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“I Was Just Fed up of Not Being Myself”: Coming out Experiences of White British Divorced and Separated Gay Fathers

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ABSTRACT



Before the so-called “gayby boom” in the 1990s the most common pathway to parenthood for gay men was heterosexual marriage. Since the 1990s most research on gay parenting has focused on *intentional* gay fathers – those parenting after coming out as gay – and the experiences of post-heterosexual divorce gay fathers (PHGF) have largely been overlooked, even though they remain the largest group of gay fathers. Furthermore, most research on this group, and on gay fathers more broadly, has been conducted in the US, with only a small handful of studies examining the experiences of gay fathers elsewhere. The current study aims to begin to address this omission by exploring the experiences of heterosexually divorced and separated UK gay fathers, focusing on their experiential journey from married, ostensibly heterosexual, men to living openly (more or less) as gay fathers. Transcripts of interviews with six white British men were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Five themes are reported: (1) The impossibility of being openly gay; (2) “Drowning in normality”; (3) “The point of no return”; (4) The kids are alright; and (5) “It just doesn’t seem to compute for people.” The findings suggest that for some PHGF little has changed since the earliest research on this group of gay fathers was published in the 1970s. The men in this study had mostly experienced a tumultuous (and sometimes incomplete) journey to gay fatherhood and continued to struggle with feelings of shame and stigma.

KEYWORDS

Coming out; heteronormative; homophobia; identity formation; interpretative phenomenological analysis

Introduction

The earliest research on gay fathers – published from the late 1970s onwards – focused on men who had had children in the context of a heterosexual relationship; dubbed post-heterosexual divorce gay fathers (PHGF) (Carneiro et al., 2017). This research often had a defensive and heteronormative focus, seeking to counter “myths” about gay parenting (Benson et al., 2005) – for example, that gay men married and had children to hide their homosexuality (Miller, 1979), and that the children of gay fathers were at risk of molestation and more likely to become gay (an assumed undesirable outcome) (Bailey et al., 1995; Miller, 1979; Weeks et al., 1975). From the 1990s onwards, following a so-called “gayby boom,” the post-heterosexual gay father began to disappear from research, he was a relic or “symbol of the past” (Trappolin, 2016, p. 49), and the

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focus shifted to intentional gay parenting, gay men choosing to have children *after* coming out as gay (Carneiro et al., 2017; Tasker & Lavender-Stott, 2020).

Intentional gay fathers have often been celebrated as challenging traditional conceptions of masculinity, paternity and homosexuality and as being at the forefront of the transformation of intimacy and family (e.g., Stacey, 2006). This contrasts sharply with the image of the PHGF as a “dying breed” (Trappolin, 2016). Some researchers have argued that changing social attitudes, developments in reproductive technologies and increased legal recognition of same-sex relationships and parenting mean that fewer and fewer gay men will enter heterosexual marriages and have children before coming out as gay (Stacey, 2006; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Lavender-Stott, 2020; Tornello & Patterson, 2015). There is some empirical evidence to support the notion that there is a generational change in pathways to gay parenthood. US surveys (e.g., Perrin et al., 2019; Tornello & Patterson, 2015) and analysis of official data from sources such as the US Census Bureau (Gates, 2015) show that a majority of older gay men have children through a heterosexual relationship whereas only a small number of younger gay men report this pathway. Gates (2015) also noted that most children (around two thirds) currently living with same-sex couples were likely born in a previous heterosexual relationship and are identified as the biological child or step-child of one partner in the couple (around 12% of children living with same-sex couples are identified as foster or adopted children). For this reason, Goldberg et al. (2014) argued that the dominance of intentional parenting in LGB parenting research is problematic and “many questions” about post-heterosexual LGB families “remain unanswered.” (p. 9) One such question is “what is it like to be a contemporary gay father divorcing his wife?” (p. 9) PHGF are sometimes included in “mixed” samples of gay fathers – that is, intentional and heterosexual pathways (e.g., Power et al., 2012; Súilleabháin, 2017; Tornello & Patterson, 2015), but it can be difficult to disaggregate the experiences of the different groups, which is problematic given that the (albeit limited) research that has compared these two groups of gay fathers suggests there are some important differences between them (Power et al., 2012; Tornello & Patterson, 2015; Tornello et al., 2015). These differences include, for example, that intentional gay fathers are more likely than PHGF to be friends with other gay fathers and lesbian parents, to feel the LGBT community is supportive of them as a parent, to feel that having children brought them closer to their family (Power et al., 2012) and to have higher levels of social support (Tornello & Patterson, 2015). Whereas PHGF occupy a marginalized status within gay parenting communities (Carroll, 2018), and face more challenges than intentional gay fathers in coming out and forming positive identities as gay fathers (Power et al., 2012; Tornello & Patterson, 2015). This group of gay fathers have lower levels of identity disclosure, more identity uncertainty, and higher sensitivity to stigma than intentional gay fathers (Tornello & Patterson, 2015) and feel that having children added complexity to coming out to their families (Power et al., 2012).

There does seem to have been a resurgence of interest in the “forgotten research backwater” (Tasker & Lavender-Stott, 2020, p. 3) of coming out experiences of PHGF in recent years. This research has often been conducted in more culturally conservative or religious countries, with few or no legal protections for same-sex parents, and where most men become parents in the context of a heterosexual relationship (Baiocco et al., 2014), such as Israel (Shenkman & Shmotkin, 2014; Shenkman et al., 2018), Italy (Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017) and Ireland (Daly et al., 2020; Súilleabháin, 2017). Alongside the “myth-busting” research previously mentioned, one of the other main concerns for the earliest research on PHGF was coming out and identity formation. This remains a key focus for more recent research on this group of gay fathers.

Coming out and identity formation for post-heterosexual gay fathers

This research strand centers the experiences of gay fathers and how they navigate a heteronormative and often overtly homophobic world, rather than a more defensive and heteronormative

research agenda of negating presumed developmental deficits for children being parented by gay men and homophobic assumptions about gay men's presumed lack of "fitness to parent" (Shenkman & Shmotkin, 2014). Early research documented the challenges gay men faced as they left their marriages and the family home, disclosed their homosexuality to their wives and children (Bozett, 1980; Miller, 1979), became (mostly) nonresidential fathers and formed same-sex relationships (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993). The other challenge for gay fathers documented in early research was reconciling two (socially) conflicting identities – the socially valued identity of father and the socially stigmatized identity of gay man (e.g., Bozett, 1981a, 1981b; Miller, 1978). Miller (1979) found that most of the men he interviewed did not identify as gay at the time they became parents, they had experience of sex with other men, but these experiences were not salient to their sense of self – they defined as heterosexual or tentatively bisexual and married and had children in "good faith" (p. 545) and felt genuine love for their wives. When the men did recognize their homosexuality, their marriages deteriorated; their children and fear of loss of custody provided reasons to stay closeted and married. When these men eventually disclosed to their children, the children's reactions were generally more positive than anticipated. Miller (1979) proposed a four-stage model of coming out and identity formation for PHGF: from *covert (sexual) behavior* with other men, to *marginal involvement* in the gay community, to *transformed participation*, the man begins to assume a gay identity and disclose it to others, to, finally, *open endorsement* of a gay identity, reflected in the man disclosing his homosexuality to his wife and children, having a male partner and being immersed in the gay community. Bozett (1981b) developed a theory of *integrative sanctioning* to explain how gay fathers achieve integration of their two identities through active participation in the gay world and the father role and receiving positive (identity affirming) sanctions of their identities as gay men from heterosexual peers and their father role from homosexual peers.

