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FATHERS ARE FATHERS ARE FATHERS: HOW SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT AND
SEXUAL ORIENTATION INFLUENCE THE GENDERING OF CHILDREN

By

SARAH M. FRANTZ

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2022

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Fathers are Fathers are Fathers: How Sociocultural Context and Sexual Orientation Influence the Gendering of Children

By

Sarah M. Frantz

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Anna Stetsenko

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Richard Bodnar

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Eduardo Vianna

Kristen Gillespie

Patricia Brooks

Mohan Vinjamuri

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Fathers are Fathers are Fathers: How Sociocultural Context and Sexual Orientation Influence the Gendering of Children

By

Sarah M. Frantz

Advisor: Professor Anna Stetsenko

Though the body of literature on gay father-headed families indicates that there is no significant differences on measures of gender normativity and well-being between children raised with two dads and their peers raised by heterosexual parents, there is a proliferation of anti-LGBTQ+ policies throughout the United States aimed at limiting this community's rights and silencing their lived experiences. Given that sociocultural and political environments vary greatly state-to-state, it is important to see how the specific context in which fathers live may impact their differential parenting of sons and daughters, their gender beliefs, and the way they feel they would navigate gender nonconformity in their children. To explore how fathers' sexual orientation and sociocultural environment may impact the raising and gendering of their children, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 gay and straight fathers living in two different urban settings, Fort Worth, Texas and New York, New York. Using inductive content analysis, strong patterns were found in three areas: priorities in parenting, perceptions of gender and gendering, and strategies to navigate gender nonconformity in children. Though fathers' sexual orientation did relate to answers about navigating gender nonconformity and the rigidity of gender beliefs, sociocultural context was more salient in responses about parenting priorities. Furthermore, the level of support shown for childhood gender nonconformity was contingent on the sex of the child rather than geographical location or fathers' sexual orientation. This is the first study to explore fathers' sexual orientation and sociocultural environment in their perceptions of parenting and gender, and these findings can inform future work with diverse family structures and the intergenerational perpetuation of gender conformity.

Keywords: fathers, gay parents, LGBTQ+, sociocultural context, children, parenting, gendering, nonconformity

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Chapter 1: Geography, Gendering, and Gay Fathers

Introduction

When I began graduate school, I knew I wanted to explore gender development and the ways gender is constructed, internalized, and performed over the lifecycle. To that end, I designed a study on the intergenerational transmission of gender and the motivations behind parents' efforts, both implicit and explicit, in promoting gender normative behavior in their young children.

The pilot study I conducted between 2015 and 2016 commenced my work on the gendering of children by parents. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, I interviewed mothers and fathers on the importance of "fitting in," their hypothetical reactions to gender nonconformity in their children, and the rigidity of their gender schemas. I wanted to explore the differences and similarities in responses of mothers and fathers, both those that identified as heterosexual and those that identified as homosexual. Unfortunately, I was unable to recruit any gay fathers for the pilot study, so the sample consisted of straight mothers, lesbian mothers, and straight fathers only. Every participant lived in New York City, and, though it was a small sample, it was appropriate for my goals: to explore the ways different types of parents perceived gender in general and how they navigated their role in gendering their own children. Through this study, I hoped to construct a more comprehensive interview agenda to be implemented with larger, more diverse samples.

The key takeaways from the pilot study were surprising in some ways, predictable in others, and greatly influenced the design of my current research. As expected, given the body of literature on male and female differences in gender ideology and acceptance of nonconformity, I

found that straight fathers were more uncomfortable when discussing gender nonconformity. They were less supportive when considering what they would do if their children behaved in ways thought of as inconsonant with their sex than were straight and gay mothers. These fathers also held more rigid views of masculine and feminine roles and traits, and put more emphasis on fitting in, particularly for their sons. Responses from lesbian mothers and straight mothers were quite similar in level of acceptance of nonconformity in their children, and they invoked stereotypical portrayals of gender differences far less often than did straight fathers.

One unanticipated pattern that emerged throughout every interview was the emphasis on physical, geographical location. New York City is a diverse metropolitan city and neighborhoods vary drastically in terms of socioeconomic level, cultural/ethnic identity, and access to quality (Dunn, 2019). This sample included parents from four of the five boroughs (Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn), and the neighborhoods these parents were raising their children in made a big impact on their perception of their ability to influence their children's trajectories. Depending on where they lived, the sociocultural environment was characterized as either a protective, beneficial part of their child's development, or as the socializing influence they feared most.

