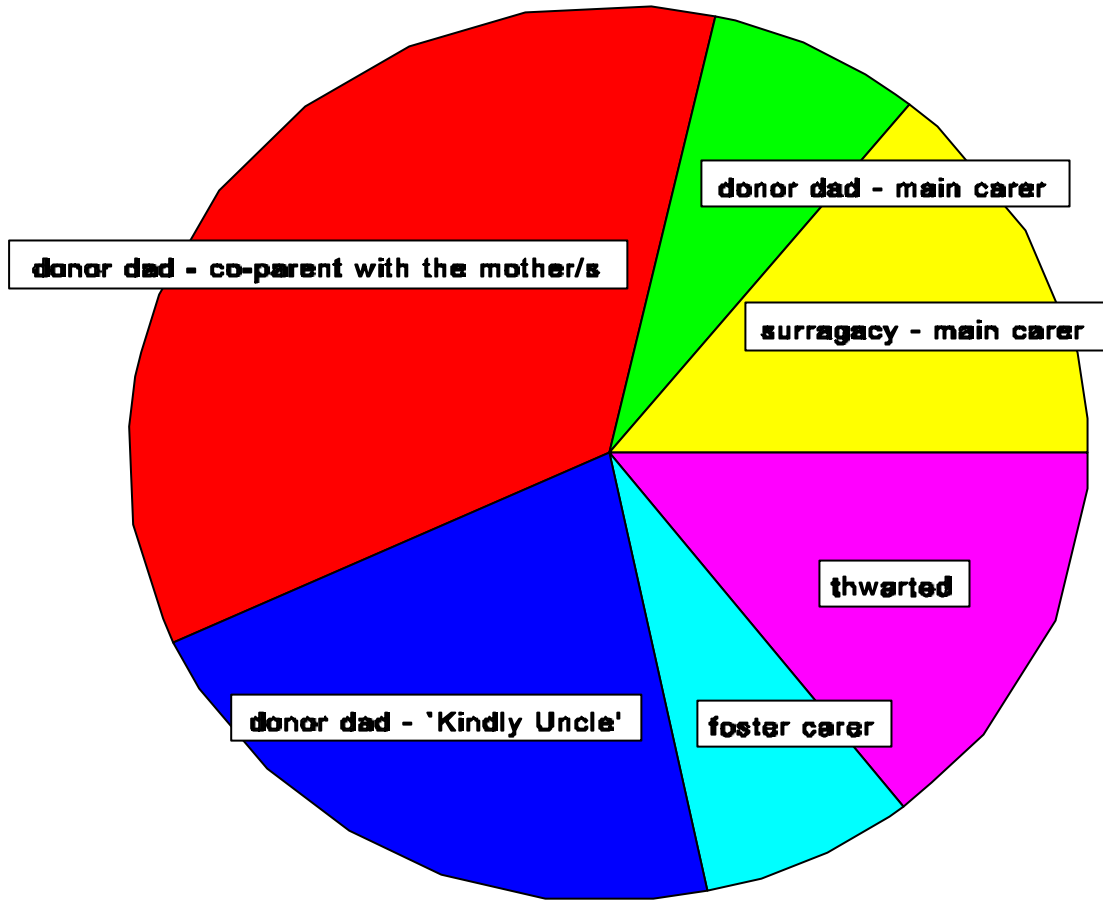
**Donor fathers** I was surprised by the high proportion of donor dads/wannabes who took or planed to take an active co-parenting role (ranging from routine weekly overnight contact to a 50% split) as opposed to a more limited 'kindly-uncle' role, figures 6 and 7. Co-parenting often involved moving to the same street or apartment block as the mother. Overall, few donor fathes were unhappy with the extent of their parenting involvement. This is probably due to what they reported as extended periods of negotiation over such matters prior to insemination. The experience of being a father sometimes led to the desire for greater involvement than was initially negotiated. One such father planned to be the main carer on the birth of his second child. His savings will enable time out from paid employment to live with the child's mother during the breastfeeding stage and he then plans to work mainly from home.

## Parenting in a non-heterosexual context: circumstances (n=40)



**Surrogacy/adoption** There were several examples from the USA of respondents who were or planned to raise children in gay partnerships, some giving up high powered jobs to be main carers, others reducing to part-time. 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 his partner donating sperm). In addition, one dad had adopted a teenage girl who asked if she could live with him, her parents and the courts agreed.

**Parenting expectations: respondents in process of becoming dads (n=14)**



**Foster Carers** These respondents were all openly gay, and for between 8 and 25 years had been caring for boys and girls . Their involvement ranges from long-term to respite care. Two British respondents were in the process of adopting the children in their care. Usually foster carers were in long-term partnerships, and they often had a background in social work. They all shared a strong desire to nurture and to give something back to society [see 7].