Given significant shifts in social attitudes and legislative changes providing increased legal recognition of same-sex relationships and parenting since the 1970s, it is important to consider whether these findings still apply in the contemporary context (Carroll, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2014). A more recent stage model for the identity transformation of post-heterosexual gay and lesbian parents suggested a similar arc of identity transformation, but with less turmoil and distress experienced by the participants (Lynch, 2004). It is important to note that the sample of 23 step-families on which it was based only included six male stepfamilies. Lynch's three-stages encompassed *discovery* of same-sex attractions (as most of her participants were not aware of this before marriage); participants quickly transitioned to *integration*, forming relationships and step-families with a same-sex partner and *transformation*, in which they negotiated other's reactions to their new identity and the loss of heterosexual privilege. Lynch argued that because the gay community is less accepting of parenting (than the lesbian community), and homosexuality is more visible and subject to greater stigma than lesbianism, this process is more challenging for gay men (see also Carneiro et al., 2017).

These models highlight several aspects of coming out and identity formation for PHGF that have continued to interest researchers, although more recent research is less concerned with formulaic models of identity development (Earley et al., 2020). Research has explored whether men are aware of their same-sex desires before marriage – with some studies finding men were mostly unaware (Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017) and others mostly aware (but minimized the significance of these desires) (Daly et al., 2020). Men's motives for marrying have also been addressed, with research highlighting social and familial pressures to conform to heteronormative expectations (Benson et al., 2005; Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017), a lack of exposure to homosexuality (Benson et al., 2005; Daly et al., 2020), genuine love for their wives and a desire for marriage and fatherhood (Benson et al., 2005; Daly et al., 2020; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017), life events such as unplanned pregnancies (Daly et al., 2020), and hoping for a cure for same-sex desires (Benson et al., 2005; Dunne, 2001a). Research has found that men engage in

covert same-sex encounters and relationships whilst married (Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a). The challenges earlier research (e.g. Benson et al., 2005; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Lynch, 2004) highlighted around the loss of heterosexual privilege in the wider society and rejection of fatherhood in the gay community remain relevant in more recent research (Power et al., 2012). Unlike Lynch's (2004) participants' experiences of easy and swift identity integration, turmoil and distress are commonly reported in recent research, but that may reflect the fact that recent research has been conducted in cultural contexts that can be considered more socially and politically conservative with fewer legal protections for same-sex parents (Carroll, 2018; Daly et al., 2020).

Men in more recent research, like both Bozett (1981a, 1981b) and Miller's (1979) participants, continue to fear their children's reactions to their disclosure (Benson et al., 2005; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017) but mostly positive and even nonchalant, "no big deal" (Clarke & Demetriou, 2016), reactions from children have been reported (Benson et al., 2005; Daly et al., 2020; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017). Furthermore, disclosure results in positive changes in men's relationships with their children and their sense of self (Benson et al., 2005; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017). Research continues to explore whether men achieve some degree of identity integration and the factors which support that. Participants in some studies prioritized their identities through fatherhood and commitments to their children (Daly et al., 2020; Súilleabháin, 2017). In other research, participants felt that as gay fathers they have the best of both (gay and straight) worlds (Benson et al., 2005). Giunti and Fioravanti (2017) participants valued the integration of parenting and their gay life through spending time with their children and partner together. Echoing Bozett (1981b), support from others and positive reactions to disclosures from family and friends are crucial to identity acceptance (Daly et al., 2020; Súilleabháin, 2017).

It is important to note that the literature on same-sex parenting has largely overlooked the experiences of bisexual fathers in same-sex relationships, with research on "LGB parents" including few, if any, bisexual parents or failing to disaggregate the experiences of gay and bisexual fathers. Furthermore, the term "gay" is widely used as a modifier for "father" throughout the literature, and the term "gay father" is often used interchangeably with the more inclusive term "same-sex parenting," thus rendering invisible bisexual men parenting with male partners (Hackl et al., 2013). The literature on PHGF largely focuses on the experiences of men who transition from a public *heterosexual* identity to a private and public gay identity. The possibility that these men might identify as bisexual, and might have always identified as bisexual, is rarely considered. Our interest in the current study was specifically with the experiences of "gay fathers," but, as we discuss further in the method, although our participants volunteered for a study on "gay fathers," which suggests they identified with this label to some extent, they did not all unequivocally identify as gay.

The current study

Despite the recent interest in the gay father experience outside of the US, the majority of research on PHGF, and gay parenting more broadly, has been conducted in the US (Carneiro et al., 2017) and we continue to know little about the gay father experience in the UK. Indeed, there has only been a small handful of studies exploring gay parenting in the UK context (e.g., Barrett & Tasker, 2001; Blake et al., 2016; Dunne, 2001a, 2001b; Golombok et al., 2018; Tasker et al., 2010). The current study aims to expand the small body of literature on the coming out experiences and identity development of PHGF, and research on gay fathers in the UK more broadly, by exploring the experiential journeys of six white British men from being ostensibly heterosexual, married fathers to separation and divorce, and gay fatherhood.

The theoretical framework underpinning our exploration of the lived experience of this group of gay fathers is provided by the methodology – that of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is informed by both the descriptive and interpretive

phenomenological traditions. It shares with descriptive phenomenology the aim to capture the texture and quality of individual experience, but, like interpretative phenomenology, it assumes it is impossible to gain direct access to participant's experiences. Furthermore, it follows interpretative phenomenology in assuming that all description, including phenomenological analysis, constitutes a form of interpretation. Thus, straightforward phenomenological description is viewed as not possible because the researcher's interpretative frameworks and standpoint inevitably shape how they make sense of the participants' accounts; thus, IPA is both phenomenological and interpretive. Specific theoretical influences include Husserl's (1931) transcendental phenomenology and his call to focus on the world as experienced by human beings in particular contexts, bracketed what we think we know, and focusing on things as they appear to us. Heidegger's (1962) development of hermeneutic phenomenology is also influential. Heidegger viewed interpretation and reflexivity as integral parts of phenomenological analysis, and the personal and social a mutually constitutive leading to an emphasis on being-in-the-world and the person-in-context in IPA. IPA has been previously used in experiential research on gay fathers (e.g., Daly et al., 2020) and on gay identity more broadly (e.g., Coyle & Rafalin, 2001). The idiographic mode of enquiry of IPA encourages in-depth exploration of the unique features of individual participant's accounts, typically collected through interviews, as well as identifying thematic patterns *across* a dataset.

