

**“People don’t understand who you are”: An exploration
of how formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers
raised with religion make sense of their identities**

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This is to certify that this research report is my own unaided work.

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“People don’t understand who you are”: An exploration of how formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion make sense of their identities

Abstract

Twelve formerly heterosexually married/partnered gay fathers raised with religion from the US, Canada, UK and Ireland participated in interviews focused on their experiences of managing their identities. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse the data from the interviews. Two super-ordinate themes are reported that capture the ways in which the men made sense of, experienced, and psychologically and rhetorically negotiated their gay father identities in various different contexts, including in gay male communities, heterosexual communities and religious communities. The first theme, *the experience of living with a conflicted identity*, offered a more phenomenological and descriptive account of the men’s experiences of managing a conflicted identity. The second theme, *managing and negotiating a gay father identity*, offered a more interpretive and conceptual stance on the men’s accounts, exploring the psychological and rhetorical ‘defence’ of participants’ identities, and the ways in which they clearly felt compelled to justify their position as gay men who fathered children in a heterosexual relationship. A third super-ordinate theme is reported in the form of a research paper, *the counselling experiences of formerly partnered gay fathers raised with religion*, which explores participants’ positive and negative experiences of psychological therapy, and offers suggestions for mental health professionals in their work with such men. The findings as a whole provide a potential basis for future affirmative therapy practice with this group of gay fathers. Implications for counselling psychology, limitations and avenues for further research are also discussed.

Key words: counselling psychology, LGBTQ psychology, coming out, affirmative therapy, gay parenting, gay identity, religious identity

Overview and Background

For as long as it has been in the public consciousness, gay parenting has been a contentious issue (Amato, 2012; Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, & Mikach, 1995; Clarke, 2001; Cramer, 1986; Gottman, 1989; Hicks, 2005; Light, 2015). At the forefront of the conflict around the issue has been religious objection to both gay parenting and homosexuality more generally (Simson, 2012; Wilson, 2007). Positivist psychological research into same-sex parenting began in the 1970s as a direct response to custody cases involving lesbian parents who lost custody due to homophobic assumptions about parental fitness among the judiciary and in the wider culture (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983; Green, 1978). Such research began in the UK in 1976 when psychologist, feminist and family researcher, Susan Golombok, read an article in feminist magazine, *Spare Rib*, about lesbian mothers losing care of their children when they divorced, and responded to a call for a psychologist to conduct a study on the children of lesbian parents. Since the publications of this ground breaking comparative study, examining the parental fitness of lesbian mothers and comparing child outcomes for children parented by divorced heterosexual versus lesbian mothers (Golombok et al., 1983), and the publication of other similarly innovative studies (e.g. Bigner & Jacobsen, 1981), it is now generally accepted by (affirmative) psychologists and professional bodies that same-sex parenting is not detrimental to child development and lesbians and gay men are 'fit to parent' (Tasker & Bigner, 2013). Some critics have highlighted the heteronormative assumptions underpinning such comparative research (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010), and the research agenda has largely shifted to a wider (and arguably less defensive) focus on the processes and dynamics of same-sex parented families, and to the lived experiences of family members (Miller, 2016).

Gay fathers have, however, historically remained far less researched and visible than lesbian mothers (Berner, 1995; Gill, 2000; Harvey, 2009; Holtzman, 2013; Riggs, 2010; Ryan & Martin, 2000). Arguably as a result of the traditional

expectation that men only become fathers through relationships with women (Golombok & Tasker, 2010), this notion has been little challenged and these men's experiences of parenting remain under-explored. However, what is known about formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers is that their identities can feel compromised (with the men feeling uncertain of how to make sense of their personal identities as both gay men and fathers – Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989) and stigmatised (by those around them who have an awareness of both their identities as a gay man and father – Bozett, 1981). This can lead these men to withhold their dual identities, both as fathers in the gay community and as gay men in the heterosexual community, making them “invisible” in the wider society (O’Toole, 1989; Berkowitz & Kuvalanka, 2013). Formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion are even less visible due to some religious authorities’ oppressive treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) issues and rights (Wilcox, 2003). Therefore, it can be assumed that the identity struggle for such men will potentially be even more complex.

Being gay and having children in the context of a heterosexual relationship is known to have a negative impact on making sense of one’s identity (see Tasker & Bigner, 2013). Furthermore, having a religious upbringing has been shown to add conflict to identity formation for gay people (see Coyle & Rafalin, 2001; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Thus, having all three *intersecting* identities (being gay, a father, religious or having a religious background) is likely to complicate identity formation for these men further. Yet, almost nothing is known about the experiences of these men. This lack of research is troubling because studies suggest that the experience of parenting is often challenging for gay men, particularly given the struggle these fathers may face in dealing with issues of self-identity (Goldberg, 2010). This thesis thus examines the experiences of 12 formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion. The literature review will outline in depth the rationale for a study of the identity formation of this group. First, as this is a counselling psychology thesis, I will make a case for the importance of this topic to the profession.

Importance for Counselling Psychology

This topic is of particular relevance to counselling psychology, as understanding client experiences and identity formation are integral to building a client psychological formulation (Johnstone & Dallos, 2013). This is a defining competency for counselling psychologists as outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS) (BPS, 2005) and the Health and Care Professional Council (HCPC) (HCPC, 2009). The BPS Division of Counselling Psychology practice guidelines (2005, p. 7) state that the profession will at all times consider its responsibility to the “wider world”, informing practice through inquiry and education, challenging “the views of people who pathologise on the basis of such aspects as sexual orientation”. The profession of counselling psychology can be broadly characterised as having humanistic ethics, and a non-theistic life stance that centres on the importance of the human experience at its core (Cooper, 2009). Counselling psychologists may practice within different therapeutic approaches (e.g. psychodynamic or cognitive behavioural models of therapy), which may place different stress on the therapeutic relationship. However, a relational imperative, referring to therapist warmth, empathy and acceptance in a relationship that is not distorted by transference (transference can be described as the redirection of a client’s feelings towards their therapist, Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2003) is often at the centre of their work with clients. The client-therapist relationship is universally agreed to be the best indicator of positive change across all models of therapy (Bachelor, 2013). The Division of Counselling Psychology guidelines define the branch of psychology as “grounded in the primacy of the counselling or psychotherapeutic relationship” (BPS 2005, p. 1). Within a relational approach to psychotherapy, this relationship is defined as the “core relationship” (Clarkson, 2003), and is concerned with the authentic humanness shared by client and therapist (Chen, 2001). This humanness can only be reached when psychologists understand a client’s identity history. To provide context to a client’s history, knowledge about the challenges experienced by a particular client group (such as gay fathers) is important in helping these clients (Rowland & Goss, 2013).

Furthermore, within National Health Service (NHS) arenas, psychologists are expected to talk about clients within multidisciplinary teams using the language of a medical model, as well as developing their case formulation within a more phenomenological approach (Frankland & Walsh, 2005). Counselling psychologists need a degree of knowledge about LGBTQ lifestyles and specific issues presented (for example, preferred language, sexual practice and current research findings in the area) if working with clients from these communities to challenge their own assumptions about this participant group and work effectively with them (a point made in guidelines for practice with this population, e.g. Langdridge, 2007). For example, the challenges for formerly heterosexually married/partnered gay fathers can include feeling judged and perceived as inadequate by the gay community for having had a sexual relationship with a woman (Dunne, 2001; Tasker, 2013a) and the difficulty in being accepted as both a gay man and a father in the heterosexual community (Bozett, 1981).

This study is an important addition to an often, as I will show, overlooked or over-simplified area of study, and will facilitate counselling psychologists in effectively helping such men during their challenging identity transition from heterosexual parenthood. It is important for such men to understand their own identities, regardless of whether they choose to share their new identity with others, or indeed label it. It is the hope that the findings of this study will become published to better inform therapeutic work with this group of men. Ethically, this is also an important area of research within the field of counselling psychologists are increasingly being asked to evaluate (through personal insight and psychological evaluation) the suitability of parents in court and adoption settings, in terms of their parenting skills (Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni & Jordan, 1999). This study will aid professionals to ensure that their attitudes and beliefs are based on empirical knowledge, rather than personal, or current societal, assumptions.

Importance for LGBTQ Psychology

The current study sits at the intersection of counselling psychology and LGBTQ psychology - a branch of psychology concerned with the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people that is affirmative in its approach (see Clarke & Peel, 2007; Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002). This field of research is concerned with LGBTQ people's lives, including discrimination, parenting, 'coming out' and identity development. This research will extend existing understandings of such men within the LGBTQ psychology literature, acknowledging the ongoing discrimination and challenge formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion experience in relation to their identity.

After outlining the aims of the current study, I present an overview of the broader literature around gay parenting, particularly focusing on gay men who became fathers in heterosexual contexts and on gay men from religious backgrounds.

Research questions and aims of the current study

This research will focus on the following research question:

- How do formerly heterosexually married/partnered gay fathers raised in religion develop and maintain a gay identity, and what are the challenges they face in doing so?

In answering this primary research question, the research will also address the following sub-questions:

- How do these men manage issues of parenthood, family and personal relationships in identifying as gay?
- What is the impact of having a religious identity on developing a new gay identity?
- What challenges do these men face in understanding, creating and managing dual identities as gay men and parents?
- How do these men negotiate being accepted as both gay men and parents in religious, heterosexual and gay communities?

- What do the experiences of men from different Western countries reveal about the challenges of ‘coming out’ in differing cultural and religious contexts?
- What are these men’s experiences of counselling and what suggestions do they have for therapists working therapeutically with men like them?

Literature review

To provide a context for each of these questions, the following literature review will summarise (from recent literature): research on same-sex parenting, which focuses predominantly on child well-being; what is understood about gay father identity; what is known about gay men who come from religious backgrounds; major religious organisations’ positions on gay parenthood and homosexuality; and theoretical perspectives on identity and stigma.

In response to the question about implications for therapeutic practice and to offer a context for working therapeutically with this population in counselling psychology, I review the historical and current positions of psychological societies and other therapeutic professional bodies with regard to working therapeutically with members of LGBTQ communities. I outline the types of therapy available specific to managing sexual identity for the LGBTQ community and their families, as well as reviewing some older models for working therapeutically with gay fathers, and exploring how these fit with psychological identity models more broadly. The review will begin with a brief overview of the social history of gay fatherhood.

Historically Closeted Gay Father

Historically, the typical pathway to fatherhood for a gay man was through a relationship with a woman (Golombok & Tasker, 2010). Most gay men have reported entering heterosexual marriages because they loved their wives, because they wanted children and a married life, or because of the strong cultural and social pressures to conform (Barrett & Tasker, 2001; Dunne, 2001; Malcolm, 2008; Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Tasker, 2013a). Therefore, stigma

associated with a gay identity and social pressure to live a heterosexual lifestyle may push men into relationships with women (Higgins, 2002; Isay, 2010), and can result in them becoming fathers.

Over the past 50 years, it has been suggested by social and psychological research (e.g. Berkowitz, 2007; Patterson & Tornello, 2011; Power, Perlesz, McNair, Schofield, Pitts, Brown, & Bickerdike, 2012) that there has been a shift for gay men away from this pathway to parenthood, towards a second pathway, one that involves 'coming out' as gay in adolescence and fathering children in the context of a pre-existing gay identity (Tornello & Patterson, 2015). Today, it could be suggested that the legal protection recently afforded to LGBTQ people in many Western countries means that it can seem to be becoming easier and easier to live openly as a gay man. In addition, rapid global shifts in legislation related to same-sex relationships (e.g. access to same-sex marriage through laws passed in Ireland and throughout the US in 2015, the UK in 2014 and Canada in 2005) suggests that in some (predominantly Western) countries it is increasingly socially acceptable for same-sex couples to marry. It is also becoming more accessible for LGBTQ people to parent while in a same-sex relationship. For example, same-sex parenting through gamete donation and surrogacy has been legal in the UK since 1985 (Surrogacy Arrangement Act) and same-sex couples have been able to adopt children in England and Wales since 2005 (changes to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 law did not come into effect until 2005) and 2009 in Scotland. Co-parenting (a parenting situation where two people, for example a gay man and a lesbian woman, who are not in a partner relationship raise a child together) is also becoming more common (Erera & Segal-Engelchin, 2014; McHale & Lindahl, 2011; Tasker & Bigner, 2013). In other words, gay men fathering children while in a heterosexual relationship (i.e. while 'closeted') might be assumed to be increasingly uncommon and thus unimportant as a topic for study. This assumption is often explicitly made in the literature (e.g. Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

My argument in this thesis is, however, that this assumption should be challenged. First, there remains a significant community of gay men who grew up in an era that was more heteronormative than today, who have fathered

children in a heterosexual relationship to maintain an appearance of heterosexuality (Tasker, 2013a). Patterson and Tornello's (2010) study focusing on gay men's pathways to parenthood demonstrated that of 102 participants (from non-US English speaking countries), 95% of the surveyed men over 50 and 53% of those under 50 years of age reported that they had fathered children in the context of heterosexual marriages. This highlights the continued prevalence of this community and the continuing battle for rights to parent and family life for members of LGBTQ communities (e.g. same-sex couple adoption was only legalised in Ireland in 2014, and as recently as 2013 the US states of Idaho and Nebraska were challenged to grant equal same-sex adoption rights).

Second, it is argued that even in a less heteronormative social context it would be problematic to assume that men who (later) identify as gay will not continue to father children while in heterosexual relationships. Even in nations like the UK, US, Canada and Ireland, where gay rights are increasingly legally recognised, homophobia, and fear of homophobia, remains prevalent (e.g. Stonewall, 2013, reported that 26% of LGBTQ people living in the UK feel they need to alter their behaviour to avoid becoming victim to a homophobic crime). The impact of prejudice is likely to be even stronger in particular socio-economic contexts, for example, outside urban centres (due to a lack of contact with diversity - Cain, 2015) and in some lower socio-economic status groups (due to a lack of education about difference - Parks, 2014). Furthermore, beliefs surrounding the morality of homosexuality are historically significant predictors of hate crime victimisation (Alden & Parker, 2005). Given the historical contrast that has been made between the richness of the lives of urban gay men compared with gay men who live in conservative rural areas without gay social networks (e.g. Kirkey & Forsyth, 2001), the experience for gay men with the added complexity of a religious background will likely have a negative impact on self-esteem (Whitley, 2009) and identity development/acceptance.

The impact of homophobia is also likely to be especially strong for gay men who have lived in religious communities that view homosexuality (or 'active' homosexuality) as sinful (see Appendix II). For gay men in a homophobic religious community, their hostile social context may make an openly gay

lifestyle dangerous or socially impossible, and thus they may feel they have no choice but to have relationships with women, and become fathers through their heterosexual relationship (Higgins, 2002). This is also true of bisexual men who are even further isolated by a lack of community and experience hostility from both gay and heterosexual communities (Steinman & Beemyn, 2014). Thus, I argue that it is important to understand the experiences of gay men who become fathers while in heterosexual relationships because they may not constitute the minority of gay fathers, either now or in the future. This is because the belief that this population is reducing and disappearing due to the increased social and legal acceptance of homosexuality, overlooks the fact that this population will always exist while religious communities remain homophobic.

This thesis is additionally important because the study sample provides an opportunity to examine the impact of intersecting stigmas on identity more broadly. In this way, the study has relevance beyond the current sample. Furthermore, by examining these issues in multiple national (Canada, Ireland, UK and US) and religious (Christian and Jewish) contexts, the present study provides a rich analysis of how different national, political and religious environments may impact identity and experiences of gay fatherhood. I now present the theory and research relevant to this study, starting with an exploration of the hostility surrounding same-sex parenting in the wider socio-cultural context.

Custody challenges for gay parents

“To say to a child, ‘I am having you adopted by two men who kiss regularly but don’t worry about it’ – that is abuse...It is a violation of a child’s human rights because that child has no opportunity to grow up under normal circumstances”

Winston McKensie (Christian and UKIP politician, quoted in *The Guardian*, Quinn, 2012).

Understanding potential custody challenges for gay fathers remains relevant as courts in Europe and North America continue to consider parent sexuality relevant in custody decision-making (see Haney-Caron & Heilbrun, 2014). As discussed in the overview, research into same-sex parenting started in the early 1970s and was promoted by lesbian custody cases (Tasker, 2013a; 2013b). This early and much subsequent research has focused on comparisons between same-sex and heterosexual parented families (e.g. Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989). However, since the 1990s same-sex parenting research has shifted its focus, with more recent research focused on pathways to parenthood for same-sex couples (e.g. Tornello & Patterson, 2015). In both early and more recent research, gay fathers are far less studied than lesbian mothers (O'Toole, 1989; Riggs, 2010; Ryan & Martin, 2000). There is a lack of research into the lives of gay fathers generally (Tasker & Patterson, 2008) and what does exist does not reflect the difficulties these men experience to be accepted as custodian parents (Goldberg, 2010) and how this impacts on their self-identities. Focusing on the current legal and social climate around gay parenting will highlight the challenges for these men.

Social discourses around homosexuality (and fatherhood) still play an important role in influencing judicial decision-making around custody, particularly in relation to homosexuality, where a traditional prejudice is held against gay men (Rivers, 2010) and bias (Boso, 2012; Levy, 2013) and homophobic judgements are still reported in the UK and North America (Bain, 2015; Fairtlough, 2008; Person, 2012). Lesbian women have recently had a less difficult time being accepted as legal parents than gay fathers, experiencing more success in custody battles (Harvey, 2009; Holtzman, 2013; Polikof, 2013). However, more recently, the traditional bias for courts to choose mothers over fathers as custodians has shifted in favour of attempting to rule in the 'best interests' of the child (Elrod, 2012; Udell, 2012). However, where there is dissolution of marriage for a heterosexual couple, judges have been noted to treat parental sexuality as relevant to determining the best interest of children (Lehman, 2010; Maccoby, Depner & Mnookin, 2014; Patterson & Wainright, 2012; Haney-Caron & Heilbrun, 2014).

In summary, there has been a history of neglect of the gay father in recent research. This is despite the challenges gay men face in custodial decision-making, as sexuality is deemed relevant in considering a child's best interest, and bias against gay parents is still reported (see Pearson, 2012). I will now explore these and other arguments made against same-sex parenting.

Anti-gay research on same-sex parenting

Most research on same-sex parenting focuses on outcomes for children (Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002; Patterson, 1992; 2006), predominantly examining children's psychosexual well-being and issues of parental fitness, with findings suggesting no negative impact on the children of gay parents (e.g. Goldberg, 2010). However, right wing Christian researchers (Cameron, 1996; 1999; 2005; 2009, Cameron & Cameron, 2002; 2005, Wardle, 1997; 2004; 2005; 2008, Regnerus, 2012a; 2012b) have made arguments against same-sex parenting predominately on the grounds that the best family form for children is to be raised by (heterosexually) married parents (Harris, Furstenberg & Marmer, 1998). This argument against same-sex parenting is made most solidly against gay fathers, with Christian research suggesting (without any robust evidence) a greater risk of molestation for children raised by gay men (Cameron, 2005). Extrapolating data from LGBTQ positive research that concluded 'no difference' between the children of same-sex and heterosexual parents with regard to sexual development, Christian researcher, Cameron (2006, p. 417) argued that gay men are more likely to foster "homosexual interests" and activities with their children. Cameron also suggests gay fathers make their children sexually "confused", eventually leading these children into less stable relationships, substance abuse and less conventionally religious-orientated (i.e. amoral) lifestyles. This argument assumes that children should not feel "confused" about or question their sexuality, and that they should only identify as heterosexual.

Other researchers have raised concerns that gay parents are more likely to raise gay children (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Perrin et al., 2013) and have articulated fears around the effect of homophobic discrimination on self-

confidence for these children (Ray & Gregory, 2001). However, such studies are problematic because they perpetuate negative beliefs about homosexuality and same-sex parenting (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011), and research has shown that homophobia has a negative impact on children (e.g. Bos, Gartrell, Peyser & van Balen, 2008). Contrarily, one benefit of same-sex parenting evidenced by research is that same-sex parented households foster openness (see Tasker, 2005), suggesting these children are more comfortable in discussing issues such as sexuality, and perhaps are more comfortable with coming out as gay (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). We should question why the idea of helping children to explore and identify their same-sex attraction is assumed to be problematic, and why some affirmative researchers emphasise 'sameness' (comparing same-sex with heterosexual parenting) and avoid acknowledging that supportive LGBTQ-friendly households make it less likely for a child to feel the need to hide their sexuality (e.g. Carlson & Corcoran, 2001).

Studies that voice concern for the well-being of children of gay and lesbian parents (such as that cited above) have been limited in number and quality, methodologically flawed and biased towards outcomes that support the beliefs of the institutions which fund anti-gay research (Hicks, 2005). This research is also countered by a wealth of studies that demonstrate a positive outlook for the children of LGBTQ parents (e.g. Tasker & Patterson, 2008), which the next section will explore.

Affirmative research on same-sex parenting

Affirmative research overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that same-sex parenting is not harmful for children (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Brown, 2012; Goldberg, 2010; Patterson, 2005) with most researchers arguing 'same difference' (see Marks, 2012) for children raised by same-sex parents when compared with children raised by heterosexual parents. Around the same time as the early arguments for 'same difference' were reported (e.g. Golombok et al., 1983), the benefits of same-sex parenting also started to be emphasised. Positive arguments in favour of same-sex parenting were first explored by Lewis (1980), later by Gottman (1989) and Patterson (1992), and more recently by

Amato (2012), Clarke and Demetriou (2016). These studies all demonstrate the positive experiences of adult children of LGBTQ parents, with many participants reporting that growing up in these families helped them to become more tolerant and open minded, as well as hold more flexible ideas about gender and sexuality in adulthood.

US sociologists Stacey and Biblarz (2001) have raised questions about the emphasis on 'sameness' in the psychological literature around same-sex parenting, suggesting that heterosexism can hamper progress in researching same-sex parenting because research is underpinned by an assumption that difference equals 'deficit' (Baumrind, 1995). They suggest that there are some differences between the children of heterosexual and LGBTQ parents and that these differences are not necessarily negative but suggestive of the 'openness' of LGBTQ parented homes discussed earlier. However, given the political and legal weight of an acknowledgement of difference in same-sex parented homes, it is easy to see why a defensive approach has been adopted by even gay and lesbian researchers (Bailey et al., 1995; Barret, & Robinson, 1990; Barrett & Tasker, 2001; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Miller, 1979b). Nonetheless, the acknowledgement of positive difference is gaining momentum, with researchers Perrin, Cohen and Caren (2013) agreeing that accepting a 'no difference' model, albeit a meaningful attempt to remove stigma, ignores important qualitative differences in LGBTQ and heterosexual parenting. For example, Patterson, Sutfin and Fulcher (2004) suggested that same-sex parents are more equal than heterosexual parents in the division of childcare and household labour.

In summary, the research evidence for the claim that same-sex parents are harmful to children and create gay adults made by right wing Christian researchers (e.g. Regnerus, 2012a) has been outweighed in number and quality of studies by research conducted by LGBTQ affirmative researchers.

Professional bodies such as the American Psychological Association (APA, 2005) have issued statements in support of same-sex parenting and condemning the work of Christian researchers (e.g. Cameron, 2005) as providing no valid scientific evidence to support their claims. Right wing Christian arguments that

present same-sex parenthood as harmful to child well-being may have an impact on the experiences and self-understandings of gay fathers (particularly those from conservative religious backgrounds), which should be explored. As most gay parenting research (e.g. Amato, 2012; Manning, Fetto & Lamidi, 2014; Perrin et al., 2013) has focused on child well-being, the identities of gay fathers has been neglected in recent years. The next section will review what we have learned from gay father identity research.

Gay Father Identity Research: An Invisible and Conflicted Identity

While there has not been much recent research on how gay men who have fathered children in heterosexual relationships manage their identities, the topic was given some attention in the early years of same-sex parenting research, 4 decades or so ago (e.g. Miller, 1979). This research took place in a very different social and legal context than that faced by gay fathers today. Nonetheless, this research is important for the current study not least because it proposes identity development models specifically for this group of gay fathers.

There has been some relatively recent research on the identities of gay fathers, focusing on gay men who become fathers after 'coming out' (e.g. Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Brinamen & Mitchell, 2008). However, the small amount of research that has examined the identities of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers was conducted by North American sociologists Miller (1979) and Bozett (1979). Both studies explored concerns over gay fathers' adjustment to a positive gay identity through the use of interviews. Both researchers emphasised the centrality of sexual identity disclosure to family and friends, and the reactions of significant people in the man's life during the transition to a positive gay identity. Miller (1979) suggested that despite increased public stigma (resulting from coming out as gay), gay fathers achieve a sense of psychological well-being, largely due to becoming integrated within a supportive gay community and creating an increased congruence between their public- and self-identities. Miller (1979) created a 4-step model to explain how gay fathers 'come out':

Step 1: A married man who desires sexual contact with other men engages in covert behaviour including secretive and often anonymous sexual encounters with other men, using drunkenness as an excuse (Ortiz & Scott, 1994).

Step 2: The man begins to have marginal involvement in the gay community; although still publicly heterosexual, he meets other gay men sexually or socially in gay spaces.

Step 3: Transformed participation happens when the man begins to assume a gay identity, disclosing sexual identity to those outside his family. He worries about family and possible court interventions; however, he experiences more favourable mental health and higher self-esteem.

Step 4: Open endorsement is the point at which the man cements his identity as a gay man, often working for various gay causes either professionally or voluntarily. The man has a gay partner, has disclosed his sexuality to his ex-wife and children; eliminating the psychological distance involved in concealing his sexuality.

Similar to Miller's model, Bozett (1989) created the theory of "integrative sanctioning" to explain the development of a gay father identity. This involved a shift from being covertly attached to the gay world to integrating with the gay world, an achievement that is made possible by coming out as gay to non-gays and disclosing an identity as a father to gay people and receiving a positive reaction. The belief was that this affirmation would have positive integrative effects, with an acceptance of both identities as a gay man and a father. Later, Matteson (1987) created a five-phase developmental schema for divorced and married gay parents, which proposed that parents in secretive same-sex relationships were in a spiral of self-rejection. As demonstrated by these examples, research into the identities of such men made clear suggestions about the direction these men needed to take to reach self-acceptance and psychological well-being.

Since this early research was published, virtually no research has addressed the identity development of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers (although there has been a small amount of research focused on the experiences of gay sperm donors (e.g. Riggs, 2009) and gay men who father through surrogacy (e.g. Bergman, Rubio, Green & Padrón, 2010). These stage-models fail to recognise the individuality of this group of men, perhaps oversimplifying identity by suggesting one must be 'out' to be psychologically well (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012). There is a need for LGBTQ researchers who choose to use stage models to include a level for men who identify a same-sex attraction, but do not identify with a gay identity (or a positive gay identity) for the model to be more inclusive (Brzezinski, 2000). Identifying as 'out' and open with everyone cannot be the only successful outcome for gay men (Byrd, 1993), as it is prescriptive and will not fit all men's goals (Boellstorff, 2011). As more scholars describe the development of gay identity as a fluid and complex process influenced by other psychosocial identities (see Diamond & Butterworth, 2008), it becomes apparent that stage models of formerly heterosexually partnered gay father identity development are not adequate to describe all identity processes for this group of men (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The continued lack of research on this group of gay fathers could potentially be due to cultural residue of understanding fatherhood as clashing with cultural understandings of being a gay man, and gay men continue to not be traditionally expected to conceive children (Bigner, 2000; Isay, 2010; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). However, men who have sex with other men have historically always fathered children (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Miller, 1979) and will continue to do so. Despite this, research on heterosexually divorced or separated gay fathers has subsided in recent years, due to the increasing emphasis on other paths to parenthood for gay men, such as adoption and fostering (Mallon, 2012; Marsiglio, 2014; Wilson, 2012), surrogacy (Bergman et al., 2010), and a variety of co-parenting arrangements (McHale & Lindahl, 2011).

As a result of the emergence of these alternative pathways to parenthood for gay men, gay men who have fathered children in the context of a heterosexual

relationship can feel socially excluded from both heterosexual fathers and gay men who have fathered children after 'coming out' (Schacher, Auerbach & Silverstein, 2005). This shift of research attention away from the identities of heterosexually divorced or separated gay fathers is potentially explained by changing social attitudes. Recent research argues that gay men come out earlier (Rossi, 2010) and so formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers are a population that is continuing to decrease (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001) and will soon no longer exist and therefore no longer need enquiry.

However, the recent lack of research on divorced and separated gay fathers is problematic because it can be argued that this group face a special set of problems in regard to identity and social acceptance (Bozett, 1981), which is considerably more complex than that of the gay man without children or gay man who fathered children in a same-sex context (Mallon, 2012). Furthermore, the research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Matteson, 1987) made interpretations about gay fathers from heterosexual relationships negotiating their identities in the time they were living in, and the problems for these men today may have changed.

For these men, identity as a father may be experienced as conflicting with their identity as a gay man. For example, one problem that gay fathers who have had children while in heterosexual relationships face is how their identity as fathers may impact their process of 'coming out' (Bigner & Bozett, 1989). Research into the experiences of 'out' gay (mostly White middle-class) fathers has demonstrated largely positive benefits attached to 'outness', such as bringing men closer to their families of origin (Bigner, 2000). The only consistent exception is where men who have children from previous heterosexual relationships face challenges confronting their family's concerns about the impact of their 'coming out' on their children (Power et al., 2012).

In summary, what is missing from the current body of research is an exploration of the current challenges for divorced and separated gay fathers, and in particular how these men manage their identities as gay men and fathers in the existing socio-cultural climate. This study seeks to explore the intersecting

identity of gay fathers who have lived in a religious context. This next section will explore the impact of this religious identity in addition to the identities of being gay and a gay father.

The Impact of Religion on Gay Identity

I have demonstrated that within identity model research a healthy gay identity is equated with 'outness'. Conversely, some religions, such as Mormonism and Catholicism, encourage men who self-identify same-sex attraction, not to act upon these feelings, as it is not the feeling but the expression of same-sex attraction through sexual acts that is condemned by religions authorities (Wolkomir, 2006). This is one example of how one religious teaching is opposed to the assumptions of more liberal social contexts, including gay communities, that being 'out' equates to being psychologically healthy (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012). The polar difference in what is asked of such men by their religious leaders, in contrast with what is expected of them by the gay community, demonstrates how conflict of the self can exist for gay men who come from religious backgrounds.

The debate on homosexuality in religious communities has risen from invisibility to being one of the central conflicts in modern religion within a few decades (Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman, 2011). Heteronormative and homophobic assumptions still shape wider perceptions of same-sex parenting in religious communities (Weiner & Zinner, 2015; Pennington & Knight, 2011). These beliefs are informed by particular interpretations of religious texts (Carneiro, 2013). As this research explores the experiences of men who come from Jewish, Catholic, Church of England, Mormon, Methodist, Fundamental, Evangelical and Charismatic Christian religious organisations, in illustrating the effect religion has on the identity of the research participants, the position of these religious groups on homosexuality and same-sex parenting will be outlined. But first, the broader consequence of religion on sexual identity will be explored.

A relatively recent study reported that more than 50% of heterosexually married male participants who had sex with other men held a current religious affiliation (Malcolm, 2008). Gay men who are inclined toward doctrine religious

practice have historically been more likely to have a poor self-concept, suffer from depression, and believe homosexuality to be sinful (Weinberg & Williams, 1974). This raises the question of the role of religion in gay identity formation for religious gay men, suggesting that a gay man with a religious identity may be less likely to come out, conceivably due to stigma from their religious community (Boswell, 2009) as well as self-stigma conflict causing identity discord (García, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez-Valles, 2008). In addition to the moral judgement that their religious group makes about sexuality, men who are actively engaged in religious communities, such as the Evangelical or Mormon Church, where spirituality is at the nucleus of day-to-day social life, may experience a tremendous sense of loss if they chose, or are forced, to end their religious affiliation because of their sexuality (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Yip, 1999). For some of these men, the loss of a religious group can feel impossible to replace (Meyer, 1995), with reports of the experience ranging from a loss of self-identity and social context, to abandonment by and alienation from others within the religious community that can lead to strong feelings of shame and guilt (Ganzevoort et al., 2011).

Gay men often find it difficult or impossible to have affiliation in both their religious community and the gay community (Ganzevoort, et al, 2011).

Furthermore, while some gay men choose to leave their religious communities (ostensibly) on their own terms because they find it impossible to reconcile their religion's view on homosexuality with their gay identity, others are forced to leave their religious community by religious authorities because the act of 'coming out' itself precludes membership (Etengoff, 2016). To provide a better context for the Western religions included in this research, I now summarise the positions of these religions on homosexuality.

Positions of Western Religious Organisations on Homosexuality

This research includes participants from the Judeo-Christian religions listed in Appendix II (starting with Judaism, then moving from larger to smaller Christian Churches based on popularity of the religion in relation to the region of the participants - for example while Mormonism is a small denomination in the UK,

it is the largest religion in Utah, from where 3 participants were recruited). Appendix II expands upon the positions of each of these religions in greater detail, exploring individual statements and research connected with each organisation. What can be summarised from the opinions and teachings expressed by these Western religious organisations is that a strong negative attitude towards homosexuality exists. This is demonstrated through the unanimous opposition towards gay marriage (by all organisations included in this study), protecting the traditional definition of marriage as the union between a man and women.

For men who come from religious backgrounds, negative attitudes potentially make it more difficult to achieve an identity as a gay man who is also a father. Therefore, for gay men who father children from heterosexual relationships and come from religious backgrounds, the research suggests that their self-identity can be conflicted on multiple levels: as gay men who are fathers, as gay men who had children while in a heterosexual relationship (closeted), and as gay men who have a religious background (and have fathered children). Notably, there is no current research that examines how having all these identities concurrently affects such men. To better understand this experience for such men, the following sections will offer theoretical socio-psychological perspectives on identity and stigma.

Socio-Psychological Perspectives on Identity

As this research is concerned with understanding how a particular group of gay fathers make sense of their identity, it is important to define what is meant by the term 'identity'. In keeping with the phenomenological stance of this study, I consider identity to be located on the level of subjective psychological experience, rather than necessarily referring to an objective "true self" (Rogers, 1961). Therefore, identity is constructed through a complex interaction of psychological (cognitive and affective) and social processes, occurring within particular cultural and local contexts (Breakwell, 1986; 2014; Markova, 1987; Reicher, 2000; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Gollledge & Scabini, 2006). Self-categorisation theory (Turner & Oakes, 1989) and social identity theory (Turner

& Oakes, 1986) both acknowledge the functional interdependence between mind and society in theorising about identity development. This study aims to capture how individuals live, work and act in a socially structured system considering the premise that human beings are both individuals and social group members (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). The psychological nature of an individual (e.g. our sense of self) is usefully comprehended within an understanding of our groups and memberships within society (see Asch, 1951; Lewin, 1947). To consider this theory for the participant population, we must first consider the social experience of these men.