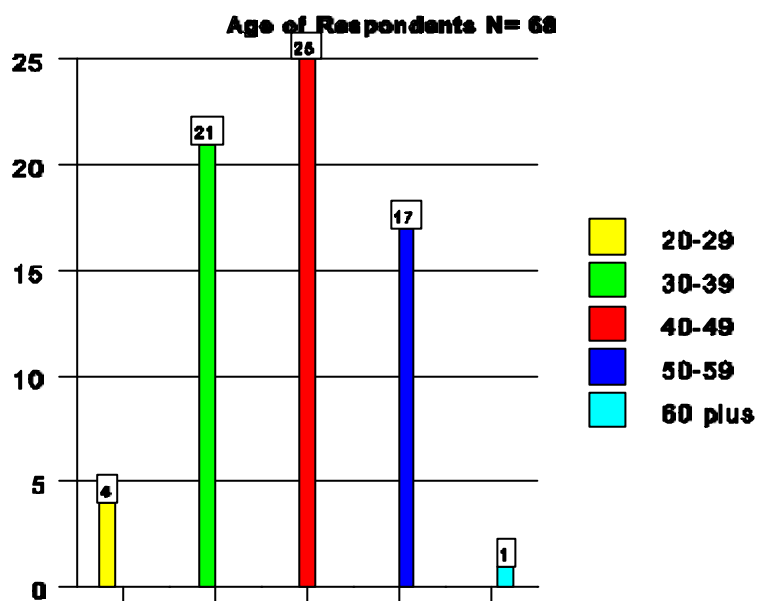
**Social fathers** were usually co-parenting with biological fathers who are main carers or active co-parents. In one case the social father took the main caring role and in another he was actively co-parenting with a lesbian friend despite no biological connection with the child.

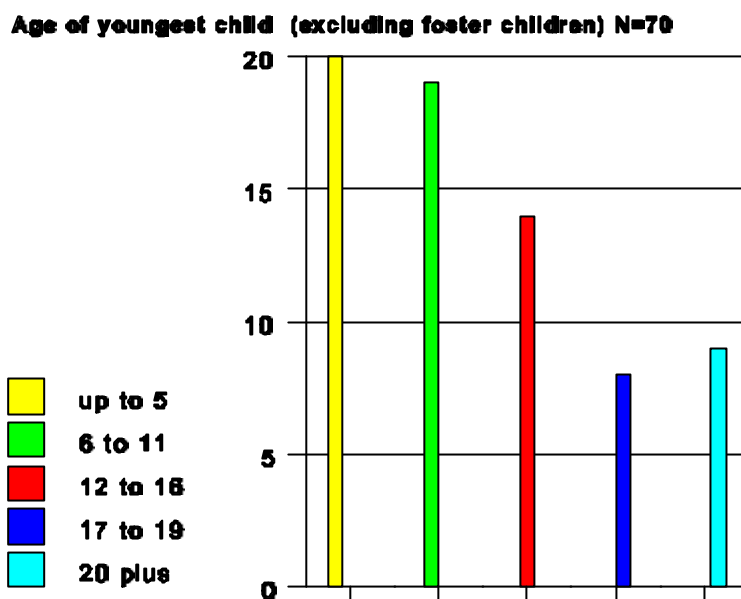
These findings suggest that the recent lesbian `baby boom' [1,8] is beginning to have a major impact on the gay community. (In July, for example, a popular national US gay magazine [4] was devoted entirely to lesbian and gay parenting). Donor fathers tend to be younger men, and are keen to be

actively involved in caring for their children. In their collaboration with the mothers, they are often developing innovative strategies for operationalizing joint parenting from separate households.

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Aside from being in a range of parenting contexts respondents were also at different stages of family formation - there is considerable diversity with respect to their ages (figure 8) and the ages of their children (figure 9).