We now provide a brief contextualizing overview of the socio-political context for gay men growing up in the latter part of the twentieth century in the UK. Homosexuality was illegal until 1967, when the Sexual Offences Act legalized sex between men on the conditions that it was consensual, in private and between two men. Park and Rhead (2013) noted that despite the decriminalization of homosexuality "stigma and prejudice against gay men and lesbians remained widespread over the subsequent decades and prevented many from openly expressing their sexuality" (p. 14). The history of gay rights in the UK is not entirely a straightforward one of increasing liberalization. For example, in her speech at the 1987 Conservative Party conference, the prime minister Margaret Thatcher stated that "children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay" (quoted in Park & Rhead, 2013, p. 14). The Thatcher Government introduced legislation known as Section 28 (of the Local Government Act 1988), amid fears about children having access to books about gay parenting (in particular the book *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin*), which prohibited local authorities from "intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality or publish[ing] material with the intention of promoting homosexuality," and schools from teaching "the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (quoted in Clarke et al., 2010, p. 268). The Thatcher era – Thatcher was the British prime minister from 1979 to 1990 – is associated with the resurgence of right-wing political discourse in the UK (the "new right," Smith, 1994), attacks on the permissiveness of previous decades and assertions of *traditional family values*. Homosexuality was equated with deviance and pathology in public discourse – AIDS was conceptualized as a "gay plague" – and the British tabloid national newspapers were notorious for their virulent homophobia (Sanderson, 1995). Throughout the 1980s only a minority of respondents (between 11% and 17%) to the British Social Attitudes survey, conducted by the National Center for Social Research, thought "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex" were "not wrong at all" (Park & Rhead, 2013, p. 16). At the same time, Section 28 and the AIDS epidemic were major catalysts for the resurgence of gay rights activism in the UK (e.g., the – then – LGB rights organization Stonewall was formed by Labor Party activists and others campaigning against Section 28 in 1989) (Clarke et al., 2010), and the first gay prides took place in the 1990s (Park & Rhead, 2013). By 2012, only a minority (22%) of respondents to the British Social Attitudes survey thought homosexuality was "always wrong" (Park & Rhead, 2013, p. 16). Shifts in social attitudes were intertwined with changes in legislation. Successive Labor Governments in the late 1990s and 2000s introduced civil partnership for same-sex couples and protection from discrimination in the workplace, extended adoption and fostering to same-sex couples, repealed Section 28 and

legislation that allowed for discrimination in the provision of goods and services, and equalized the age of consent for sex between men to 16. However, it was a Conservative Government that finally introduced equal marriage to the UK in 2013.

Method

IPA was employed to explore the lived experiences of a small and relatively homogenous group of PHGF (Smith et al., 2009). All of the participants responded to a call for participants for a study on “gay fathers” and, as detailed below, some were recruited through social networks for “gay fathers.” However, as noted in Table 1, two participants expressed uncertainty about whether or not they were bisexual, and one declined to label his sexuality, noting that he was “just me” (however, he did concede that he was more sexually attracted to men than women). We did not probe around the nature of this uncertainty and whether or not this represented some ambivalence and discomfort around the label “gay,” an expression of internalized shame and stigma in relation to same-sex desires. Because the men volunteered for a study on “gay fathers”/PHGF, and these terms are widely used in the existing literature, we use these as pragmatic labels of convenience, while noting the limitations of these terms as detailed above.

Participants and recruitment

In IPA interview research, samples vary widely from case studies of one participant to samples of over 30; however, samples *tend* to be smaller (e.g., Daly et al., [2020] IPA of the coming out experiences of Irish gay fathers had 9 participants) to facilitate a focus both on thematic patterns *across* interviews and the unique idiographic details of each participant’s account. We reviewed the data quality and substance after 6 interviews were completed and determined that given the diversity of some aspects of the men’s experiences this provided adequate data to explore thematic patterns while retaining a focus on the idiographic detail of each man’s experiences. PHGF are a difficult to recruit group (Benson et al., 2005); the men in existing research tend to be active in gay father support groups and may differ from other gay fathers in meaningful ways (e.g., more positive about their experiences, less closeted, Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993). Thus, two recruitment avenues were employed: a social networking site for gay fathers in the UK and snowball sampling through the second author’s personal contacts. All the participants had experienced long-term heterosexual marriages ($N = 5$) or relationships of five or more years ($N = 1$), all of which had ended at the time of interview. As with gay parenting research more broadly, the participants were a relatively privileged group (Carneiro et al., 2017; Goldberg et al., 2014) – all were white, educated to a tertiary level and worked in what could be regarded as “middle class” professions; the mean age of the sample was 52 years. Table 1 provides further information about the participants. Participants were not asked if they identified as non-trans/cisgender so we cannot comment on their identity in this regard.

Interviews

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 clarify chronology and provide further details about: any pressures to conform and sexual feelings for other boys/men when they were growing up; their sense of how and why they married/partnered with a woman; their feelings about having children; their relationships (with their children, ex-wives or former female partner, and male partners – including in some instances men who were also fathers); their sense of why and how their marriages/partnership ended; their coming out experiences to their children, family members and others; their perception of

Table 1. Overview of participants' demographics and relationships.

Pseudonym	Sexuality	Age	Former (heterosexual) relationship	Sex and relationships with men	Children	Disclosure of homosexuality
Alistair	Gay	53	Married in early 20s, divorce not yet finalized.	Relationships with men before marriage, some sex with men toward end of marriage, current male partner (2-year relationship); met online.	Three children.	Wife "definitely knew" he was gay before marriage; out to children, out to family.
Rob	Gay (identified as heterosexual during his marriage).	39	Married in early 20s, divorced in mid 20s.	Sex with men during teens, sex with men (met online) after separated from wife.	Three children (limited access), eldest son now living with him.	Came out to ex-wife after divorce, out to his children and family, out at work.
Ronan	"I'm just me" (more attracted to men than women).	64	Married in early 30s, divorced 10 years later.	Sex with men during teens, brief relationships with men following divorce ("friends with benefits").	Two children (sole custody following divorce).	Never explicitly come out to children ("it's none of their business").
Richard	Identifies as gay (uncertain if he is bisexual).	52	Married in early 30s, divorced 6 years later.	Sex with men during divorce, current male partner (met online during divorce).	One child (joint custody until his wife moved overseas with his daughter).	Out to friends and family, not out to his daughter or ex-wife.
Peter	Identifies and behaves as a gay man (wonders if he is bisexual).	62	Married in mid-20s, divorced in early 30s.	Sex with men during teens, sex with men throughout his marriage, two long-term gay relationships since separating from and divorcing his wife.	One child.	Out to child, ex-wife, and family.
James	Gay.	41	Relationship with a woman (met when both teenagers); separated after 12 years.	Sex with a man (met online) during relationship with female partner, relationships with men after separating from female partner, current male partner.	One child.	Out to ex-partner, not out to child, out to family, not out at work.

others' reactions to their homosexuality and fatherhood, and of their children's feelings about their male partners; and the response from the gay community to their fatherhood. The interviews were conducted by the second author who disclosed to the participants before the interviews that he was a gay man without children, with the aim of fostering trust and rapport. The interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and lasted between 75 minutes and 2 hours. The audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed orthographically using Braun and Clarke (2013) notation system. The research received ethical approval from the authors' Faculty Research Ethics Committee. Potential participants were given written information about the study and if

they agreed to take part were asked to sign a consent form. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research both before and after their interview.

Analytic procedure

The first step of the analysis involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, and the authors meeting to discuss their initial impressions of the data. Then both the first and second authors engaged in initial noting of the first transcript – capturing what was important in the participant’s account of their experiences, more speculative (conceptual) insights from the researcher’s standpoint and any particularly evocative uses of language (Smith et al., 2009). The authors discussed these notes and then developed emergent themes for this transcript – condensing the notes into key insights about the participant’s experiences and journey from heterosexually married father to gay father. At this point because of the relatively unstructured character of the interviews and the invitation at the start for the participants to “tell their story” or “share their history” we were struck by the fact, having familiarized ourselves thoroughly with all the transcripts, that all of the participants told stories encompassing their journeys from early childhood experiences of (familial) homophobia and pressures to conform to their present situation as gay men and fathers (e.g., their relationships with the children, ex-wives/partner and any male partners, their degree of “outness”). Inspired by Smith and Osborn (2007) temporal rendering of their IPA of participants’ experiences of the self in chronic pain, and participants’ experiential journey to the “pain self,” we determined that a broadly temporally organized thematic structure would best capture the men’s experiences. We returned to the emergent themes for the first transcript and clustered these into five superordinate themes and this process was repeated for the other transcripts. Finally, the superordinate themes from each transcript were clustered into a set of (five) temporally organized themes for the entire dataset. These themes were then organized to produce a coherent narrative about the men’s experiences, which captures a roughly chronological account of the men’s journeys from being married, ostensibly heterosexual, men to openly (more or less) gay fathers: 1) The impossibility of being openly gay; 2) “Drowning in normality”; 3) “The point of no return”; 4) The kids are alright, and 5) “It just doesn’t seem to compute for people.”