It has been argued that being gay in a heteronormative world can be stressful (e.g. Jaspal, 2010). The added complexity of a religious and/or a father identity for gay men can present further social and psychological stressors. Studies focusing on intersecting identities, such as being gay and Muslim (Yip, 2007), being gay and Jewish (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000) and being gay and a father (e.g. Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007), have demonstrated that being gay and having another facet of identity can give rise to internal conflict. This in turn can have a negative impact on psychological wellbeing. To manage these stresses, gay men with intersecting identity configurations, such as gay fathers from heterosexual relationships raised with religion, must manage these stressors by minimising any perceived threats to their identities (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Threats to personal identity can include an individual's perception of being dehumanised, stereotyped, disempowered or devalued by others (Coyle, 1999).

Identity conflict arises when two (or more) identity components that are relevant to, and are held by an individual (e.g. being a gay father and having been raised in a religious community), are experienced as being in some way incompatible (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000). For example, for a gay father from a religious background, the identity component that might be required to be assimilated is 'being gay', which may be incompatible with one or more existing identity components of being a father from a heterosexual relationship and having a religious identity. Arguably, this identity conflict can be even more challenging when a religious identity is enmeshed in an ethnic (e.g. Judaism, see

Webber, 1997) or cultural identity (e.g. Mormonism, see Toney, Keller & Hunter, 2003), as this cultural/ethnic component can be considered to be fixed.

Identity Process Theory (IPT) was developed in 1986 by the social psychologist Glynis Breakwell to provide an integrative framework within which identity, threats to identity and strategies for coping with identity threats can be understood, which captures the dynamic complexities of these processes (Breakwell, 2014). IPT is relevant to this study because it is concerned with the shifting dynamics between individual identity (e.g. gay man), interpersonal relationships (e.g. as fathers) and the social structures they are part of (e.g. religious membership). The theory analyses at multiple levels (or intersections) the processes whereby identity changes (Breakwell, 2014). IPT conceptualises identity structure in terms of content and value/affect dimensions. This structure is regulated by two universal processes: the *assimilation-accommodation* process and the *evaluation process* (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012; Turner & Coyle, 2000). The *assimilation-accommodation* process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure and the ways in which this changes the identity structure. The *evaluation process* places meaning and value on the contents of identity.

Breakwell (1986, 1992) initially identified four identity *principles* that guide these universal processes: (1) *continuity* - across time and situation; (2) *distinctiveness* - uniqueness from others; (3) *self-efficacy* - feeling confident and in control of one's life; and (4) *self-esteem* - feelings of personal worth or social value. Later, Vignoles and colleagues (Vignoles et al., 2002, 2006) proposed two additional identity principles: (5) *belonging* - the need to maintain feelings of closeness to and acceptance by others; and (6) *meaning* - the need to find significance and purpose in one's life. More recently, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010, p. 865) also introduced the (7) '*psychological coherence principle*', which refers to the motivation to establish feelings of compatibility between one's interconnected identities. For example, a gay man's acknowledgement that they 'always knew they were gay' may not be an attempt to create continuity of their identity, but rather to reconcile their incoherent pre-existing identity as

heterosexual. IPT proponents argue that identity threat comes about when any of the identity principles are hindered by changes in the social context (Jaspal, 2014). For example, when a gay father's identity feels threatened by his religious community, he will engage in coping strategies, such as leaving the religious community, to alleviate the threat. Breakwell (1986, p.78) defined a coping strategy as 'any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity'.

Theoretical Perspectives on Stigma

Sociologist Irving Goffman's (1963) theory of social stigma presented stigma as an attribute that is socially discredited in a particular way, causing an individual to be classified by others as an undesirable or rejected stereotype. Goffman considered stigma to be an attribute that is "deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3), indicating a loss of status for the individual in public situations. Goffman defined stigma as a special kind of "gap" between one's potential identity and actual identity that creates a "disappointment" of expectations between one's desirable identity (e.g. heterosexual) and the social category which the person belongs (e.g. homosexual). When the actual identity is lacking, this dynamic "spoils" the identity (Goffman, 2009). Goffman (1963) wrote about stigmatised identities (e.g. people with visible and invisible impairments) and described a "spoiled identity" as occurring when an individual is classified as socially undesirable due to the stigma attached to being labelled with an undesirable characteristic, such as being gay. Conversely, gay men who are not out can also feel disparagement because they have not historically been open and honest about their sexuality, which can leave these men feeling excluded from both heterosexual and gay communities (LaSala, 2000). It is also argued that a self-esteem injury can motivate gay men to enter into heterosexual marriage (Isay, 1998). Formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion, where homosexuality is condemned, could thus be described as managing intersecting stigma.

The intersectional identities of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion connects well with Goffman's theory of "spoiled identity" in

two ways. Firstly, being gay and 'closeted' creates a "spoiled identity" in a homophobic society. Secondly, being 'closeted' creates a "spoiled identity" in gay communities, which generally hold that it is important to be 'out'. In other words, stigma depends on the context of the individual, with different parts of the same identity being stigmatised within different contexts.

Intersectionality

For forty years sexuality theorists have adopted the concept of intersectionality, a theory developed by Black feminists (e.g. the concept was named by Crenshaw, 1989, but arguably has a much longer history in Black feminist thought), as a means of understanding identity (Brah & Pheonix, 2013; Walby; 2007; Nash, 2008; Riggs & das Nair, 2012; Shields, 2008). Intersectionality addresses the complex ways in which experiences of social marginalisation and privilege intersect to create particular experiences of identity. Intersectionality describes the intersection between forms or systems of oppression (e.g. the experience of being black and a woman cannot be understood independently, but must include the interactions between the two). The concept of intersectionality fits with the multiple intersections of participants who have to manage: being a gay man, being a father, being 'closeted', being openly gay or being religious. This research uses intersectionality theory in considering how these interactions cannot be separated from one another but inform each other to produce experiences of identity.

In this thesis I use intersectionality and identity theory as concepts for examining how the research participants make sense of their own (potentially conflicted) identities. Breakwell's IPT (2014) and Goffman's notion of "spoiled identity" are useful lenses for considering the challenges of 'coming out' in mainstream society, which have been well documented (Coleman, 1982; Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Vincke & Bolton, 1994), with evidence suggesting that it is even more challenging 'coming out' after marrying heterosexually (Higgins, 2004). It is also reported that gay men who come from religious and conservative communities have a more challenging time with negotiating their

gay identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Spitzer, 2003; Thumma, 1991; Whitley, 2009).

While coming out as gay in Western societies has potentially become less challenging for LGBTQ people because of increased legal protection and changing social attitudes (Eskridge Jr, 2013), 'coming out' does not necessarily feel easier for some gay men today (Herdt & Boxer, 2014). The fact that it is deemed to be more acceptable to be a gay man (legally, politically and socially - see Harbeck, 2014) can in fact make men feel they have less of a 'justification' for remaining 'closeted' (Herdt & Boxer, 2014). This is particularly so when considering the moral importance of being a genuine, honest and 'authentic' person, which is imposed by both the gay and heterosexual communities (Legate et al., 2012). 'Closetedness' is thus often seen as a zone of shame and exclusion (Lynch, 2015), creating a potential stigma for gay men who have been formerly 'closeted'. In other words, an apparently more tolerant social context may ironically have increased the stigma associated with having been 'closeted'. This thesis will thus consider identity and stigma for divorced and separated gay fathers raised in religion, while critically examining assumptions about what makes a 'good' or 'healthy' gay identity. I will now examine how gay men manage their stigmatised identities.

Therapeutic perspectives on homosexuality

This review has so far demonstrated the potential difficulties gay men face as fathers and as part of religious communities in reconciling their identity. While the main aim of this research is to understand how this participant group understands themselves, from a counselling psychology perspective it is also important to understand how these men have been served historically by psychological and health professionals when they are struggling with issues such as identity formation and 'coming out'.

The relationship between psychological practitioners and the gay community has long been a difficult one, with the earliest research from psychiatry viewing homosexuality as an illness (King & Bartlett, 1999). Homosexuality was first

listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM – the manual used by the APA and widely among Western mental health practitioners) in 1952 and only removed in 1973. This was a significant event for the gay community and prompted the move away from a pathological model of homosexuality and the notion that homosexuality was a mental illness that could be cured through psychological treatment (Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002; Pixton, 2003). However, there is still significant negative judgement held about LGBTQ people in the wider society (Hatzenbuehler, Bellatorre & Muennig, 2014; Jenkins & Johnston, 2004; Nicolas & Skinner, 2012; Meyer, 2015; Span, 2011; Woodford, Levy, & Walls, 2013) and that judgement continues to be reflected among some therapeutic professionals (Bigner & Wetchler, 2014; Grove, 2003; Godfrey, Haddock, Fisher & Lund, 2006), in particular among some ‘religious’ practitioners and psychoanalytic psychotherapists (Evans, 2003; Herzog, 2015). In order to better understand the context for this research it is important to be aware of the treatment approaches these men may have experienced in psychological services or as members of their religious organisations. For example, conversion (ex-gay) therapy remains prominent in Mormon communities (Besen, 2012). This next section will list and define the broad therapeutic interventions available to gay men.

Conversion (ex-gay) therapy

Commonly referred to as conversion therapy, as opposed to reparative therapy, by LGBTQ researchers (e.g. Haldeman, 2014), ex-gay therapy describes therapeutic approaches and interventions that seeks to provide ‘gay-to-straight’ outcomes for clients (Beckstead, 2012). Despite the consensus among critics of conversion therapy that it does not work (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Spitzer, 2003; 2012), statements by professional bodies condemning the practice, and a move towards prohibiting the practice in Western countries (Clair, 2013; Wolkomir, 2006), conversion therapy is still practised, particularly within religion-based therapy programmes (Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, Hyde, & Crowell, 2015). While conversion therapy is not promoted by all religious organisations, celibacy or managing same-sex impulses, which are key elements

of conversion therapy, are consistently deemed by many religious organisations (e.g. Mormonism – see Besen, 2012) to be desirable goals for men who have same-sex attraction (Haldeman, 2002; 2014). The experience of conversion therapy has been described as “brutal and psychologically invasive” (Haldeman, 2002: 124) and psychologically damaging (Haldeman, 1994), with participants describing the experience as creating “awful, empty hope” (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004: 672). Tozer and McClanahan (1999) cite numerous reasons (including the problem that perpetuation of the belief that homosexuality is inferior and pathological – see Haldeman, 2014) for therapists not to concede to a client’s desire to change his or her sexual orientation, which men with religious beliefs are cited to be most at risk of seeking (Flentje, Heck & Cochran, 2014). They also offer several reasons why gay affirmative therapy (GAT) is a psychologically better alternative, for example taking a ‘strengths’ perspective, focusing on the strength and determination of LGBTQ individuals in managing their presenting problems (Crisp, 2006).

Gay Affirmative Therapy

Gay affirmative therapy (GAT) emerged in response to conversion therapy, and provides a model that does not pathologise homosexuality (regardless of theoretical orientation) in an attempt to rectify previously discriminatory psychotherapeutic practice with lesbians, bisexuals and gay men (Clark, 1987; Davies, 1996; Hancock, 1995; Hunter & Hickerson, 2003; Perez, DeBord & Bieschke, 2000; Nicolosi, 1997). Researchers who have studied the experiences of LGBTQ clients who have undertaken GAT demonstrate largely gay affirmative elements that are unique to GAT and cannot be attributed to other factors (Johnson, 2012; Lebolt, 1999; Milton, Coyle, & Legg, 2002; Pixton, 2003). GAT is experienced positively by clients, with descriptions such as “affirming of *me*” and as demonstrating the therapist as seeing one’s difficulties as “human” (Lebolt, 1999: pp.360-361). Surprisingly, there is a lack of recent research into client experiences of GAT compared with the experience of ex-gay therapies. While GAT offers a positive framework for respectful therapeutic work that seeks to avoid imposing any expectations on clients about identifying as ‘out’, it

has been challenged by humanistic and existential psychotherapists (Cross, 2001; du Plock, 1997; Goldenberg, 2000; Langdridge, 2007) for its wider applicability in practice due to its therapeutic agenda (supporting more LGBTQ people to 'come out'). For example, Davies' (1996) GAT guidelines recommend that the therapist actively encourages and affirms LGBTQ thoughts to reduce feelings of shame and guilt.

LGBTQ Family Therapy

Within GAT also lies LGBTQ family therapy, a practice that can help support parents but customarily focuses on the children of LGBTQ parented families (Bernstein, 2000). LGBTQ family therapy acknowledges that each family member is influenced by the specific history and culture of his or her own family of origin (Laird, 2003). Blumer and Murphy (2011) suggest that due to the stigma faced by LGBTQ families, such families build a protective circle of people they trust around them to buffer the negative impact of sexual stigma, seeking mental health professionals to deal with family issues. Until recently, LGBTQ family therapy was concerned with the importance of 'coming out' to reap the benefits of living 'outside of the closet' (LaScala, 2000). Most recently, Rootes (2013) studied how gay fathers experience social and sexual stigma as a result of being both gay and male caregivers, acknowledging that much of family theory and therapy is weighed down with heteronormative assumptions and biases (see McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011).

Therapy Alternatives

In summary, the choice between conversion therapy and GAT offers two polarities which potentially excludes a group of individuals who find neither model satisfactory due to the polarising aims of each model (to help people identify as gay or 'straight'). This group is likely to include many gay men who have added complexities to their identity, such as parenthood and religious beliefs or backgrounds. Beckstead and Morrow (2001) have proposed an alternative to both forms of therapy in a group-treatment model aimed at developing identity acceptance. This model involves freely exploring identity in an atmosphere without judgement or expectation, not assuming a direction

toward homosexuality or heterosexuality, but enabling the individual to explore identity concepts without any expectations on how they label their identity. However, given the complexity of an intersecting identity, gay fathers from religious backgrounds may find accessing a same-sex group therapy programme too challenging.

The Importance of Guidelines for Practitioners

Most Western psychological associations (all those of the countries included in this study - Canada, Ireland, UK and US) have taken a stand against same-sex discrimination, but few have taken clear positions on gay parenting. Appendix III illustrates the positions of each psychological society on same-sex parents and their families (by the chief awarding psychological bodies in these countries, as well as Australia as a further example which offers a more comprehensive guide). Statements from these societies show that Western psychological associations generally take a positive stance on LGBTQ individuals and their families. However, these organisations still fail to provide guidance for working with gay parents and their families. Guidelines from accrediting bodies, such as psychological societies, are important for practitioners who rely on governing bodies to present them with 'best practice' models and specific practice recommendations for working with therapeutic groups. It is also important for professional bodies to offer practitioners a degree of knowledge about LGBTQ lifestyles and specific presenting issues (e.g. current research findings in the area of gay parenting) to better inform their work with LGBTQ clients (Anderson, 2012). There is an emphasis within psychological societies (such as the BPS) for evidence-based practice for psychologists (Norcross, 2011). For practitioners, this includes research evidence, clinical experience and expertise (Cummings, 2006).

Literature Summary

This review has established that most LGBTQ parenting research has been quantitative and comparative (focused on differences between heterosexual and same-sex parenting, e.g. Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989) and mainly focused on lesbian parenting (Chan, Brooks, Raboy & Patterson, 1998; MacCallum &

Golombok, 2004; Redding, 2007; Tasker, 2005). What research does exist on divorced and separated gay fathers is largely limited to research offering stage models of gay father identity development (e.g. Miller, 1979) that correlate being 'out' with psychological wellness for such men. It is important to examine the experiences of gay men who have children before 'coming out' and the obstacles and conflicts they potentially face as gay fathers in society (Strong & Cohen, 2013), particularly when research is shifting towards new pathways to parenthood for gay men, such as surrogacy and adoption and neglecting the experiences of these men (e.g. Tornello & Patterson, 2015). This research aims to offer insight into the experiences of these men and make interpretations about their processes of managing their identity as gay men and fathers, and any impact their religious backgrounds may have on this.

LGBTQ researchers appear to make the assumption that this population of men who father children while in heterosexual relationships is disappearing due to reduced social stigma surrounding coming out as gay (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tornello & Patterson, 2012). This makes the assumption that because it's easier to come out as gay (socially and legally) that in the future everyone will be 'out', and therefore gay men will no longer father children in the context of a heterosexual relationship. However, with discrimination against homosexuality by religious authorities continuing, and a newer form of discrimination against 'closeted' gay men by wider society (Rasmussen, 2004), there may always be a group of men who do not follow the 'coming out' trajectory set by over-simplified and dated identity models (e.g. Matteson, 1987). This furthers the importance of this study; offering insight into this participant group that is currently underrepresented in psychological research with little or no current guidance on what constitutes appropriate and valuable psychological input. In a time of social change this study will offer new reflections on identity for formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion, and make best practice suggestions for working therapeutically with these men.

Methodology

This research offers a qualitative exploration of the experiences of 12 men who (more or less unambiguously) identify as gay and have fathered children in a previous heterosexual relationship and have a religious background/upbringing. Qualitative research allows for access to meanings, interpretations and perspectives while remaining sensitive to the voices and concerns of individuals (Lyons & Coyle, 2016; Willig, 2013), which is particularly important for a study into the lived experiences of participants from a stigmatised identity group (such as formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an ideographic mode of enquiry that encourages in-depth exploration of individual accounts (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is based on the principles of phenomenology and focuses on how people find meaning and make sense of their experiences (Smith, et al., 2009). The approach is both phenomenological and interpretative in that it views the analytic outcomes as resulting from an interaction between the participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretation of the participants' meanings, what Smith (2004, p. 45) calls a "double hermeneutic".

Participant recruitment

The aim for this project was to recruit adult men (i.e. over 18 years of age) who: 1) self-identified as gay; 2) came from a religious background (either raised in religion in their family home or joined a religious community in adult life) and; 3) had fathered children while in a heterosexual relationship. In addition, the aim was to recruit men from different national contexts to allow exploration of the impact of different social and religious contexts on the men's experiences. Participants' first language was not required to be English, but their English speaking needed to be 'good enough' to engage in an interview. The difficulty in conducting research with hard-to-reach populations is well-documented (Elze, 2003; Sullivan & Losberg, 2003) and this is especially true when attempting to research members of populations who may conceal part of

their identity to avoid stigma (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005; Hash & Cramer, 2003). Participants were recruited in four countries: Canada, Ireland, the UK and US, offering the opportunity for comparison of different levels of access to LGBTQ rights (from full same-sex adoption and marriage rights in UK and Canada, to an ongoing movement towards legal rights in Ireland and the US at the time of interview) on the men's experiences. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling from the researcher's personal contacts in these countries, as well as advertising through gay parenting social networking groups (e.g. *Gay Dads UK* and *Gay Fathers of Toronto*).

IPA studies are typically based on relatively small sample sizes of research participants for whom the research question is meaningful (Smith, 2015). Whilst there is variation within IPA studies in the published literature, Smith et al. (2009) identified a sample size of between 6 and 10 as being sufficient for professional doctorate studies. However, as an unexplored topic, 12 participants was deemed appropriate and recruiting from 4 different countries - from the US (4), Canada (3), UK (3) and Ireland (2) - allowed for exploration of the impact of differing cultural contexts on the men's experiences (Smith et al., 2009). A primary concern in IPA research with a larger participant number (i.e. over 10 participants) is that the detailed account of individual experience may be lost for a more globalised account of experience. Smith et al. (2009) believe that high quality research does not come from the quantity of data but from successful analysis through the investment of time, dialogue and reflection. While larger sample sizes may inhibit an ideographic focus, the current study remains close to the recommended sample size and was small enough to allow the analysis process to focus clearly on individual stories.

Given the complexity of human experience, Smith et al. (2009) highlight the advantage of recruiting a homogeneous sample in order to explore convergence and divergence within participants' narratives. While this group is homogenous in some ways, characterised by being formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion, they are also different in terms of varying religions, cultures, ages and degrees of openness around their sexuality (as discussed further below).

The ongoing debates for marriage equality in the media at the time of data collection (2014) in countries such as Ireland (before the Irish Referendum voted in favour of same-sex marriage by altering the constitutional definitional of marriage in 2015) are important to note as terms of ‘sensitivity to the (wider) context’ for this research (Yardley, 2008). Initial interviews took place in Utah in January 2014, days after a court halt was issued on newly legalised gay marriages (from 20 December, 2013 – 6 January, 2014, a brief window allowed same-sex marriage in Utah) before the ban was ruled as unconstitutional in October, 2014 (weakening the historical control of the ties between state and Mormon Church in Utah). See Table 1 below for overview of same-sex rights – with regard to marriage and adoption - at the time of interview in the 4 countries/states in which participants were recruited.

Table 1: Same sex rights in countries included in this research

Country	Same-sex marriage rights at time of interview	Same-sex adoption rights at time of interview
USA (Utah)	Equal marriage rights suspended	Equal adoption rights Suspended
Ireland	Civil partnership rights, marriage rights pending referendum	Equal adoption rights announced, law pending change
Canada	Equal marriage rights	Equal adoption rights
United Kingdom	Equal marriage rights	Equal adoption rights

Interviews

Interviews are a well-established method of data collection in qualitative research, and in particular in IPA research, which allow participants to challenge the researcher’s assumptions about the meaning and relevance of concepts and categories (Willig, 2013). Semi-structured interviews allowed the content to be participant-led and for unanticipated issues to be raised, whilst allowing the

researcher to address the main areas of concern with all participants (Smith, 2015).

I used both face-to-face and *Skype* interviews to collect data. Hanna (2012) explored the use of *Skype* as a medium for qualitative research and identified that this approach offered a meaningful alternative to face-to-face interviews, allowing both a visual and audio interaction in a private and safe space. As *Skype* provides a face-to-face experience whilst maintaining the comfort of a private space, the length and richness of the data from these recorded interviews are of similar quality to those recorded in person (see Ayling & Mewse, 2009). *Skype* interviews also allow for the recruitment of a geographically dispersed participant group. Although face-to-face interviews are often regarded as the 'gold standard' and virtual interviews a 'second best' replacement when face-to-face interviews are not possible (Denscombe, 2014), a growing body of research suggests that virtual interviews are just as effective as face-to-face ones in generating rich data (Barak et al., 2008). A key suggestion to successful interviewing is ensuring a good 'fit' between the needs of the individual participant and the interview mode (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For this reason, qualitative researchers are increasingly offering participants a choice of interview approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and *Skype* allowed participants from areas that I was unable to travel to, to be included as well as participants who may have been uncomfortable with a face-to-face meeting. The interview schedule (See Appendix IX) was developed from questions created for an earlier research project I carried out on the experiences of formerly married gay fathers in the UK. This schedule was modified to include questions about participants' experiences of therapy and religion. Direct questions which covered important areas to address (e.g. motivations to remain married after identifying a same-sex attraction; experiences of gay parenting within different communities) were used as a guide and were asked to facilitate discussion only when topics were not addressed spontaneously. For all participants, initial contact was made via email to solicit participation, discuss details of the project and answer any questions (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). The length of the interviews ranged from 49 minutes to 88 minutes (the

average length was 66 minutes). These interviews took place in participants' homes (7 face-to-face), or another quiet location convenient for the participant (1 face-to face) and via *Skype* (4). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed orthographically (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In the transcription process repetitions, hesitations, false starts and such were transcribed.

Participants described their race and ethnicity as White American (3), White Canadian (2), White British (2), White Irish (2), White Jewish South African (1), Hispanic American (1), and White Romanian (1). Participants fathered between 1-4 children, with a median of 2 children (25 children in total). Participants identified their sexuality as gay (9), mostly gay (1), gay or bisexual (1) and bisexual, leaning towards gay (1). Participants identified their religious affiliations as: ex-Mormon (2), ex-polygamist Mormon (1), ex-Catholic (2), Catholic (1), ex-Evangelical (1), Christian Orthodox (1), non-practicing Charismatic Christian (1), ex-Southern Baptist (1), Methodist (1) and Masorti Jewish (1). Participants' ages ranged from 25-68, with a mean age of 42. Eleven fathers had biological children, while one participant became a father to two adopted children while in a heterosexual relationship. For a full table of participant characteristics see Appendix IV.

The decision to label all participants as 'gay fathers' reflects a pragmatic choice with regard to ease of labelling and terminology. However, it should be noted that all of the men responded to a call for participants for research exploring the experiences of gay fathers, thus all identify as a gay father at some level.

Data Analysis

Smith et al. (2009) identify clear steps to IPA analysis. I will now outline how I followed these steps in my analysis. I began to immerse myself in the data by reading and re-reading and subsequently noting initial reactions to the data as I collected each interview. I also shared my initial transcripts with my supervisors and we met to have an initial discussion of the men's stories. I listened to the recordings a number of times, sometimes alone in my car on long journeys, and I wrote down some of the most powerful recollections from the interviews.

Before and after meetings with my supervisors I began initial noting on the content of the transcripts and the language used by the participant in an attempt to identify how I believed they understood and thought about their experiences. From this, I created an overview of my initial notes. From this process of initial noting, alongside ongoing discussions about the data with my supervisors, themes emerged which I began to initially note on the transcripts (see Appendix V). These themes were later constructed as emergent themes when all interviews had been completed and transcribed. I noted emergent themes in a new column to the left-hand side of my interview transcripts in pencil (a column on the right-hand side held exploratory comments, see Smith et al., 2009, p. 93). I broke down the emergent themes into areas of difference, a process which is described by Smith et al. (2009) as subsumption, to 'bring together' the themes. I repeated this process across each transcript, bracketing previous ideas and concepts from other transcripts, in an attempt to treat each transcript as unique and individual, before finally exploring patterns across transcripts to identify unique and shared qualities. This process of exploration required me to adopt a position of interpretation, through reflective practice and bracketing of preconceptions, which was sometimes challenging as a gay man who often saw myself alongside the stories of participants. However, as a trainee counselling psychologist I felt practiced at this interpretative stance and was able to notice what was evoked in me as an individual (DeYoung, 2015). This process resulted in the generation of three themes – two themes centering on the men's sense-making and lived experience around their identities as gay fathers and one centred on the men's experiences of counselling. The first two themes capture the two lenses of IPA – a more phenomenological or descriptive approach, seeking to document the men's experiences of gay fatherhood (theme 1), and a more interpretive stance – drawing more on my conceptual and interpretive lens to explore how the men psychologically and rhetorically negotiate and manage their identities (theme 2).

Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was sought from and approved by the UWE Health and Applied Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee. Pre-interview, participants were given a participant information sheet (which included information about relevant sources of support for all 4 local areas participants were recruited from, see Appendix VI), which they were asked to read, following which they were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix VII). All participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the research before (and after) the interview and they were made aware of their right to withdraw their participation at any point during (and after) the interview collection (the practical limits on retrospective withdrawal were explained to the participants). Participants were given the opportunity to receive a copy of their interview transcripts and at a later point a short summary of the research findings. Participants chose their own pseudonym to protect their anonymity where desired. The researcher explained the increased risk to anonymity (that they could be more easily identified by people who may know a little about them who read the research) for participants who chose to retain their own first name.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research the experience and identity of the researcher always influences the findings (McLeod, 2001). Therefore, carrying out qualitative research is a personal activity and it is this that separates it from positivist research, where the potential impact of the interests and values of the researcher are typically overlooked (Smith et al., 2009). Regular supervision with an experienced qualitative researcher and social psychologist as primary supervisor and a counselling psychologist as secondary supervisor, both with experience of researching stigmatised participant groups, helped me to ensure that an appropriate topic guide was constructed. While IPA aims to explore the participants' experiences from their own perspective, it recognises that such an exploration cannot easily be separated from the researcher's own view of the

world, and the nature of the interaction between researcher and researched (Willig, 2013). For this reason, it is important in qualitative research for the researcher to state their own experience with the research topic and to recognise what Wilkinson (1988) termed 'personal reflexivity', which includes reflecting on prior assumptions that the researcher may have about the area of investigation and what motivated the researcher to select that topic in the first place.

Before each interview I disclosed my own sexuality as a gay man (without children, who was engaged in the adoption process with his same-sex partner) to participants in the hope of fostering trust and rapport. The benefits of disclosure have been demonstrated by other qualitative research, such as Ayling and Mewse (2009) who found that self-disclosing a gay identity when interviewing gay participants to be successful in fostering an open and safe environment. While an enhanced research relationship may indeed be permitted by appropriate disclosure before a research interview, Dickson-Smith, James, Kippen and Liamputtong (2008) suggest it can also create a potential risk for blurred boundaries. This was mediated by stating to participants that wider conversations around my experience of identity or parenthood would be better suited to an informal conversation after the interview was complete (Willig, 2013).

I will now inform the reader a little about my relationship with the research topic and personal background.

My interest in this participant group arose from my own experience of coming out as gay and feeling a sense of loss about my inability to father children in a heterosexual context by taking up a new identity as an openly gay man. Shortly after 'coming out', I decided to study the experience of gay parents through research at Masters level where I explored the experiences of gay parents in Ireland. I followed this research in my second-year doctoral research project focusing on gay men who parent children in heterosexual relationships.

As a gay man raised in Ireland, I attended Sunday services at my local Catholic Church until adulthood and studied at Catholic schools until university. In my community, very little was said or taught about homosexuality, however, I did experience homophobic bullying from peers at school, which I believe held me back from coming out as gay until early adulthood. I believe another strong reason I did not identify as gay until adulthood was my fear that as a gay man I would never be able to have a family, as same-sex adoption was not a possibility in Ireland at that time. I also held homo-negative assumptions about gay adoption that were passed onto me by the community I lived in (such as worries about the impact of my sexuality on the child and fears around homophobic bullying for the children of gay parents). It was not until I started to read research on the topic of gay parenting that I began to feel hopeful about becoming a parent. As previously noted, while conducting the interviews, I was in the process of adoption with my same-sex partner. After data collection was complete I became a parent to a seven-month-old boy.

As an openly gay man, and a trainee psychologist who occasionally discloses his sexuality to therapeutic clients dealing with problems related to sex, gender and sexuality, I have experienced individuals to feel most comfortable with same-sex identity when they feel they can talk openly about their same-sex experiences without judgement. In my work with clients, these experiences do not have to be labelled and individuals do not have to self-identify as LGBTQ or be open about their same-sex preference in every aspect of their life (for example I have met many individuals who choose not to disclose their sexuality in the workplace, who appear to have healthy identities as men who self-identify as having same-sex attraction). Unlike the authors of the stage models of identity development discussed in the literature review, I do not believe gay men have to be 'out' in all contexts to have a healthy self-identity. Feeling comfortable with one's identity around those close social relationships, I feel is a more relevant indication of identity acceptance.

Today, I do not identify as Catholic or as affiliated with any other religion, however, I come from a large family where religion and religious festivals are celebrated. I sometimes partake in religious ceremonies as an observer and am

respectful of the religious beliefs of those around me. I aspire to be tolerant of other's beliefs, however, foremostly, I feel strongly about human rights and the freedom to choose to identify as LGBTQ.

Results

The two themes reported here capture the ways in which the men made sense of, experienced, and psychologically and rhetorically negotiated their gay father identities in various different contexts, including in gay male communities, heterosexual communities and religious communities. These two intersecting themes capture the two different lenses of IPA – the first theme offers a more phenomenological and descriptive account of the men’s experiences (the ‘P’ in IPA) and captures and attempts to ‘stay close to’ their experience of living with a conflicted identity. The second theme offers a more interpretive and conceptual stance on the men’s accounts (the ‘I’ in IPA) and explores the psychological and rhetorical ‘defence’ of their (spoiled and stigmatised) identities, and the ways in which, in the context of the interview, they clearly felt compelled to justify their position as gay men who fathered children in a heterosexual relationship.

Super-Ordinate Theme 1: The Experience of Living with a Conflicted Identity

“I mean it would be nice to be in a situation where it’s completely normal, but obviously in this day and age it’s not.” (Gerard)

This overarching theme explores the participants’ experiences of living with an (intersecting) identity as gay, a father and a man from a religious background in various contexts, beginning exploration with the emergent theme, *being a gay man in a religious community*, as religion was the first of these identities experienced by participants. Here, participants explain what is it like to come out as gay when one has been raised with religion. For many participants, this experience meant leaving a community they had been firmly rooted in. The emergent theme, *being a gay father in the heterosexual community*, captures how the men experienced their identities as gay fathers in the heterosexual community. In the emergent theme, *being a gay father in the gay community*, participants similarly explained how they are experienced as fathers in the gay community. Finally, the emergent theme, *accepting a conflicted identity* explores, how each participant found some degree of self-acceptance.

Emergent theme 1a: Being a gay man in a religious community

Many participants considered being part of a religious community their strongest self-identity trait in early adulthood before identifying as gay (e.g. Tim: "I identified myself as Christian."). Most participants considered their friendships to largely come from within their religious communities, which limited their interactions with people with non-religious viewpoints:

"I was never really talking to anybody outside of a Christian circle, so everybody I'd talk to would say homosexuality is wrong" (Tim)

"I mean I went to the B.Y.U. [Brigham Young University, a Mormon university]" (Jason)

"Most of my friends were from the Church" (Tom)

Three participants (Bernie, Ed and Nick) were employed by their religious organisations at the time they began to question their identity. Bernie was living in an enclosed religious community when he started to notice his same-sex attraction:

"...within that community you were taught that if a woman asks to be part of your family, you shouldn't say no, unless you have a valid reason to decline her request. And the obvious answer after I've told people before is, well you were gay that should have been reason enough. But at the time I wasn't ready to come out. And so, uhm that wasn't an issue I felt like disclosing. And so I had no reason to decline her request. And so I married her out of obligation, not out of love."

This extract exhibits some of the expectations and pressures placed on many participants by their religious communities. From an early age Bernie felt his religious group's expectations prevented him from finding the space he needed to feel "ready" to understand or reveal his identity. This is underscored by his comment that people did not understand how he allowed his marriage to happen given he suspected he was gay, forcing Bernie into a defensive position. However, Bernie offered that he felt unready and uncomfortable about this disclosure.

The experience of 'coming out' while living their lives among religious

communities (experienced by 9 of the 12 participants) that were largely opposed to homosexuality had a strong negative impact on participants. This is well illustrated by Tom's story:

"...all of our friends were through the church. I lost all of my friends... My best friend of almost twelve years that I talked to everyday uhm said, 'never call me again, you're not the man I thought you were.' Some elders of the church who I had confided in [about my struggle with same-sex attraction] and asked for prayer, went and told my ex[-wife] everything I told them and said uhm 'you have no right [to] expect privacy'..."