For parents who saw the environment as protective, New York City represented a place full of diversity and acceptance, with much more flexibility in terms of societal and gender norms than other parts of the country. These parents tended to feel in control of the external societal constraints placed on their children, perhaps because they themselves felt more acceptance and personal freedom in those neighborhoods. However, for the parents who saw their neighborhoods as full of dangerous situations or undesirable people, these external societal influences were perceived as overriding the potential impact of parenting. These parents

generally said the trajectories of their children would be determined by peer influences, and their confidence in their ability to impart values and navigate development was low. The importance all of these parents placed on geographical location inspired me to delve deeper into the ways the sociocultural environment may constrain and/or direct parenting practices, including the gendering of children.

As a person raised in Fort Worth, Texas, a geographically large but relatively homogenous area, and who now lives in one of the most diverse and densely populated cities in the United States, New York City, I began to wonder how environmental/sociocultural influences may be perceived differently by parents in each city. Fort Worth is about 350 square miles and has a population of just under a million (2022 World Population Review). New York City is slightly smaller geographically but is the home of 8.8 million people (United States Census Bureau, 2021). In Fort Worth, 63% of the population is White, and the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex has the largest percentage, at 78%, of Christians of any urban area in the United States (Lipka, 2015). Fort Worth is also the only metropolitan area in Texas to still considered to be a Republican stronghold. In contrast, the population of New York City is 42% White (United States Census Bureau, 2021), 59% Christian (Lipka, 2015), and political representation is dominated by Democrats.

Having grown up in a city I always saw as conservative and unaccepting of diversity, I began to wonder about the possible differences in parenting in general, and the gendering of children specifically, that may exist between a New York City sample and a Fort Worth sample. There is a dearth of literature comparing regional parenting practices, but there is some evidence that Southern states tend to hold more traditional views of family and gender than do areas on the West Coast and Northeast (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004). Comparisons can also be made simply

by examining differing laws and political agendas between states. I decided to modify my original interview protocol to include questions on how parents felt about where they were raising their children and whether they felt supported by their sociocultural environment.

Not only did the pilot study inspire me to compare parenting views and the reasons for promoting normative gender development in children in two highly different U.S. cities, it also reaffirmed the importance of exploring fathers' roles in gendering children. Though lesbian and straight mothers' responses were essentially indistinguishable from each other, straight fathers spoke about their children and gender very differently. Would fathers' responses be similar regardless of sexual orientation as well? There is less research on fathers' parenting practices overall, and research on gay men as fathers is still in its nascent stage. Delving into the similarities and differences between gay and straight fathers living in New York City and gay and straight fathers living in Fort Worth is needed to have a better understanding of how environment, gender, and sexual orientation intersect in parenting. This study may also help to fill in gaps in the literature on sociocultural parenting differences, on fathers' gendering of children, and on gay men as parents.

Sociopolitical Context

When the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was overturned by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) in 2015, same-sex couples were finally allowed to marry throughout the country and, presumably, were legally entitled to all the rights and benefits enjoyed by heterosexual married people (History.com Editors, 2021; Reilly, 2016). However, the sociocultural and political climate in the United States has been historically unaccepting of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities that are not

solely heterosexual or cisgender (LGBTQ+) (Gates, 2015), particularly when the issue is about these people's wish to form families. Up until the federal ruling in 2015 marrying someone of the same sex was illegal in over a quarter of U.S. states (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Legalizing same-sex marriage nationally has not unilaterally changed negative views of LGBTQ+ people, but support for this community in general has increased in the years since the overturning of DOMA. According to a 2021 Gallup Poll support for same-sex marriage has risen ten percent since 2015, with an estimated 70% of Americans now agreeing that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry (McCarthy, 2021). This is a record high, and for the first time a slim majority of Republicans support marriage equality as well.