Quality practices in IPA center on researcher reflexivity, and recording and reflecting on the process of bracketing assumptions and data interpretation, and evidencing the transparency of the analytic process (Vicary et al., 2017). Transparency can be evidenced through maintaining a paper/electronic trail of the research – including the research proposal, interview guide, audio recordings, annotated transcripts, and tables of themes – that would in principle allow another researcher to check if the final report is plausible and credible and the analytic process has been systematic and rigorous (Smith et al., 2009). Both authors engaged in a process of reflexivity and we used the meetings to discuss the data and the developing analysis to deepen our reflexive engagement with the data (e.g., sharing our analytic observations and insights provided the other with an opportunity to reflect back on the assumptions being made). A team analytic process necessarily required us to maintain a paper/electronic trail so we could share our initial noting of a transcript and so on, and this allowed us to check each other’s process and interpretations. For the purposes of transparency, we note our personal positioning – at the time of the research – as a white, middle class queer-identified woman in her late thirties without children, and a white, middle class gay man in his late twenties without children. The first author also had considerable experience of researching lesbian and gay parenting (e.g., Clarke, 2001).

Interpretations of the data are illustrated by extracts from the interview transcripts. Transcription notation is as follows: ellipses indicate where superfluous material has been omitted, (pause) indicates a pause in the flow of speech, “word” indicates reported speech or thoughts,

word indicates emphasis, [word] is clarificatory information. Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants.

Results

Table 2 provides an overview of the themes.

The impossibility of being openly gay

A feeling of impossibility around coming out and living openly as a gay man earlier in life (before they were married) was central to the stories of each of these men. All described “always knowing” they were gay or sexually attracted to males, or having an early sense of difference (Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a, 2001b): “I always felt that was something different about me from a very young age” (James). For James this sense of difference was related to gender: “I always found it easier to establish relationships with girls, because girls liked to talk, I liked to talk and I didn’t bond through sport because I wasn’t very good at it and it didn’t interest me at all.” Most of the men had sexual experiences with other boys in adolescence (Miller, 1979): “There was one guy who I saw after school ... we’d go over to each other’s house and we’d just wank each other off. It was straightforward” (Ronan). As Ronan’s extract illustrates the significance of these sexual encounters was often minimized (“just,” “straightforward”), and framed as “a normal thing that boys did, y’know” (Ronan). Sexual experimentation and “fooling around” with other boys were part and parcel of adolescence, a “phase” that “most boys go through” (Ronan), same-sex experiences were not framed as a feature of a distinctly gay biography (Daly et al., 2020). In later adolescence, guiltless encounters with, and feelings for, other boys transformed into something these men did not fully understand. They began to feel shame about these sexual experiences, which often led to the compartmentalization of their sexual and social lives:

So I had a sort of relationship with a guy when I was at college. Erm, which was very private, we passed each other in the corridor and didn’t even acknowledge each other, and we sort of passed each other, all the way down. We did it whenever we could ... but neither of us knew what to do with that. We were both from very small villages (Rob).

Peter disclosed to his General Practitioner (family doctor) when he was a teenager in the 1960s that he thought (or worried) he might be homosexual and he was referred to a psychiatrist:

... why was this coming up for me at the time even though I was going out with girls, shagging girls and a male friend; though we were just boys growing up together ... [the psychiatrist] said, ‘do you masturbate?’ I said, ‘I masturbate about women’, he said ‘alright’, but I said, ‘just at the last minute a man walks through the door, I don’t know what that’s all about?’” (Peter)

Like Ronan, Peter normalized his same-sex experiences (“just boys growing up together”) but the appearance of a man in his fantasies was inexplicable to him at the time. For the two men who did not have same-sex sexual experiences in adolescence, desires were still there:

I didn’t have any physical contact with guys whatsoever in my adolescence, but the feelings were always there. Low level dormant feelings like, images ... they always kind of turned me on. *Tarzan* movies, Jesus on the cross, naked half stripped men (laughs) ... there was that natural attraction to that image (James).

Looking back on their lives before marriage in the interviews, despite these feelings and experiences, it felt impossible to identify and live as a gay man. The men provided several reasons for this, including their isolated, rural upbringings, which they felt encouraged conformity to heteronormativity: Rob “grew up in a very rural [name of county] village where you just did what your parents did ... everyone knew everyone in the village and there was a conformity about that, that you met a girl, you got engaged, you did that.” Geographic isolation – “in the back woods” (Ronan) – also meant cultural and social isolation and a sense that they were “the only gay in the

Table 2. Overview of themes.

Theme name	Definition	Example data extracts
The impossibility of being openly gay	The men all described always knowing they were gay or having an early sense of difference. However, they found it impossible to acknowledge their sexuality and live openly as a gay man earlier in their life because of the stigma attached to homosexuality, which they felt was particularly pronounced in their rural upbringing, and the shame they associated with gender nonconformity.	"I know it sounds cliché, but there was something not quite right or wrong or whatever." (Rob) "I was brought up to believe people wouldn't like me for owing up to being gay." (Alistair)
"Drowning in normality"	Although the men described a variety of emotions about marrying a woman, sooner or later they felt oppressed by their marriages and longed to live authentically and openly as a gay man and meet their need for sexually and emotionally intimate contact with other men (if they were not meeting this need already).	"I remember him [my eldest son] sitting on my knee, and obviously I loved him to death ... but I can remember being so unhappy. Sitting, crying with him on my knee, when [my wife] was at work, and thinking what on earth could I do?" (Alistair)
"The point of no return"	Most of the men emphasized the importance of finding the "right time" to end their marriages. Some framed this as a "point of no return" - the point at which it became impossible to do anything other than leave. Their need to find the "right time" in part reflected their anticipation of the devastating emotional fallout from the marriage collapsing - for their wife/partner, for their children and for themselves.	"I knew [having sex with a man for the first time] was a life-changer, and my life would never be the same again [...] I knew I would never be the same again. And this was me beginning to dismantle everything I ever had." (James)
The kids are alright	The men emphasized that their children were "okay" in the sense of not being emotionally damaged by the experience of parental separation and divorce, and, if they had come out to their children, having a gay father. They also emphasize that their children were "okay" in the sense of being accepting of their sexuality, if they had come out to the children or if they felt their children knew anyway even if this had not been openly discussed or acknowledged.	"I made it quite clear that this was my boyfriend and we lived together and they were really resilient, they just accepted it. They say, 'well, you were just Dad and whatever boyfriend you were with at the time, we came up and saw you and them, and it didn't really affect us.'" (Rob)
"It just doesn't seem to compute for people."	The men felt at times that they did not completely belong in either the gay or straight worlds and the identity of "gay father" was difficult for some people to comprehend, especially given the conventional and stereotypical associations of heterosexuality and fatherhood, and gay men with hedonistic lifestyles and a lack of responsibility.	"in the past there's been stuff about the whole, you know, gay men are pedophiles around children, which I did experience." (Peter) "It's a small percentage of the gay community, that don't want anything to do with children whatsoever. Yeah, it does exist definitely." (Rob)

village" (Bozett, 1981b). The men often referenced the period in which they grew up as well (the 1980s or earlier): "at the time I grew up, it wasn't very erm common to know [a] gay person, so knowing you prefer boys to girls was a difficult thing to grow up with especially when in a close

family in the [rural region of the country]" (Alistair). The participants often "educated" the interviewer, a younger gay man, in his late twenties at the time of the interviews, about the social climate they experienced as children and adolescents:

What you have to remember is gay things were not discussed. They were illegal 'til nineteen-eighty-one: there were no clubs, no pubs, I didn't even know what gay men were, what they did, nothing; I only came across it in my sociology lectures because one of the lecturers there was doing American research and I thought he was a crackpot (Ronan).