Tom's painful account reveals the great loss of friendship and trust he experienced in coming out as gay. This demonstrates the extent of the challenges some participants faced when their private lives were enmeshed in a religious group that was anti-gay. For these participants, coming out as gay usually meant choosing to leave one's heterosexual partner; however, it also often meant leaving one's friendship circles and religious community. This shows how devastating the loss can be for men in this position, when choosing to come out and live openly as a gay man. For some participants (5 of 12) remaining in their religious communities after admitting a same-sex attraction meant working with group leaders in an attempt to deny their feelings, which will be later discussed in depth in relation to the men's therapeutic experiences.

Not all participants felt religion played a negative role in their 'coming out' process. For Paul (currently Unitarian, formerly Southern Baptist) and Ed (Judaism), religion remained a constant in their lives, a way of rethinking and interpreting their identities, as they remapped their belief systems based on their new identity. For example, Paul found Unitarianism, a liberal "orthodox-free" church. This 'finding' of a new, more liberal, Christian denomination could be understood as reflecting Paul's acceptance of his gay identity and a shift away from the homophobia of the strict Southern Baptist Church he grew up in. He described this church as growing "even worse than they were even when I

was young – they are one of the most homophobic denominations”. Paul described his new Church as placing the individual at the centre:

“Unitarianism [is] a way of thinking not just believing, it is not a religion, it is a way of looking at the world around you. Ultimately that helped a great deal with coming out as a gay man. It’s about how we create our own new traditions, the restructuring of family. There’s change and we need to be adapting to that.”

Paul framed his spiritual identity as “not a religion” but more as a way of viewing the world; this seemed to play a role in reducing the stigma he associates with homophobic religions, such as his past experience in Southern Baptist Church. For Paul, Unitarianism offered the ability to think about sexuality in an environment that encouraged questioning and allowed him to create a new identity that fit his beliefs and enabled him to be surrounded by a community of people who share similar beliefs. This was also true for Ed, who identified as Masorti, a liberal form of Judaism that “...doesn’t have somebody dictating a dogma...”, which allowed Ed to make his own interpretations about homosexuality from scripture. Ed believed “...one of the strengths of the Jewish religion is being able to look at things anew and take a view.” Similarly, as a Methodist, Nick also took a pragmatic approach to his religion based on his own experiences rather than religious dogma, finding that his local Church held a non-judgemental standpoint on homosexuality: “there’s been lots of discussion about [homosexuality] and ... it’s now viewed upon as not immoral.”

While the interpretations of Nick and Ed may not necessarily reflect statements made by the more orthodox branches of their religions on same-sex rights, what matters most to them is the opinion shared by the people who they come into contact with from these groups and the message shared by their local religious leaders. However, for the other 9 participants, their religious organisations were strongly against homosexuality. For this reason, all other participants fell somewhere on a spectrum from continuing to struggle with their sexuality and religious beliefs, to severing all connections with religious

organisations and feeling generally anti-religion.

For example, Dan continued to attend Church services because of the familiar affirmation he felt from the experience: "I feel good when I go to the Christian Orthodox liturgy. It touches my insides, some core that vibrates when I do that". However, because of the Christian Orthodox Church's homophobia, Dan described his engagement with his Church to have changed "in a more passive way" until he finds a place of worship that is more accepting of homosexuality: "I'll look at other places at the same time as well. Other churches. I understand there's a Metropolitan Church which is very accepting of gay people." Tom explained his complicated relationship with his Church very simply: "I still love God; I just cannot handle God's people right now". This demonstrates how difficult it can be to acknowledge that one's religion does not accept your new gay identity.

Participants usually chose to turn away from religion when their religious community was unaccommodating of their sexuality. This shift from being deeply religious in the early years of life to being deeply antithetical of religion is illustrated by Jared: "I considered myself a very strong Catholic... Now, I'm anti-Catholicism, I'm very opposed to the Church, I'd like to see it go to hell and damnation. So, again I was strong on one side, now I'm strong on the other." Here, Jared's use of religious language and constructs, "hell and damnation", to reject his former church demonstrates the powerful impact religion has had on him. Other participants offered similarly definitive responses when asked if they identified with their religion today: "no, I do not." (Jason).

In this emergent theme, *being a gay man in a religious community*, the complicated experience of having a religious background was demonstrated to have an impact on the men's formation of their gay identities. This equated to the extent to which participants were enmeshed within their religious communities and how homophobic participants considered their local religious communities to be.

Participants spoke broadly about their struggles with religious teachings on homosexuality as wrong and sinful, developing a sense of shamefulness about having same-sex attraction, a recognised problem for such men (see Ganzenvoort et al., 2011). This emergent theme acknowledged the loss participants felt when they believed they needed to withdraw from their religion (Wolkomir, 2006). Participants who were able to retain their religious affiliation did so by choosing more accepting aspects of their religion that did not promote homophobia or were already members of a local church/temple within a particular denomination they experienced as liberal and accepting. Kubicek, McDavitt, Carpineto, Weiss, Iverson and Kipke (2009) have found that for gay men who find a way of maintaining their religious affiliation in a same-sex positive way, alongside other likeminded individuals, this provides as an emotional support system, aiding same-sex identity acceptance.

Emergent theme 1b: Being a gay father in the heterosexual community

The participants' experience of developing an awareness of their same-sex attraction/identity often began with an early understanding of being 'different' from everyone in their families. This early belief stayed with them into adulthood until a point when they began to identify as gay more openly. The process of identity acceptance had been complicated by participants' identities as 'heterosexual' fathers before they assumed a gay identity. This emergent theme captures participants' complicated experiences of coming out as a gay man in the wider heterosexual community, which was often described as a frustrating process and one that left them feeling vulnerable:

“This is what gets me, really annoys me to this day, is when people come up to you and tell you that they don't mind that you're gay. It really freaks me out, like. My line is to turn around and say like, do you know what, I've no problem with you being straight either...” (Gerard)

This account plainly exhibits a common experience for participants; that coming out as gay in the wider heterosexual community was something heterosexuals

often believed they could openly approve or disapprove of, in a privileged way that could make participants feel disadvantaged. Gerard's language demonstrates his frustration with (heterosexual) people who believe they are entitled to free him from his perceived identity shame and offer him acceptance. This quotation exemplifies the privileged position of heterosexuals and how it feels to move one's identity from a socially accepted identity (heterosexual) towards one that may not be socially accepted (non-heterosexual).

While all participants struggled on some level to feel acceptance as gay fathers, they equally struggled to feel acceptance as heterosexuals while in heterosexual relationships. For example, Paul: "people thought I was gay all the time...". Therefore, identity acceptance from others, of any kind, is something this participant population have always struggled with. For example, Ed spoke about the challenges he faced before 'coming out' in upholding his heterosexuality to others in the workplace. To manage this he placed his heterosexuality front and centre to avoid any suspicion of his same-sex sexuality, an identity he was at the time unready to embrace:

"...[Before I came out as gay] I'd usually throw something into the conversation about my wife early on, or my children, to get people off the scent. To stop them thinking that thought early on, and I'd be very careful not to express myself about anything gay. And when I came out, I would talk about my wife and my boyfriend quite openly, quite early on."

Ed's comments demonstrate his transition from fear and shame to openness. However, Ed must continue to justify and explain his complex identity as a gay father to avoid prejudice from (heterosexual) others. To manage this, he moves from a passive way of communicating his uncertain identity (promoting his heterosexual father identity) towards clear and defiant language about his true complicated identity as a gay father (e.g. "my wife and my boyfriend"). The tiresome nature of constantly 'coming out' about one's gay father identity to heterosexuals was mentioned by many participants, as illustrated by Tim:

“I think people like to label you, like to box you, to understand you. This discussion we’re having now, I don’t want to go through that with everybody.... Because I don’t want to talk about it. I’m absolutely happy to talk about it here because it will add to the body of knowledge. It is a very complex process, it wasn’t a straightforward process where one day I woke up and decided I was gay and was going to walk away from everything. It was a hugely complex process. Full of ambivalence, full of internal traumatic experiences, full of complex relationships. So, I don’t want to tell that to everybody. I just want people to accept me, my circumstances and who I am now.”

This extract highlights the resolution Tim seeks from the weariness of perpetually managing his complex identity. For Tim, his journey towards a gay identity was traumatic and personal and, therefore, not for public consumption. Tim appears to feel frustration that changing identity culturally requires explanation and there is pressure to explain the “complex process” of transitioning from heterosexual father to gay father. Tim, who articulated explicitly the idea of a conflicted identity, further highlights this:

“...society has changed incredibly and the idea of somebody now coming out as gay and deciding, “I want to be a parent”, is very acceptable but the idea of being married and having kids and then ‘coming out’ is still acceptable but actually people don’t understand who you are... they would like to see you as gay right from the word go. But back in the nineteen-eighties was very different, but if I was a young man in two-thousand-fourteen, I would possibly suspect that things would be quite different for me...” (Tim)

This extract signifies Tim’s frustration with “society” about his decision in early adulthood to marry a woman and father children, which he feels his era and (heterosexual) environment are partially responsible for. Tim believes his choice

is less understood and less acceptable to others than the choice to raise a family within the context of one's "true" sexual orientation. Tim offers a perspective suggested by most participants - that heterosexual people struggle to make sense of someone (i.e. people like him) who has not been clear about their identity before starting a family. This is further demonstrated by Tim's expression that (heterosexual) people want to see one's identity as concrete "from the word go", because they want certainty and someone who demonstrates uncertainty about themselves is felt to be less explicable or worthwhile to others. This depicts a challenging relationship with the heterosexual world for Tim and men like him. However, Tim and other participants clarified that their experience as gay fathers within heterosexual communities were not necessarily negative.

Some participants – Alex, Dan, Richie, Tim – described the reaction from the heterosexual community to their gay father identity as not necessarily negative but lacking understanding, particularly around the complexity of their identity. For example, Alex stated, "At my office...when they know that I've a kid, there's no thought in their head that I could even be gay". Some participants – Bernie, Jason, Tim and Tom – also discussed instances of explicit homophobia from heterosexuals. For instance, Jason reported a negative experience in his local community:

"[My son]'s scout leader... wouldn't allow me to go on father and son activities ...because, I don't know, I'm going to molest the boys or something? I just don't know. There's stuff like that that comes around every once in a while."

This upsetting experience was normalised by Jason as something gay fathers simply have to deal with. Jason's language demonstrates bewilderment and frustration, but his attitude is accepting, conceding that negative experiences like this are part of holding this conflicted identity.

Perhaps out of fear of disparagement or the pressure to justify their

complicated positions, other participants (Dan, Jared, Nick) were uncomfortable talking about their homosexuality with heterosexual friends and rarely (if ever) divulged it. For example, Jared commented, “I’m not comfortable talking about it. I’m very comfortable talking about it with gay men, but otherwise I’m not...” Having a gay father identity was complicated for all participants, affecting their relationships within heterosexual communities regardless of their level of ‘outness’.

This emergent theme explored the shift from being a heterosexual father to being a gay father, which usually meant participants experienced the downgrading from holding a privileged position as heterosexual father towards one that is often not socially accepted (see Katz, 2007). Many participants spoke about the over-importance of labelling in Western culture (Eyben & Moncrieffe, 2013) and their frustrations with being expected to be open with everyone they meet about their identity (Rasmussen, 2004). Other identity research has demonstrated that identity uncertainty for gay fathers from heterosexual relationships is usually caused by stigma from (non-heterosexual) others (Tornello & Patterson, 2012). Participants described their relationships within the heterosexual world as not necessarily negative, but lacking understanding, particularly around the complexity of their identity (Goldberg, 2010). However, it should nonetheless be acknowledged that homophobia still exists (see Plummer, 2014). While a gay father identity was better understood by the gay community, participants still found conflict within this community.

Emergent theme 1c: Being a gay father in the gay community

Overall, participants expressed positive experiences of coming out as gay fathers in the gay community. Five participants had come out to other gay men in the context of gay support groups, such as *Gay Fathers of Toronto*, the benefits of which have been documented in existing research (see Legate et al., 2012). An example of this positive experience can be seen in Tom’s comment:

“the LGBT centre here [Ohio] has a support group for men ‘coming out’.

About seventy per cent of them were married at one point... and a lot of

them have kids. So, that's really cool because they understand exactly what you're going through."

However, the other 7 participants did not have the advantage of 'coming out' in a supportive environment, which appeared to be because these groups were not geographically accessible to them or they had no knowledge of such groups. This is a recognised problem for gay men in more rural communities (Langdrige, 2007). Nonetheless, most participants (10) experienced some negativity in the gay community about their roles as fathers. This negativity usually related to distrust from childless gay men. For instance, Richie recalled one comment he encountered from a childless gay man:

"Oh, you're in a gay bar and you've children?" And they feel that I'm a dishonest person for being there when I have four children. That I have a heterosexual profile...I shrivel when that happens...they're wary..."

The impact of this remark falls heavily on Richie, evoking fear of negative judgement and embarrassment, exposed by his language that he feels hurt that people would judge him to be "dishonest" and acknowledges that his identity stirs suspicion among childless gay men. Many participants reported encountering negativity within the gay community. For example, Dan said: "A lot of people in the gay community, their reaction is, 'Well, okay, I don't want to have anything to do with you at this point because you're not exclusively available'." Overall, it appeared that the experience of 'coming out' to childless gay men was expressed to fall on one definitive end of a spectrum ranging from very positive to very negative reactions:

"[Gay men come from] two ends of the spectrum ranging from, "that's amazing, I've always wanted to be a dad, right the way through to, "Oh my God"... Nobody ever sat in the middle and I don't know whether that is a unique experience. They either really wanted to be a parent, thought that's amazing, all the way through to, it's not for me." (Tim)

As suggested above by Tim, commonly participants perceived childless gay men as having either a strong desire to parent or no desire at all. Most participants believed that most childless gay men did not want children for themselves. The feeling that children were undesirable to childless gay men was most powerfully endorsed by those men who had dated, or considered dating, non-parents. For example, Dan said:

“Some people would not want you as a boyfriend... I met a guy who said, ‘People like you are baggage to a gay guy, because you have to come out with your daughter’ and y’know, they have to make plans for her. I thought, ‘Oh that’s interesting, I’ve never thought of my daughter as baggage before’.”

Many participants shared similar comments about dating, for example, Bernie said: “I will divulge it on a first date because I know for some people [being a parent is] an issue”. While the experience of coming out as a father to other gay men was challenging, participants who experienced support from other gay men seemed to feel more comfortable about having a dual identity as a gay man and father. For example, Nick shared his early experience of ‘coming out’ socially to gay men:

“When I first went to a local professional gay men’s group, I had a thing about being a gay man and a father. But when I talked to other men, I became open about it because I met two young guys who made me feel very welcome...to be able to be open in a social place is just lovely. Very liberating.”

This extract demonstrates the value of open acceptance from others in feeling comfortable with one’s self-identity and the importance of feeling like one belongs.

Overall, in the emergent theme, *being a gay father in the gay community*, participants reported that childless gay men had either a strong desire to parent or no desire at all, which had an effect on the reaction they received from such

men. This is supported by research that suggests polar attitudes towards parenting exist for most gay men (Pollock, 2015; Riskind & Patterson, 2010). The feeling of negative judgement (10 of 12) participants reported about their identities as fathers in gay communities has been identified in other research (Benson, Silverstein & Auerbach, 2005). However, participants also reported that some childless gay men felt envious of their fatherhood (Riskind & Patterson, 2010) and experiences of support for gay fathers within the gay community (Massey, Merriwether & Garcia, 2013). While the experience of coming out as a father to other gay men has been historically documented as challenging (see Bozett, 1981), it has been noted to be less challenging than 'coming out' to heterosexuals (see Tornello & Patterson, 2012). These findings demonstrate that support from gay men can help such men feel comfortable about having a dual identity as a gay man and father, which has also been documented in other research (Davies, 2014; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; LaSala, 2013) and open acceptance from others supports them to feel comfortable with their self-identity (Ryan, Legate & Weinstein, 2015). The final emergent theme will explore how participants accept their conflicted identity as gay fathers with a religious background.

Emergent theme 1d: Accepting a conflicted identity

Throughout this super-ordinate theme, I have explored how participants' make sense of and experience their multiple roles as gay men, fathers and past or present membership within a religious organisation. This final emergent theme will examine how participants' experiences have shaped their conflicted identity as a gay father raised with religion to create some level of acceptance around their identity, and how they manage that understanding of their identity around others. This will be illustrated by discussing the participants on an individual level but also focusing on clusters of participants who have shared similarities in their personal identities.

The literature review discussed the limitations of older stage-models of gay father identity, observing that the simplistic categorising of participants into

stages of 'outness' is unhelpful because it suggests a single positive pathway for such men. In the current study, the participants varied greatly in levels of identity acceptance and disclosure, which will now be discussed in three clusters, focusing on the varying levels of gay father identity security that emerged from the research.

The first cluster can be identified as participants who conveyed a sense of comfort with their identity, talking about their identities as gay fathers in wider society and often endorsing gay rights and advocacy for gay parents. This was the largest participant group (7 of the 12 – Alex, Bernie, Ed, Jason, Paul, Richie and Tim), and they reported wide-ranging comfort and security in talking about their gay father identity with gay and heterosexual communities. This can be illustrated by Ed's comment on how he wears his identity as a gay father confidently around others:

“...because I haven't been ashamed, and when you're not ashamed people don't feel uncomfortable when they're with you... If you're ashamed and uncertain, you make everyone feel uncomfortable.”

Here, Ed makes a clear link between identity congruence and acceptance from others. This association between how he presented his identity and how it was received by others was echoed by other participants, either through their stories or direct remarks (e.g. Paul, “I can't help but wonder if negative reaction is triggered by your own”). This feeling may be true for Ed today, however, he struggled with identity acceptance until older adulthood (in his 60s); it wasn't until his children were raised that he felt he could be open about his sexuality to his wife and close community.

Participants reported the difficulty they had in letting go of the shame they felt about homosexuality, because of how homosexuality was stigmatised and the homophobia they endured during early life. All of the 7 participants included in this cluster experienced this struggle before reaching the point of 'open endorsement' (Miller, 1979) of their gay father identity, while the other

participants were caught in varying levels of this struggle. For example, Tim, who reported strong security and openness with his gay father identity, still described some discomfort around talking about his life before coming out as gay to even his same-sex civil partner:

“Even with my partner, he asked me lots of questions; I say, ‘It’s another life, I don’t want to talk about it’. If he was sat in the other room now, he’d say, ‘God, I discovered all these things about you that I didn’t know’.”

Even the participants who reached a position of strong identity acceptance did not wish to have to recount their journey to this place for the rest of their lives. Tim recognised the exhausting nature of constantly telling and retelling one’s painful journey and he did not wish to be defined by this story.

Part of the comfort this cluster took in their identity came from reaching a place of acceptance in their search for answers about how they ended up in their current position. Richie possibly best illustrates this:

“I realised that if there is an answer I’m not going to be able to find it. What am I looking for? There isn’t an answer. All I’m going to ever do is find more questions to search or struggle. And honestly I’m just tired of it. This is what I am. This is who I am. Part of me is the kind of person who needs to open things to discuss things.”

Richie’s words articulately reveal what it means to accept himself as he is, rather than struggle to make sense of his circumstances. Richie suggests that he reached this place by acknowledging himself to be someone who needs things out in the “open”, available for discussion. This sentiment was echoed by other participants, such as Jason: “I think just being open and honest...has lessened the drama of the whole thing, like ten fold.” This stance is in contrast to that of the next cluster of participants.

The second cluster of participants could be described as in a transitional stage

with identity acceptance, past 'coming out' to close friends and family, but not yet experiencing great comfort or security about their gay father identity more broadly and within their wider communities. These participants (Gerard, Jared and Tom) understood themselves as working towards the identity comfort evident of participants in cluster one. However, their personal journeys towards identity acceptance were diverse. For instance, Gerard is an openly gay father in a long-term same-sex relationship. However, Gerard's approach to his sexuality and role as a gay father remained a struggle, in which he searches for greater comfort and security. This can be evidenced perhaps by Gerard's fears about the Irish referendum on marriage equality that was topical at the time of interview:

"...what I fear is shoving it [same-sex marriage] in people's faces, people who are totally in agreement with gay marriage are sick of it, people who are gay like me are sick of it... if we're to have a civil partnership we'll go into a solicitor's and sign a piece of paper, we don't want the razzmatazz."

This extract demonstrates how Gerard managed his identity privately, which could be interpreted as helping him to feel protected from negative judgement. Gerard's fears that "shoving" his sexuality "in people's faces" will only bring about criticism and discomfort could be understood as projecting Gerard's identity discomfort and fear of negative judgement about his own conflicted identity onto others.

For Tom, a participant in the early stages of coming out as gay, recently leaving his family home meant losing all of his friendships, his financial stability and severely restricting access to his daughter. These experiences had each been very painful: "It's been a hell of a lot tougher than most people know. Uhm I, yeah, I don't know how to make life work right now. I'm sorry I'm trying really hard not to cry and lose it." The difficulty of this process for Tom, as illustrated by his fight to hold back tears when talking about his current struggle, could offer some explanation as to why some men choose to remain in the family home, a choice made by two participants in the final identity cluster.

The final cluster of participants, Dan and Nick, lived with their wives as married couples at the time of the interview, but with very different levels of openness about their identity struggles. Dan could be seen in a contemplative place with his identity development, describing himself as “undecidedly gay or bisexual” (though he chose to engage in a research project on gay fathers). For Dan, managing his identity meant sharing some of his concerns about his sexuality with his wife (while promising not to have sex with other men). Dan also sought support from a counsellor and a peer-facilitated gay fathers group, which he was open with his wife about. Dan described his identity as follows:

“I came to this understanding recently that yes, you could be romantically attracted to this one person and sexually attracted to another person, and I kind of thought, that kind of fits my model, yeah. I see myself with my wife for the rest of my life, but...I’d like to have sex with other men. So, obviously I’m attracted to men, sexually, but to my wife, who is female, romantically. That concept to me suits me, so I adopted it.”

Dan’s identity model separates romantic from sexual attraction, which appears to suggest he has found a way of making sense of things for himself (for now) but could also be interpreted as making it impossible for him to feel fully satisfied by his current life position. In contradiction with this, Dan also spoke about his hopes for the future through his experience of meeting other gay fathers who have left the family home: “most [gay fathers I know] are past the stage that I am in and have moved out, have left their houses and live with a boyfriend or husband. Most of them are long past the phase that I am in.” Dan’s use of the word “phase” suggests he believes that this place of uncertainty is temporary and it is a place most gay fathers break through. Dan described this insight as his “light at the end of the tunnel”, acknowledging that there is something unsustainable to him about living with his wife and denying the sexual side of his identity.

However, not all participants believed they needed to end their marriages to

women to live a fulfilling life. A similar feeling of un-sexual/romantic love for his wife was expressed by Nick, who at the age of 66 had moved his same-sex attraction for men beyond sexual intimacy into his first romantic same-sex sexual relationship. Nick remained covert about his same-sex relationship to his family and heterosexual friendship circle, instead managing his identity by living a double life. Nick chose a same-sex partner with a similar life story; married to a woman, adult children and retired. Nick described the situation as “perfect” for both of them, with no plans for future change:

“I think [my boyfriend and I] are probably quite content with how things are...I think if I was open [with my wife] then that would be the end of our relationship, if it was open and honest. And I don’t think I have the strength or the courage to do that.”

Nick clearly believed that coming out as gay to his wife would mean the end of family life, which was too challenging for him. Nick’s story demonstrates that no stage model for identity can work for all men, as Nick reported feeling secure in his identity and lifestyle as it was. This was very different from where Dan felt positioned with his identity living with his wife, further demonstrating the variations that occur for individuals on how they come to feel comfortable with their sexual identity.

In summary, this emergent theme has illustrated that while participants can be grouped into levels of openness about their same-sex attraction and relationships, being part of a particular cluster did not always relate to the level of comfort that they reported feeling about their identity. Participant accounts signify that ‘coming out’ is linked with the pain of loss. For some men, this loss is too great to manage and results in them retaining their position in the heterosexual family home (see Barnes & Meyer, 2012). Therefore, pathways outside of those illustrated by stage models that lead from covert behaviour to open acceptance of same-sex attraction can be adopted by this participant population to manage their identities in positive ways.

While I have discussed participants' varied levels of identity acceptance and disclosure in three cluster groups, the aim of this was not to suggest a (new) stage model for such men. Participants in all clusters could be considered to be concerned with finding some form of identity acceptance. Clusters 1 and 2 (10 of 12 participants) portrayed the experiences of participants who could fit with the trajectories of stage models of gay father identity research, such as Bozett (1987), but what these models do not capture are the experiences of the third smaller cluster. These findings reflect the message of existing research on gay fathers from heterosexual relationships; that such men reach greatest identity comfort when they find acceptance from those around them (Berkowitz, 2009; Bigner & Bozett, 1989; Bozett, 1981; Patterson, 2000; Langdridge, 2013; Tasker, 2005). However, cluster 3 identified (2 of 12) participants who reported different points of contemplation about same-sex identity openness, while remaining in the family home. This cluster included one participant who felt that he probably needed to leave the family home in order to feel comfortable with his same-sex identity, something reflected in existing research on gay identity development (Isay, 2010). The remaining participant in this cluster reported feeling satisfied with his life as it was – having a covert same-sex romantic relationship while remaining married to a woman. Therefore, not all participants believed they needed to end their marriages to women to live a fulfilling life, something disallowed by older stage models of identity and something that remains unrecognised by affirmative research on gay fathers, which continues to suggest one must be 'out' to be psychologically well (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012). Although this finding does not ignore the relationship between psychological wellness and living openly as a gay man, it highlights that there is more than one pathway for such men and that some men can report psychological wellness without meeting the previously suggested criterion of being 'out' as gay. This emphasises the importance of broadening our notions of what is best for such men.

The findings of this super-ordinate theme, which sought to explain how participants made sense of their conflicting identities, leads us to the

importance of understanding this group of men from a psychological perspective. As counselling psychologists, it is important that that we do not assume a singular pathway or goal focus for any individual, even when some research suggests one. Instead the role of counselling psychology is to focus on the individual's life story to help that person feel understood (see Woolfe et al., 2003).

Super-Ordinate Theme 2: Managing and Negotiating a Gay Father Identity

This theme moves to a more interpretive and conceptual stance on the men's narratives to explore how they felt the need to explain and justify their identities as men who became fathers before identifying as gay. This need to justify was evident in the often apologetic and apprehensive tone and language used by participants, who appeared to try to express the development of their identities through their personal histories in a way that avoided 'too much' negative judgement. This anticipated negative judgement about being perceived to be 'dishonest' for 'pretending' to be heterosexual is expressed in the emergent theme *I always knew I was different*. The emergent theme, *I didn't know anything about being gay*, portrays participants' poor knowledge or lack of education around homosexuality, which could be interpreted as their way of justifying their inexperience and choice to father children in relationships with women. In the emergent theme, *I am not like other gay men*, participants differentiated themselves from other childless gay men to separate themselves from a gay community they appear to believe is negatively judged (by the heterosexual world) as selfish, which participants seemed to elide with choosing not to have children. Finally, in the emergent theme, *I'm a good father*, participants used their fatherhood to defend their identities, aligning themselves with a positively valorised identity by arguing that they are first and foremost good parents who put their children above themselves. These factors demonstrate the complex strategies participants appear to employ in an attempt to claim an identity accepted by both the gay and heterosexual communities.

Emergent theme 2a: I always knew I was different

Participants justified their decision to have children in a heterosexual context before coming out as gay by revealing some awareness of feeling 'different' (i.e. a sense that their sexuality was not heterosexual) from an early age (childhood and adolescence) and then explaining the impossibility of acting on this feeling. For example, Dan (41) noted his same-sex attraction awareness in adolescence and justified why he hid from it for many years:

"I was growing up [in Romania] during the communist years when gay people would go to jail... be bashed and killed... and nasty things said. And obviously that was not something I wanted to be...somehow I adopted that being Christian Orthodox and being attracted to men is a no-no. And I can't have those two together; I have to choose something. And so I chose to be Christian Orthodox and follow that path. But soon I found this clash within myself, a confidence which I could not explain..."

This statement demonstrates Dan's journey and how he believed this was shaped by the context in which he was living, where it was frightening to identify with a sub-culture, the members of which were "bashed and killed". Many participants put pressure on themselves to fit in. This led to a feeling of identity uncertainty throughout childhood about identifying as gay (despite awareness of their same-sex attraction). For example, Tim said:

"I knew from quite a young age that I had those kinds of feelings. But in the context of the church, it was very much about... working towards the ideal, which was meeting somebody, marrying somebody and starting a family."

Like Tim, some participants described knowing clearly they were gay, but even clarity about their same-sex attraction did not make the feelings easier to manage because of the values of their community, and desires to be a 'good' member of that community. For example, Bernie's statement: "even though I knew I was attracted to men I couldn't call myself gay", suggests internal

conflict with his identity; a reluctance to perhaps even internally claim a gay identity. Indeed, awareness of their same-sex attraction often resulted in feelings of loneliness and isolation, and a sense of being 'the only gay in the village'. For example, Gerard said: "I always knew I was gay. And I always felt like, y'know... probably the only gay in my area (laughs)"; Alex: "I really thought that I was like the only gay person under twenty years old in the state". In contrast to Alex, Bernie, Gerard and Tim, many other participants reported that despite feeling 'different' from others, they were unable to clearly identify their difference as same-sex attraction. For example, Tom said: "I don't think I really knew, I couldn't identify it". From participants' narratives, it appeared that identity uncertainty was often attributed to how homosexuality was presented to them by their families and communities, if any communication on the topic was vocalised at all, as illustrated here by Bernie:

"...I couldn't in my own mind refer to myself as gay, just because of the extreme stigma I grew up with associated to it. My dad was extremely homophobic...he forbade me from playing with my sisters...in actually quite a physically abusive way... I couldn't do any house chores. Anything that was effeminate at all, he stopped."

Bernie's account explicitly demonstrates how being gay, and having effeminate 'tendencies' (being improperly masculine), was viewed as unacceptable from an early age. Furthermore, Bernie reveals an early fear of appearing different from others and how he began hiding his difference, encouraged by his family. This could be interpreted as developing shame around difference, which prevented Bernie from acknowledging his homosexuality, despite having an awareness of same-sex attraction. The seriousness of Bernie's situation, illuminated by his fear of displaying homosexual "tendencies" in case it resulted in physical abuse, justifies Bernie's fear of exploring his 'difference'. The stigma (and danger) associated with identifying as non-heterosexual in childhood and adolescence, as experienced in Bernie's household, was true of all participants' households. A further example of this can be seen by the fear Alex's mother passed onto him about identifying as gay – "fear...that I would go to hell, that I wouldn't be accepted, y'know, to the celestial kingdom".

These accounts demonstrate the impossibility participants felt from an early age in exploring their nascent awareness of their same-sex attraction. Yet, when participants later publicly revealed their same-sex attraction, they feared disclosing any awareness of their same-sex attraction from an early age (pre-parenthood) might implicitly incur negative judgement from other gay men and heterosexuals for their decisions to enter parenthood with women and to live as 'closeted'. In this way, early (often partial) awareness of same-sex attraction in later life could feel like a social liability. For example, Richie felt he had a duty to be clear with new friends and relationships in social situations about how he previously and currently identified: "when you meet someone, all those issues [about being a gay father from a heterosexual relationship] have to be brought out very early...and you have to be cautious."

This cautiousness can also be noted in the often hesitant and careful framing of participants' stories, illustrating how practiced at warding off judgement the participants were. For example, when asked the opening question "How did you become a gay father?", participants usually found it difficult to start telling their story and often began by explaining their religious identity in early adulthood, followed by the expectations of their religion for them to marry. For example, Tom answered the opening question with a justification for his current position:

"Well, I was heavily involved in our church... And because I was heavily involved in the church I thought, well, yes, I'm attracted to guys but once I get married [to a woman] and we start having sex that will go away. So, we got married and I struggled right off the bat..."

Tom's rationalisation here might be interpreted as a way of helping whomever he shares this story with to understand where he was coming from and how hard it truly was to be (or understand) himself in that context. It also demonstrates how participants were often taught that marriage was a cure for same-sex attraction. Tom, like other participants, offers some scene setting to help us to understand the complexity of his difference and how it was not something he could easily accept.

Generally, participants' responses to the opening question could be taken as an attempt to justify their decision to try to live a heterosexual lifestyle despite the fact that they had some awareness of their same-sex attraction prior to entering relationships with women. For example, Tim said: "Uhm (pause) well...I was brought up in a church environment and I think there was quite an expectation that I would get married, I guess, and settle down." Tim's words "I guess" may demonstrate how he still struggles to understand the confusion he experienced at that time and how little he understood about himself. This quotation suggests that expectations from family and friends to be heterosexual (i.e. not to be different) felt inescapable for participants, even when they were uncertain about this heterosexual pathway. The burden of expectations from those around them, on how they should live their lives, informed how participants' managed their awareness of difference from an early age. The sense of the men being trapped into a heterosexual lifestyle is echoed in the passive language some of the men used. For example, Gerard said: "We would have been six weeks pregnant when we got married...I just let myself fall into it... and I shouldn't have." The language used by Gerard demonstrates an active "let myself" and passive "fall into it" position that could be interpreted as placing Gerard on the outside of his own life, looking in at something he felt little control over. This language of having events "happen" to the participant was echoed by others. For example, Tim: "I met somebody and very quickly after we met, became engaged and got married. Uhm, and uhm, then within a couple of years had children. It wasn't really something, I, uhm, set about to do really." This quotation suggests the events felt uncontrollable to Tim and the repeated "uhm" perhaps suggests he still struggles to articulate and make sense of the events.

These accounts demonstrate almost apologetic justifications for participants' awareness of same-sex attraction in an apparent attempt to avoid judgement. Participants seemed to carry anxiety about their identities, which appear to rise from the fear that they will continue to be judged by others for misleading the mothers of their children by not disclosing their sexuality. This fear was conveyed throughout participants' framing of their accounts, and is most

evident in the descriptions of the 6 participants who reported that their ex-wives were aware of their same sex attraction before marriage. For example, Tom: “my wife knew before we were married that I was attracted to other guys”. This line could be interpreted as suggesting that Tom would like his wife to share responsibility for their failed marriage, or at least frame it as joint enterprise. It was certainly important for Tom to illustrate that he did not deceive his ex-wife.