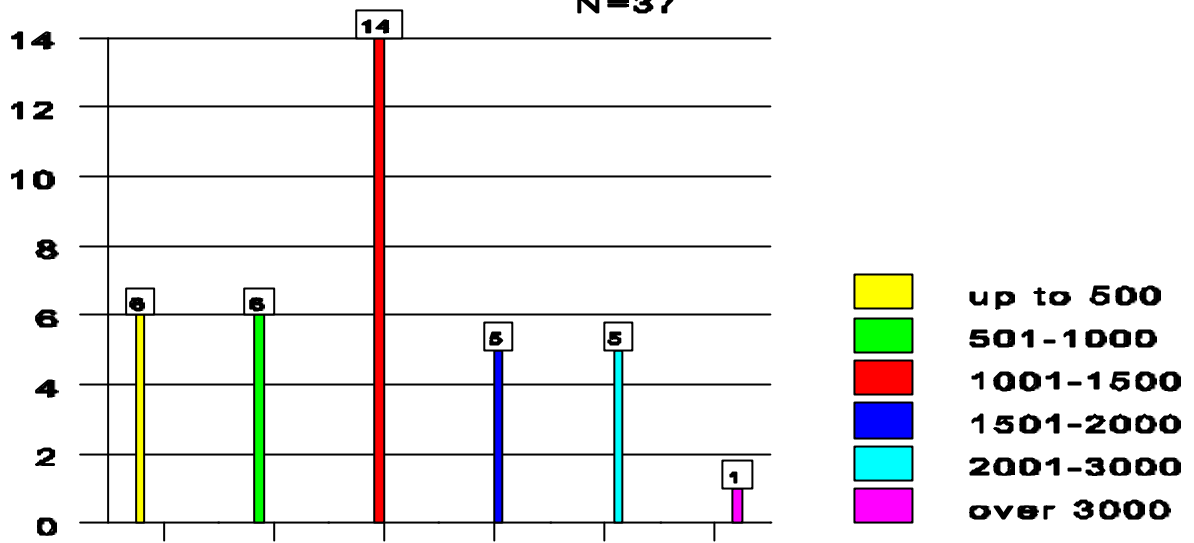


The socio-economic data is limited. Their questionnaires revealed that the great majority had been educated beyond school leaving age, 74%, and were in a wide range of professional, managerial and technical occupations (although information on the occupations of their fathers suggests a fair amount of social mobility). Figure 10 summarizes the incomes of U.K based respondents as given in the questionnaire.

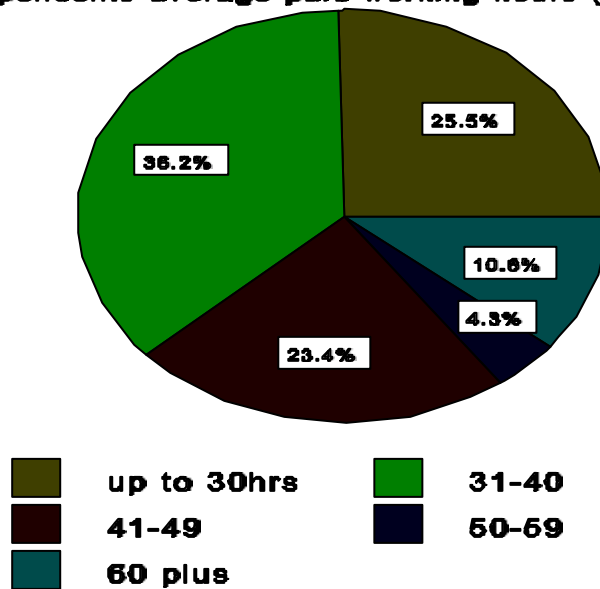
It was difficult to assess the impact of children on respondents' employment lives because as well as being in different parenting situations, they were at different stages in family formation. However, compared with the long paid-working hours of fathers more generally [9] respondents appear to experience more flexibility - 25% worked less than 30 hours and only 38% worked more than 40 hours a week - see figure 11. Possibly, men experience fewer social and economic pressures to be main breadwinners in relationships with other men.

**Average monthly income (take home) UK Respondents**

**N=37**



**Respondents average paid working hours (n= 47)**



## **CONCLUDING COMMENT**

These findings challenge several assumptions about both gayness and masculinity. 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. Respondents' experience illustrates the complexity of our emotional and sexual landscapes. 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. It may be that the enduring quality of friendship provides the kind of emotional consistency and equality that can incorporate the flexibility demanded in times of change.

Just as the mainstream has much to learn from gay men's experience of parenting so too does the gay community. It faces major transformations as a result of the 'gayby boom' and expanding opportunities for fathers to 'come-out'. The greater visibility of gay men who are actively parenting is likely to encourage others to contemplate fatherhood. In the meanwhile, gay fathers can feel very isolated in both the mainstream and gay communities. Those who are denied access to their children may have little in common with heterosexual fathers in similar situations, and active carers may do so in difficult circumstances - feeling different from other fathers and excluded from networks constructed by mothers. Gay fathers may be constrained in socializing, and may experience rejection from other gay men. The gay community needs to recognize and support its own diversity.

Almost without fail respondents believed that children gained from having a gay parent. The process of coming out often required inordinate amounts of self-reflection on what constituted masculinity, personhood and the landscape of sexual and emotional ways of being. Many reported that experiential insights acquired in dealing with homophobia enabled them to be more tolerant individuals. Most said that they hoped their children would grow up 'to be, and think for, themselves.' Major gifts that gay parents might give their children is the opportunity to grow up in a more egalitarian household and gain an awareness of the value of difference.

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