The men referenced the negative associations homosexuality had in the period in which they grew up – in the early days of AIDS, homosexuality was associated with promiscuity, disease and death: "I remember growing up thinking, being all the documentaries about AIDS in the news and stuff at the time, the huge coffin image sort of sticks, thinking (pause) why would I want to explore that part of me" (Rob). The men also struggled to identify with the camp and effeminate image of homosexuality embodied (and mocked) by certain television personalities: "in my head ... if you were effeminate you must be gay, if you're not, you're not gay. So, you bury all of that stuff" (Peter). These undesirable images led Rob and Peter and the other men to ignore and close off their feelings for other men.

While the wider social context imparted stigma, the men's families often left them with an overwhelming sense of shame (Daly et al., 2020): "I was brought up to believe it was a shameful thing, y'know, my family would disown me for, people wouldn't like me for owning up being gay. And those shameful feelings came from the fact that I couldn't be me" (Alistair). Being mocked by his parents for playing with his sister's (toy) handbag had a profound impact on Alistair: "those sort of experiences I suppose, drive you underground and stop you being your real self and I guess that was why I couldn't, I couldn't be my real self." Given these feelings of shame, alienation from social images of homosexuality, social stigma, their geographic and cultural isolation, the men felt their conformity to wider social and familial pressures to marry a woman and have children (Benson et al., 2005; Daley et al., 2019) were almost inevitable. The men often reflected, with some sadness, on how times had changed, commenting on how lucky the interviewer was as a younger man to be able to live an openly gay life.

"Drowning in normality" (Peter)

In addition to marrying a woman in response to heteronormative social and familial pressures and expectations described above, some of the men spoke about authentic feelings of love (Daly et al., 2020; Lynch, 2004; Miller, 1979) – "I met the girl who became my wife ... and really did fall in love with her" (Richard) – and an almost inexplicable "special" connection with their future wife: "there was just a connection" (James).

Some of the men also spoke about marriage as something that just happened to them, almost as if by accident or through circumstances out of their control; life events such as unplanned pregnancies threw the men and their wives together. Ronan presented his decision to marry as unplanned and impulsive – he wanted children and a woman proposed to him and he thought "well, why not? So, I married her." The men often used rather passive language and clichés such as "one thing led to another" to describe how they came to be married to a woman: leaving the family home "sort of propelled me into a relationship" (Rob). Some of the men wanted children (more than they wanted a wife). Alistair described himself as "*desperate* to have a child."

Five of the men described satisfactory and even "fulfilling" (James) sex lives with their wives and thus their marriages had an element of authenticity: "We'd a good sex life" (Alistair). But Alistair "never ever stopped thinking about guys" (Alistair). In contrast Rob compartmentalized his earlier same-sex encounters and his heterosexual marriage:

While I was married, I didn't really think anything of it, particularly, I didn't think I missed it. I was married, I was in a monogamous relationship, and didn't think of myself as gay or bisexual or whatever. At the time I was married, in my mind I was heterosexual and that's how the relationship went.

The men described marriages that sooner or later became unhappy and their suppressed desires for men and for authenticity eventually became overwhelming (Daly et al., 2020). Rob did not contemplate sex (with men) outside of his marriage, he remained true to his marriage vows, only seeking out sex with men after he had separated from his wife, but other participants sought out sex with other men while married, often through the internet and websites like *Gaydar*, something not available to them before marriage (Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a). These encounters (both during their marriage and after they separated) were typically covert and anonymous and understood as meeting sexual "needs" (Rob) rather than fulfilling any desire for a committed relationship with another man. Meeting their sexual needs in this way helped some of the men to contain their same-sex desires for several years and remain in their marriages: "that was how I kept a lid on it" (Alistair). However, some participants felt increasingly torn between their commitment to their wife and children, and their sexual "needs" (Alistair) (Bozett, 1981a; Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a): "I knew I couldn't change my basic fundamental sexuality... but I was confused because I didn't want to let her down" (Alistair). Alistair, like the other men, was "just fed up of not being myself." This led to a feeling of being trapped in the marriage (as Peter said "drowning in normality") and by their marriage vows, which weighed heavily on them. Alistair remembers sitting with his son on his knee crying and thinking "what on earth could I do? How could I get out of this? And I just thought, 'there is no way out of this, I'm married now, I've got to stick with her in sickness and health, 'til death do us part'." Rob was relieved when his wife had an affair as "it was a great excuse for the relationship to finish" and gave him a way out and the "freedom to explore my sexuality" without having to take responsibility for ending the marriage.

Some of the men clearly felt obliged to explain why they "continued with a married life for so long" (Alistair). The life events that "propelled" them into marriage were also provided as examples of things that kept some of them in their marriages (in some instances, for several decades); such as unplanned pregnancies and house moves. Some described volatile marriages: "We were arguing more and more, and the kids were getting more and more upset with our dynamic" (Rob). Two of the men experienced domestic violence: Rob's wife "was very violent and at one point I was very much an abused spouse, and my children witnessed some of that." For all the participants, there were different factors which pulled them into and pushed them out of their increasingly unhappy marriages, and toward a gay identity. In addition to often unanticipated life events, the shame of disclosing their homosexuality to others played a large part in keeping most of the men in their relationships for some time: "the shame of, at that point, pulling out at all, and telling everyone the reasons why I'm pulling out – and, y'know, the way you've been brought up, y'know the climate you're up against is hard to beat" (Alistair). This shame, combined with feelings of isolation and a sense that they were the only man in this situation (Benson et al., 2005), meant that it was easier for some of the men to stay in their marriages. For two of the men (Alistair and James), it was also easier for their wives to stay in the relationship, even after they had disclosed their homosexuality: "Up until that point she thought at least we'd have each other... We stayed together for eighteen months after that [disclosure]" (James). Both of these men (and Rob and Richard) still have close relationships with the mothers of their children, even if these are a little strained: "there's still a fondness there for us" (James).

"The point of no return" (Alistair)

For most of the men it was a process of finding the "right time" to leave; there was often a revolving door of leaving and then returning before finally ending the marriage: "I couldn't have

done it (clicks fingers) on a whim, just like that, it had to be the right time. It had to be the time that you rationalize it all in your own mind, that you go with it" (Alistair). This theme explores this "right time" and the emotional "fall out" from leaving their marriages.

Two of the men explicitly identified a "point of no return" (Alistair, Rob) – the point at which they decided to end their marriages for good and live (more or less openly) as gay men. James similarly spoke of driving over a bridge on the way to meet a man he had met online and this bridge became "so symbolic, because I knew I would never be the same again." For some of the men, this "life-changer" (James) was having sex with another man, for others it was falling in love with another man and meeting "someone I wanted to move in with" (Rob) and feeling "overwhelmed with something I had never experienced before in my life" (Peter).

At this point, Rob (probably the most "out" participant) decided to come out to his family: "I did it all one weekend, one fell sweep. I just phoned everybody, because I wanted to feel like I was having a normal relationship, a normal place with everybody else, and sort of okay." For Alistair coming out to his son signaled to his wife "that I was serious." Thus, coming out to others made the decision irrevocable. Some of the men – like Rob and Alistair – came out when their marriages ended, for others it was some time later. Most of the men at the time of the interview limited who they were "out" to (see Table 1) and half were not out to their children.