In summary, this emergent theme, *I always knew I was different*, explored participants’ awareness of personal ‘difference’ from an early age and worry that admitting to having this awareness would be met with judgement from others about their decision to parent children in heterosexual contexts.

Research into non-heterosexual men’s experiences of growing up in heterosexist environments has demonstrated that such men often recognise their difference or same-sex attraction at an early age and describe feeling “terrified” of their difference being noticeable to others (e.g. Flowers & Buston 2001; Floyd & Stein, 2002). Furthermore, research exploring the identities of gay men from religious backgrounds have found these men feel distinctly fearful about their own difference in childhood and carry this burden heavily (Ganzevoort et al., 2011).

As evidenced in the literature review, this fear can be explained in part by the pressure that exists for non-heterosexuals to be ‘out’ about their sexuality within their communities (Rasmussen, 2004). This has meant that non-heterosexual men who have not come out in early adulthood have felt open to judgement from others about their delay in so doing (see McLean, 2007) and their failure of authenticity. Participants’ accounts explicitly demonstrated how they were taught that being gay was unacceptable from an early age and their fear of being (and being identified as) different from others. These men’s stories convey the cultural negativity towards homosexuality held in many Western countries, particularly in previous decades (see Downs, 2012). The negative impact of homophobia on gay men’s well-being has been well documented (see Rosser et al., 2008). While homo-negativity appears to have softened more recently in Western society, it is still widely evident (see Morrison, Morrison &

Franklin, 2009), perhaps most explicitly demonstrated by the ongoing debates about same-sex rights in some countries (Eskridge Jr, 2013; Hagai & Crosby, 2016). Some scholars have argued that cultural heterosexism has superseded explicit homophobia in many Western countries (Herek, 2004). Cultural heterosexism is often underpinned by liberal ideologies that fail to recognise the privileged position of heterosexuality and the marginalisation of homosexuality (see Brickell, 2011), furthering the subordination of non-heterosexuality. In summary, openly identifying as gay was impossible for these participants in early life, leaving the only apparent option to have relationships with women and follow a heterosexual narrative to family life (Drescher, 2014).

Emergent theme 2b: I didn't know anything about being gay

This emergent theme explores the participants' narratives about how poor and pathologising information about homosexuality had a negative impact on their ability to understand and accept their same-sex identity from an early age, and this was presented as a further justification for the failure of authenticity. Participants often presented their 'cluelessness' about same-sex attraction as a justification for how their identity as gay fathers came about. Rhetorically this seemed to be a further attempt to avoid potential negative judgement from others as well as an attempt to make sense of their identity development. Participants reported that their access to information or education about homosexuality was limited through mainstream methods (e.g. school or television) until adulthood or the advent of the Internet in the 1990s. Even the youngest participant, Alex (25), received pathologising same-sex education on homosexuality: "growing up that's what I had heard, that being gay was a disability or a mental problem". For participants raised in strict religious communities, church-affiliated education was usually underpinned by homophobic and heterosexist assumptions. This can be illustrated by Bernie's experience at Sunday school:

“...the topic of the Sunday school class was homosexuality and the teacher... said that the word for homosexual in Hebrew means abhorrent and that is because homosexuals are abhorrent to God.”

Such deeply homophobic comments about homosexuality made participants fearful and anxious, often seeming to prevent them from considering homosexuality for themselves until much later in adult life, as demonstrated by Jason's powerful extract:

"...in my mind I didn't consider myself gay...I knew I was, but I didn't consider (pause) I don't even know how to explain that, I don't know, uh, and I thought that y'know by getting married that would... change those feelings or whatever...I was able to talk to bishops...and that was kind of the feeling at the time... you get married and have children, those feelings will go away if you're doing the right things. And that in my mind was the right thing: you get married, you have kids, that's the reason why you're a member of the church. And so I kind of just followed that path, hoping that it would change ...of course, it didn't...three and a half years into my marriage I read this article in *Ensign* [Mormon magazine] about same-sex attraction... I finally realised that I was gay at that point and I kind of just broke down and I told my wife...her idea of getting through this was counselling and prayer and fasting and going to the temple and all that kind of stuff, because she just knew that that would work. So, I did all of that. I did it, I did it all."

This extract demonstrates Jason's continued confusion about his thoughts and feelings at this time – how he could 'know' he was gay but not 'consider' himself to be gay. Jason reported that he still struggles to understand how he felt back then with so little information, even with all that he knows now as an openly gay man. Jason highlights that living within a close-knit religious community influenced his beliefs, and that he trusted wholeheartedly in members of that community for information and guidance, as evidenced by his openness with Church leaders.

While Jason's story bears similarities to many participants' accounts, for others from less explicitly homophobic communities, it was the lack of any open conversation about homosexuality that led participants to understand it was

stigmatised. For example, Ed (68) was raised in South Africa in a Jewish family. Already having a historically persecuted religious identity as a Jewish man in South Africa, Ed felt it was important to follow convention where possible (e.g. leading a heterosexual existence) to avoid potential retaliation from others:

“Growing up was very conventional. But then South African Jewish upbringing was not very questioning ... [Sexuality was] a little bit dangerous. As a child I wasn’t aware of sexuality. But one’s feeling was that one had to be a bit careful of them [same-sex feelings].”

This extract demonstrates how a social context in which being gay was framed as “dangerous” acted to restrict Ed’s ability to come out and even to recognise his sexuality. This again emphasises the importance of positive education and accurate information around homosexuality for gay men’s identity development. Furthermore, because participants grew up in conservative communities, they reported no knowledge of a local gay community from which they could access information or talk to another self-identifying gay man. For Dan (41), who grew up in Romania and now lives in Canada where he has access to LGBTQ support networks, the contrast in his LGBTQ knowledge is clear:

“there was only one way back home. The LGBT community did not exist at all, or I wasn’t exposed to it, I didn’t know there was an option there, it was something that I never considered, uhm, due to the fact that I was coming from a very religious family also.”

This extract powerfully demonstrates how, for Dan, being gay was a closed or taboo topic. By contrast, in Canada, Dan attends a gay fathers group where he is presented with information and topics for discussion, feels supported and is able to articulate his same-sex feelings without negative judgement or expectation to openly identify in any way:

“It feels good in a way because that shows me that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, in case I decide to take it [the option of living openly

as a gay man], of course. Uhm, the atmosphere is very relaxed and very casual and I think that helps.”

It is clear that the openness and lack of pressure to identify a particular way allows Dan the freedom to identify as non-heterosexual to his own level of comfort, including being as ‘out’ as he wishes to be (e.g. ‘out’ in contexts such as the gay fathers group, but not in others). This openness and acceptance is depicted by Dan as in stark contrast with his restrictive community in Romania, in a way that could be seen as in part a justification for Dan’s identity as a heterosexually married gay father.

Participants believed that lack of LGBTQ-positive information or contact with openly non-heterosexual people prevented them from feeling part of a gay community. For example, this lack of awareness and contact quite often resulted in participants’ developing unhelpful (often homophobic) beliefs about gay men and gay identity. Thus, Jared relied on homophobic and pathologising information that was circulated in heterosexual contexts in 1970s Canada (when gay activism was still in its foundation stages and same-sex relationships did not have legal recognition): “that was the stereotype [held in the heterosexual community], ‘gay men can’t make a go of it [relationships]’, ‘gay men are promiscuous’... I kind of plugged into that”. These kinds of stigmatising statements had a strong impact on Jared and other participants, and prevented him from believing in the possibility of living an openly gay, or even ‘closeted’ gay, life. This internalised homophobia thus created an early internal conflict in the identities of participants, which eventually resulted in a conflicted and defended identity.

Participants’ stories, spanning 70 years of changing social and political contexts for LGBTQ people, revealed a shared sense of isolation and pain around the impossibility of being openly gay in early adulthood, in part due to a lack of access to and information about other gay men. Participants reported that their same-sex feelings were shut down by the inability to discuss homosexuality in an accurate and open way. Instead, growing up, information about homosexuality was often pathologising and underpinned by homophobic and heterosexist assumptions. This negativity impacted on the self-identity of

participants then and even to this day. The lack of opportunity to fully understand and express their same-sex desires from an early age has potentially contributed to the participants' defended identities as gay fathers and helped create a conflicted identity. This conflicted identity potentially distances such men from not just heterosexual communities but also gay communities – an uncomfortable positioning, which is explored in the next emergent theme.

In summary, the emergent theme, *I didn't know anything about being gay*, demonstrated participants' early understanding about homosexuality and explained their lack of knowledge and innocence on the topic, which was compounded by their conservative religious upbringings. This lack of accurate information on same-sex attraction has been reported to be common for gay men who grow up in religious communities (see Barnes & Meyer, 2012). It has also been predictably reported that deeply homophobic comments about homosexuality make gay men fearful about disclosing a same-sex attraction (see Barton, 2010). Some of these inaccurate/homophobic assumptions about homosexuality created a belief for participants that they remained unlike other gay men.

Emergent theme 2c: I am not like other gay men

One recurring theme across the narratives was that being a father had made participants' gay identity complicated, as demonstrated by Tim's quotation where he talks about feeling outside of gay culture. All participants saw themselves as different from other gay men, with some (but not all) claiming that they were 'better' than other (childless) gay men because they are fathers. Correspondingly, participants carved identities by comparing themselves to and distancing themselves from stereotypically negative images of gay men. This was demonstrated by participants' narratives sometimes derogating childless gay men as selfish or immature, rhetorically allowing them to claim a traditional masculine (non-gay) father identity. This emergent theme will examine how this claim to a traditional masculine father identity fails to acknowledge participants' own homophobic stereotypes.

The men defend themselves by segregating themselves from other gay men, in part through alignment with homophobic stereotypes of gay men. Participants' described feeling separate and different from both the gay and heterosexual communities as a result of their identities as gay fathers. As discussed in the previous emergent theme, participants had negative notions of their own gay identity as a result of growing up in conservative communities, where homosexuality was pathologised as immoral or a selfish and self-centred lifestyle choice. The impact of growing up in such environments seems to have resulted in participants desiring to be viewed as different from childless gay men. For example, Tim perceived his gay identity to be less important than his father identity and stated: "I don't identify with it [being gay]. I just see myself as more of a normal straight-forward person, as far as you see normal." Tim's language – use of the word "normal" – evidences his wish to fit in with a heterosexual community, but it also suggests that he sees a gay identity as 'not-normal'; a heteronormative stance.

Participants also sought to highlight their "normality" and/or heterosexual credentials as fathers through comparison with other (childless) gay men, who were sometimes depicted as "selfish". An example of participants' perception and experience of childless gay men as "selfish" (and thus unlike them) can be seen in the quotation from Tom:

"It is hard with the quote-unquote standard gays, who have never been married, never had kids uhm that don't get that your kids are your number one priority. That when [my daughter] calls, you take the phone call. Y'know. They don't understand that when they say, 'do you want to get together this week?', you say, 'I can't because my kid's coming'. And they're like, 'oh, well can't you leave her there by herself?'"

Tom's narrative illustrates frustration at childless gay men whose lives are – in his view - less complex than his own. The experience of being gay, single and childless is felt to be an experience far removed from the experiences of being gay and a father.

Tom's quotation depicts childless gay men as inconsiderate of parental responsibilities, and as irresponsible or thoughtless. Similarly, Jason reported: "the biggest problem that we have is that they [gay men] don't know what it's like to have kids. So, often times they think we're ignoring them or not spending enough time with them... they have a hard time understanding that". This comparison to childless gay men thus allows participants to frame their gay father identity in a more positive light, albeit in a defensive way that could be viewed as grounded in negative stereotypes about the selfishness of gay men. However, participants could be understood to be making sense of their own complex identity in a way that makes them feel comfortable with the traditional notions of masculinity they were raised in. This comparison with "standard gays" allows these men to claim a traditionally valorised masculine/heterosexual father identity above a stigmatised childless gay male identity.

The representation in the participants' accounts of childless gay men as lacking understanding outside of their own self-interest was furthered by those participants who are or were in relationships with childless men. For example, Richie discussed managing his partner's jealousy of his children: "He might say, 'oh daddy's here... daddy has the ATM on his forehead and daddy comes running when they call'. And I say they are number one." Richie provides another example of a participant prioritising his father identity over his identity as a gay man; this is enhanced through implicit comparison to his partner, portraying Richie to be a more understanding individual who puts the needs of others first (an idea which will be explored in the next emergent theme).

In making sense of their identities, 'othering' of childless gay men (usually by highlighting similarities between their own identities and those of heterosexual fathers) also allowed participants to identify with values they were raised to believe emulated from a masculine/heterosexual father identity; values not shared by childless gay men. For example, Bernie stated about childless gay men: "they're still in that high school mentality where you've got to look like us and act like us to fit in". Alex explicitly described the importance of 'maintaining

masculinity' in order to feel desirable. However, it is important to note that not all participants engaged in this type of 'othering' of childless gay men.

While most participants distinguished themselves and saw themselves as different from childless gay men, some participants (Dan, Ed, Gerard and Nick) made this differentiation in an affirmative way. This positivity was demonstrated through a common remark that gay men often revealed envy at their dual identities as gay men and fathers – "...oh you've got children, you're so lucky, I would love to have children. That's been the reaction with gay people" (Gerard). This type of remark is positive but notably it still places these fathers as a distinct minority within the gay community, separate from childless gay men.

Throughout the emergent theme, *I am not like other gay men*, participants demonstrated envy and frustration at childless gay men whose lives/identities were, in their view, less complex than their own, a finding documented in early research on gay fathers (Bozett, 1981). Looking deeper into this apparent envy this theme suggested that some participants presented childless gay men as 'selfish' – a belief which mirrors the homophobic stereotypes that have been historically perpetuated through dominant cultural discourses on gay men (Costa, 2013). This demonstrated that participants with such beliefs were perhaps trapped between the beliefs about gay men their heterosexist and homophobic contexts presented to them in early life and their understandings about gay identity developed outside of their religious communities.

Emergent theme 2d: I am a good father

The emergent themes so far have demonstrated how participants made sense of their gay identity as fathers who had fathered children in a heterosexual relationship. The homophobic rhetoric that participants grew up with and still experienced informed how they identified their same-sex attraction. This context also crucially seems to have meant that participants have felt that they had to defend against negative judgements about their parenting as gay fathers from a heteronormative (and sometimes homophobic) society. I will argue in

this emergent theme that claiming an identity as a good father also allowed participants to align themselves with (good) heterosexual fathers (just as they sought to distance themselves from childless gay men).

Descriptions of “sacrifice” were common for participants, who were keen to demonstrate their worth as good parents; parents who made decisions in the best interest of their children. For example, Tim’s story about how he approaches parenting after ‘coming out’ highlights the importance of feeling like a father over a “gay father”; his sexuality is irrelevant to how he parents his children:

“You stay steady and consistent as a parent, you give them all of the things that you’ve always given them...[after ‘coming out’] I was going to be consistently a good parent to them, and give them a relationship with a father, and bring them up in a loving, caring, supportive, nurturing environment. All of the things the same as a normal parent. We go out and do things, we spend time together... y’know, regular activities, hobbies, just being a good parent, not necessarily in the context of my sexuality.”

This extract expresses Tim’s desire to separate his sexuality from his parenting. The latter could be interpreted as a defence against the possibility of his sexuality being perceived as having a negative impact on his parenting. Comments like this seem to suggest that some participants held beliefs that being gay could obstruct one’s ability to be a good parent.

All 12 participants believed at some point in their heterosexual relationships that to be the best parents for their children they needed to remain living with their child’s mother (for 2 participants, this was an on-going struggle between best interests for their families versus themselves, which kept them living in the family home). Tom talked about this struggle when he said, “I always swore I would be there for my daughter and in my mind uhm I had to remain married to do that”. This suggests that Tom feared (and potentially still fears) that no longer living in the family home made him less of a father; that he is not truly

“there” for his daughter. Similarly, Dan, who had not left the family home, said: “I don’t want to create any anxiety like maybe leaving the house.” This comment about “anxiety” from Dan could be interpreted as speaking about his own anxiety about what deciding to live as an openly gay man will do to his relationship with his daughter and how his role as a father will change. Such quotations illustrate how difficult it was for participants to leave the family home and no longer be a full-time live-in father.

The difficult decision to leave the family home was so challenging for some participants (e.g. Gerard – “[moving out] had taken so much out of me that I wasn’t going to go back for the sake of living the perfect life...”) that it encouraged them to do everything in their power to be the best possible parents they could be. This is perhaps best demonstrated by Bernie’s appraisal from the judge in his Child Custody case, which confirmed to him that he could be a gay man and remain an exemplary father: “When he [the judge] was rendering his judgement, he said...‘from all of the evidence today I can say not only is he a good father, he is a role model father’.” It seems that for Bernie these binding words from a judge felt like important evidence that he truly *is* a good (gay) father. A further example could be seen in Alex’s statement about his proactive approach to parenting: “[If I didn’t understand something] I would open up a book and say, well this is how it is, and I think this is how any parent should be.” Here, Alex uses external authority (parenting books) and separates his sexuality from his parenting (he is like ‘any parent’) to evidence his status as a good father.

Along with wishing to be seen as good fathers, participants suggested practice as parents that indeed fits with positive parenting techniques (e.g. openness – Ryan, 2013). For example, Dan demonstrated how his learning from his own struggle with identity allowed him to teach his daughter about the importance of self-awareness:

“...showing [my daughter] that honesty about your own feelings are very important to someone and the people around you. When you try to hide

things inside, it's not healthy for you, for your family or your surrounding people."

This quotation also demonstrates Dan's communication to his daughter about the consequences of not being 'out' to her, suggesting it is "unhealthy" for the whole family. This emphasises the importance of the Western value of being one's authentic self (Clarke & Smith, 2015).

Participants also demonstrated their positive worth as parents by emphasising their openness and acceptance of their children, as Tom said: "I'm kinda lucky because I'm the parent that accepts her." Participants often spoke about feeling "lucky" to be accepted for who they are by family, a quality that heterosexual parents take for granted. They also spoke about how their own difference allowed them to bring their "children up to accept people who were different from themselves" (Paul), something that is often presented as a benefit of same-sex parenting (e.g. Clarke & Demetriou 2016). Jason linked this enhanced understanding and compassion to his own (gay) parenting: "I feel like my kids have such a much better understanding of the world, and I feel like they're more compassionate."

Participants also claimed great plasticity around their role as fathers. For example, Tim's children opted to move in with him full time when they were struggling at home with their mother – "I think they found my parenting style, while being very boundaried, was also very permissive and I think they liked the idea of living with dad full time for a while". This 'boundaried/permissive' parenting style demonstrates conflicting complexities in a parenting capacity, furthering the participants' narrative of being "super-dads". This was perhaps an attempt to compensate for their difficult feelings around their decision to leave the family home (in order to live openly as a gay man), something which was discussed as very difficult for the 7 participants who left before their children reached adulthood. However, it may have also been difficult for participants to feel they could be anything but flexible and accepting of their children's choices when they had to push for their own identities to be accepted.

The difficulty of leaving the family home while parenting children was so difficult for older participants (aged over 65), that 3 of the 4 participants (Ed, Paul and Nick) in this age bracket felt ready to move only out after their children reached adult age (over 18 years). This demonstrates the greater challenge these men would have encountered in 'coming out' in earlier times before greater same-sex rights and tolerance of homosexuality. An illustration of the experience of growing up in less enlightened times, and the complexity this caused, can be seen through the example of one older participant. Nick (66), as previously noted, was involved in a covert romantic same-sex relationship while remaining married to his wife. Although Nick was no longer parenting children, he had become a grandfather and enjoyed this new parenting role – "I always loved being a dad and love being a grandpa". Nick expressed that he would "...love to just [come out] ... But then I also love my other life as well." It could be interpreted that Nick is fearful of losing his 'heterosexual' father identity if he openly identified as gay and potentially perceives this role might be lost, or in some way diminished, in identifying as publicly gay.

This final emergent theme, *I am a good father*, emphasised the single identity aspect all participants were comfortable with promoting: that they strived to be good fathers. Portraying their positive attributes as fathers is understandable, given continuing arguments made against same-sex parenting that claim to hold the interests of the child as paramount (Tasker & Bigner, 2013). The results from this section also demonstrated how much more difficult it was for older gay men who grew up in less accepting times to come out as gay. Three of the 4 participants over 65 years of age came out after parenting, which suggests the increased difficulty older participants experience in coming out as gay after fathering children (e.g. Gardner, de Vries & Mockus, 2014).

In summary, the super-ordinate theme has captured how participants felt the need to explain and justify themselves as gay fathers, due to the social stigma attached to having this dual identity position. This was interpreted through the often apologetic and apprehensive tone and language used by participants, who

often tried to explain the development of their identities through their personal histories in a way that avoided negative judgement.

Super-Ordinate Theme 3: Participants' Counselling Experiences and Implications for Practice

This theme returns to a more phenomenological view of the interview material, reporting the men's experiences of psychotherapy. In first emergent theme, *negative experiences of ex-gay therapy*, participants explain the harmful effects of ex-gay therapy in Christian counselling settings and psychiatry. By comparison, the emergent theme, *positive experiences of GAT*, explores one-to-one and group psychotherapy experiences that could be described as gay affirmative (or non-judgemental about homosexuality). The emergent theme, *participants' suggestions for therapists working with gay fathers*, offers participants' suggestions for counselling practice for professionals working with formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers.

Emergent Theme 3a: Negative Experiences of Ex-Gay Therapy

Of the 12 participants, 7 experienced therapy that could be labelled as ex-gay or 'anti-gay'. For these participants, therapies were usually connected to Christian Churches (5 of the 7 experiences; the other 2 experiences of conversion therapy were in the context of psychiatry). For example, Jason reported that after acknowledging his same-sex attraction to his Mormon Church, a counsellor was assigned to him by the Latter Day Saints (LDS) social services, paid for by the Church, with the aim of ending his same-sex attraction. Jason simultaneously attended a LDS facilitated ex-gay group where men were encouraged to share their "success stories" and "milestones" about abstaining from same-sex thoughts and behaviours. Jason attended both therapies for 18 months. One-to-one therapy was conducted by a therapist who Jason described as:

“...completely straight. I mean had no clue (laughs) of any of the thoughts or feelings that I was going through, not at all. And he would, like, make me go out and play basketball, y’know, because I needed man-time, healthy man-time. And we would talk about fishing, like in

our therapy sessions, because somehow that was supposed to make me straight.”

Looking back, Jason viewed the therapy as ignoring his needs and instead as guided by a fixed agenda of ‘restoring heterosexuality’ and being underpinned by a problematic view of homosexuality as a failure of appropriate masculinity (something noted in the existing literature on conversion therapy, Besen, 2012). Jason described this experience of therapy as an attempt at: “convincing myself that I had changed”. He realised the impossibility of changing his same-sex attraction only after writing an exit letter to his ex-gay group members, declaring he was “cured”. Writing this letter was a way for Jason to end ex-gay treatment, and permitted him the freedom to decide: “...right then and there that I was gay. I had to explore that part of me”. While he did eventually end his ex-gay therapy, Jason’s story demonstrates the potential negative power therapists hold with such men and the impact of therapist reluctance to openly explore non-heterosexual sexualities with same-sex attracted client (Israel, Gorcheva, Walther, Sulzner & Cohen, 2008).

Bernie described a similar experience. After coming out to his Mormon pastor, Bernie was sent to the LDS social services to manage his same-sex attraction. Bernie engaged with the LDS therapist for two sessions but felt judged negatively about his same-sex attraction. Bernie described the therapy as “unprofessional... because the looks that I would get from the psychologist, as I was talking to him, just were not conducive to the therapy”. Later, when Bernie decided to leave his marriage, he experienced another LDS therapist in court when seeking shared custody of his children. Bernie described this therapist as “extremely antagonistic” and concluded of his experience with LDS therapists: “that their religion biases their therapy”, impeding their ability to be non-judgemental.

Dan, a Romanian Orthodox Christian living in Canada, sought psychotherapy with the goal of “fixing” his same-sex attraction. Dan attended weekly psychotherapy for a year until the negative impact on his health became too great: “It made me feel more guilty; it made me feel more inappropriate and I

think it triggered my anxiety attacks alone.” For Dan, the therapy contributed to his diagnosis with Generalised Anxiety Disorder, for which he, at the time of interview, continued to take anti-anxiety medication. Dan’s story provides evidence of the potential damage caused by ex-gay therapy, including increases in anxiety, depression and self-destructive behaviour (see also Baxter, 2014).

Tom was encouraged by his Charismatic Christian Church to join the (folded in 2013) ex-gay organisation, *Exodus International*. Tom described *Exodus International* as an organisation that helped “gay people to become straight”, which he clarified as meaning: “...so I basically learned how to hide it [my sexuality] better”. This ex-gay therapy involved shaming: “...a lot of accountability, like ‘have you looked at porn? Have you had sex with a guy?’ Uhm, we had this whole list of things that they would ask every week.” Tom described the process as helping him at the time to understand his thought processes and triggers, because “in their minds it was a cause and effect thing”. However, ultimately for Tom: “it never usually took away the desires”.

In the UK, Tim experienced a similar ex-gay organisation that has also ceased operation very recently, *Living Waters*. This monthly group was run by a Christian GP who claimed to have previously experienced a transition from same-sex to heterosexual attraction:

“...we would meet and work through the materials, in terms of moving from same-sex attraction towards heterosexual relationships. And people in our group were from different backgrounds, some were single, some came from I think emotionally psychologically damaged [places], some had clearly some mental health difficulties as well. In fact, there was one gentleman in the group who some years later went on to take his own life.”

Tim spoke about his negative experience of this ex-gay group, claiming he felt “tormented” when in the group. The group provided a “temporary resolve” for Tim that only restored a pattern of self-doubt: “I had a new resolve to overcome my feelings and to sort of pray them away, so to speak. And then

something else would happen and I'd sort of feel myself spiralling again and feeling dreadful."

Taken together, the participants' reported experiences of ex-gay therapies that were unanimously harmful and ethically questionable as they ignored their needs in favour of a set agenda of "restoring heterosexuality" (see Besen, 2012). However, attending the meetings perhaps helped these men to acknowledge that they were not alone with their same-sex feelings. For example, Tim described how all group members were bound by their religious beliefs: "...people in our group were from different backgrounds...[we] all identified as Christians though."

Particularly for participants from immersive religious communities, these groups offered a transitional space with like-minded people who shared similar struggles that were not necessarily understood by other Church members (or non-Church members), and this was experienced as comforting by some participants. However, the initial comfort offered to participants by these ex-gay groups lessen over time for participants, as their same-sex identity continued to be denied. As reflected by Tom's description of his ex-gay group: "It helped a lot. But it never usually took away the desires."

Ex-gay psychiatric treatment within secular settings was experienced by 2 of the older participants, both in 1970s Canada. Paul met a psychiatrist twice weekly for four months to be "cured" of his homosexuality, concluding with the psychiatrist determining that Paul was not gay. A short number of years later, when his same-sex feelings became "impossible" to control, Paul saw a second psychiatrist for a period of two years: "...at that end of that again the psychiatrist didn't think that I was gay." Thus, Paul was twice informed of his 'true' sexuality by an 'expert', rather than helped to explore his same-sex attraction.

Jared attended a group where: "the psychiatrists were obviously anti-gay...so it was 'we love you because you're human, but we... wouldn't want you to act on your homosexual impulses'." The impact of this experience was reflected in Jared's ongoing identity struggle over the last 40 years, and the persistent

"People don't understand who you are"

shame he felt about his same-sex identity: “I always felt, ashamed was the wrong word, but shame”. Jared, who had experience of both ex-gay and gay affirmative therapy, believed his therapeutic experiences have been “paralleling social trends of the time. Back in the seventies it was one way, now it’s very gay affirmative”.

Participants’ experience of ex-gay therapy across settings highlights the important it is in all forms of therapy to trust clients as the experts on themselves (Drescher, D'Ercole, & Schoenberg, 2014).

Emergent Theme 3b: Positive Experiences of GAT

Eight participants (3 from Canada, 3 from the US, and 2 from the UK) had experienced one-to-one therapy that could be described as gay affirmative, or non-judgemental about homosexuality. Overall, participants reported attending therapy to help manage their non-heterosexual identity and the process of coming-out. However, the reasons presented to their therapists for attending therapy were frequently related to symptoms of anxiety or depression rather than speaking explicitly about their same-sex attraction, perhaps because the participants were initially hesitant about disclosing their same-sex identity (Bernie, Dan, Ed and Tim). The participants attributed their anxiety and depression to the difficult shift from a familiar family life towards a new identity.

Five participants from the US and Canada experienced gay affirmative group therapy (not something that seemed to have been available to participants from the UK and Ireland). One participant experienced an affirmative group specifically for men from religious backgrounds. Jason attended a “coming out” ex-Mormon peer support group set up by other gay men who experienced involuntary excommunication from the LDS Church. This support network offered an alternative to the LDS community as Jason prepared for his transition out of the family home and Mormon Church. Jason described the group as offering him information and friendship in a supportive environment (note how

Jason presents his transition as not from straight to gay but from Mormon to gay, and in so doing conflates Mormonism and heterosexuality):

“...you get together and you have like a lesson, like a church lesson. But it's for gay people. Basically you still believe in the church, but you're gay. So we were going to that group together, because it's hard. It's hard to transition from being Mormon to gay.”

Similarly, Tom attended a bimonthly “coming out” support group at his local LGBTQ centre: “About seventy per cent of [the members] were married at one point or another. And a lot of them have kids. So, that’s really cool because they understand exactly what you’re going through...” The importance of this group to Tom demonstrates the significance of feeling understood for such men and the effectiveness of a support group of this kind.

Three participants (Paul, Dan and Jared) attended a gay father support group which has been running since the 1970s. Dan spoke of his growing acceptance of his identity through the group:

“[In the affirmative group] at the beginning I was not sharing much, I was just listening and giving very vague information about myself, but lately I’ve noted that I’m becoming more open and I’m caring less about what people think of me. How they might label me or how they might judge me. I think I’m growing stronger and stronger.”

The group offers a framework that has been developed over the past almost forty years that seemed to work well for its members. As described by peer facilitator, Paul:

“[Group name] is a peer-led group, we don’t have professional leaders but we’re all gay fathers, so somebody has to plan every meeting and organise them. They’re not just getting together for social purposes. In fact, we actively steer away from that... we actively tell people that this is only a discussion group, we talk and that’s it... Our mission is to find a way of being tolerable of being gay and being a father. And that probably means leaving the family home. Although, we’ll say that

probably will happen but you have to figure that out, what works for you... like one former member to this day is still with his wife... I have been in his house while his boyfriend and his wife prepared the meal together for a group of gay men...that's not going to happen for very many people. But this is one family. And I say anything is possible as long as everybody involved wants it."

The language used by Paul to describe the group's mission statement – "being tolerable of being gay and a father" – highlights an important consideration of this study; that having two or more conflicting identities is something this population must find a way of feeling comfortable about, and that for some men counselling or gay affirmative groups may aid them to achieve this aim. The value that Paul and the other participants ascribed to their experience of affirmative group work also corresponds with the benefits described in existing research (e.g. increased self-acceptance, see Vincke & Bolton, 1994). Paul's statement that there are multiple possible outcomes for a coming out journey also reflects the suggestions made in the critical literature on GAT models that the imposition of expectations on clients should be avoided (Langdridge, 2007).

Emergent Theme 3c: Participants' suggestions for counsellors working with gay fathers

Participants provided a number of suggestions for clinical work with formerly heterosexual partnered gay men raised with religion. First, the importance of adopting a gay affirmative therapeutic stance was seen by all participants as critical. Nonetheless, some participants suggested that the level of positivity expressed to clients about having a gay identity should be tempered (Ed, Dan, Jared). Jared suggested psychotherapy should be "[LGBTQ] positive but not...overly positive...I don't think I'm swayed in that [overly positive] way". From this statement, it appears Jared felt that a therapist being "too comfortable" with being gay made him uneasy because he viewed being gay as not a lifestyle choice he made, but rather something innate that he had worked hard to accept. This critique parallels the challenge made by humanistic and

existential psychotherapists (e.g. Goldenberg, 2000) about the agenda in GAT of helping LGBTQ individuals 'come out' (Davies, 2012).

Jared described his current affirmative therapist as being "quite clear [about] what she wants" for him: to be both content and 'out' with his sexuality. However, although Jared appeared to appreciate his therapist's wishes for him, the proposed 'out' gay identity appeared to sit uncomfortably with him. This suggests that having a therapeutic agenda about how a client *should* feel about their identity can be unhelpful to some clients. It also suggests therapists should not demonstrate a clear interest in the client being 'out' about his sexuality, but rather that they should encourage the quest for self-exploration and understanding (Johnson, 2012). Participants believed achieving this delicate therapeutic balance (affirmative but not 'pushy') required the right therapeutic skills and personality (see DeYoung, 2015) and a high level of understanding about gay identity development (see McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011).

While Jared wanted a therapist not to be 'too' affirmative, Paul and Ed made the opposite point, recounting experiences of a 'neutral' therapeutic approach – one which was silent on issues such as sexuality – which they found unhelpful and frustrating. Paul noted seeking meaning in the smallest of gestures because of the lack of a stated stance on sexuality: "You, as the client, go through everything to a raised eyebrow or a nod." This suggests that it is important for therapists to signal in some way that they are gay-affirmative.

Ed suggested that being a 'good' (affirmative) therapist might sometimes mean pushing a bit around areas of sexuality:

"There is a dichotomy where the therapist's role is to support the client. But...support isn't always enough, doesn't move you on. There are therapists I've been to who...don't get involved at all. And it's just very interesting and very interesting and we just carry on talking and talking until we stop talking...I think the theory is a good therapist would lead you towards exploring your own things that you think are too dangerous to touch..."

Ed suggests that the role of therapist with men such as him should be to support exploration of the parts of the self that they have worked hard at leaving unexplored, and perhaps to help them integrate these hidden parts into their identity. Yet, like Jared, he also suggests that the therapist should provide the client with support that does not have a particular endpoint in mind (for instance, towards being more 'out'). Given both the empirically-supported relationship between psychological wellness and living openly as a gay man (e.g. Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012) and the common assumption in GAT models that being out is the desired end-point, it is interesting that the participants argued for the importance of a more open therapeutic agenda.

Ed's comment about "things that are too dangerous to touch" hints at the anxiety and fear that men can experience as they begin to realise their same-sex attraction, an attraction that in some cases seems to make them feel less like 'a man'. To manage the complexity of beliefs such as this therapeutically, Richie suggested therapists should recognise the effect of a heteronormative culture for gay men: "...always observe that the person comes out and is gay and is loving a man. That doesn't mean he is less. Society can do that to people" (see Bryan, Carr & Kitching, 2009; Harris, 2015). Bernie similarly suggested the importance for therapists to normalise homosexuality:

"[You don't] need to be fixed...that there was nothing wrong with being attracted to the same sex...if you're counselling a gay person, even if they aren't ready to come out, helping them to come to an understanding that there's nothing wrong with who they are is important."

The participants' comments suggest that feeling 'less' as a gay man - something that has been imposed on gay men by the heteronormative world they live in - is likely to be a common issue for therapists working with these men (Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman, 2011).

Some participants also stressed the value of therapists being non-judgemental (Winslade, 2013). For example, Dan believed the greatest benefit to him was "the fact that I have somebody to talk to very openly without hiding anything...

it's okay to say everything we feel, there is no judgement, there is no bad judge". While many clients value a non-judgemental space, this statement may also speak to the religious backgrounds of participants, who have been raised to believe there will be negative judgement for their 'sin' of having sex with another man. As Nick said of his experience of brief therapy: "what I found absolutely wonderful ... was the feeling they gave me of not feeling guilty".

The importance of a therapist signposting towards information and resources for gay fathers was also highlighted by some participants (Gerard, Jason, Tim) (Richards & Bennett-Levy, 2010). For example, Jason said: "I would have welcomed any information at the time, just because I didn't know. I didn't know anything. I didn't know anything..." Jason's religious context prevented him from accessing information about homosexuality, which made coming out particularly frightening, with no resources or people he felt he could turn to.

Overall, this super-ordinate theme offers new insight into the counselling experiences of an under-researched group of gay fathers and confirms that while counselling experiences for LGBTQ people broadly are improving and shifting towards an affirmative stance (Evans & Barker, 2010), pockets of LGBTQ people continue to have damaging or less than satisfactory experiences of therapy, including ex-gay therapy. The discussion will further outline guidance and implications for practice with such men.

Discussion

The current study addressed the following research question: How do formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised in religion develop and maintain a gay identity, and what are the challenges they face in doing so?

To answer this question, the following sub-questions were explored:

- How do these men manage issues of parenthood, family and personal relationships in identifying as gay?
- What is the impact of having a religious identity on developing a new gay identity?
- What challenges do these men face in understanding, creating and managing dual identities as gay men and parents?
- How do these men negotiate being accepted as both gay men and parents in religious, heterosexual and gay communities?
- What do the experiences of men from different Western countries reveal about the challenges of 'coming out' in differing cultural and religious contexts?
- What are these men's experiences of counselling and what suggestions do they have for therapists working therapeutically with men like them?

Findings from super-ordinate themes 1 and 2 directly addressed questions about how these men experience, develop and maintain a gay identity, determining that identity acceptance has different meanings for each man and it is something that this population navigates with great care to protect themselves from negative judgement. Overall, the descriptive (theme 1) and interpretive (theme 2) findings confirm that for most men, identity acceptance is reached when their full identities as formerly heterosexually married gay fathers raised with religion are met with love and support from family and friends (Coleman, 1982). While this is consistent with existing research on gay fathers more generally (e.g. LaSala, 2013), the current research suggests that

identifying as 'out' is not the only pathway to identity acceptance for gay fathers (c.f. Bigner & Bozett, 1989). This invites counselling psychologists to think more creatively about these men therapeutically. The findings also demonstrate many of the challenges participants faced in their journey towards identity acceptance, such as 'coming out' in religious contexts to experiences of homophobia and feeling negatively judged by others about their perceived secrecy around their homosexuality (Rasmussen, 2004).

The discussion will relate the findings of the present study back to theories addressed in the literature review, including Goffman's notion of "spoiled identity" (1963) and intersectionality, as well as challenging the notion of 'old' gay fathers. The contribution of this research to LGTQ psychology and counselling psychology will be addressed, along with limitations of the study and suggestions for further research. As the current study focused on the experiences of gay fathers from the US, Canada, UK and Ireland to demonstrate the impact of 'coming out' in differing cultural contexts, this will be explored first.

Cross-cultural differences in the participants' experiences

One rationale for collecting data from more than one Western country was to note the similarities and differences in participants' experiences across these contexts. The recruitment of participants from multiple countries allowed for varying religious affiliations to be explored, such as the experience of growing up in a Mormon polygamist community in the US, which would have been challenging (perhaps impossible) to capture among European participants. One distinction apparent in the findings of super-ordinate theme 3 was the prevalence of counselling sought and experienced by North American compared to British and Irish participants, which had far greater engagement and was more varying in therapeutic form (e.g. GAT groups) for North Americans. Generally, religious experiences of participants from North America conveyed histories with stronger religious ties and stronger anti-gay messages from their religious communities (see Nava & Dawidoff, 2014; Rosik, Griffith & Cruz, 2007), than participants from the UK and Ireland. For European participants, the topic

of homosexuality was unspoken in their communities (see Sharek, McCann, Sheerin, Glacken & Higgins, 2015), which was oppressive in a different but often equally painful way (Wickens & Sandlin, 2010) and similarly prevented these participants from raising questions about same-sex identity in early adulthood. Participants from other countries (Romania and South Africa) included in this research offered further cultural comparison. For these two participants, being gay was not considered to be an option at the time they were growing up in their home countries.

Perhaps, because all participants had the experience of growing up with religion, cultural differences among participants were found to be less noteworthy than initially anticipated. Participants' expressed the same belief around the impossibility of identifying as gay in early adulthood across all religions and countries because of their shared conservative religious contexts. In fact, the most surprising finding about participants from varying contexts was how similar the experiences for such men were. Participants experienced the same pain and loneliness with their identity growing up, whether they were raised rurally or in cities because of the communities they were raised in (Coyle & Rafalin, 2001; Whitley Jr., 2009).

The impact of living in countries where full same-sex adoption and marriage rights were (at the time of interview) unpermitted had an impact on participants' accounts. For British and Canadian participants, the topic of same-sex rights was largely silent, perhaps because these parts of a legal same-sex identity did not need to be contested. However, throughout the extracts with Irish and American participants, participants' narratives addressed same-sex rights concerns, influenced by the social and legal climate of uncertainty within which the interviews were carried out (see introduction). This was demonstrated in the fear of one Irish participant around the pending same-sex marriage referendum being 'too much' for heterosexual people to have to hear about or manage (theme 1d). This was also evident in the narratives of older North American participants, like Jared (theme 2b) who illustrated the pathologising framing of homosexuality in pre-rights 1970s Canada when he was a young man, and the strong impact this continued to have on his identity

acceptance. These examples show how a lack of same-sex rights has a negative impact on how this group of men make sense of their identity.

Socio-Psychological Considerations on Participants' Identities

In the literature review I considered socio-psychological perspectives on identity theory, paying particular attention to the most recent conceptualisations of IPT (see Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), as a way of understanding how a group such as gay fathers may make sense of their identity. The theory highlights shifting dynamics of the individual, their relationships and social networks in creating perceptions of identity (Blackwell, 2014). The term 'identity conflict' is used to represent the feeling that arises when identity components, such as being gay, being a father and being religious, are experienced as being in some way incompatible (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000). The stories relayed by this group of men were filled with accounts of painful losses of facets of personal identity. This occurred typically when these men were no longer considered to be 'heterosexual' fathers after coming out as gay. During this process of shifting identity (from 'straight' to gay), their group identity changed for most participants. This was particularly true for those who were excommunicated from their religious communities because of their new identities. Regardless of the level of social change participants encountered, psychologically these men were left with a feeling of being 'outside', both in relation to their old identity (heterosexually married fathers) and their new identity (as gay men who are fathers in relation to childless gay men), as they tried to assimilate these intersecting identity components.

In theme 1, participants' accounts of their experience of disclosing their intersecting identities in each community (religious, heterosexual and gay communities) indicated their experiences of disclosure were largely negative. This created identity conflict for these men when each social community demonstrated (or was perceived to feel) some dissatisfaction with parts of the participant's identity. This dissatisfaction or threat was usually related to disclosing a gay identity in religious communities, and disclosing a gay father identity in heterosexual and gay communities. Positive experiences of

acceptance of all aspects of participants' identities were reported to be quite rare initially. Positive disclosure experiences tended to be within gay affirmative networks (e.g. coming out peer support groups) and among family members over time. This further demonstrates the socio-cultural influences on identity, as families were often perceived by participants as growing more accepting of their identities over time, in turn suggesting that these family members' identity components also developed (e.g. their religious identity becoming less rigid in relation to anti-gay beliefs). It is important to note that all positive 'coming out' experiences developed participants' sense of belonging (Vignoles et al., 2006). This is demonstrated by the participant clusters in theme 1d, where participants with greater positive experiences of coming out and acceptance from others reported greater identity acceptance and less perceived identity threat.

In exploring the identity conflicts of religious groups around issues of homosexuality, there is a danger of 'pathologising' gay men as having identity problems (e.g. internalised homophobia, see Barnes & Meyer, 2012) if they choose to retain membership within religious groups that hold anti-gay beliefs. However, the importance of these social communities, as reported by many participants, highlights the value of membership for many men who retain religious beliefs and membership (as highlighted in theme 1a) despite the potential cost this has for the open expression of their same-sex identity.

Participants' experiences of identity management highlight the creative ways in which these men make sense of their identities, whilst also managing their religious beliefs. By documenting the experiences of gay men who have chosen to retain membership of organisations that reject gay identity, this research reminds us that individuals who have identities that are not accepted by certain religious organisations will still choose to follow some of the teaching of these organisations (see Sherry, Adelman, Wilde & Quick, 2010). These new findings have the potential to inform how these religious organisations manage their treatment of such topics as same-sex sexuality in the future. These findings also help secular people to understand the importance of a religious identity for such individuals. Although most participants left their religious communities as a way of coping with this identity conflict, their stories also demonstrated a

sense of loss of self and community that was experienced as painful. Both experiences of managing religious affiliation (retaining and rejecting religious identity) could be characterised as strategies for coping with identity threat within religious communities (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010).

Other strategies for coping with identity threat were highlighted through the interpretive lens of theme 2. This theme explored how participants managed and negotiated their identities and tracked the development of participants' identities from early experiences of same-sex identity awareness to current management of their gay father identity. During the interviews, participants were generally cautious in their reporting of early feelings of same-sex attraction, perhaps in an attempt to reduce the perceived threat to their identity as honest individuals (as discussed later in reflections on stigma, see Rasmussen, 2004). Participants' narratives followed individual trajectories, which assimilated pre-existing identities (e.g. being fathers) with new identities (being gay) and chose different pre-existing identity components to retain (e.g. religious beliefs), leave behind (e.g. religious affiliation) or manage in some way (e.g. the choice to limit openness about gay identity to within a gay community in order to retain a 'heterosexual' identity in other contexts). Strategies for coping with perceived identity threat were directly informed by the *assimilation-accommodation* process of IPT (the absorption of new information into the identity structure – see Breakwell, 2014). Evaluation was based on the importance participants attributed to the parts of their identity they wished to protect most. This was based on the individual's identity values (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012).

Universally, participants protected their father identity in multiple ways, which coheres with Jaspal and Cinnirella's *psychological coherence principle* (2010). This refers to people's motivation to establish feeling of compatibility between interconnected identities. Most positively, this 'good' father identity was maintained by participants making strong justifications about their roles as fathers in a heterosexual context, through reporting great flexibility as parents and describing themselves as 'super-dads' (theme 2d) in a bid ward off negative judgements about their pathway to parenthood. Participants also made strong

statements that distanced themselves from childless gay men (who were often labelled as less understanding and 'selfish', theme 2c). Through these statements participants promoted the notion that they were selfless parents putting the needs of others first. This might be viewed as a way to avoid threat to the integrity of their intersecting identities and as a strategy to ward off accusations of selfishness. The interpreted approval-seeking aspect of these narratives demonstrates the shifting dynamics for participants at the intersections of their individual identities (as gay men), their interpersonal relationships (as parents) and the social structures they are part of (their numerous social memberships). IPT demonstrates that identity is fluid (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008) and will continue to develop for these men throughout their lives based on how they live, work and act within their socially structured system (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). The implications for counselling practice, illustrated in theme 3, further evidences the participants' desire to manage identity conflict by wishing to be understood, to be treated as individuals without negative judgement and to be supported in a way that is affirmative of their multi-faceted identities.

Considering Goffman's notion of a "spoiled Identity"

In the literature review I considered Goffman's (1963) notion of "spoiled identity", a theory which recognises the "disappointment" experienced between one's potential identity and actual identity. This brought about questions concerning the strategies gay fathers use to manage this "disappointment". The findings demonstrated many ways participants managed their "spoiled identity" as formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion. For participants who identified as gay, management of their "spoiled identity" as gay fathers from heterosexual contexts, in a world that places an importance on being 'out', included strategies such as distancing themselves from childless gay men. This strategy was used to defend against feeling rejected by such men and promoting their identities as good fathers to be accepted by others, but also to accept themselves as gay fathers. Such strategies demonstrate the challenge these men face in managing their identity,

which they feel is contested by their social worlds, and the difficult experience these men have at navigating different identities in different communities. This management can also feel counterproductive to their aim of identity acceptance (i.e. wishing to be accepted by the gay community, while wishing to be seen as separate from childless gay men). Goffman's theory of "spoiled identity" connects well with intersectionality theory, giving rise to the idea that being gay and 'closeted' creates a "spoiled identity" in a homophobic society; and being 'closeted' creates a "spoiled identity" in a gay community.

Considering Intersectionality

As discussed in the literature review, sexuality theorists have adopted the concept of intersectionality in identity research to address the complex ways in which social characteristics can intersect one another, often creating intersecting stigma (e.g. Riggs & das Nair, 2012). Although intersectionality is commonly used in feminist theory (e.g. Brah & Phoenix, 2013), this is the first study of which I am aware to use the concept of intersectionality in relation to research on gay men raised with religion. This concept can be applied to the intersectionality of being a gay man: being a father, being 'closeted', being openly gay or being raised with religion, and how these interactions cannot be separated, but inform each other to produce experiences of identity.

Although there are multiple conceptions of intersectionality, there are identifiable central assumptions, including the idea that human lives cannot be reduced to single characteristics, and human experiences cannot be accurately understood by prioritising any one single factor (Hankivsky, 2012). Social categories such as race/ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality are the primary intersecting identities universally utilised by theorists (e.g. Cole; 2013; Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013; Shields, 2008). Perhaps because religion is sometimes considered to be a chosen membership in adulthood (e.g. McCullough, Enders, Brion & Jain, 2005) it has been excluded from some conversations around categories of intersectionality (e.g. Mattsson, 2014; Rosenfield & Mouzon, 2013). However, as intersectionality is generally concerned with intersecting categories of oppression, the importance of the

inclusion of religion as a category has been recently discussed to broaden insight (Reimer-Kirkham & Sharma, 2011). For participants, religious membership was usually something they were born into, just like their social class, and they felt oppressed by the experience of being part of these groups (where these groups oppressed their intersecting identity as same-sex attracted). Also, participants' narratives demonstrated that their identities were so entangled with their religious communities, that even when they chose/were forced to end their affiliation with homophobic religious organisations, they were left with the painful losses, sometimes including their jobs, homes and everyone they were once close to.

This raises the question: how do these men manage when they become excluded from different communities of identity? Participants spoke about feelings of exclusion from each community (heterosexual, gay and religious) because of their intersecting characteristics. This usually started with the problem of participants initially feeling they were not permitted to say, 'I don't know' or demonstrate uncertainty about their same-sex identities in early adulthood to retain membership of their religious/heterosexual communities. However, for participants who did 'come out' as gay (usually leaving their religious community) these men continued to be haunted by their perceived identity uncertainty, as they felt the pressure to justify their pathway with a clear rationale for marrying and parenting in a heterosexual context to secular gay and heterosexual communities. This may be explained by the social expectations of secular gay and heterosexual communities on such men to come out as gay (Rasmussen, 2004). However, this same-sex identity was in conflict with the participants' experiences of being raised with religion, and the belief that their gay identity could be, and needed to be, managed or terminated (e.g. Out et al., 2006).

This illustrates the importance of including intersectionality theory in the discussion of these men, as the experience of being raised with religion cannot be separated from the experience of these gay fathers from heterosexual contexts, but interacts with their identities as formerly heterosexually

partnered gay fathers. Focusing on the intersecting religious identity of participants highlights a clear identity complexity (due to the historically complicated relationship between religion and homosexuality) for such men. Arguably, these findings offer notions about the complexity of identity for gay fathers from other intersecting identities (such as gay men who grow up in rural communities) as it demonstrates how an intersecting identity can complicate the ability to manage a same-sex identity.

While offering some ethnic diversity the present study characterises a largely White population, with a focus on the experience of such men living in the Western world. Men in Africa and the Middle East (for example, among many other areas of the world) are living a culturally different version of this reality, where the law prohibits any expression of same-sex desire. Intersectionality theory is used in the present study not to demonstrate ‘which group is worse off’, but to use the theory to challenge us to contemplate what it means to have a marginalised status within a marginalised group (Bennett & Coyle, 2007; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

Guidelines for counselling practice

Super-ordinate theme 3 reported suggestion for psychological practitioners for effective working with this participant population. I have used these suggestions to create a clear guide for therapists, which I will now outline:

1. Therapists should seek an understanding of this client group and consider that gay men raised in religion and who fathered children in heterosexual relationships are likely have complex and varied personal histories (see Barnes & Meyer, 2012).
2. The individual story and wishes of a client should drive any psychological formulation of them rather than any pre-existing GAT model or model of gay (father) identity development.
3. A key part of therapy for this group is providing psycho-education about the common impact of a heteronormative culture and normalizing homosexuality. For some clients it will also be important to offer information

and signpost to relevant resources. While such signposting may not be necessary for all clients, and should not be offered without discussion, it is important for therapists to have an awareness of where to direct clients who are in need of further LGBT resources (e.g. peer support groups and online forums – see Harris, 2015).

4. It is the role of the therapist to support and guide the client to places that are difficult (see McDougall, 1995); and to support these men to make sense of their identities. However, this must be carried out in an appropriate way and ‘one size fits all’ identity development models (e.g. Miller, 1979) may not capture these men’s experiences or their needs and desires with identity acceptance, as a gay man and father.

5. An LGBTQ affirmative approach is an essential underpinning of therapeutic work with such men and it is critical that therapist’s make this stance clear to clients (being neutral is not enough). However, the model should not be drawn on in any rigid way (e.g. the assumptions that being ‘out’ is best, see Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012). Feeling comfortable with one’s identity (whatever that means for the individual client) should be the goal of therapy, consistent with more recent approaches to gay affirmative psychotherapy (see Johnson, 2012); this means being non-judgemental in general and also specifically when clients (for example) elect not live as ‘out’ gay men. However, this does not mean that therapists should promote or support any beliefs that one’s same-sex identity can or should be cured. Therapists should be aware of the problem of pathologising same-sex sexuality in this way, and should feel confident in teaching clients in search of ‘ex-gay’ therapies about evidence highlighting the negative impacts and ineffectiveness of such therapies (e.g. Besen, 2012).

These suggestions are aimed at improving counselling for a specific group of LGBTQ individuals who have been in recent years largely ignored in the literature on same-sex parenting. The population-specific guidelines are intended to supplement the already broad LGBTQ therapeutic guidelines established by professional bodies (e.g. APA, 2011; BPS, 2012).

Challenging the notion of ‘old’ gay fathers

The current study demonstrated that gay fathers struggled to identify (or be permitted to identify) their same-sex attraction in early adulthood, partially due to the conflict of identifying as gay with their religious identities. However, when participants entered heterosexual relationships and had children, their identities were further complicated and the socially perceived ‘lie’ of withholding their same-sex identity became harder to bear. This is a painful and complex journey to identity; one that has been demonstrated to require great sense-making for these men to reach a place of identity acceptance. As demonstrated in theme 3, this journey cannot be manualised for formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers from religious backgrounds. Nor can it be simplified for gay men who parent children while in heterosexual relationships, as assumed in older stage models of identity research (e.g. Bozett, 1987), as this research demonstrates that not all men will feel comfortable with or have the desire to identify as openly gay.

This group of gay fathers constitutes a group that is perhaps today considered ‘old’ gay fathers, in the context of ‘new’ gay fathers parenting through adoption, surrogacy and co-parenting (Erera & Segal-Engelchin, 2014). Although this group of gay fathers may be framed as ‘old’, while religious authorities continue to deny same-sex rights and families (and are even found to be growing more contentious on issues of same-sex rights – Ganzevoort et al., 2011), gay men will continue to marry women and have children, and this population will not disappear and will always require consideration. Yet, there has been little or no research on the identity of heterosexually divorced and separated gay fathers in almost 30 years (the most recent study being Bigner & Bozett, 1989) due to a shift in research focus on to other family forms. This exclusive focus on other forms of parenting neglects the first recognised gay father population – gay fathers who were formerly heterosexually partnered. Therefore, research like this needs to continue to explore this population and update our understanding about a group that is not ‘dying out’ and will likely continue to exist for as long as religions promote homophobic values, to ensure

that mental health professionals understand and work appropriately with these men.

The research will now explore how this research contributes to LGBTQ and counseling psychology.

Contribution to LGBTQ Psychology

LGBTQ psychology and counselling psychology share common aims in their respective branches of psychology. For example, both research fields seek to represent understudied populations to broaden psychological understanding (Clarke & Peel, 2007; Pugh & Coyle, 2000). The focus of my research on an intersecting area of LGBTQ and counselling psychology makes sense for me in my early journey as a psychological researcher and practitioner. Charlotte Patterson, a key researcher in the field of LGBTQ psychology, believes that as LGBTQ researchers we have to begin our journey based on our own lived experience (Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010). As a trainee counselling psychologist and as a man who identifies as gay and is a father, studying sexual identity and same-sex parenting may not be the only area I research, however, it is the first door I must “unlock” (Baldwin, 1955).

As an undergraduate psychology student I first encountered Rochlin’s (1972) “Heterosexuality Questionnaire”, an intelligent and acerbic tool used to challenge same-sex stereotypes. What is surprising about this tool is how relevant it remains over 40 years on, sadly because the same stereotypes it addressed about the LGBTQ community continue to exist (Glassgold & Drescher, 2014). LGBTQ psychology calls for activism from LGBTQ researchers to explore LGBTQ issues and to debunk heteronormative assumptions (Glassgold, 2007), which is an essential underpinning of this research, to challenge older psychological understandings (e.g. Monteflores & Schultz, 1978) and social stereotypes about gay men who enter heterosexual marriages (e.g. Dunne, 2001). As LGBTQ researchers, we must not forget participant populations such as formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion and remain empathic about our representation of such stigmatised groups.

The current study offers some insight into what it is like to live in religious communities with a gay identity, contributing new considerations about the specific population of gay fathers from heterosexual contexts for the field of LGBTQ psychology. Up until now, LGBTQ psychology narratives have usually connected gay men who have religious beliefs and values with internalised homophobia (e.g. Barnes & Meyer, 2012). This study demonstrates that individuals can have positive relationships with religious organisations and positive same-sex identities when their experience of their local religious community takes a non-judgemental standpoint on homosexuality.

Implications for Counselling Psychology

The Division of Counselling Psychology Guidelines (BPS, 2005, p 1/2) present counselling psychology as a field that seeks to be “practice led, with a research base grounded in professional practice values”, recognising “social contexts and discrimination and to work always in ways that empower rather than control”, while demonstrating “high standards of anti-discriminatory practice”. Based on these statements, this research has sought to educate counselling psychologists and other mental health professionals about the experiences of this particular group of men, and offer best practice guidance in working appropriately with them. As the profession places great importance on the subjective experience of clients in a collaborative relationship, seeking to understand inner worlds and constructions of reality (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2010), this research offers evidence of the kinds of experiences such men may encounter. To assist counselling psychologists in their work with these men, this evidence is reported through the descriptive experiences of such men in their own words, alongside the psychological and rhetorical ‘defence’ of the stigmatised identities these men must manage, demonstrating how some men will feel compelled to justify their position as gay men who fathered children in a heterosexual relationship.

Counselling psychology encourages a process of “mutual discovery” through “being with” rather than “doing to” clients (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2010, p.12). The therapeutic guidelines provided by participants will assist counselling

psychologists in their therapeutic practice, and these guidelines clearly reiterate the importance of “being with”, rather than “doing to” such men in their journey towards identity acceptance. These guidelines are particularly important for all psychological practitioners working in mental health arenas, such as the NHS. The non-goal orientated approach suggested by participants is often in conflict, to some extent, with routine NHS practice that relies heavily on outcome measures (Thornicroft, 2010) and with the medical model of treating ‘problems’. This is a tension that has been said to require careful “navigation” (Walsh, Frankland & Cross, 2004, p.326), but is a challenge that counselling psychologists should be prepared to address. It can be argued that counselling psychologists are skilled in their abilities to negotiate with others’ world views (Walsh et al., 2004) and therefore should feel prepared and confident to find ways of shaping services by emphasising the process of holistic formulation (Johnstone & Dallos, 2013) and the importance of practitioner experience (James, 2009). This research further evidences the importance of formulation-driven work (the goal of which is insight driven rather than ‘problem solving’) and demonstrates that agenda-driven work can be harmful for such men as highlighted by participants’ experiences.

As stated in the introduction, counselling psychology as psychologists are increasingly being asked to evaluate the suitability of parents in court and adoption settings in terms of their parenting skills (Haney-Caron et al., 2014). It is the hope that the findings of this study will update our current knowledge base around formerly heterosexually married/partnered gay fathers to hopefully ensure that views held about such men are based on empirical knowledge, rather than personal, or current societal, prejudice. Importantly, this research exemplifies accounts from this ‘forgotten’ population that suggests they work hard to be considered to be great parents, perhaps even at times feeling they must over-compensate for their conflicted identities and act as ‘super-dads’ in their search for acceptance from (heterosexual) others. As counselling psychology seeks to bring awareness to marginalised and invisible populations, in a field that is dedicated to developing social awareness (Milton,

2010; Pugh & Coyle, 2000), this research has offered perspective on the complex narratives of one such group.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

While the present study has provided a rich and detailed account of the experiences of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion, like all research, it is not without limitations, which will now be addressed.

As 10 of the 12 participants identified as White North American or European, this research offers a far greater account of the experience of 'coming out' for White men from Western Culture than other ethnic groups. Although the study included one Jewish South African and one Hispanic man from the US, there was no representation of Black or Asian men, and other non-White nationalities that live in the UK, Ireland and North America. Similarly, 11 of the 12 participants identified as Christian, with only one Jewish participant from a Masorti background, which means this research is limited to the experiences of predominantly White Christian men.

Many of the participants were recruited through snowballing from my personal networks. A number of people were approached online but declined to take part in the study without providing an explanation of their reasons not to be interviewed. It may be that these people had more painful stories which they felt unready to share, and therefore it could be suggested that the results are also limited to the stories of participants who have already reached a certain level of identity acceptance that would enable them to access a study such as this one (by being known openly as a gay man to some extent, either to a personal or community network).

This research explored the impact of religion on the process of 'coming out' as a gay father; future research could focus exclusively on questions around identity and religion for gay fathers, exploring feelings of pressure and religion-centred agendas directly, to understand precisely how such men deal with these challenges. As noted above, this research focused exclusively on Judeo-Christian religions from a Western cultural perspective, therefore future research could

explore other religions, such as Islam, focusing on participants from cultures which are even more conservative in their stance on homosexuality, at least culturally in the context of the countries such men live in. The contentious issues of homosexuality for Muslim men has been explored in great detail by Kugel (2010) and Yip (2015). However, an exploration into the experiences of Muslim fathers who identify as same-sex orientated would offer interesting insight into the challenges faced by these gay fathers, for a group who are recognised to struggle with stigma (see Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014).

This study focused on fathers who identified (at least on same level) as gay, and a focus on the experiences for bisexual parents warrants further exploration considering the complex stigma bisexual individuals are already known to experience (see Bostwick, 2012). The current study also explored participants who largely experienced traditional monogamous relationships, both heterosexually and homosexually. However, as one participant reported feeling content with having more than one relationship (Nick – with his wife as a companion and his boyfriend as a romantic and sexual partner), an exploration of the experiences of same-sex parents who have a variety of relationship forms (e.g. polyamorous or ‘open’ relationships) and how these individuals manage their identity, would perhaps open the exploration to a group of men who perhaps did not identify with the topic of this research. This may have been because, like Nick, these men experience satisfaction with holding both heterosexual and homosexual identities. However, unlike Nick who held these two identities independently and covertly (as a heterosexual husband and a gay boyfriend), there has been some older research (e.g. Bozett, 1982) that demonstrates that some heterosexually married couples share openness around same-sex sexuality and find creative ways to manage these same-sex desires (e.g. permission for the husband to have sex with other men). It would be interesting to explore how these agreements are shaped today given the legal and social change that has occurred since Bozett’s initial study, as it would help us to understand whether groups like this will continue to exist regardless of same-sex rights progression. Also, as most recent research into the

experiences of (heterosexually identifying) men who have sex with other men focuses on the topic of sexually transmitted infection (e.g. Millett, Peterson, Flores, Hart, Jeffries, Wilson, Rourke, Heilig, Elford, Fenton, & Remis, 2012), positive research about how these men develop identity would help to change this singular research narrative.

Finally, since exploration into child development outcomes for children of gay parents continues to be a popular area for research (see Perrin et al., 2016), and as many of the participants (Ed, Jared and Paul) came out as gay after their children reached adulthood, research exploring how adult children react to their parents' 'coming out' for those children who retain a religious identity from childhood is worthy of study. This research into the experiences of the wider family, would help such men to understand the process for their children after they come out as gay, but also inform family therapy practice in tracking the change in dynamics for the family when one parent identifies a same-sex attraction. More research on this topic for the modern family (i.e. 21st century families) could better inform family therapy practice for counselling psychology and psychotherapy.

Conclusion

Coming out as gay is probably the most universally shared experience in modern gay identity (Ryan, Legate & Weinstein, 2015). There have been many novels (e.g. Vidal, 1948), autobiographies (e.g. Thomas, 2014) and research papers (e.g. Ryan et al., 2015) dedicated to the topic of 'coming out', however, because 'coming out', as a process, is individual and changing over generations (Herdt & Boxer, 2014), the topic will likely never be exhausted. This research has contributed to the body of research on formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers, a recently neglected area of inquiry due to a focus on other pathways to parenthood for gay men (e.g. surrogacy; see Tornello & Patterson, 2015). What was previously known about such men was limited to prescriptive stage models (e.g. Bigner & Bozett, 1989) suggesting only 'out' gay fathers have a 'healthy' identity. What makes this research unique is its focus specifically on the identities of such men raised with religion, which offers a new perspective about how participants manage this intersecting identity.

This research has emphasised the emotional needs of this participant population. While earlier research has emphasised the importance of 'outness' and well-being (e.g. Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012), this research seeks to understand this group of men from their own viewpoint, hearing what they felt they needed to help them along their journey towards identity acceptance, in their own words. Specifically, this study has emphasised how the practice of therapy with such men must be acutely sensitive to what is being communicated by them and understand how their context has shaped their experiences to allow them to make sense of their journey. To foster this understanding, a therapist must not be concerned with facilitating a pathway towards identifying as 'out' for such men. Instead, therapy with such men should acknowledge the pain and complexity of the journey towards identity acceptance, which will mean different outcomes for different individuals. This study highlights that not all formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion will have the need to engage in therapy. However, for those

who do engage in therapy, this study informs practitioners about the experiences of such men, what has worked best for them therapeutically and what has been unhelpful in their therapeutic experiences, which largely suggests that a goal-orientated focus towards identifying as 'out' can leave a client feeling unsupported and pressured.

From a counselling psychology standpoint, working both relationally and with wider contextual factors in mind to create an individual formulation for such men will decrease the likelihood of practitioners being seduced into a 'fixing' role and may in turn prevent them from furthering the 'coming out' imperative that one must be 'out' to be happy (Rasmussen, 2004).

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Appendices

Appendix I: The counselling experiences of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion

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The counselling experiences of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion

Abstract

In light of the limited research on and lack of guidance for working therapeutically with formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion this research aims to: 1) explore the counselling experiences of such men; and 2) offer suggestions for counselling and mental health professionals in their work with this population. Twelve formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion from the US, Canada, UK and Ireland described their experience of counseling, including both 'ex-gay' conversion therapy and gay affirmative therapy. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to interpret data obtained from semi-structured interviews with self-identifying gay fathers. Experiences of 'ex-gay' (conversion) therapy and psychiatry were wholly negative and reflected the therapists' pathologising attitude towards same-sex attraction and the use of unhelpful interventions focused on 'changing' the men's sexuality from gay to 'straight'. Participants' experiences of ex-gay therapies were unanimously reported as harmful and ethically problematic as they ignored their needs in favour of an agenda set on 'restoring' heterosexuality. Positive experiences of gay affirmative therapy related to the facilitation of acceptance and openness in exploring same-sex identity. Participants offered suggestions for mental health professionals in their work with such men including that therapists' should seek an understanding of this client group and consider that the individual story and wishes of a client above any pre-existing gay affirmative therapy or of gay (father) identity model. Therapists should use psycho-education to normalize homosexuality and support these men to make sense of their identities.

Key words: Coming out, conversion therapy, ex-gay therapy, same-sex parenting, gay affirmative therapy,

Public Significance Statement: This study demonstrates that formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion continue to have damaging experiences of therapy, including ex-gay therapy, and as long as

religious communities that are hostile to homosexuality exist, such men are likely to continue to seek therapy to support them in “coming out” as gay. The study offers therapeutic guidelines for professional in their work with such men.

Overview

This study explores the experiences of a distinct group within the wider LGBTQ population - formerly heterosexually married or partnered gay fathers raised with religion, a population that arguably has particular needs and concerns with regard to both coming out as gay and counselling. The study focuses on the men’s experiences of seeking counselling to manage their same-sex attraction (this includes seeking counselling both to support and to stall/prevent the ‘coming out’ process).

Background

Research has consistently shown that the majority of mental health professionals living in Western countries are ill-equipped to work with LGBTQ clients (Bayliss, 2009; Lyons, Bieschke, Dendy, Worthington & Georgemiller, 2010). Most practitioners receive little or no training on the topic of sexuality (Alderson, 2004) and therefore lack knowledge about the specific needs and concerns of LGBTQ clients (Grove, 2009). As LGBTQ people are at greater risk of mental health problems than the general population (Davies & Barker, 2015; King, Semlyen, Killaspy, Nazareth & Osborn, 2007), it is important to understand the counselling experiences of LGBTQ individuals and there is a need for mental health professionals to be educated about what this population needs and wants from psychological services.