For the men who came out when their marriages ended, their initial social or sexual contact with men was "like the biggest scariest rollercoaster ... a combination of panic and paranoia, and the excitement of what is this all about" (Richard). It took some time to process these feelings.

Even though some of the men felt "in a trap" (Peter) in their marriages and suffocated by their marriage vows, finally leaving their marriages and coming out did not bring uncomplicated feelings of relief and "freedom" (James, Rob). The language of destruction some of the men used around leaving their marriages communicated their feelings of guilt about the impact this decision had on their wives and children (Carroll, 2018; Daly et al., 2020): "bring that world crashing down" (Alistair); "I blew up her entire life ... it was this huge bomb that came out, and it was ground zero from that moment on" (James). Alistair was in the process of divorcing his wife at the time of the interview and he reported that his wife "feels completely let down." Peter's wife was distraught and at times suicidal – "she couldn't compete with a man ... And what it did for her was it took her life plan" – and she grieved the loss of their marriage and family life. The men often punished themselves for "destroying" their families and the anticipated futures of their wives and children. For James, this involved convincing himself he was HIV positive: "I felt guilt, and I had to torture myself with all that, 'I've inflicted myself with HIV', kind of scare. Convincing myself I had picked up HIV and given it to her." Richard had a mental health crisis after he started to have sex with other men following the ending of his marriage: "my health completely broke, I collapsed and ended up in hospital for several days, it's a blur." Some of the men seemed to go through mental turmoil before they could achieve some degree of self-acceptance (Carroll, 2018; Daly et al., 2020).

Some of the men spoke of feelings of grief and "excruciating pain" (Rob) around the loss of daily contact with their children and had fears around losing access to their children if their homosexuality became known – "suddenly I had a life without erm (pause) my daughter, or reading a bedtime story, or getting them breakfast ... getting access to my children was really difficult" (Rob) (Daly et al., 2020). Richard was "in and out of court with my ex-wife just fighting in legal battles" (Daly et al., 2020; Perrin et al., 2019). Ronan was awarded sole custody of this children because his ex-wife "had left them and she didn't keep her access dates" (Ronan). As a result, neither Ronan nor his children had any contact with his ex-wife at the time of the interview. Rob, Richard and Ronan kept their sexuality private whilst fighting for custody and access: "I didn't do it during because custody was quite tricky, and access was quite tricky ... let alone if I chucked that in the mix" (Rob) (see Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017; Lynch & Murray, 2000). The other three men did not fight for custody and accepted whatever their children's mother

proposed in relation to access without question. This may have reflected their guilt around breaking up the family.

The kids are alright

The men stressed that their children were “alright” both in the sense of not being damaged by the experience of parental separation and divorce and, for the men who had disclosed to their children, having a gay father and in the sense that the children were “accepting” (Rob) of their sexuality (Miller, 1979), perhaps after some initial anger and discomfort (especially for sons).

In their lives post-marriage, the men often spoke of the importance of being “open” (Alistair) and prioritizing “honesty and integrity” (Rob), including in their relationships with their children (Benson et al., 2005; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017). For some of the men, living authentically meant integrating their life as a father and their life as a gay man (Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017). Peter initially compartmentalized his gay life and his life as a father but then when he met his current partner and fell in love he felt an overwhelming desire to live authentically – the compartmentalization that had felt protective of his son now felt like “hiding” part of himself and an expression of shame: “I always tried to keep that side of my life away from him, until I met my current partner, because I didn’t want to hide that part of my life anymore; this is the man I’m going to share my life with, who I’m always going to live with” (Peter). Peter emphasized the “brilliant relationship” he had with his son and his son’s “relaxed” attitude to sexuality. Alistair felt that his children had not fully processed his disclosure, but he was quick to emphasize that he had a good relationship with them and they were “absolutely cool with” his sexuality: “I still don’t think they’re sure what to make of it. But, I get on well with them all, y’know, they’re all fine. I’ve a really good relationship with them.” Rob reflected “a bit of honesty goes a long, long way.” He “met somebody quite quickly and wanted my children to be part of that relationship ... I wanted it not to be hidden.” He felt disclosing was the “right thing” to do and he reported that his children had told him that “it didn’t really affect us.” He also reflected on the different approach his son’s friends had toward sexuality: “I’d say one third of them [the girls] are bisexual ... one third if not half of the boys he knows are gay. And, they are very open about it. It seems like a whole different way of being.”

For the three men who had not (yet) explicitly disclosed their sexuality to their children, this was sometimes framed as protecting their children and putting their interests first (Lynch & Murray, 2000). All felt their children were nonetheless aware of their homosexuality. Richard did not feel able to disclose to his daughter but felt she knew – she had met his previous co-habiting partner and “has been close to it [my sexuality] a few times,” but he could not bring himself to be open with her. Ronan’s daughter similarly skirted round the subject and signaled her acceptance – she “sometimes says, ‘I wish you’d get a friend. I don’t care if you are.’” James felt his son knew and that his inability to be honest and open with his son was damaging their relationship: “I think he does [know] and I think it’s blocking our relationship ... I think I’m not setting a good example by not telling him, and that makes me feel like a bad dad.” James was planning to disclose if he met someone he wanted a serious relationship with; he was also planning to explain why he had not disclosed before: “I didn’t want it to be a stress in your life.”

“It just doesn’t seem to compute for people” (Rob)

The men encountered incomprehension in both the gay and straight worlds; they felt at times that they did not completely belong in either world. The men also experienced negativity in the straight world (Benson et al., 2005; Perrin et al., 2019), particularly from straight men. Four of the men encountered homophobic assumptions around pedophilia (Dunne, 2001b): “in the past there’s been stuff about the whole, y’know gay men are pedophiles around children, which I did

experience” (Peter). Peter made sure he was never alone with his son’s friends to protect himself from potential accusations. Similarly, for Ronan, as a single parent in the 1980s, the potential for accusations of pedophilia was always on his mind and he put limits on his children bringing their friends into the family home in order to protect himself:

I told them that if they were to have any friends ‘round, they’d have to have six or seven. I’m not having one friend around who could go home and tell their parents something happened, but if we have a group of your girlfriends ‘round, they can be upstairs with pizza and a movie... you can’t be too careful when you’re on your own. People will make anything up about you.

Gay fathers are a “minority within a minority” (Rob) in a gay world (Bozett, 1981a). The men encountered a lack of interest in children from other gay men, which was a source of frustration: “‘what planet are you on?’ Y’know, ‘you’re someone’s child’” (Rob). Rob reflected on gay men’s perception of his situation: “It’s looks a bit strange from the outside, ‘oh god he’s gay, he’s got three kids, he’s walking down the street with his partner, but he’s got three kids in tow, what’s that?’ sort of thing.” Relationships with men who were intolerant of their children tended not to last long. James reflected that from the perspective of some gay men: “One of the bonuses of being a homosexual is not having kids and that complexity.” The men’s perception of the gay community was rather negative, they viewed gay men as shunning commitment and long-term relationships in favor of transient sexual encounters: “I do find the gay community, it is quite sad in many ways. It lacks something. I find the gay community is... oversexed, unthinking, male teenager, who can’t grow up... It always seems to be about the next fast shag. Y’know, it’s about the trivial thing” (Richard). Furthermore, a lack of caring responsibilities often meant gay men “become very selfish” (Richard) and irresponsible, qualities diametrically opposed to those required of (good) parents. James similarly commented that “there are narcissistic tendencies within most gay men, and that’s expressed with the body beautiful, and the gorgeous house... and doesn’t go any deeper than the surface.” For the participants, this “young, free and single” ethos explained why (some) gay men were dismissive of or hostile to gay fathers (Bozett, 1981a).