One context in which LGBTQ people may seek counselling is when they are ‘coming out’. LGBTQ psychology emphasises the importance of ‘coming out’ as gay in the development of identity (e.g. Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010). ‘Coming out’ is a common term used to describe a person’s disclosure of same-sex attraction to others (Riley, 2010). Many researchers have spoken about how ‘coming out’ is not a single event, but something LGBTQ people must do throughout their lives, potentially every time they encounter someone new

(e.g. Rasmussen, 2004). While the coming out (to self and others) experience may be a relatively 'straight-forward' part of sexual self-discovery for some LGBTQ people (Evans & Barker, 2010), for others it remains a difficult and painful experience (e.g. Etengoff & Daiute, 2014). For this reason, some LGBTQ individuals seek counselling to help them manage this process (Clarke, 2007). It is important to understand how the coming out experience unfolds for particular groups of LGBT people and how counselling may facilitate this 'coming out'.

One group that may have a particularly complex 'coming out' journey is gay men who were raised in religious contexts and have fathered children in heterosexual relationships. Being gay and having children in the context of a heterosexual relationship is known to have a negative impact on making sense of one's identity (see Tasker & Bigner, 2013). Furthermore, having a religious upbringing has been shown to add conflict to identity formation for gay people (see Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Thus, having all three *intersecting* identities (being gay, a father, religious or having a religious background) is likely to complicate identity formation for these men further. LGBTQ researchers appear to make the assumption that this population of men who father children while in heterosexual relationships is disappearing due to reduced social stigma surrounding coming out as gay (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tornello & Patterson, 2012). This makes the assumption that because it's easier to come out as gay (socially and legally) that in the future everyone will be 'out', and therefore gay men will no longer father children in the context of a heterosexual relationship. However, with discrimination against homosexuality by religious authorities continuing, and a newer form of discrimination against "closeted" gay men by wider society (Rasmussen, 2004), there may always be a group of men who do not follow the coming out trajectory set by over-simplified and potentially dated identity development models (e.g. Matteson, 1987).

Yet there is very little research on this population. The last three decades have witnessed considerable positive shifts in social attitudes toward homosexuality, and same-sex parenting specifically, however the emphasis has

moved away from formerly heterosexually divorced/married parents towards planned parenting by non-heterosexuals (Tasker, 2013). Most research on the coming out experiences and identity development of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, concluding that one must have an 'out' gay identity to reach a place of self acceptance (e.g. Bigner & Bozett, 1989; Matteson, 1987; Miller, 1979). Another limitation of the existing research is that it adopted a rigid understanding of 'best' outcome for these men. All the currently existing stage models for formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers (e.g. Matteson, 1987) share an end point in which the men openly identify as gay, suggesting one must be 'out' to be psychologically well (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012) and linking being 'closeted' with internalised homophobia (Corrigan, Larson, Hautamaki, Matthews, Kuwabara, Rafacz, Walton, Wassel & O'Shaughnessy, 2009), creating a 'one-size fits all' model of identity development.

The recent lack of research on this group of gay fathers is problematic because arguably they face a special set of difficulties in regard to self-identity and social acceptance (Bozett, 1981; 1989), which is potentially more complex than that of the gay man without children or the gay man who became a father in the context of a same-sex relationship (Mallon, 2012). This study thus explores the men's experiences of counselling including both gay affirmative and arguably *anti*-gay forms of therapy, such as conversion therapy, acknowledging that ex-gay therapy is a common practice within some (conservative) religious communities (Drescher & Zucker, 2013).

LGBTQ people's experiences of therapy

There has been no research on the therapeutic experiences of gay fathers who fathered children in heterosexual relationships in 30 years, since Dunne (1987) studied the treatment of 7 gay fathers from heterosexual relationships in a group set up to develop strategies to help these men 'come out' to their children and families to positive outcomes. There is however a broader literature on LGBTQ people's experiences of therapy. Historically, LGBTQ people have reported negative experiences of psychological therapy,

including feeling unsafe about ‘coming out’ in therapy (Golding, 1997; Riley, 2010), feeling pathologised (Galgut, 2005), and believing counsellors hold heterosexist beliefs and a poor understanding of diversity (Hunt & Fish, 2008). LGBTQ people’s experiences of counseling are believed to be improving (King et al., 2007) yet negative experiences, which occur almost exclusively due to counselor’s disaffirming attitudes and negative responses to client same-sex orientation disclosure, continue to be reported (Victor & Nel, 2016).

Conversion (‘ex-gay’) therapy

Men with religious beliefs – the population of this study - are said to be most at risk of seeking conversion therapy (Flentje, Heck & Cochran, 2014). Commonly referred to as conversion therapy, as opposed to ‘reparative’ therapy, by LGBTQ researchers (e.g. Haldeman, 2014), ex-gay therapy describes therapeutic approaches and interventions that seek to provide ‘gay-to-straight’ outcomes for clients (Beckstead, 2012). Despite the consensus among critics of conversion therapy that it does not work (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Spitzer, 2003; 2012), statements by professional bodies condemning the practice, and a move towards prohibiting the practice in Western countries (Clair, 2013; Wolkomir, 2006), conversion therapy is still practised, particularly within religion-based therapy programmes (Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, Hyde, & Crowell, 2015). While conversion therapy is not promoted by all religious organisations, celibacy or managing same-sex impulses, which are key elements of conversion therapy, are consistently advocated by many religious organisations (e.g. Mormonism – see Besen, 2012) to be desirable goals for men who have same-sex attraction (Haldeman, 2002; 2014). The experience of conversion therapy has been described as “brutal and psychologically invasive” (Haldeman, 2002: 124), psychologically damaging (Haldeman, 1994), and creating “awful, empty hope” (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004: 672). Tozer and McClanahan (1999) cite *numerous reasons (including the problem of perpetuation of the belief that homosexuality is inferior and pathological – see Haldeman, 2014) for therapists not to accept a client’s desire to change his or her sexuality. They also offer several reasons why gay affirmative therapy (GAT)*

is a psychologically better alternative, for example taking a 'strengths' perspective, focusing on the strength and determination of LGBTQ individuals in managing their presenting problems (Crisp, 2006).

Gay Affirmative Therapy

Gay affirmative therapy (GAT) emerged in response to conversion therapy, and provides a model that does not pathologise homosexuality (regardless of theoretical orientation) in an attempt to rectify previously discriminatory psychotherapeutic practice with lesbians, bisexuals and gay men (Clark, 1987; Davies, 1996; Hancock, 1995; Hunter & Hickerson, 2003; Perez, DeBord & Bieschke, 2000; Nicolosi, 1997). Researchers who have studied the experiences of LGBTQ clients who have undertaken GAT highlight gay affirmative elements that are unique to GAT and cannot be attributed to other factors (Johnson, 2012; Lebolt, 1999; Pixton, 2003). GAT is experienced positively by clients, with descriptions of it being “affirming of *me*” (emphasis in original) and as demonstrating the therapist as seeing one’s difficulties as “human” (Lebolt, 1999: 360-361). There is a lack of recent research into client experiences of GAT compared with the experience of ex-gay therapies. While GAT offers a positive framework for respectful therapeutic work that seeks to avoid imposing any expectations on clients about identifying as ‘out’, it has been challenged by humanistic and existential psychotherapists (Cross, 2001; du Plock, 1997; Goldenberg, 2000; Langdridge, 2007) for its wider applicability in practice due to its therapeutic agenda (supporting more LGBTQ people to ‘come out’). For example, Davies’ (2012) GAT guidelines recommend that the therapist actively encourages and affirms LGBTQ thoughts to reduce feelings of shame and guilt.

The current state of counselling for LGBT people

Overall, LGBTQ counselling appears to be slowly improving with more reports of ‘better’ counselling (where sexual and gender diversity is not viewed as problematic, see King et al., 2007; Liddle, 1999), increased use of gay affirmative practice (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011) and a greater number of LGBTQ affirmative training programmes available to mental health professionals

on issues of sexuality, gender and diversity (e.g. Davies, 2012). However, non-heterosexual clients continue to describe early negative experiences of counselling, in which the therapist does not work with sexuality effectively or appropriately, which can prevent people from seeking counselling in the future (Eady, Dobinson, & Ross, 2011; Victor & Nel, 2016). In addition, conversion therapy and GAT offer two opposing models of therapy that potentially excludes a group of individuals who find neither model satisfactory due to the competing aims of each model (to help people identify as gay or 'straight'). This group is likely to include gay men raised in religion who have fathered children in heterosexual relationships as these men have often been raised to believe same-sex attraction is wrong, and religious family members have been found to use theistic values against such men post-coming 'out' which can have an affect on how these men manage their same-sex identity (Etengoff & Daiute, 2014). Another issue is that while there are professional guidelines for working with LGBTQ populations in the UK (British Psychological Society (BPS), *Guidelines and Literature Review for Psychologists Working Therapeutically with Sexual and Gender Minority Clients*, 2012), the US (American Psychological Association's (APA) *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*, 2011), Canada (Canadian Psychological Association's position statement: *Equality for lesbians, gay men, their relationships and their families*, 1996) and Ireland (Psychological Society of Ireland's *Guidelines for Good Practice with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Clients*, 2015) there are no guidelines that explicitly address the needs of the population of men studied in this research. The APA guidelines (2011, p.18) include a section on the importance of understanding same-sex parents, highlighting that LGBTQ parents are a resilient community, but that bias and misinformation about such parents continue to exist. However none of the other guidelines provide recommendations for working with gay parents and none of the guidelines address working with GLBTQ people who have been raised in religious contexts.

Aims of this study

In light of the limited research on and lack of guidance for working therapeutically with formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion this research aims to: 1) explore the counselling experiences of such men; and 2) offer suggestions for counselling and mental health professionals in their work with this population. Given the lack of research on this population of gay fathers it was decided to recruit a diverse sample, from different Western countries and with different religious backgrounds, in order to broadly explore their experiences of therapy.

Method

This study is based on interviews with twelve gay fathers. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provided the methodological framework and analytic technique for the research (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Following the recommendations for IPA, the interviews were relatively unstructured and began with an invitation to the participants to 'tell their story'. Both planned and spontaneous prompt questions were used to encourage the participants to provide further details about their experiences of counselling. The interviews were conducted by the first author who disclosed to the participants before each interview his identity as a gay man in the process of adopting a child with his partner, with the aim of fostering trust and rapport (Hanson, 2005). The interviews lasted between 49 and 88 minutes (mean 66 minutes) and took place in participants' homes (N=7), or another quiet location convenient for the participant (1) and via *Skype* (4). Men who expressed interest in participation were given a participant information sheet and written informed consent was obtained before the interviews took place. The study received ethical approval from the first and second author's Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Participants and recruitment

Twelve men who self-identified as gay, had a religious background (either raised in religion in their family home or joined a religious community in adolescence) and had fathered children in a heterosexual relationship were

recruited from a social networking site for gay fathers and snowballing sampling through the first author's personal contacts. The aim was to recruit English-speaking men from various (Western) countries to explore the impact of different social and religious contexts on the men's experiences. Participants were recruited from the US (N=4), Canada (3), the UK (3) and Ireland (2), and were aged between 25 and 68 (mean: 42 years). Participants identified their (in some instances former) religions as ex-Mormon (N=3), ex-Southern Baptist (1), ex-Evangelical (1), Charismatic non-practicing (1), ex-Catholic (2), Catholic (1), Christian Orthodox (1), Methodist (1) and Masorti Judaism (1), and their race/ethnicity as White with the exception of one participant who identified as Hispanic American. The men had fathered between 1 and 4 children (in one case 2 children through adoption). In terms of their identity journey and 'outness', the men were in a range of places. Most but not all had left the marital home; the two who had not maintained relationships with male partners in secret. The ten who had left the marital home had done so between 1 and 18 years previously; 10 of these were (at the time of study) in a romantic relationship with a man. Eleven of the men self-identified as gay; one participant identified as "gay/bisexual".

Analytic Procedure

The goal of IPA is "to explore in detail the processes through which participants make sense of their own experiences [by looking at participants' accounts] of the processes they have been through and seeking to [use] an assumed existing universal inclination [toward] self-reflection" (Brocki & Wearden, 2006: 88). IPA not only focuses on participants' experiences, views and understandings, but on the perceptions and meanings that these individuals make regarding such experiences (Constantine & Sue, 2007). This approach is both phenomenological and interpretative in that it views the analytic outcomes as resulting from the researchers' interpretations of the participants' interpretations of their own experience – what Smith refers to as a 'double hermeneutic' (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed orthographically (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The first step of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009)

involved reading and re-reading the first transcript and writing 'initial notes'. These notes were then organised into emergent themes. Emergent themes were then clustered into super-ordinate themes and this process was then repeated for each of the remaining transcripts. A final set of super-ordinate themes was then produced for all participants. This paper reports one of these super-ordinate themes: *the counselling experiences of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion*.

Interpretations of the data are illustrated by quotations from the interviews, which allows the reader to assess the data within their own interpretive framework. To assist with this: ellipsis points (...) indicate where material has been omitted, and a (pause) indicates a pause in the flow of a participant's speech. Material within square brackets [] is clarificatory. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants where anonymity was desired.

Results

Before exploring the participants' counselling experiences, it is important to highlight cross-country similarities and differences in their accessing of counselling. All participants living in the US and Canada had engaged with at least one form of psychological therapy (6 of the 7 participants engaging in both gay affirmative group and one-to-one therapy, and 5 of the 7 having some experience of ex-gay therapy). Of the 3 UK participants, only one experienced ex-gay therapy, with two reports of therapy that could be considered to have gay affirmative elements. Irish participants reported no therapeutic experience of any kind, however, these participants offered suggestions about what they would like from psychotherapy.

For context, it is also important to note that the majority (11 of 12) of the participants reported being raised in conservative homes where religious homophobia abounded and there was a strong unspoken pressure to marry and have children in a heterosexual context.

Negative Experiences of Ex-Gay Christian Therapy

Of the 12 participants, 7 experienced therapy that could be labelled as ex-gay or 'anti-gay'. For these participants, therapies were usually connected to Christian Churches (5 of the 7 experiences; the other 2 experiences of conversion therapy were experienced within the field of psychiatry and will be explored in the next section). For example, Jason reported that after acknowledging his same-sex attraction to his Mormon Church, a counsellor was assigned to him by the Latter Day Saints (LDS) Social Services, paid for by the Church with the aim of ending his same-sex attraction. Jason simultaneously attended a Latter Day Saints (LDS) facilitated ex-gay group where men were encouraged to share their "success stories" and "milestones" about abstaining from same-sex thoughts and behaviours. Jason attended both therapies for 18 months. One-to-one therapy was conducted by a therapist who Jason described as:

"...completely straight. I mean had no clue (laughs) of any of the thoughts or feelings that I was going through, not at all. And he would, like, make me go out and play basketball, y'know, because I needed man-time, healthy man-time. And we would talk about fishing, like in our therapy sessions, because somehow that was supposed to make me straight."

Looking back, Jason viewed the therapy as ignoring his needs and instead guided by a fixed agenda of 'restoring heterosexuality' and being underpinned by a problematic view of homosexuality as a failure of appropriate masculinity (something noted in existing literature on conversion therapy, Besen, 2012). Jason described this experience of therapy as an attempt at: "convincing myself that I had changed". He realised the impossibility of changing his same-sex attraction only after writing an exit letter to his ex-gay group members, declaring he was "cured". Writing this letter was a way for Jason to end ex-gay treatment, and permitted him the freedom to decide: "...right then and there that I was gay. I had to explore that part of me". While he did eventually end his ex-gay therapy, Jason's story demonstrates the

potential negative power therapists hold with such men and the impact of therapist reluctance to openly explore non-heterosexual sexualities with an LGBTQ client (Israel, Gorcheva, Walther, Sulzner & Cohen, 2008).

Bernie described a similar experience. After coming out to his Mormon pastor, Bernie too was sent to the LDS Social Services to manage his same-sex attraction. Bernie engaged with the LDS therapist for two sessions but felt judged about his same-sex attraction. Bernie described the therapy as “unprofessional... because the looks that I would get from the psychologist, as I was talking to him, just were not conducive to the therapy”. Later, when Bernie decided to leave his marriage, he experienced another LDS therapist in court when seeking shared custody of his children. Bernie described this therapist as “extremely antagonistic” and concluded of his experience with LDS therapists: “that their religion biases their therapy”, impeding their ability to be non-judgemental.

Dan, a Romanian Orthodox Christian living in Canada, sought psychotherapy with the goal of “fixing” his same-sex attraction. Dan attended weekly psychotherapy for a year until the negative impact on his health became too great: “It made me feel more guilty; it made me feel more inappropriate and I think it triggered my anxiety attacks alone.” For Dan, the therapy contributed to his diagnosis with Generalised Anxiety Disorder, for which he, at the time of interview, continued to take anti-anxiety medication. Dan’s story provides evidence of the potential damage caused by ex-gay therapy, including increases in anxiety, depression and self-destructive behaviour (see also Baxter, 2014).

Tom was encouraged by his Charismatic Christian Church to join the (folded in 2013) ex-gay organisation, *Exodus International*, in his home state. Tom described *Exodus International* as an organisation that helped “gay people to become straight”, which he clarified as meaning: “...so I basically learned how to hide it [my sexuality] better”. This ex-gay therapy involved shaming: “...a lot of accountability, like ‘have you looked at porn? Have you had sex with a guy?’ Uhm, we had this whole list of things that they would ask every week.” Tom

“People don’t understand who you are”

described the process as helping him to understand his thought processes and triggers, because “in their minds it was a cause and effect thing”. However, for Tom: “it never usually took away the desires”.

In the UK, Tim experienced a similar ex-gay organisation that has also ceased operation very recently, *Living Waters*. This monthly group was run by a Christian GP who claimed to have previously experienced a transition from same-sex to heterosexual attraction:

“[The group] had a big manual and it was a mixed group, male and female, and we would meet and work through the materials, in terms of moving from same-sex attraction towards heterosexual relationships. And people in our group were from different backgrounds, some were single, some came from I think emotionally psychologically damaged [places], some had clearly some mental health difficulties as well. In fact, there was one gentleman in the group who some years later went on to take his own life.”

Tim spoke about his negative experience of this ex-gay group, claiming he felt “tormented” when in the group. The group provided a “temporary resolve” for Tim that only restored a pattern of self-doubt: “I had a new resolve to overcome my feelings and to sort of pray them away, so to speak. And then something else would happen and I’d sort of feel myself spiralling again and feeling dreadful.”

Taken together, participants’ experiences of ex-gay therapies were unanimously reported as harmful and ethically problematic as they ignored their needs in favour of a set agenda on “restoring heterosexuality” (see Besen, 2012). However, attending the meetings perhaps helped these men to acknowledge that they were not alone with their same-sex feelings. For example, Tim described how all group members were bound by their religious beliefs: “...people in our group were from different backgrounds...[we] all identified as Christians though.”

Particularly for participants from strong religious communities, the groups also offered a transitional space with like-minded people who shared similar struggles that were not necessarily understood by other Church members and this too was experienced as comforting by some participants. However, the initial comfort offered to participants by these ex-gay groups wore off for participants, as their same-sex identity continued to be denied. As reflected by Tom's statement of his ex-gay group: "It helped a lot. But it never usually took away the desires."

Negative Experiences of Ex-Gay Psychiatry

Two of the older participants in the study also reported experience of ex-gay psychiatric treatment within secular settings, both in 1970s Canada. Paul met a psychiatrist twice weekly for four months to be "cured" of his homosexuality, concluding with the psychiatrist determining that Paul was not gay. A short number of years later, when his same-sex feelings became "impossible" to control, Paul saw a second psychiatrist for a period of two years: "...at that end of that again the psychiatrist didn't think that I was gay." Thus Paul was twice informed of his 'true' sexuality by an 'expert', rather than helped to explore his same-sex attraction.

Jared attended a group where: "the psychiatrists were obviously anti-gay...so it was 'we love you because you're human, but we... wouldn't want you to act on your homosexual impulses'." The impact of this experience was reflected in Jared's ongoing identity struggle over the last 40 years, and the persistent shame he felt about his same-sex identity: "I always felt, ashamed was the wrong word, but shame". Jared, who had experience of both ex-gay and gay affirmative therapy, believed his therapeutic experiences have been "paralleling social trends of the time. Back in the seventies it was one way, now it's very gay affirmative".

Participants' experience of ex-gay therapy within psychiatry highlights the power of the field, where professionals have historically felt they had the authority to define a client's identity for them (see Bayer, 1981). This confirms how important it is in all forms of therapy to trust clients as the experts on

themselves (Drescher, D'Ercole, & Schoenberg, 2014). While these ex-gay experiences are evocative of a particular era (pre-1970s, see Peel & Riggs, 2016) before the development of LGBTQ-affirmative psychology and psychotherapy, the testimony of participants in this study evidences that anti-gay therapies continue to be practiced, particularly in religious communities that live in (various degrees of) isolation from mainstream culture (Besen, 2012).

Positive Experiences of GAT

Eight participants (3 from Canada, 3 from the US, and 2 from the UK) had experienced one-to-one therapy that could be described as gay affirmative, or non-judgemental about homosexuality. Overall, participants reported attending therapy to help manage their non-heterosexual identity and the process of coming-out. However, the reasons presented to their therapists for attending therapy were often symptoms of anxiety or depression rather than speaking explicitly about their same-sex attraction, often because the participants were initially hesitant about disclosing their same-sex identity (Bernie, Dan, Ed and Tim). The participants attributed their anxiety and depression to the difficult shift from a familiar family life towards a new identity.

Five participants from the US and Canada experienced gay affirmative group therapy (not something that seemed to have been available to participants from the UK and Ireland). One participant experienced an affirmative group specifically for men from religious backgrounds. Jason attended a “coming out” ex-Mormon peer support group set up by other gay men who experienced involuntary excommunication from the LDS Church. This support network offered an alternative to the LDS community as Jason prepared for his transition out of the family home and Mormon Church. Jason described the group as offering him information and friendship in a supportive environment (note how Jason presents his transition as not from straight to gay but from Mormon to gay, and in so doing conflates Mormonism and heterosexuality):

“...you get together and you have like a lesson, like a church lesson. But it's for gay people. Basically you still believe in the church, but you're gay. So we were going to that group together, because it's hard. It's hard to transition from being Mormon to gay.”

Similarly, Tom attended a bimonthly “coming out” support group at his local LGBTQ centre: “About seventy per cent of [the members] were married at one point or another. And a lot of them have kids. So, that’s really cool because they understand exactly what you’re going through...” The importance of this group to Tom demonstrates the significance of feeling understood for such men and the effectiveness of a support group of this kind.

Three participants (Paul, Dan and Jared) attended a gay father support group which has been running since 1978 and was one of the first documented gay affirmative peer-led groups for gay fathers. Dan spoke of his growing acceptance of his identity through the group:

“[In the affirmative group] at the beginning I was not sharing much, I was just listening and giving very vague information about myself, but lately I’ve noted that I’m becoming more open and I’m caring less about what people think of me. How they might label me or how they might judge me. I think I’m growing stronger and stronger.”

The group offers a framework that has been developed over the past almost forty years that seemed to work well for its members. As described by peer facilitator, Paul:

“Gay Fathers is a peer-led group, we don’t have professional leaders but we’re all gay fathers, so somebody has to plan every meeting and organise them. They’re not just getting together for social purposes. In fact, we actively steer away from that... we actively tell people that this is only a discussion group, we talk and that’s it... Our mission is to find a way of being tolerable of being gay and being a father. And that probably means leaving the family home. Although, we’ll say that probably will happen but you have to figure that out, what works for

you... like one former member to this day is still with his wife... I have been in his house while his boyfriend and his wife prepared the meal together for a group of gay men...that's not going to happen for very many people. But this is one family. And I say anything is possible as long as everybody involved wants it."

The language used by Paul to describe the group's mission statement – "being tolerable of being gay and a father" – highlights an important consideration of this study; that having two or more conflicting identities is something this population must find a way of feeling comfortable about, and that for some men counselling or gay affirmative groups may aid them to achieve this aim. The value that Paul and the other participants ascribed to their experience of affirmative group work also corresponds with the benefits described in existing research (e.g. increased self-acceptance, see Vincke & Bolton, 1994). Paul's statement that there are multiple possible outcomes for a coming out journey also reflects the suggestions made in the critical literature on GAT models that the imposition of expectations on clients should be avoided (Langdridge, 2007).

Participants' suggestions for counsellors working with gay fathers

Participants provided a number of suggestions for clinical work with formerly heterosexual partnered gay men raised with religion. First, the importance of adopting a gay affirmative therapeutic stance was seen by all participants as critical. Nonetheless, some participants suggested that the level of positivity expressed to clients about having a gay identity should be tempered (Ed, Dan, Jared). Jared suggested psychotherapy should be "[LGBTQ] positive but not...overly positive...I don't think I'm swayed in that [overly positive] way". From this statement, it appears Jared felt that a therapist being "too comfortable" with being gay made him uneasy because he viewed being gay as not a lifestyle choice he made, but rather something innate that he had worked hard to accept. This critique parallels the challenge made by humanistic and existential psychotherapists (e.g. Goldenberg, 2000) about the agenda in GAT of helping LGBTQ individuals 'come out' (Davies, 2012).

Jared described his current affirmative therapist as being “quite clear [about] what she wants” for him: to be both content and ‘out’ with his sexuality. However while Jared appeared to appreciate his therapist’s wishes for him, the proposed ‘out’ gay identity appeared to sit uncomfortably with him. This suggests that having a therapeutic agenda about how a client *should* feel about their identity can be unhelpful to some clients. It also suggests therapists should not demonstrate a clear interest in the client being ‘out’ about his sexuality, but rather that they should encourage the quest for self-exploration and understanding (Johnson, 2012). Participants believed achieving this delicate therapeutic balance (affirmative but not pushy) required the right therapist skills and personality (see DeYoung, 2015) and a high level of understanding about gay identity development (see McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011).

While Jared wanted a therapist not to be ‘too’ affirmative, Paul and Ed made the opposite point, recounting experiences of a ‘neutral’ therapeutic approach – one which was silent on issues such as sexuality – which they found unhelpful and frustrating. Paul noted seeking meaning in the smallest of gestures because of the lack of a stated stance on sexuality: “You, as the client, go through everything to a raised eyebrow or a nod.” This suggests that it is important for therapists to signal in some way that they are gay-affirmative.

Ed suggested that being a ‘good’ (affirmative) therapist might sometimes mean pushing a bit around areas of sexuality:

“There is a dichotomy where the therapist’s role is to support the client. But...support isn’t always enough, doesn’t move you on. There are therapists I’ve been to who...don’t get involved at all. And it’s just very interesting and very interesting and we just carry on talking and talking until we stop talking. And... there’s no communication...I think the theory is a good therapist would lead you towards exploring your own things that you think are too dangerous to touch... they’ve just gotta push you into the difficult things, if they can identify what the difficult things are coming, and to make you delve into them and to work out... it’s a tough profession, because people are trying to hide things. And

some people manage better when the things are hidden! Y'know? How do you know that they need change? It depends on the level of stress that it gives them."

Ed suggests that the role of therapist with men such as him should be to support exploration of the parts of the self that they have worked hard at leaving unexplored, and perhaps to help them integrate these hidden parts into their identity. Yet, like Jared, he also suggests that the therapist should provide the client with support that does not have a particular endpoint in mind (for instance, towards being more 'out'). Given both the empirically-supported relationship between psychological wellness and living openly as a gay man (e.g. Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012) and the common assumption in GAT models that being out is the desired end-point, it is interesting that the participants argued for the importance of an open therapeutic agenda.

Ed's comment about "things that are too dangerous to touch" hints at the anxiety and fear that men can experience as they begin to realise their same-sex attraction, an attraction that in some cases seems to make them feel less like 'a man'. To manage the complexity of beliefs such as this therapeutically, Richie suggested therapists should recognise the effect of our heteronormative culture for gay men: "...always observe that the person comes out and is gay and is loving a man. That doesn't mean he is less. Society can do that to people" (see Bryan, Carr & Kitching, 2009; Harris, 2015). Bernie similarly suggested the importance for therapists to normalise homosexuality:

"[You don't] need to be fixed...that there was nothing wrong with being attracted to the same sex...if you're counselling a gay person, even if they aren't ready to come out, helping them to come to an understanding that there's nothing wrong with who they are is important."

The participants' comments suggest that feeling 'less' as a gay man - something that has been imposed on gay men by the heteronormative world they live in - is likely to be a common issue for therapists working with these men (Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman, 2011).

Some participants also stressed the value of therapists being non-judgemental (Winslade, 2013). For example, Dan believed the greatest benefit to him was “the fact that I have somebody to talk to very openly without hiding anything... it’s okay to say everything we feel, there is no judgement, there is no bad judge”. While many clients value a non-judgemental space, this statement may also speak to the religious backgrounds of participants, who have been raised to believe there will be negative judgement for their ‘sin’ of having sex with another man. As Nick said of his experience of brief therapy: “what I found absolutely wonderful ... was the feeling they gave me of not feeling guilty”.

The importance of a therapist signposting towards information and resources for gay fathers was also highlighted by some participants (Gerard, Jason, Tim) (Richards & Bennett-Levy, 2010). For example, Jason said: “I would have welcomed any information at the time, just because I didn’t know. I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know anything...” Jason’s religious context prevented him from accessing information about homosexuality, which made coming out particularly frightening, with no resources or people he felt he could turn to.

Discussion: Implications for practice

Participants’ discussion of their experiences with therapy suggest a number of clear implications for practitioners:

6. Therapists should seek an understanding of this client group and consider that gay men raised in religion and who fathered children in heterosexual relationships are likely have complex and varied personal histories (see Barnes & Meyer, 2012).
7. The individual story and wishes of a client should drive any psychological formulation of them rather than any pre-existing GAT model or model of gay (father) identity development.
8. A key part of therapy for this group is providing psycho-education about the common impact of a heteronormative culture and normalizing homosexuality. For some clients it will also be important to offer information and signpost to relevant resources. While such signposting may not be necessary for all clients, and should not be offered without discussion, it is

important for therapists to have an awareness of where to direct clients who are in need of further LGBT resources (e.g. peer support groups and online forums – see Harris, 2015).

9. It is the role of the therapist to support and guide the client to places that are difficult (see McDougall, 1995); and to support these men to make sense of their identities. However, this must be carried out in an appropriate way and ‘one size fits all’ identity development models (e.g. Miller, 1979) may not capture these men’s experiences or their needs and desires with identity acceptance, as a gay man and father.

10. An LGBTQ affirmative approach is an essential underpinning of therapeutic work with such men and it is critical that therapist’s make this stance clear to clients (being neutral is not enough). However, the model should not be drawn on in any rigid way (e.g. the assumptions that being ‘out’ is best, see Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012). Feeling comfortable with one’s identity (whatever that means for the individual client) should be the goal of therapy, consistent with more recent approaches to gay affirmative psychotherapy (see Johnson, 2012); this means being non-judgemental in general and also specifically when clients (for example) elect not live as ‘out’ gay men. However, this does not mean that therapists should promote or support any beliefs that one’s same-sex identity can or should be cured. Therapists should be aware of the problem of pathologising same-sex sexuality in this way, and should feel confident in teaching clients in search of ‘ex-gay’ therapies about evidence highlighting the negative impacts and ineffectiveness of such therapies (e.g. Besen, 2012).

These suggestions provided here are aimed at improving treatment for a specific group of LGBTQ individuals who have been in recent years largely ignored in the literature on same-sex parenting. The population-specific guidelines are intended to supplement the already broad LGBTQ therapeutic guidelines established by professional bodies (e.g. APA, 2011; BPS, 2012).

As 10 of the 12 participants identified as White North American or European, this research offers a far greater account of the experience of coming

out for White men from Western Culture than other ethnic groups. Similarly, 11 of the 12 participants identified as Christian, with only one Jewish participant, which means this research is limited to the experiences of predominantly White Christian men.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers new insight into the counselling experiences of an under-researched group of gay fathers. This study confirms that while counselling experiences for LGBTQ people broadly are improving and shifting towards an affirmative stance (Evans & Barker, 2010), pockets of LGBTQ people continue to have damaging or less than satisfactory experiences of therapy, including ex-gay therapy. The ongoing relevance of this study is that as long as religious communities that are hostile to homosexuality exist, particularly those that are isolated from the mainstream socio-cultural context, such men are likely to exist and to continue to seek therapy. It is hoped therefore that this paper may improve the quality of the treatment that is offered to the population of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion.

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Appendix II: Summary of religious teachings on homosexuality (from religious organisations included in this research)

This appendix focuses on the religious teachings of Judeo-Christian religions which the participants were members of, focusing on statements and research connected with each religious organisation. The summary begins its focus with Judaism, then moves from larger to smaller Christian Churches based on the popularity of the religion in relation to the region of the participants. For example while Mormonism is a small denomination in the UK, it is the largest religion in Utah, from where 3 participants were recruited.

Judaism

Orthodox Jewish law has traditionally understood same-sex sexual relationships as wrong (citing the following text - Leviticus 20:13, “A man should not lie with a man as with a woman”; “it is an abomination”). This law is not only based on the *Old Testament* but also two millennia of social commentary. It is generally accepted (see Mott, 2011) that the bible was composed using the values and ideas of society at the times of writing and one of the greatest struggles for Judeo-Christianity today is making sense of the bible in contemporary society (Bray, 1996; Pleins, 2001). However, more progressive strands of Judaism, such as Liberal and Reform, manage discord between older teaching and contemporary lifestyle by choosing to interpret the bible according to modern values (Liebeschütz, 1964) using rationalism (for instance, comparatively noting that female same-sex acts are not forbidden in the Torah, allowing same-sex relationships more broadly to be interpreted as acceptable) (Ladin, 2014). With an open-lens approach to religious texts tolerance among the Reform/Liberal communities can extend to same-sex parenting and families.

Catholicism

The Catholic Church has arguably softened its approach to same-sex issues very recently (signified by a recent document, *Welcoming Homosexual Persons*, 2014). However, it continues to take a strong stance against same-sex rights to marriage and parenting, viewing same-sex families as not in the best interest of children (Rekers, 2005; Rekers & Kilgus, 2001). The current Catholic leader,

Pope Francis, has also been quoted as describing same-sex marriage as “a destructive pretension against the plan of God” (McDonagh, 2013), harming the identity of the term family. He has also been quoted as expressing “shock” and “sadness” around the question of same-sex parenting as “discrimination against children” (Pentin, 2014). The arguments made by the Catholic Church against same-sex marriage have become completely intertwined with the Church’s beliefs on protecting the nuclear family (holding marriage as the union between a man and a woman for the purpose of having children), making this study’s exploration of formerly heterosexually partnered gay fathers raised with religion pertinent to exploring how pressure to protect the traditional family can impact on identity for these men (Tornello & Patterson, 2015). Pope Francis believes that in allowing same-sex marriage “the family is hit, that the family is knocked and that the family is debased...Can everything be called a family?” (Crisis magazine, 2015).