The men also felt that their fatherhood, and heterosexual past, damaged their credibility as gay men in the eyes of some other gay men, their children were a constant reminder of their heterosexual past (Bozett, 1981a); they were not “pure-bred” (James) gays. The men felt that gay fathers are “men with maturity” (Rob) and a sense of responsibility, and some had relationships, or liked the idea of having a relationship, with other gay fathers. Rob’s relationship with another gay father after his divorce “normalized” being a gay father for him. Alistair commented that: “Y’know it is an attractive proposition to me to be in a relationship with a gay man who is also a father... Maybe it’s the combination of masculinity and being caring.”

In addition to incomprehension and disinterest, some of the men encountered curiosity and envy, and acceptance, from other gay men: “Most have just been intrigued by how I deal with it, and in actual fact, they are quite envious” (Richard). Using the exact language of one of Benson et al.’s (2005) participants, Richard reported that some gay men felt as a gay father he had “the best of both worlds” (a phrase also used by Rob) – a same-sex relationship and children. Two other participants felt that some gay men were envious of their dual identities as gay men and fathers – both had received comments that they could “have their cake and eat it” (Peter, Rob). Having your cake and eating was also cast as selfishness, something predicated on “ruin[ing] people’s lives” (Peter).

Discussion

Like participants in some existing research, the men told stories of having early awareness of difference and same-sex desires, with most of the men acting on these desires in adolescence (Bozett, 1982; Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a, Miller, 1979). Some normalized these sexual experiences as a “phase” typical of male sexual development (this could be interpreted as a way of

rationalizing why they did not identify as gay after having these experiences) (Daly et al., 2020). The men pinpointed numerous barriers to identifying as gay, some of which echo the findings of existing research: the social stigma of homosexuality; the negative and alienating representations of homosexuality in the wider culture; their geographic and cultural isolation and concomitant lack of contact with the gay community (Benson et al., 2005; Daly et al., 2020); the shame associated with their sexual feelings and gender expression; familial homophobia and familial and societal pressures and expectations for heteronormative conformity (Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017; Pearcey, 2005); what Benson et al. (2005) dubbed “heterosexist gender role strain.” As none of the men felt able to fully explore and make sense of their same-sex feelings, in contrast with some previous research (e.g. Benson et al., 2005; Dunne, 2001a), none married with the intention of hiding their homosexuality or hoping for a magical cure. Instead, they gave accounts of their marriages “just happening” or even happening to them – they were often passive subjects pulled into marriage by circumstances (unplanned pregnancies) (see also Daly et al., 2020), because they met that “special girl” and genuinely fell in love or because they wanted children (Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017; Lynch, 2004; Miller, 1979). In accounting for their marriages, the men seemed to walk a particularly precarious tightrope – some articulating others’ negative views of “men like them” who “ruin lives” (see Power et al., 2012) – around social imperatives for authenticity and honesty.

The men described increasingly unhappy marriages (in some instances over several decades), covert and often anonymous same-sex encounters, and feeling torn between their commitment to their wife and children and living authentically (Bozett, 1981a; Daly et al., 2020; Dunne, 2001a). Some had revolving door experiences – leaving and coming back to the marriage before they finally reached a “point of no return,” often when falling in love or having sex with another man for the first time. This was also for some the point at which they decided to come out to their wives and children. The men who had not (yet) come out to their children thought their children knew or suspected they were gay. As in existing research on PHGF, children’s reactions were accepting and even nonchalant (Bozett, 1980; Daly et al., 2020; Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017; Miller, 1979); this reaction is echoed by research with adult children (e.g. Clarke & Demetriou, 2016; Tasker et al., 2010). For the most part the men’s relationships with their ex-wives were now broadly positive if strained (with some wives devastated by the disclosure initially) (Bozett, 1981a).

This is in contrast both to studies which have reported hostility from ex-wives, particularly in church-going families (Carroll, 2018; Jenkins, 2013) and to studies which have reported warmth, generosity and acceptance from ex-wives (Dunne, 2001a; Súilleabháin, 2017). The men who were out to their children emphasized the importance of honesty and openness in their relationships, echoing some existing research (e.g. Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017; Miller, 1979). The extant literature offers contrasting pictures of joy in the discovery of a gay identity and quick integration of this new identity (Lynch, 2004) and years of turmoil, shame, guilt, depression and even suicidal feelings (Benson et al., 2005; Bozett, 1981a, 1981b; Carroll, 2018; Daly et al., 2020); our participants’ experiences were mostly closer to the latter. Some men had achieved some degree of the identity integration described in previous research (Bozett, 1981a, 1981b), others were still struggling with complex and competing feelings of shame, guilt, longing for a relationship with another man and greater openness in their lives (Daly et al., 2020). Thus, our research reflects existing findings that gay fathers in same-sex relationships report higher levels of self-disclosure and less identity difficulty (Tornello & Patterson, 2015). Furthermore, the two men who had not had sex with males prior to marriage were not (yet) out to their children, echoing Bozett’s finding (1981a) that gay men who had sex with men before marriage experienced an easier journey to identity reconciliation.

Turning to the wider LGBT literature, all of the men spoke of their rural upbringings and the challenges of growing up in geographically and culturally isolated environments. This echoes

decades of research on rural LGBT people living in Western countries (mostly the US), which has highlighted the homophobic social climate of rural environments and the often weak and patchy LGBT resources available in such environments (e.g., Oswald & Culton, 2003). Such environments limit opportunities for identity expression, which potentially have negative impacts on mental health (Lee, 2019). Research specifically exploring gay men's experiences of growing up in a rural environment has identified a similar theme to that identified in the current study of an early sense of feeling different from other men (Cody & Welch, 1997). Cody and Welch (1997) also highlighted their participant's internalization of negative messages about homosexuality; something also evident in our participants' narratives. Some of the men in our study linked the social conservatism of rural environments with the traditional religious beliefs more common in those environments (Ruiter & van Tubergen, 2009). Research suggests gay men who have had a religious upbringing experience more identity conflict when coming out as gay (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Thus, growing up in conservative rural and religious environments are two factors that seem to have added complexity to our participants' experiences of gay identity formation and expression.