Church of England

The Church of England has for many years claimed to support ending same-sex discrimination (Clucas, 2012). However, the Church has objected to same-sex unions because the impossibility of procreation in these relationships dilutes the meaning of marriage and “excludes the fundamental” function of marriage (Church of England, 2012). The Church caused controversy when it blocked the rights of a gay clergyman to act as a vicar after entering into a same-sex civil marriage (Huffington Post UK, 2014), which raised legal uncertainty in relation to British Employment Law. The Church of England is unique compared with other Christian denominations, due to the Church’s tie with the state, where there is no legal distinction between marriages that are held in religious institutions and those civilly registered, however, same-sex marriage is not permitted in Church of England churches.

Mormonism

The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (commonly known as the Mormon Church), strongly objects to same-sex marriage and parenting on the grounds of the religion’s central (and sometimes in itself controversial; for example, it’s assignment of gender role stereotypes – England, 2010) focus on

the heterosexual biological family. As proclaimed by the religion's former President, Hinckley, "marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and that the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children" (Hinkley, 1995). The religion's "oppressive othering", a process of morally classifying gay people as less than others, has been documented (Sumerau & Cragun, 2014). However, like Catholicism, the Mormon Church has moderated its language around sexuality in recent years to appear more accepting (Graham, 2013), while continuing to oppose gay rights on the basis that it cannot "make moral what God has declared immoral" (Oaks, 2013).

Other Christian Denominations

This research also includes participants from Methodist, Fundamentalist, Evangelical and Charismatic Christian communities. These Christian denominations (other than Methodism) largely take anti-LGBTQ positions similar to Mormonism, differing only in the degree to which they censure non-heterosexual members (Ganzevoort et al., 2011). Methodism, while universally against same-sex unions, varies in its messages across countries from viewing homosexual sex as a sinful act (the British Methodist Church - Bryan et al., 2012) to being a practice which is incompatible with Methodist beliefs and an inability to be "certified as candidates in the church" (in the US – see UMC online, 2012 for "Homosexuality: Full Book of Discipline statements"). However, the religion claims it sees all people as of "sacred worth" (see United Methodist Church, 2012) and does not turn away LGBTQ members as long as they do not engage in same-sex unions or parenting, which are against its teachings.

Appendix III: Western Psychological Societies' Positions on Same-Sex Families

US

In 2005, the APA issued a brief on “Lesbian and Gay Parenting” that has been repeatedly invoked in many same-sex rights debates. The brief reports that “not a single study has found children of lesbian or gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents” (APA, 2005, p. 15) and cites 59 research papers to support this. This statement was refuted (by Christian researcher, Loren Marks, 2012) on the grounds that more research with larger representative samples is needed. However, it should be noted that in the past the APA has been clear to state that their guidelines are not all exhaustive or mandatory (Ackerman & Ackerman, 1996), reducing this brief (and others like it) simply to preferred practice.

The UK

The BPS has not addressed the topic of gay parenting directly, however, in the Society’s official guidelines for psychologists working therapeutically with “sexual and gender minority clients” (BPS, 2012), therapists are encouraged to be aware of diverse family forms and the challenges potentially faced by this group. This document suggests best practice models and methods for working with such individuals and groups, such as, engaging with the “client’s reality” and deconstructing “normalcy” both in one-to-one and family work (BPS, 2012, p. 37).

Psychologists in the UK are also expected to meet standards of proficiency within their professional role as set out by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), which offers little guidance relevant to LGBTQ clients. Of relevance to working with LGBTQ clients, these standards require psychologists to “understand the impact of differences such as gender, sexuality... on psychological well-being or behaviour” (HCPC, 2009, p.29).

Ireland

“People don’t understand who you are”

The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) established a Sexual Diversity and Gender Issues Special Interest Group in 2008 to create guidelines for working with LGBTQ clients. On April 23, 2015, one month before the Irish referendum on same-sex marriage, Taoiseach (Irish Head of Government) Enda Kenny launched the new guidelines for PSI, titled, “Guidelines for Good Practice with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Clients” (2015). The guidelines offer direction specific to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) clients, including preferred language and best practice information, an introduction to affirmative psychotherapy concepts, as well as a directory of LGB services in Ireland. However, the guidelines do not offer any guidance on LGB families.

Canada

The Canadian Psychological Association guidelines (CPA, 1996) state that it supports the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected ground of discrimination for the LGBTQ community and their families. However, the CPA does not offer any guidance for working with LGBTQ individuals and their families.

Australia

For comparison with an English speaking country that has been more explicit than the above Western countries, I would like to point to the Australian Psychological Society’s (APS, 2007) published literature review on “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Parented Families”. The review cites papers that conclude “no difference” on items including self-esteem, psychiatric ratings and cognitive abilities. The review also addressed the issue of ‘difference’ (between same-sex and heterosexual parenting) stating that it is problematic to interpret difference as “concerning”. The review pointed to studies including Kershaw (2000), McNair (2004) and Tasker (2005) to illustrate difference, for example, that children of same-sex parented households demonstrate less aggressive behaviour with a wider spectrum of emotions, when compared with children raised by heterosexual parents (MacCallum & Gollombok, 2004). The APS (2010) has also published “Ethical Guidelines for psychological practice with

lesbian, gay and bisexual clients” to offer direction to psychologists in their therapeutic work with LGBTQ communities. The APS has also publicly condemned any “ex-gay” or conversion therapy practices and treats any psychologists attempting such work to be in breach of their code of ethics (2007).

Appendix IV: Participant Demographics

Name	Ethnicity	Resident	Religion	Age	Educa- tion	Hetero- sexual Relation- ship status	Sexual Identity	Gay relationship Status	Child No.
Jason	White American	Utah, USA	Ex- Mormon	42	Under- graduate Degree	Divorced	Gay	Same-sex married	2
Alex	White American	Utah, USA	Ex- Mormon	25	Under- graduate Degree	Previously engaged	Gay	Same-sex cohabiting	1
Bernie	Latino- Hispanic	Utah, USA	Ex- Polygamist Mormon	41	Some college	Divorced	Gay	In a same- sex relationship	2
Richie	White Irish	Ireland	Catholic	54	Primary level	Divorced	Gay	In a same- sex relationship	4
Gerard	White Irish	Ireland	Ex-Catholic	46	Second level	Divorced	Gay	Same-sex cohabiting	2
Ed	Jewish South African	London, UK	Masorti Judaism	68	Under- graduate Degree	Divorced	Mostly gay	Same-sex cohabiting	2
Tim	White British	South West, UK	Ex- Evangelical	45	Masters	Divorced	Gay	Same-sex civil partnership	3
Dan	White Romanian	Ontario, Canada	Christian Orthodox	41	Under- graduate Degree	Married	Gay or bisexual	Married to woman but exploring options	1
Jared	White Canadian	Nova Scotia, Canada	Ex-Catholic	66	Under- graduate Degree	Married, living separately	Gay	Single	2
Tom	White American	Ohio, USA	Charismati c Christian - non- practicing	44	Under- graduate Degree	Legally Separated	Gay	Single	1
Paul	White American	Ontario, Canada	Ex- Southern Baptist	74	Under- graduate Degree	Divorced	Gay	Same-sex cohabiting	3
Nick	White British	South West, UK	Methodist	66	Third level diploma	Married	Bisexual- leaning towards gay	Married to woman and in covert same-sex relationship	2

Appendix V: Interview Sample with Initial Notes

Tim, aged 45, White British (interview length: 88 mins)

Education level: MSc

Occupation: Deputy director Mental Health nursing

Children: son, (aged=) 24; daughter, 23; son, 20.

Sexuality: Identifies as gay.

Heterosexual status: divorced.

Same-sex status: civil partnership since 2009.

Religion: non-practicing Christian (formerly Evangelical).

Interview transcript:	Researcher's exploratory comments:
<p>I: So, if you'd like to start by telling me the story of how you became a father?</p> <p>T: Okay, uhm (pause) well, I think as I was saying to you, I was brought up in a church environment and I think there was quite an expectation that I would get married I guess, and settle down. So, when I was nineteen, I met somebody and very quickly after we met, became engaged and got married. Uhm, and uhm, then within a couple of years had children. It wasn't really something, I, uhm, set about to do really. I think it was just part and parcel of growing up and getting married and having children. It just felt very natural. A very natural expectation, really.</p> <p>I: Which church were you married in?</p> <p>T: Uh, I married in an evangelical church. I'd been going to an evangelical church since I was about twelve years old. I had quite a, I think, I wouldn't say it was a disturbed upbringing, it was reasonably stable, but both my parents, were uhm (pause) were quite</p>	<p>A little nervous about where to begin and goes to the religious background – seems to sum up the expectations around those values.</p> <p>No choice? No conscious thought. It was what you did. No sense of control? Options to lead a life other than this didn't exist.</p> <p>"natural" suggests preordained, normal – instead felt unnatural.</p> <p>Turned to the church in puberty to escape home life which was "challenging"</p>

<p>challenged in lots of ways. My father was always out of work. My mother was an alcoholic. My father then became an alcoholic, once he left the [military]. So, it was quite a difficult upbringing. Uhm, I had stability of being at home. When I was twelve years old, through my religious education teacher, I was introduced to a local church. I hadn't been brought up in a church, I had occasionally gone to a Church of England, and it provided me with a lot of security. I went to a boy's church camp, uhm, and then from that point on identified myself as Christian. I started going to a local church, where I lived in [South West England]. My parents had no objections, whilst they were generally interested they weren't overly interested in what I was doing on a day-to-day basis. So, I was going to school. Going to church, had church friends, joined the church youth group, did church activities, and would identify myself as a Christian. And it was an incredible place of security for me growing up, where in an environment it wasn't as secure as I'd like or have expected it to have been. And I can look back at that now and think what that was about, more than at the time; but I know it was about the security bit. So, I was at an Evangelical church and I continued to go to that church, and I suppose I had always identified myself as having homosexual feelings. And I knew from quite a young age that I had those kinds of feelings. But in the context of the church, it was very much about, actually talking to someone about it. getting support and counseling for it. And working towards the ideal, which was meeting somebody, marrying somebody and starting a family. And it wasn't about the expectation, when you're brought up in that church environment there</p>	<p>Sounds like he was quite stressed as a child aware of his parents addiction and instability. Church offered stability. Goodness?</p> <p>Taken under the wing of a teacher – converted. Perhaps knew he was looking for something that he wasn't getting from his life. Offered 'security'.</p> <p>Labelled identity – Christian. (repeats this line, end of page)</p> <p>Church showed interest when no one else was.</p> <p>Church offered a friendship group – fit in.</p> <p>Real sense of comfort – or escape.</p> <p>Recognises that perhaps it was hiding from perhaps same-sex feelings and other difficult events at the time.</p> <p>Always knew he had same-sex feelings, an probably sensed that the church was not open to that.</p> <p>Goal "IDEAL" = family - get married + have children with a woman.</p>
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<p>isn't somebody saying, "you've got to meet someone, you've got to marry someone", it's just all around you, it's what everyone was doing. Certainly back in the nineteen-eighties, I think people were still marrying quite young, certainly in their late teens, early twenties, and the group I was in were marrying people in their late teens and early twenties. So, for me it wasn't a sort of conscious thing, I just sort of fell into it. and I was working in a little church outreach group, associated with my church. We used to go up to [the local town] on a Saturday night and talk about Christianity, they were coming from the pubs to the clubs, we would be talking about Christianity. And uhm, with the hope they would want to engage in a conversation and think about whether that was something they wanted. At the time it was about sharing your faith with somebody, for me as a Christian. And uhm, in that group of people there was somebody that I got on very well with, we lived quite closely, geographically, so we started running together, and then we were going away together for a weekend...</p> <p>I: Was that person male or female?</p> <p>T: No, this was the female, the uhm person that I met. And then very quickly, this was September nineteen-eighty-seven, and then very quickly, between over the summer, right up to September and we kind of just sort of me, got on really well, and decided we loved each other for whatever that means when you're nineteen (laughs) and by December the twelfth we were married in an evangelical church and everyone was kind of overjoyed in that sense. Y'know, you're part of a church, and you're part of a church family, and</p>	<p>It was what everyone was doing – unspoken expectation. Pressure?</p> <p>Unconscious – went along with peer group?</p> <p>Church also provided employment, therefore added expectation/pressure. Evangelical church expectation to spend free time preaching the word of God – when other people may be doing other social activities on a Sat night.</p> <p>Importance of sharing your faith – a true belief in God.</p> <p>Met his future wife – similar <u>identity</u> – white Christian, S.West, similar interests, ideals...</p> <p>Language suggests he did not know what love was – but we "fit" together.</p> <p>Married within 6 months – and it made "everyone" happy.</p> <p>Church = family. Belonging.</p>
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<p>they all kind of participated in the wedding; the pastor or the elder married us; everybody within the church all prepared the reception. It was just the way it was really. So, I'd say I rather fell into it, not in a very conscious way, really. Found myself married, still very conscious of my homosexual feelings, but not necessarily being gay, and then very quickly, within a couple of years we had [my son]. So [my son] was born in nineteen-eighty-nine. And uhm, and then a couple of years afterwards, [my daughter] ninety-one, and then I think after that time, things became more difficult and challenging for us. I suppose as I was turning and going into my mid-twenties, really. We had [my youngest son] in nineteen-ninety-four, and very quickly after [he] was born we sort of separated. And that's a whole story in itself, really. So, we had three children by that point, nineteen-ninety-four, and we separated. And at that point, I wouldn't have said that I identified as a gay man. Although, uhm, the divorce bit cited me as having an unhealthy dependence on some of our male friends. So, that was how the divorce was cited.</p> <p>I: So, were you having sexual relationships with men?</p> <p>T: No, no, not at all. Not that I didn't think about it and actually, back in ninety-four, the only thing that you had in terms of contact with other men, I mean I didn't really know about things I know now, things like, cruising or cottaging or anything like that, I didn't really know about any of those things. But I knew about telephone and newspaper ads, and at that time, the only thing that I ever did whilst I was married was have a telephone</p>	<p>Everyone pitched in to make the wedding happen. "FELL INTO IT" – choice feels removed.</p> <p>Aware he was attracted to men, unaware of what was happening around him?</p> <p>Then found himself with a son.</p> <p>..then a daughter, quite soon – then things were "difficult"</p> <p>my 'turning' – mourning his same-sex attraction?</p> <p>3rd child resulted in separation – perhaps felt over-whelmed</p> <p>Didn't identify as gay at the time of divorce, but wife cited "unhealthy dependence" on same-sex relationships as grounds for.</p> <p>No contact with gay men but...</p> <p>...telephone conversations through personal ads. But no meet-ups.</p>
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<p>conversation with another gay man. And talked about possibly meeting him. And I used to go through phases, where I didn't really think about it a lot, I was focused on work, focused on home, focused on family. And there were phases where I was absolutely tormented by it. And it was normally in relation to the fact that I had uhm formed an attachment to somebody or was attracted to somebody, and it just kind of had all of those feelings kind of emerge. And at that time felt sinful, because in the context of my faith. And uhm I got involved whilst I was married in an organization called the True Freedom Trust which I suppose in common vernacular is known as an ex-gay ministry. And they're based in Liverpool. And I had some counseling from them. I also went to a group in Bristol called Living Waters group, something like that, ran by a GP a Christian GP who also identified as having uhm gay feelings, with a small group of people. So, for a while, I was in contact with the trust, Freedom Trust, receiving some support, I'd been to their conferences. Once a month I would attend there, I've forgotten what it specifically was called, but their Living Waters group run by somebody called Andy Comiskey. It had a big manual and it was a mixed group, male and female, and we would meet and work through the materials, in terms of moving from same-sex attraction towards heterosexual relationships. And people in our group were from different backgrounds, some were single, some came from I think emotionally psychologically damaged, some had clearly some mental health difficulties as well. In fact, there was one gentleman in the group who some years later went on to take his own life. Uhm, and some people had families as</p>	<p>Blocked the thoughts by keeping busy. But at times was 'tormented'</p> <p>Made attachments to men based on real life people he knew.</p> <p>SINFUL – wrong to have those feelings</p> <p>Was part of a conflicting ex-gay organisation which tore up his identity. Lose everything for this one [fundamental] thing.</p> <p>Attended Conversion therapy.</p> <p>Other religious members made him believe it was possible to be ex-gay.</p> <p>Leading UK ex-gay teacher.</p> <p>Workshops to run through materials [like CBT?]</p> <p>Goal – to move away from same-sex attraction</p> <p>Many emotionally 'damaged' attendees. Vulnerable. Some members took their life later.</p> <p>Shared Christian identity – sits</p>
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<p>well and children. They all identified themselves as Christians though. So, ninety-four was kind of a big change for me. Well, in nineteen-eighty-seven, I got married and I was married for seven years. Over the seven years I think probably, other than early on in the marriage where I found it terribly difficult to adjust and have some sort of counseling in the loosest sense from church colleagues, and uh, really between ninety-one and ninety-four, I was still receiving quite a lot of help and support from various groups. I wouldn't say that being married was sort of a blissful existence; it was quite difficult for me on lots of different levels. It was never difficult being a parent, I don't think it was, but it was definitely difficult maintaining a straight relationship, a marriage, difficult maintaining any form of sexual contact at all, so it was quite challenging really. By my nature, I'm not somebody who gets terribly depressed and maudlin, I have had a brief period where I was quite low after my marriage broke up, but generally I am quite positive, I'm quite content with life and the universe and everything else (laughs), but that was a difficult area of my life that kind of, yeah, it just eventually was a kind of key decision that effected the decisions that I made.</p> <p>I: Was your therapy from ninety-one to ninety-four, was that generally about having same-sex feelings?</p> <p>T: Yes, yeah. So, it was about having homosexual feelings. It was about how to overcome those feelings on a</p>	<p>alongside belief in changing sexuality</p> <p>Believed the Christian counselling he received was v. losing counselling – but church was major support network.</p> <p>Marriage was difficult/conflicting, but parenting was not. Could hold onto parenting when all else was a struggle</p> <p>Maintaining a straight relationship – feels like a full time job. Exhausting and painful.</p> <p>The end of marriage was low point – because it also was the end of that identity.</p> <p>Wants to be grateful? Wants to put a positive spin on things? But this is one area that feels impossible?</p> <p>“overcome” same-sex feelings – as if they were a weaker state.</p>
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<p>practical levels. How to understand them from a theoretical level that was present to me. How to understand it from a biblical perspective, how to become, or have healthy interdependent relationships with other men. Uh, it was quite broad, it was quite a broad programme of work and it was classed as kind of a group therapy, but I would say that it wasn't group therapy as I understand it as a registered mental health nurse. So, the two people facilitating the groups, certainly I don't think were particularly trained in terms of therapeutically leading a group and I'm sure, maybe looking back it wasn't therapeutic, maybe it was a group of people meeting together, dispersed with as I said counseling in the loosest way from places like the True Freedom Trust. Now, the True Freedom Trust are still going actually, the person who did most of my counseling was a person called Martin Hallett, has now retired and actually he was I think quite a interesting gentleman, certainly he had, in my reflection, he had a very good counseling style, in the general sense, and certainly helped me. But it was only very temporary really, because y'know, I had a new resolve to overcome my feelings and to sort of pray them away so to speak. And then something else would happen and I'd sort of feel myself spiraling again and feeling dreadful.</p> <p>I: You mentioned some theoretical understanding of identity, what was being taught to you?</p> <p>T: Uhm, y'know I don't remember a tremendous of the detail, uhm, I think as I recollect it was routed in</p>	<p>Practical and theoretical help [sounds a lot like CBT!] having healthy relationships with men rather than unhealthy fantasies.</p> <p>Ex-gay Group facilitators had no formal training</p> <p>The ex-gay therapist sounds charismatic – helped but in a short-term way. Perhaps took a non-judgemental approach to the feelings, but a judgement on the actions? "keep at it" approach?</p> <p>Wish the feelings away.</p> <p>Blamed trauma and attachment</p>
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<p>understanding uhh, I think, understanding early experiences and early attachments and sometimes relating to trauma, because some people in the room had trauma, and different possible route causes of why you felt the need uhm to over-identify with the same sex. So it was about uhm attachment. So, looking at it, and I can talk about this because I'm fortunate enough to be a registered mental health nurse, I understand quite a bit about psychological interventions and different types of approaches, so when I'm looking at it, it was quite heavily based on attachment theory I'd say.</p> <p>I: Based on any research, or based on people's assumptions about what people thought about...</p> <p>T; I would say more assumptions yeah, I would say. I mean you're talking about the early nineteen-nineties here (laughs). I mean I'm sure somewhere in there was probably something around general attachment theory but that was the overall approach, and it was about early experiences and trauma. Particularly some traumatic early experiences and how that may have set up a pattern of over-identification with the same sex.</p> <p>I: So, it sounds like it was very much about trying to understand why you have those feelings. Was it putting any moral standing on those?</p> <p>T: Yes, of course, absolutely, because weaved all the way through that was the biblical premise that homosexuality is against God's design, that actually it's fundamentally how we were not</p>	<p>figures for leading you down the gay pathway.</p> <p>Importance for Tim to make sense of his experience using theory, e.g. attachment.</p> <p>The traumatised child is where the problem occurred... Over-simplified notions of attachment.</p> <p>Also selling the notion that same-sex attraction is wrong and sinful, while</p>
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<p>created and it was wrong. And you'd have the old Leviticus passages the Roman passages, what saint Paul said. Nothing actually about what Jesus said because my knowledge of the bible used to be very-very good, less so these days, because I would identify myself as being Christian but of the spectacularly lapsed variety. But certainly the old passages would come out, y'know, the things that were commonly used. In the same way that passages that were commonly cited around divorce twenty-thirty years prior to that and other abominations.</p> <p>I: When that biblical knowledge came out, how did that make you feel?</p> <p>T: Uhm, a wide variety of different feelings, I think a huge amount of uhm, I think the whole idea of Christianity is that we, from a biblical perspective, is that there is this whole idea that Jesus came, he died for us, and on that basis we can be forgiven for our sins. Y'know, very straightforward, so matter where you come from, what your experiences have been, no matter what's happened, you can still seek forgiveness and be forgiven. And that's the basic Christian as you probably know, and I had this continual cycle of uhm, of, having homosexual feelings, feeling overwhelmed by them, feeling rotten by them, being reminded of the passages in the bible, being reminded of the common message, "it's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong, it's wrong", then going through a phase where, I mean we didn't have the access to things like pornography or things like that, so my thinking about what it would be like to</p>	<p>trying to help you see it's not your own will either.</p> <p>Laced with guilt from old testament passages.</p> <p>Suggesting that this is today's taboo for Christianity, but later it will be something else.</p> <p>Believe that as long as I end up on the 'right' path I will be forgiven for any wrong-doings.</p> <p>Felt 'rotten' for not having same-sex feelings. Bible reminded him that he was rotten – reinforcing.</p> <p>Being told who he is <u>is</u> "wrong".</p>
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<p>have sexual contact with somebody, y’know, masses of masturbatory behaviour, all of that sort of stuff, and then feeling absolutely rotten, and then having to enter into prayer, seek forgiveness and then y’know feeling good again for a while, feeling you’ve got new resolve, getting a bit of counseling for it, and then being in the same cycle again. And it was weaved into it, those kind of repeated biblical messages that you’re being given all the time, in the context of the people you’re talking to. So, I was never really talking to anybody outside of a Christian circle, so everybody I’d talk to would say homosexuality is wrong.</p> <p>I: And that counseling you received at that time would have been from a church minister, or?</p> <p>T: Yeah, a church minister or somebody who was particularly interested in that area, uhm, supporting people with homosexual feelings. I mean, I never really said, y’know, what have you been trained in? What are your credentials? (laughs) I mean you just don’t, do you really?</p> <p>I: And what about your wife, was she aware of those feelings?</p> <p>T: Yeah, she was aware of them before we married, I spoke with her about it, certainly before we were married on a number of occasions. But it was that kind of naivety, y’know? It was that kind of “God will overcome, we’re</p>	<p>Masturbating about men made him feel guilt. Praying for forgiveness...from who? Self? God?</p> <p>Sought help because it felt so unmanageable – but help from biased untrained people who helped reinforce the guilt.</p> <p>Excluded from knowing non-christian people.</p> <p>Blind faith - Never asked for credentials of church leaders, just accepted and believed they knew best.</p> <p>Wife knew before marriage that he had same-sex feelings.</p> <p>God will save us mentality</p>
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<p>meant to be together, it's fine". All that kind of stuff. And she, I have to say, other than when we separated and in the subsequent years as we were bringing up our children, the relationship we just had was dreadful, just awful and not good for the children, but it was just awful, but during the marriage actually she put up with a hell of a lot. I think, actually, I can look back as a forty-five year old man and think, God, what would it have been married to a gay man who was constantly struggling with his feelings? Uhm, yet, forming some unhealthy dependencies with other people in the church who he considered to be quite attractive, and not really being able to fulfill her sexually. Uhm, and I think there were moments when it was good, I mean obviously there was enough for us to have three children. But what would that have felt like? And living with somebody who had that emotional kind of rollercoaster ride at the time. I was in my early twenties, y'know, most men don't, y'know, just in terms of physiological development, their brains don't develop until their mid-twenties (laughs) you don't, it was just completely, the wrong place, the wrong time. I mean I've got three lovely children but y'know you just think, "What was I doing?" But looking back it just feels like a completely different life. Like it wasn't really my life, I know it was my life because I can talk about it, but you look back and you think, God, that was absolutely mad.</p> <p>I: Did you want to have children?</p>	<p>Very poor relationships satisfaction with wife.</p> <p>Recognises it must have been tough to be married to a gay man – sexually and emotionally.</p> <p>Male brain doesn't develop until mid-20s – and had 3 children by then!</p> <p>But never regrets fatherhood.</p> <p>Parenting was an "inevitable</p>
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<p>T: Yeah, I think I did. Yeah, absolutely, other than the fact that it was an inevitable consequence of being married, and the unfair expectation of the church, but I think yeah, absolutely, I think it was uh, it felt absolutely very natural. It was a wonderful thing, to have children, being a dad in spite of everything else was incredible, for me.</p> <p>I: and what was it like coming out to your wife, when you ended the relationship did you come out?</p> <p>T: when I ended the relationship, the reason given for the divorce was my unreasonable behaviour for forming unhealthy attachments with other men. Didn't have a sexual, I didn't have any sexual contact with anybody. I remained at Church, we continued to attend the same church, albeit that we wouldn't sit next to each other. Uhm, I continued to have my children through every weekend at that time. Things were okay, it was quite tense. That said, and this was the really interesting thing, it wasn't until nineteen-ninety-seven, when I actually came out, so this was a three year gap, and in that three year time, I remained at church, tried to maintain strong parental contact and obviously had lots of contact with my children. Had a very-very up and down relationship with my former wife, and a lot of people actually thought that if we had some time apart we'd get back together at some point. had two girlfriends in that time. One girlfriend I dated for about three months, and another one that I dated for about four months and got engaged to, so it was still a real struggle, regardless of what</p>	<p>consequence" of being married. But wanted it.</p> <p>After the marriage ended, still was unready to seek out same-sex relationships. Remained within the church community, as was all he had.</p> <p>Did not 'come out' until the late 90s, 3 years after end of marriage.</p> <p>Tumultuous relationship with wife.</p> <p>Dated 2 women after – became engaged again. Desperate to make things work as a heterosexual.</p> <p>Took a planned same-sex encounter to change course.</p>
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<p>was on the divorce papers, actually I still identified myself as somebody with homosexual feelings who still wanted to be straight. So it wasn't until nineteen-ninety-seven, when I had my first uhm, sexual contact. I have to say. As a teenager, I had over two years, between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, an ongoing sexual relationship with a male school friend, and then when I was eighteen I was also say seduced by somebody who was twenty-seven, who kind of knew and took advantage of me when I was eighteen. So prior to getting married, I had had sexual contact with two people. But it wasn't until ninety-ninety-seven that I met somebody at work. I was working as a nurse and at some training and I met somebody as part of the training who I started to chat with, and it was quite clear that he was gay. And I didn't necessarily say that I was gay but I asked, 'did you want to meet for a drink?' so we met for a drink, and we didn't have any sexual contact until, we slept in the same bed but we had no sexual contact. You had to say I was absolutely all over the place. And I didn't sort of actively think, I have to go have sex with somebody, it just didn't feel like that (laughs). It was a bit like, this constant ambivalence all the time. So, I'd had this contact in nineteen-ninety-seven, uhm, and I'd also had one sort of other event, where I had used sort of a telephone chatline. Got an enormous bill for seventy-quid, and in those days, ninety-seven, seventy-quid was a lot of money, particularly when you've paying for three kids and have got a flat, and I remember at some point in ninety-seven meeting up with this guy at [Southwest] bridge services and us having some kind of sexual contact and going home afterwards and feelings</p>	<p>As a teen did have a 2 year sexual relationship with male.</p> <p>Also 'taken advantage' of by 27 year-old at 18 – fits with story of 'traumatised' and poor attachment figure.</p> <p>Very confused about feelings – probably because against everything he'd been taught</p> <p>The shame was immovable.</p> <p>Wanting to be cleansed – spiritual – of his sins.</p>
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<p>ashamed and having a bath and wanting to wash it all off me. So, actually, until I came out which was in nineteen-ninety seven, that was my world really.</p> <p>I: And so, did you come out to your wife or your children?</p> <p>T: No, I didn't come out to my former wife directly, by that point we were divorced, but what happened was I took my children away for the summer down to my brother's and my sister-in-law's, and through that week, it was the week actually that princess Dianna died, because I remember actually very clearly, during that week my children had gone to bed and my sister-in-law is quite an interesting person, she's got a very engaging, she seems to be able to get anything out of anybody. We seemed to be talking about my life and how it was going, I'd never told anybody in my family I was gay, nobody knew. My brother didn't know, my parent's didn't know, nobody knew. And I remember talking to her, my brother had gone to bed, and eventually after two or three hours of me prevaricating that I'd my own difficulties and troubles, I just said I think I'm gay. And that was it. So, it was early in the week, I had my children with me, so obviously we were doing holiday things and in the subsequent evenings she finally talked me to a place when she said, you cannot live your life like this. She told my brother with my permission, my brother was absolutely fine about it, and by the end of the week, which was the august bank holiday weekend, I had gone</p>	<p>Came out to [sibling] family that summer all at once – over the space of a week [not ex-wife].</p> <p>It took someone to take an interest in his sexuality and allow him to explore it without judgement on either end, to be able to come out.</p> <p>So avoidant – trained to be.</p> <p>Was accepted as himself for the first time. Liberating.</p> <p>Realised that the identity as a church member and a gay man were</p>
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<p>home and I had come out. That was it really. So it was a terribly difficult time. The only way I could really come out properly was to leave the church, to leave my job, and I moved to [different county] and did a degree for three years. I completely cut myself off from every part of my life. The only part I didn't cut myself off from was my children. That was the only tangible contact I had with any part of my previous life.</p> <p>I: what about your family, your brother?</p> <p>T: Yeah, my brother, I've got one brother. My parents were still alive, my father subsequently has died. And over the next few months, I gradually came out to people. It was quite simply the most horrific few months of my life.</p> <p>I: Was that because of the reactions from others, or?</p> <p>T: No, the reactions from others were, particularly in the church, people felt a mixture of feeling very sorry for me in a pitying kind of way, to very angry; "How can you leave your children, how can you do this? Basically forget all the time you've invested in the church." But actually it was just a trauma really. It was just hugely traumatic. And at that time, I can remember all those times because they're just crystal clear, I had one of those rotating CD disc players, that were trendy, y'know, you'd put three CDs in and they'd rotate around. There were two</p>	<p>mutually exclusive.</p> <p>Coming out meant cutting off from everything in life, apart from his children.</p> <p>"horrific" – unbearable experience-coming out.</p> <p>Church members demonstrated – pity to anger. Never acceptance and encouragement.</p>
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<p>particular albums at the time that I bought in the months leading up, that I was playing at the time quite a lot. And I used to wake up in the morning, they used to wake me up automatically. There was Urban Hymns by the Verve and and Elton John album, I think it was called The Big Picture. Those were the two albums and even when I hear them now, uhm, I mean I've still got them, I can identify with those feelings of waking up and feeling that sense of dread and thinking, "Oh my God, what have you done?" I've come out, I'm lying in bed, my children are still in [hometown], two hundred miles away, and everybody hates me, and I've given up my job and I'm now doing a degree course and y'know everything changed literally over night. And that went on for about three or four months before I actually began to feel better.</p> <p>I: yeah.</p> <p>T: But the story really wasn't quite over, in terms of my coming out experience, because even up until the following summer, uhm, I still had times where I thought "I just need to go back to my life the way it was, I've done something terribly wrong, I've taken the wrong course, a simple course". (laughs) Even at one point the following summer in nineteen-ninety-eight, I even started to go back to church in [local town] and within about three weeks of being in that church I met another girl and had a new relationship for three months, would you believe it? I never actually slept with her, I'd slept with only one woman my whole life. And I met and dated another girl, and y'know I would say, that the coming out experience in terms of the religious context, although there was a significant event where I just upped</p>	<p>Sunk into a depressed state, feeling alone and vulnerable.</p> <p>Still calling on God for answers, to no avail.</p> <p>Felt hated and judged.</p> <p>Lost his job within the church. Changed careers – huge change at once.</p> <p>But still coming out made him feel better.</p> <p>Coming out lasts one's whole life.</p> <p>Still wished to return to old life at times. The beliefs that it was all wrong continued to haunt him.</p> <p>Even returned to a new church for a time later and met another woman and tried to go back.</p> <p>Pattern continued of trying to be straight – trying hard.</p> <p>Not until the ties were broken that he felt okay with himself.</p>
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<p>and broke my ties, it was a long period of time before I actually started to feel okay. After I'd dated this girl in nineteen-ninety-eight, and realising I didn't want anything to do with the church after this period, that was the time after that when I thought, it's starting to feel okay. And to be honest with you, when I eventually moved back to be closer to my children after I finished my degree. The only real way that I started to strong identify with myself as a gay man was going on the gay scene a bit more. I wouldn't say I was massively promiscuously, but I went through a phase where I slept with quite a lot of guys. Uhm, had different types of sexual experiences and I think exposure to all of that, by the time, two-thousand-and-two, three, I was comfortable with my sexuality. And all of that pervious trauma was kind of almost forgotten really. And throughout all of that time maintained contact with my children, as a dad bringing them up as well.</p> <p>I: Tell me about coming out to your children?</p> <p>T: well, it wasn't my choice, uhm, in two-thousand and two my former wife was marrying again, and it had been very difficult, particularly with me coming out, very traumatic for her, and I think she was very concerned about what our children were exposed to. She and her new husband decided one day they were going to sit the children down and tell them, without even asking me. And I literally woke up one morning and there was a letter under my door to say they had told my children of my "bisexual and gay inclinations", that literally what they told them, I've got the letter somewhere.</p>	<p>Had to engage with other gay men to feel gay and okay.</p> <p>Had to sleep with men to feel connected with sexuality.</p> <p>Took a decade to be more comfortable with sexuality.</p> <p>Being a dad was the only consistency in his life.</p> <p>Choice in coming out to children was taken away by wife.</p>
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<p>I: What age were your children at this time?</p> <p>T: Two-thousand and two, so [youngest son] was eight, [daughter] was eleven and [eldest son] was thirteen. Yeah, I had no choice. So, literally from seeing them one weekend to the next time I saw that, their mum and step-father had told them without my consent, without my input. So the next time they turned up I can only say how awful it was, having them come through, saying “Hi, how’re you, sit down”, and having to talk to them.</p> <p>I: And how did they take that?</p> <p>T: Uhm (pause) I don’t think they really understood it. the problem I had was I had absolutely no idea how they were told and in the context. So, were they told actually, uhm, y’know your dad is gay, I mean the letter said bi-sexual/gay inclinations, uhm, were they told in the context or the atmosphere of it being wrong or immoral. But I do know that they actually really did struggle. So, what I did at the time was I said, “I know what your mum’s told you. Yes, it’s absolutely true, but if you want to talk to me about it, we can talk about it. but let’s get on and have a normal weekend and do what we normally do”. God knows what they were thinking about. And we didn’t really have a lot of conversations about it. my youngest son, who’s always been the bravest of my children did say, ‘so does that mean you’re going to be with a man?’ And I said, “I don’t know, maybe in the future, but I’m not really thinking about it. So, we didn’t have lots of conversations, but I just remember the feeling they were coming to see me over something I had absolutely no</p>	<p>Was not around to tell his story to the children – and they were left alone with it. felt v disempowering.</p> <p>Perhaps because of their conservative upbringing they didn’t understand it – also young age.</p> <p>Never knew what way it was depicted to them – probably that it was wrong, as their church had taught them – as they struggled.</p> <p>Felt shaming again. Embarrassing for Tim. Didn’t know what to say, caught off-guard.</p> <p>His children came first.</p> <p>Vulnerable position – uncertain of</p>
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<p>control over. And I didn't want to redress anything because I didn't know what they'd been told and how they'd been told. So, if for example, I'd been told that it was highly immoral, I'd think I'd have to sit them down and tell them what my take on it is. But I didn't know that so I didn't want to assume anything.</p> <p>I: and were they accepting?</p> <p>T: Uhm, they had to be. I don't think they necessarily had to accept it or liked it, I think they thought, y'know, they had no real contact with it, I never had any men in the house. Although over the next couple of years there were some friends in the house that were gay, but they had no idea that they were gay. They had no idea that I was having any sexual relationships with anybody. So, they had to be, and the reason they had to be is because I have a good relationship with all three of my children. We get on extraordinarily well, and we just did normal family things together. They'd stay around a couple of nights and we'd just do things together, spent quality time together, we'd deal with homework, we'd deal with all sorts of things. If I was just going to say how did they react, well they had to be okay. If I'd had a terrible relationship with them, then they could have been different. They may have used that as an excuse to say, "Well, I don't want any more contact", but actually none of my children's contact didn't change at all.</p> <p>I: And how about your civil partnership, did they accept that?</p> <p>T: Well, the first time they uhm, they knew of people that I had dated, that I</p>	<p>what to counter. Respectful enough not to poke them questions.</p> <p>Felt like it was something he should be arguing was normal to them, but didn't want to have to.</p> <p>Kept his gay life separate from family life – which may be communicated something about the shame to his children,</p> <p>Eventually opened this up.</p> <p>Very strong close relationship with kids today – because he wanted to – made sure of it.</p> <p>Shared custody – with full parenting responsibilities.</p> <p>Felt had to work hard at his relationship for fear they'd cut contact with him – but never happened.</p> <p>Met ex-boyfriends, but never as boyfriends until met current partner.</p>
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<p>had never told them I was dating, so I was with a couple of people that they kind of had known about, but they didn't know that I was in a relationship. For instance during that time I was in a relationship with [ex-boyfriend] for six months and during that time they had a lot of contact with him but he was just a friend of mine who came around the house. And when that relationship ended we remained in contact and so [ex-boyfriend] they started a relationships and that couple became friends with my children. Then, in two-thousand-and-six I met [civil partner] and we knew fairly quickly. I'd had a few boyfriends for short periods, sort of three to six months on average, and I'd had very brief-brief relationships with people. But when I met [my civil partner] it felt like the real deal really for me and for him. (laughs) And so the summer of two-thousand and six I made the conscious decision that my kids were going to meet him and meet him as my partner, and we had been together four or five months at that point. And I truly believe I did the decent thing, I wrote to them and told them that was what was going to happen. I told them, we were going on holidays and returning here to this flat and in the course of that they would have a day out with me and [my civil partner], and he wasn't going to stay here. And at the beginning I told them that I was seeing somebody, I would like for them to meet him. I think they were feeling very apprehensive about it.</p> <p>I: If you'd like to tell me about how being a father and a gay dad, how that's affected your relationships?</p> <p>T: Uhm, broadly speaking and this may be common to every father whether</p>	<p>Then got to know ex's in same-sex relationships, which helped to introduce other gay couples.</p> <p>All relationships were shot-term until partner.</p> <p>First authentic relationship – on all levels – emotional and physical.</p> <p>To give the relationship a proper chance [maybe the reason the others had failed] had to introduce him as his partner.</p> <p>Still respectful around allowing him stay over, for fear of kids reporting back to mother?</p> <p>Kids were apprehensive about meeting partner when explicitly knew – because of religion?</p> <p>Financial implication of being a separated gay father.</p>
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<p>you're gay, straight or whatever; until the last few years, I've never had a lot of money, been constantly broke. Not been heavily in debt or anything, just never had a lot of money. My perspective of being a gay dad is that it's actually been really healthy for me and hopefully my kids feel they've had a good upbringing, but I think they've made me a more balanced person, and I think my view of the world is not from a cultural perspective, family centric. I mean I do all the things, the parents' evenings, the, certainly while they were growing up, paying for university and for travel, and sharing their social experiences as well. Identifying more strongly with other families than other gay men. Your perspective and your outlook is very different, and I kind of wonder if I didn't have children what would be life be like? It's always very difficult to pit yourself into that scenario, but I also think that potentially I would have been a bit more selfish and a bit more gay-centric (laughs) in terms of identifying with queer culture. I've got no strong identification with queer history and culture, although I'm interested in it I don't identify with it. y'know, one of my lesbian friends say, "y'know we're two general elections away from a pink star" (laughs), y'know she's that kind of a person (laughs) y'know we have a little conversation about some of the things that are going on in society, and I'm quite interested in it but I don't identify with it. I just see myself as more of a normal straight -forward person, as far as you see normal. So, in terms of being a gay parent, I think there's that broad-broad feeling of identifying more as being a parent than necessarily identifying as a gay man. I think it changes your priorities, so for me I did not feel it was right for my</p>	<p>Most important for Tim to feel his kids feel they've had a good upbringing. Balanced good people.</p> <p>Family still at centre of life. That value from church remains.</p> <p>Feels beside the gay community as a dad. What kind of person would I be without my experience?</p> <p>Some homo-negative self-beliefs about gay men who are not fathers, or maybe non-parents more broadly</p> <p>Feels unconnected with gay culture.</p> <p>Through the looking glass perspective on homosexuality – interested but apart from it.</p> <p>Identity trumps - Feels more like a parent than gay man</p> <p>Values and priorities – dad</p> <p>Concealed identity from children</p>
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<p>children, and my views slightly changed I have to say, but to be exposed to having a gay dad living with somebody else. Some of that would have been to do with the flack I would have got from their mum. It would just have been horrendous really. So, I decided for the main, they would meet some of my friends but they'd never know anything about my sex life, well I don't think any kids know anything about their sex lives (laughs), my relationships. So, when we eventually moved in together in two-thousand-seven, they were teenagers, they could think for themselves, their mother had no care and control. Because my relationship with my kids was still very strong, I knew that even if their mum said, "you're not to see your dad", they would have just walked out the door. And they have a great relationship with their mum but they did eventually, two of them, move in with us.</p> <p>I: Whilst in school?</p> <p>T: Yes, whilst in school. My eldest son was living with his mum. But the younger two moved in with us. And so they kind of voted with their feet. Being a gay parent, the conscious bit of it was thinking very careful about when to introduce them to somebody, what age, what would be the possible consequences of that in terms of their mother's influence as well which had a very strong determinant with me, because I didn't want to lose contact with my children just because I was being in a gay relationship. So, yeah, I would say quite consciously I was able to come to a position where my children were able to come to their own stand.</p> <p>I: what was their decision to leave</p>	<p>because it didn't feel right – and would have complicated rel'ships</p> <p>Sex intertwined with sexuality. Keep the sex part out of being gay.</p> <p>Waited for his children to be ready to accept him [and be in a good position with relationship] and for them to be in control of their own lives [re: mum].</p> <p>Children chose to be with relaxed dad over controlling mum.</p> <p>Fear of losing children by coming out</p>
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<p>home, was it their relationship with their mother?</p> <p>T: Yeah, well, their mum was having some difficulties in their marriage, and they were only very brief because they're still married and very happy, at least that's what my children are saying. And uhm, she was having some difficulties and the kids were really struggling with that. And I think if I was being honest, I think they found my parenting style, while being very boundaried was also very permissive, and I think they liked the idea of living with dad full time for a while and now that that dad's got a partner, they'd probably get a lot more (laughs), I don't know. You never really know, but I always said to my kids, they've always had their own bedrooms, their own clothes, their own belongings, so when they turned up and said they wanted to move in, other than the conversations I had with their mum, they just came through the front door. Poor [civil partner], he just had to put up with it, really. And he accepted the fact that my children were living with us.</p> <p>I: did he play any role in parenting?</p> <p>T: He uhm, (pause) he doesn't think he did but of course he did. He is incredibly objective, he has a very objective focus. The interesting dynamic is that I can criticise my children, but he can't. when he criticises my children I get mad with him (laughs), and often he is right, from an objective perspective. He is incredibly nurturing to his general character and disposition. And they got to know him as a person, not as a gay man. The things they had to come to terms with were things like, us sharing a bedroom. We've never ever been</p>	<p>Mum was able to demonstrate an unstable new relationship, while Tim didn't feel the luxury – needed to be the stable one in the family?</p> <p>Kids desired dad's "permissive" parenting style. Importance of sense of humour in parenting.</p> <p>Always made a home available for children, so he was there whenever they needed him.</p> <p>Tim's partner accepted his family, but was not given much of a say in it.</p> <p>Partner offered an objective view in terms of parenting.</p> <p>Tim still gets cross with partner if he criticises his children. But very nurturing.</p> <p>Partner had to be known as a person, and not a gay man.</p> <p>Benefits of gay parenting – approachable, open, inclusive.</p>
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<p>tactile in front of them, ever, and I'm not sure whether that's right or wrong, only recently perhaps, but certainly when they were living with us. But he was great. He was very, probably, a model stepparent without even realising it. y'know we all holidayed together in two-thousand and eight, and they all came on our honeymoon with us (laughs) in two-thousand nine, can you believe it, so we didn't have what you'd call just us two. And the two younger ones came on a holiday with us several years after that. And it's only literally been in the last couple of years that we've had holidays on their own. But they're independent now. Okay, my daughter did struggle when we had our civil partnership because they all still go to church, and I think she was struggling understanding while she loved and understood my circumstances, just the whole idea of same-sex relationships. She wouldn't walk me in, I had to get my niece to do it, and I have a feeling she regrets it, because certainly some of the more recent conversations she's had a different same-sex view to a lot of her peers now, through her own experiences. So, I think she's had quite a difficult time. My sons have had absolutely no difficulty at all.</p> <p>I: Great. And your parents?</p> <p>T: Yeah, my sister-in-law initially spoke with mum and then my dad. They are absolutely fine about it, I mean you just imagine all sorts of horrors about it, particularly when you come from quite a restrictive background of having a lot of religious ideology around you. They've been very open about it and met quite a number of people I was dating. My mum now unfortunately is not well, and my father no longer is</p>	<p>Daughter struggled to accept civil partnership – because of her church ties.</p> <p>Refused to walk her father in and honour his beliefs.</p> <p>Daughter even differs from her peers with open-mindedness – which is a potential risk for her</p> <p>Sons have been accepting.</p> <p>Parents are fine about sexuality – as they didn't come from religious backgrounds. But his experience in the church made him worry.</p> <p>Being accepted by his family makes</p>
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<p>with us, but things feel very settled, and my life feels a hell of a long way from what it was in the nineteen-eighties/nineties, where I was just going through this rollercoaster ride all the time. And it was a process for me that went on for years, even after my divorce, three and a bit years after my divorce, that whole process, and it really wasn't until two-thousand two/three that I began to properly feel comfortable with my sexuality and in my own skin, and comfortable in the relationships I was having rather than feeling some sense of shame about it.</p> <p>I: you talked about the challenges you had transitioning out of your marriage, and reactions from the religious community. Have you had experiences from other straight community members about being a gay man who's a father?</p> <p>T: Yeah, people are very surprised. Uhm, my most recent experience was with work colleagues in a new job, and I certainly don't walk into any room and say, "I'm out proud and loud", I don't do it. so, when people ask me about my relationship, if I'm married, I always say I'm in a same-sex relationship, I never say I'm civil partnered, I just say, I'm in a same-sex relationship. So, I did the usual things, like [my partner] had bought me a really lovely card that I put on my desk, and it gave something to talk about. And I remember having a conversation with my PA, and just in the conversation I started talking about children, and she said, "What you have children?" And just for me it's normal, I don't think about it, and people just feel, when you're gay first and you have children, people always ask the same question, 'so, are you gay or are you bi?' So, they sort of try and box you off,</p>	<p>him feel 'settled'</p> <p>It was a long process to acceptance – of self, through acceptance from others. A decade from leaving marriage to feel "comfortable in my own skin" and remove/reduce the shame/stigma.</p> <p>Straight community are surprised that a gay man can father, often.</p> <p>Language suggests it's still something to remain guarded about – particularly in workplace.</p> <p>Being gay and having children feels incompatible to some – must mean you are still interested in women.</p>
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<p>y'know. So, I kind of have this conversation about how people sit on a spectrum and then I say anyone's completely straight or completely gay and I talk about how I more strongly identify with being a gay man and we go into all these discussions with people about it. But it's always a surprise, particularly when I mention I'm in a same-sex relationship, and people always ask the same question, "are you gay or are you bi?" And I get asked that question more than anything else, and I'd love to hear what other people say. I think people like to label you, like to box you, to understand you. This discussion we're having now, I don't want to go through that with every body. Even with my partner, he asked me lots of questions, I say, "it's another life, I don't want to talk about it". if he was sat in the other room now, he'd say, "God, I discovered all these things about you that I didn't know". Because I don't want to talk about it. I'm absolutely happy to talk about it here because it will add to the body of knowledge. It is a very complex process, it wasn't a straightforward process where one day I woke up and decided I was gay and was going to walk away from everything. It was a hugely complex process. Full of ambivalence, full of internal traumatic experiences, full of complex relationships. So, I don't want to tell that to everybody. I just want people to accept me, my circumstances and who I am now. Society has changed incredibly and the idea of somebody now coming out as gay and deciding I want to be a parent, is very acceptable but the idea of being married and having kids and then coming out, is still acceptable but actually people don't understand who you are. They kind of see you as, they would like to see you as gay right from</p>	<p>People prefer labels for others. But tim prefers to refer to a spectrum of sexuality – strength of identity.</p> <p>People most curious about bisexuality and homosexuality.</p> <p>A lot of pain attached to old like, would rather not discuss it with his partner or others often because it's too complicated to explain fully.</p> <p>Tim's story was easier to share with me than with people he knows.</p> <p>Too complex to summarise for people. But desire to leave the experiences in the past, but live in the present with what the past has given him [family]</p> <p>His history is full of worry about the future and fear about what would become of him, due to the trauma inflicted by others about his identity.</p> <p>GOAL = to be accepted for what I am.</p> <p>Even though being gay/parenting is 'more' acceptable, there's still a lack of understanding from others.</p> <p>Pressure to choose an identity and stick to it – don't change.</p>
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<p>the word go. But back in the nineteen-eighties was very different, but if I was a young man in two-thousand-fourteen, I would possibly suspect that things would be quite different for me.</p> <p>I: What about in the gay community as a father. Have you had any reaction?</p> <p>T: Yeah, two ends of the spectrum ranging from, “that’s amazing, I’ve always wanted to be a dad, right the way through to, “Oh my God”. And I’ve dated some who right the way through didn’t want to know anything about it. all they wanted to be was with me, enjoy sexual contact, whatever, but nothing about my family life. Nobody ever sat in the middle and I don’t know whether that is a unique experience. They either really wanted to be a parent, thought that’s amazing, all the way through to, “it’s not for me”.</p> <p>I: You talked about counselling, have you had other experiences since that period?</p> <p>T: Yeah, I had one brief period of counselling in nineteen-ninety-eight outside the church experience, where I was struggling to form new relationships, because I’d lost all of my friends, so about identity really. I haven’t had any form of counselling at all since that time. The only thing I’ve ever had that looks remotely like it is coaching, through the work context. I don’t feel like I need psychological support now, but the only thing I still struggle with is the kind of reconciling faith in a world where the Christian is still anti-gay. Uhm, and you don’t have to dig very far. I avoid churches and generally avoid Christians (laughs) except for my children who would identify as Christian. I have Christian</p>	<p>GAY COMMUNITY: spectrum also, from: disinterest to excited. People never appear to sit in the middle.</p> <p>Gay men rarely ambivalent about parenting.</p> <p>Therapy to find identity – but more coaching – desire to build one’s life.</p> <p>Still feels the loss of faith and desire to reconcile that. Manifests itself in fear of religion.</p>
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<p>conversations with my kids, very interested in their life, and some of their friends are very accepting as well. But the moment you step into a church is like stepping into a viper's pit, really, just my stark assessment of it. And I still think it's got a hell of a long way to go. It's difficult to know in my lifetime whether I think I could ever walk into a church and feel comfortable.</p> <p>I: Thank you. When you did have that experience of non-Christian counselling, was it non-judgemental?</p> <p>T: Yeah, absolutely non-judgemental, no, sexuality wasn't the issue. So, it was very different. As I said, I only needed that for a very brief period of time, but it was a very different experience. And of course, identifying more with secular society than I ever have before in my life, I've never been exposed to any form of discrimination within the secular world, just non-judgemental. So, from my perspective, I identify more with secular society, than I do with Christian relationships. Although they said they wouldn't judge, they wouldn't accept my relationships or any other sexual contact with another man. So, yeah, with counselling completely non-judgemental; sexuality was not the issue; we were talking about relationships and forming new relationships, and my experience of secular society has been fantastic.</p> <p>I: Your experience of Christian counselling was that your sexuality was an issue?</p> <p>T: Yes, it was the issues, the problem to be treated, it was the problem, it was central to all the problems as a Christian. I didn't get counselling for anything else, just to do with my</p>	<p>Church today feels like a place of judgement and makes him uncomfortable.</p> <p>Non-judgemental therapy was the only way he could properly explore identity with a therapist honestly.</p> <p>Links the secular world with non-judgementality.</p> <p>Church lied to him – said it wouldn't judge, but did by exclusion of recognition of same-sex relationship.</p> <p>In Christian counselling, sexuality was THE issue – opposite of other therapy.</p>
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<p>sexuality.</p> <p>I: is there anything you'd like to offer therapists or counsellors, for men who are in your situation, or the situation you were in twenty years ago with coming out?</p> <p>T: Uhm, okay, in terms of the experience of being in a religious environment, I think understanding uniqueness of the journey; understanding ambivalence; and really enabling people to take same decision and balance work in terms of really thinking through quite constructively the way they want to go, but dealing with the emotional dynamic that goes with that. Understanding just how life changing it is for somebody to step outside of their culture. Thinking quite carefully about the length of time that it takes it's not just a straight-forward concrete decision and it just happens. For me, my experience was that it is an evolving journey because as a young person I thought I had to individuate all over again as a teenager in my late twenties. So, the context of being a parent and uhm (pause) for me I think, it's about really kind of thinking, as a parent you have your responsibility and they are your priority and thinking about the fact that, aside from your personal circumstances, what are your priorities to your young children, your young family, and how do you see your decision in the short, medium and long term planning out? Having a more conscious discussion about it rather than people falling into all sorts of different scenarios. I've had one relationship with a person who did have children in the late nineties and had come out of a marriage, and it isn't something I could talk about at length here, but for him he literally walked</p>	<p>Therapists should recognise the uniqueness of each man's story and complicatedness of environments. Working with ambivalence is important.</p> <p>Acknowledging the life-changing nature of 'coming out'. Not rushing the client or trying to sway them any way.</p> <p>Believed he had to re-experience his teenage desire when he came out – which he may have needed to! This is further complicated when the 'teen' is a parent themselves and needs to prioritise.</p> <p>Desire to embrace his family above his identity, and cannot identify with gay</p>
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<p>away from his kids because he wanted to be gay. And for me, I just couldn't reconcile to that in any way. So, it's about thinking about priorities without telling anyone in a counselling environment, "your priority is your children" (laughs) but thinking about responsibilities and how people think their lives and decisions panning out in the context of their responsibilities. In the context of being a parents and coming from a religious background and understanding the difficulties of having children who are also being brought up in that religious environment, and the challenges that they may have in terms of their thinking (pause) a strong interventional approach isn't the best way in by view. You stay steady and consistent as a parent, you give them all of the things that you've always given them, and you allow them to discover it in their own way, and you let them form their own thoughts, views and opinions on this. And I totally accept they may turn around and say, "I'm a Christian, I go to church and I don't want to know you any more". But I was not going to tell them what views to form and how to form it. but I was going to be consistently a good parent to them, and give them a relationship with a father, and bring them up in a loving, caring, supportive, nurturing environment. All of the things the same as a normal parent - we go out and do things, we spend time together, we do the usual moaning and groaning, who're they relating to, all that kind of stuff, bed time stories, y'know, regular activities, hobbies, just being a good parent, not necessarily in the context of my sexuality.</p> <p>I: Great. Is there anything you wanted to add or didn't get to speak about?</p>	<p>fathers who don't want that.</p> <p>Challenges of raising children who are being raised with strict beliefs you no longer share is important – requires an approach which is hands off and accepting.</p> <p>It leads to the fear that they may not accept you – perhaps because they get enough 'told' to them that he keeps their minds open.</p> <p>Good parenting qualities.</p> <p>Important to be communicative and hands on.</p>
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<p>T: Not really, I think I've covered. It's been very comprehensive; there've been lots of opportunities to share. I mean it's been the first time in a few years, I haven't ever really talked to anybody, some people have asked me about it and we've had conversations, even in the context of my relationship now, we've never really talked about it to any great extent. I'm delighted to be involved in this and absolutely fascinated what themes will come out, and what further hypotheses you may come to about being a gay parent but also what it's like to be a parent coming from a religious environment and those perspectives. The interesting thing about this for me is the context of these things changes for society. So the context for me is the eighties and nineties, whereas the context of somebody else's discussion will be based in the time and the environment they're working in. and I possibly will even suggest the church has moved a little bit, but possibly not, and it would be interesting to hear from somebody who's just done this or maybe did it five years ago. The societal effect is probably more impact than we think; it's just that we're part of our own world at that time.</p>	<p>This has clearly been cathartic but painful – the difficulty of sharing is exhausting and painful, so it's still a contained story.</p> <p>The role of society in relation to change around identity and coming out is important.</p> <p>This unique position (ex-religious gay dad) is often lonely, so being a part of this study has reconnected him to other similar stories, he hopes.</p> <p>Desire to learn about himself – the coming out process continues...</p>
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Appendix VI: Participant Information Sheet