It is striking how little has changed for this group of gay fathers since the first research was conducted in North America in the late 1970s (e.g., Bozett, 1981a, 1981b; Miller, 1979). Much of what Bozett and Miller reported about the experiences of the PHGF they interviewed (who came of age in the inter- and postwar periods when homosexuality was typically illegal in Western countries) remains relevant to the British gay fathers we interviewed, who came of age between the 1960 and 1980s (as previously noted, homosexual acts in private between two men [aged 21] were decriminalized in the UK in 1967). From a life course perspective, historical contexts shape development (Tornello & Patterson, 2015), members of different generational cohorts have different experiences, gay men who came of age in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s have different experiences from younger generations of gay men. These men are still the boys shamed for playing with "girls' toys," who lived through the early days of the AIDS epidemic and the notorious "tombstone" public health campaign in the 1980s. This campaign, with the slogan "don't die of ignorance," depicted the creation of a tombstone-like monolith with "AIDS" chiseled into it (Burgess, 2017). The rapid social and legal changes of the last two decades in the UK cannot completely eradicate the heteronormative societal pressures and expectations, familial homophobia, stigma and shame experienced early in life. Some of our participants emphasized the significant changes in social attitudes to homosexuality, compared to when they were young men, and rather wistfully reflected on the greater freedom their children's generation seemed to experience around sexuality. However, not all thought that PHGF like them are a "dying breed" (Gates, 2015; Perrin et al., 2019; Tasker & Lavender-Stott, 2020; Tornello & Patterson, 2015) – some argued that the greater accessibility of sex with men via the internet means that men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay will enter heterosexual marriages safe in the knowledge that they can relatively easily meet their needs for sex with men. Whereas cottaging and cruising (seeking out casual sex with other men in public sex environments such as toilets; "cottaging" takes its name from the cottage-like appearance of some self-contained public toilet blocks in UK parks) require a certain amount of specialist knowledge, any man with access to the internet can find men to have sex with. Given the rapid shifts in social attitudes and legislation around homosexuality and same-sex relationships, it is important to explore how these impact on gay men, especially in relation to choosing to marry or partner with a woman and have children in the context of a heterosexual relationship. Furthermore, future research could usefully explore whether PHGF are a "dying breed" in general, or mainly in more liberal, high equality social contexts, as some existing research suggests (e.g., Perrin et al., 2019).

We find Goffman's (1963) concept of a spoiled identity, one polluted and discredited by social stigma, useful for making sense of the men's stories. The men's stories clearly oriented to social imperatives for authenticity and honesty, and negative views of heterosexually divorced gay men

who selfishly “ruin lives.” The men arguably managed their spoilt identity by walking a tightrope in telling their stories (they were passively propelled into marriage, they had authentic desires for children and love for their wives, external forces made it impossible for them to identify as gay), negotiating these imperatives and warding off potential accusations of selfishness. The men seemed painfully aware of their failures regarding the social “quest for authenticity” (Kates & Belk, 2001, p. 419) – this could explain why those who had disclosed to their children emphasized the openness and honesty of their relationships. The men who had not (yet) come out clearly worried that their failure to be authentic, to “be themselves,” was potentially damaging their children, and their relationship with them, modeling a lack of self-acceptance.

A “coming out imperative” (Rasmussen, 2004) in gay communities could be understood as a queer version of wider social imperatives for authenticity. Gay fathers’ gay identities are spoilt or polluted – in the eyes of some gay men – by their heterosexual past and their failure to come out earlier in life. They are weighed down by the baggage of commitment and responsibility (to and for their children) and are therefore less authentically gay. As Goffman (1963) suggested, the men’s spoilt (gay) identities lead to a loss of social status; in this instance, in the gay world. We argue that it is these imperatives that predominantly shaped the stories the men told in their interviews, rather than the social stigma of homosexuality. It is the failure to be honest with and about themselves and act authentically earlier in their lives that the men were compelled to justify and explain (and in a way that is what we asked them to do). Arguably earlier models of gay father identity development reinforce authenticity and coming out imperatives by framing open endorsement and integration of gay identities and the father role as the pinnacle of identity formation for PHGF (Bozett, 1981b; Miller, 1979). The men’s stories viscerally demonstrate the challenges of living with a spoilt identity and making sense of (both to the self and others) a non-normative life course. We think that discursive (e.g. Clarke & Smith, 2015) and narrative (e.g. Hammack & Cohler, 2011) approaches that have been usefully employed in research on gay identity more broadly could be drawn on in future qualitative research on PHGF’ coming out tales for teasing out the imperatives these men orient to in telling their stories and the rhetorical devices they use for crafting plausible stories about their lives. Likewise, research on the social construction and discursive management of stigma (Meisenbach, 2010) would be useful to consider in such research.

Like most research on gay fathers, our sample was relatively socially privileged – white, highly educated, middle class professionals (Carneiro et al., 2017; Goldberg et al., 2014) – and the men’s stories should be interpreted with this in mind. There has been virtually no exploration of how experiences of racism, poverty and other facets of social marginalization shape the experiences of gay fathers and PHGF specifically (Carneiro et al., 2017; Carroll, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2014), and yet US research suggests that racial and ethnic minorities in same-sex relationships are more likely to be raising children (Gates, 2015). As the most common recruitment strategy for this hidden population is off- and increasingly online gay father groups and networks, it seems likely that the use of this strategy plays a role in the recruitment of such privileged samples – Carroll (2018) reported that the gay parenting groups she observed were predominantly white. Although snowball sampling (our second recruitment strategy) has been recommended as a strategy for identifying fathers who are not associated with gay parenting organizations (Carroll, 2018), which is how we used it, it is nonetheless argued to produce samples that reflect the social positioning of the researcher (in this case a white, middle class gay man) (Braun & Clarke, 2013). One of the very few studies specifically exploring the experiences of queer parents of color notes the challenges of gaining entry and establishing trust with this group even for researchers of color (Moore, 2006). As we are not the first and no doubt will not be the last (white) researchers to lament the predominance of “the usual suspects” in our sample, queer parenting researchers need to develop alternative recruitment strategies and white researchers particularly need to find ways to build trust with queer communities of color.

A further limitation is that, as previously noted, the participants were not asked if they identified as cisgender/nontrans (although it seems likely they were all non-trans as they were all the biological fathers of their children), thus reinforcing cisnormativity through not making visible cisgender/nontrans identities. Research on trans parents remains limited, with existing research mostly addressing themes familiar from the literature on LGB parenting – such as the impact of parenting on child development, comparing socially normative (heterosexual/cisgendered) and nonnormative (gay and bisexual/trans) parents, and, in more recent research, a focus on *intentional* trans parenting (e.g., Condat et al., 2020). The handful of studies that have addressed the experiences of those who became parents before transitioning (e.g., Hines, 2006) suggest that such parents navigate some similar issues to PHGF such as disclosing to spouses/partners, relationship breakup (in some instances), forming new partner relationships and step-parenting, renegotiating relationships with ex-spouses/partners, and disclosing to children. This literature also highlights experiences unique to trans parents such as negotiating their transition with children (e.g., deciding on a new name for their children to call them rather than reversing the pronouns of mother and father) and if they remain with their spouse/partner, renegotiating the boundaries and meaning of this relationship post-transition.

As noted in the introduction, another group often overlooked and invisible in the LGBT parenting literature are bisexual men parenting with male partners. As previously noted, the use of the term “gay father” interchangeably with more inclusive language of “same-sex parenting” in the LGBT parenting literature undermines bisexual inclusion. As does the failure to disaggregate the experiences of gay and bisexual men, and the failure to consider that post-heterosexual fathers might identify as bisexual. Although responding to a call for participants for a study on “gay fathers,” three of the men expressed ambivalence about identifying with the label “gay” and uncertainty about whether or not they were bisexual. This suggests future research on post-heterosexual fathers needs to adopt a more inclusive approach to sexuality to capture the fluidity and ambivalence in these men’s expressions and understandings of their non-heterosexuality.

Conclusion

This research explored the experiences of six PHGF and their experiential journeys from heterosexually married fathers to men living (more or less) openly as gay fathers. Like the PHGF in the earliest gay father research, these men had predominantly tumultuous journeys – suppressing and closing off same-sex desires, succumbing to heteronormative convention and then wrestling with their commitment to their wife and children and their desire for men and for an authentic life. Some men had achieved some degree of integration of their gay identity and their father role, whereas others – although divorced or divorcing their wives – were still struggling. These men’s stories convey the challenges of living and making sense of a non-normative life course and a spoilt identity, and echo existing research that suggests PHGF face more challenges than intentional gay fathers in coming out and forming identities (Power et al., 2012; Tornello & Patterson, 2015).

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