Experiences of gay fathers from religious backgrounds who had children before coming out

Who are the researchers and what is the research about?

My name is Eóin Earley and I am a third year student in the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology programme in the Department of Health and Social Sciences (HSS) at the University of the West of England, Bristol. I am completing my research for my doctoral thesis, which is supervised by Dr Victoria Clarke, an Associate Professor in Sexuality Studies in the Department of Health and Social Sciences (HSS) at UWE, and Dr Naomi Moller, a Counselling Psychologist and Associate Head of Department of HSS.

Although there is lots of psychological research on lesbian parents, there is very little research on gay male parents (most of which was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s in the US). I want to contribute to the small body of literature on gay male parents by speaking to men who had children before 'coming out' as gay (and so within a heterosexual relationship) about their experiences.

The interviews will focus on your experiences as both a gay man and a father. You will be invited to share your story of how you became a parent. This will include some questions about how you feel you are perceived as a gay man and a father in both the gay community and the wider world. You will also be asked about your family and personal relationships. These findings will provide insights into this underrepresented group, informing therapeutic professionals in their work with gay men and fathers.

This research is being explored cross-culturally. This means that men from the UK, Ireland, Canada, and the US are being interviewed. Cross-cultural research is important because there has been significant legal and social change in relation to gay rights in the last decade. The four countries included in this study occupy different points on a continuum of limited gay rights to full legislative equality.

This research is specifically looking at the experiences of men who have grown up in households where there was any religious context, from one or both parents.

Who is eligible to participate?

Any man over the age of 18 who self-identifies as gay and had children (in a heterosexual relationship) before coming out. It doesn't matter if your children are young or grown-up. You do not have to be 'out' as gay in all areas of your life, but simply self identify as a gay man.

What will participation involve?

You are invited to participate in a face-to-face interview, in which I will ask you to talk about your experiences in your own words. The interview will be audio-recorded and the recording will be transcribed (typed up) for the purposes of analysis. The analysis will involve identifying patterns in the participants' experiences, as well as identifying the unique aspects of each individual participant's experiences. If it is not possible for me to meet up with you, or you would prefer not to meet face-to-face, I will invite you to choose between a telephone or Skype interview. The interview itself will last around an hour, with another half an hour or so for pre- and post-interview chat and completion of the consent form (but it's helpful if you can leave around two hours for the interview, in case it over-runs). Before completing the interview you will be invited to answer some *demographic questions*. This is for me to gain a sense of who is taking part in the research.

How will my data be used?

The data will be used in my research. The interview transcript will be anonymised (i.e., any information that can identify you – people's names, places etc. – will be removed or changed) and you will be invited to choose a pseudonym (fake name) to replace your real name in the interview transcripts and in any reports of the research. Once anonymised, the data will be analysed for my research, and anonymised extracts from the data may be quoted in my report and in any publications and presentations arising from the research. The demographic data for all of the participants will be compiled into a table and included in my report and in any publications or presentations arising from the research.

The information you provide will be treated confidentially and personally identifiable details will be kept separately from the data. Agreeing to take part in this research means that you agree to this use of the information you provide.

Will I be identifiable?

I will transcribe the interview data and will make sure the transcript is anonymised so that any personally identifying information has been changed or removed. Nonetheless there is a very small chance that people who know you very well may be able to identify you if I quotation extracts of your interview response in my report or in any publications or presentations arising from the report (and they read these).

How do I withdraw from the research?

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide you want to withdraw from the research after participating in an interview/completing the survey – please contact me Eoin2.Earley@live.uwe.ac.uk. Please note that there are certain points beyond which it will be impossible to withdraw from the research – for instance, when I have submitted my thesis reporting my analysis of the data. Therefore, I strongly advise you to contact me *within a month* of participation if you wish to withdraw your data.

What are the benefits of taking part?

You will get the opportunity to tell your story and talk about your experiences, and in so doing contribute to a research project on an important and neglected social and psychological issue.

Are there any risks involved?

There are no particular significant risks involved in this project, and I do not anticipate that it will cause significant distress or harm. The *general* “risks” of participating in qualitative research is the potential to become upset by a particular question or topic (e.g., if a question reminds you of a distressing personal experience). If you feel distressed as a result of participating in this research, the following website lists free and low cost counselling and support services in your area.

Bristol/UK:

Bristol Mind offer a director of counselling services and mental health helpline

<http://www.bristolmind.org.uk/our-services/mindline-helpline>

Pink Therapy provides an online directory of “pink (gay affirmative) therapists” working in the UK: <http://www.pinktherapy.com/>

Gay Dads Scotland is a social and support group for gay fathers living in Scotland: <http://www.gaydadsscotland.org.uk/>

Gay Dads UK is a social networking website for gay fathers living in the UK: <http://www.gaydads.co.uk>

The lesbian, gay and bisexual charity Stonewall provides a guide for gay dads which offers information on parenting and useful legal advice: http://www.stonewall.org.uk/at_home/parenting/4696.asp

Toronto/Canada:

Toronto Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) provides a 24hour support line for LGBTQ individuals, their families and friends <http://www.torontopflag.org/how-we-help/support-line-416-406-6378>

Gay Toronto <http://www.gaytoronto.com/support.htm> offer a wide range of individual and group support information and referrals in Toronto

The LGBTQ Parenting Connection provides information, resources and support to lesbian, gay bisexual, trans and queer parents and their children and communities:

<http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/home.cfm>

Rachel Epstein (LGBTQ Parenting Network at the Sherbourne Health Centre) has a very large network of gay parents, mostly lesbians and gay men who choose to become parents.

<http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca/contact/moreaboutthelgbtqpn.cfm>

Chris Veldhoven coordinates Parenting Programs at The 519 Church St Community Centre, providing support services for “young” queer parents and offers the 3 parenting planning programs: ‘Dykes Planning Tykes’ (for roughly 20 years), ‘Daddies and Poppas 2B’ (for 13 years), and ‘Trans-parents’ (for 4 or 5 years). <http://www.the519.org/blog/tag/chris-veldhoven/>

Gay Fathers of Toronto alone focuses on the issues of gay men who fathered children in heterosexual relationships, which it has been doing for over 36 years. www.gayfathers-toronto.com

Salt Lake City/USA:

Utah Gay Fathers is a social networking website for gay fathers living in Utah: <http://www.utahgayfathers.org>

Utah Pride Centre offers counseling and other resources for LGBTQ people: <http://www.utahpridecenter.org/resources/lgbtq-directory?sobi2Task=sobi2Details&catid=23&sobi2Id=135>

Metro Health Centre in Salt Lake City, Utah offers referrals and group support services for LGBTQ people:

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-center/centerDetails.asp?f=3958#!service=lgbt>

Limerick/Ireland:

Rainbow Support Services Limerick is a counseling, support line and advisory service for LGBTQ people and their families in Limerick, Ireland:

<http://rainbow-support-services.community-services.community.limerick.tel>

LGBT.ie offer an Irish service directory and listing helpline for LGBT people and their families <http://lgbt.ie/get-support.aspx>

Worldwide:

Gay Parents Meet-up is an online resource based in New York for gay parents to connect with each other all over the world:

<http://gayparents.meetup.com/>

If you have any questions about this research please contact my supervisors:

Dr Victoria Clarke, Department of Health and Social Sciences, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK.

Email: Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

Dr Naomi Moller, Department of Health and Social Sciences, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK.

Email: Naomi.Moller@uwe.ac.uk

*This research has been approved by the Health and Life Sciences
Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)*

Appendix VII: Consent Form

Experiences of fathers who had children before coming out as gay Consent Form

I..... (insert name)
am over 18 years of age and agree to participate in this research. I have been informed about the nature of the research project and the nature of my participation in this project. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I have been informed of my right to withdraw from the research at any time (within the limits specified in the information sheet), without giving a reason. I understand that any information I provide will be kept confidentially.

Please tick the following boxes:

- ☐ I agree to participate in a interview on the topic of gay fathers.
- ☐ I agree to the interview being audio-recorded and transcribed for the purposes of research. I understand that anonymised extracts of the interview data may be quoted in Eóin's thesis and in any publications or presentations arising from the research.
- ☐ I agree to the collection of demographic data that will be compiled into a table and reported in Eóin's thesis and in any publications or presentations arising from the research.

Signed:.....

Date:.....

NB This sheet will be kept separately from the interview transcript and audio file and demographic data.

*This research has been approved by the Health and Life Sciences
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Appendix VIII: Interviewee Demographic Form

Name:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Religion:

Education level:

Occupation:

Do you consider yourself to be a Disabled person?

☐

Yes

☐

No

☐

Prefer not to say

How many children do you have (please include sex and age)?

Marital status (e.g. divorced, separated):

Sexuality:

Current relationship status:

Appendix IX: Interview Schedule

1. I'd like to start with you telling me your story of how you became a father...
2. Can you tell me the story of how you came to identify as gay man?
3. Can you tell me the story of your heterosexual relationship? How did it begin? What did it feel like early on? What did it feel like later? Did you have any idea that you might be gay before you were married? (Any adolescent experiences?)
4. Did you want to have children?
5. What were the key motivations in staying married (if you have)?
6. What was it like coming out to your wife/female partner (if you have)?
7. What is your relationship with the mother of your child/children like today?
8. Does your child(ren) know that you're gay? If yes, what was it like coming out to your child(ren)?
9. Can you tell me about your experiences of coming out to others (friends, wider family, religious community)? If out, what kind of responses have you experienced?
10. What has the response been like in the gay community, as a father?
11. Has having a child affected your relationships with other gay men?
12. What do you feel (if any) are the positive aspects of gay parenthood? The negative?
13. Can you tell me about any forms of support you accessed when coming out/leaving your marriage? Counselling? Support groups? Online support? If you've had counselling, how was it? What was helpful about it, or less helpful? If no counselling, do you think counselling could have helped in any way?
14. As you know I am a counselling psychologist trainee, and one of the aims of this research is to help counsellors and therapists to work more

effectively with men in your position – what advice (if any) would you offer to a counsellor/therapist working with a gay father like yourself?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything you were expecting me to ask about that hasn't been discussed?