The community itself has also expanded as more people openly identify as LGBTQ+ today than ever before. Though the U.S. Census still does not include questions about individual's sexual orientation or gender identity, there are respected nationwide polls that provide some LGBTQ+ population estimates. One poll reported that about 4.5% of Americans identify as LGBT and that number has been steadily increasing (Newport, 2018). The percentage of younger cohorts is higher than the average. This is likely because people born after 1981 grew up in a time when homosexuality was not seen as a psychological disorder, which ended with the removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1974, and when sex between consenting adults who happen to be the same sex was no longer illegal, due to the 2003 ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* by the Supreme (History.com Editors, 2021). Now, approximately 8% of millennials identify as LGBTQ+. According to the American Community Survey, as of 2019 around a million households included a same-sex couple, which is approximately 0.8% of all households in the U.S. (Taylor, 2019). The majority of these couples were married, and while marriage rates have been steadily declining for heterosexual

people, marriage rates for same-sex couples have been increasing over the past decade (Masci, Brown, & Kiley, 2019).

State of the Nation for LG-Headed Families

The current political climate nationally, as well as in certain states, does not reflect the attitudinal change of many Americans, the rise in lesbian and gay (LG) couple-headed households, or the increase in people who openly identify as LGBTQ+. To be sure, there is still a sizable segment of the American population who continue to fight against LGBTQ+ rights, as well as politicians and conservative advocacy groups who promote anti-LGBTQ+ (Masci, Brown, & Kiley, 2019). This is more common in specific regions of the country and in states with sizable religious, conservative populations. In 2017, just two years after DOMA was struck down, which was also the first time since the early 2000s that the Executive, Judicial, and Legislative branches of the federal government were controlled by Republicans and conservative judges (Rasmussen, n.d.) who historically oppose gay rights, 131 bills that would allow discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals had been proposed in 30 states.

On a federal level, since 2017, some new rights were conferred while other court decisions narrowed or withheld LGBTQ+ civil liberties. The most notable win in the fight for gay and trans rights since the overturning of DOMA came from the U.S. Supreme Court decision on the 2020 case *Bostock v. Clayton County* (Williams, 2020). This ruling made it illegal to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people in the workplace. Prior to this case, only 28 states had laws protecting this community from discrimination in employment, and seven of these states' laws only applied to public employees. This means in about half of the country between 2015 and 2020, a lesbian could legally marry her female partner one day and then be fired the next day when she put pictures of the wedding on her desk, or a man could tell a coworker he joined a gay

men's softball league and immediately be terminated. The Bostock ruling was incredibly important, but it should be remembered that this court decision only ruled job discrimination unconstitutional nationwide and does not impact legal discrimination on the state level in housing, medical offices, or foster/adoption agencies, for example.

On the legislative side, bills such as the Equality Act, H.R.5, have been proposed. "This bill prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in areas including public accommodations and facilities, education, federal funding, employment, housing, credit, and the jury system. Specifically, the bill defines and includes sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity among the prohibited categories of discrimination or segregation" (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Despite multiple polls demonstrating that the majority of Americans support equality for all people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, 2019), this bill has been passed by the Democrat-lead House of Representatives but not by the Senate as of spring 2022.

While there is no doubt that the ruling in *Bostock v. Clayton County* is a momentous step forward in the fight for equal rights for all Americans and the Equality Act, if passed, would enshrine equal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals, other rulings have privileged religious freedom or freedom of speech, both key aspects of the First Amendment, over the rights of Americans who are sexual or gender minorities. These cases include the *Masterpiece Cake Shop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* in 2017 (Alliance Defending Freedom Advocates, 2022) and *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* in 2021 (Higgins, 2021). The *Masterpiece Cake Shop* ruling, although not as wide sweeping as conservatives had hoped for, allows private businesses to refuse services to LGBTQ+ people on religious grounds in certain cases (Epps, 2018).

The *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* decision in 2021 is far more problematic and portentous for people in the LGBTQ+ community, especially for those who wish to adopt or foster a child. In an unanimous decision, the court ruled that the City of Philadelphia could not cease contracting with a Roman Catholic adoption agency based on its refusal to work with LGBTQ+ prospective parents (Higgins, 2021). Again, though narrow in scope, this is another example of a movement towards increasing rights based on the First Amendment at the expense of LGBTQ+ people. In the U.S., there were an estimated 424,000 children in foster care in 2019, and the median time spent in foster care is over a year (USA Facts, n.d.). There are arduous background checks, in-home inspections, and various criteria that one must meet in order to be deemed worthy of adopting or fostering a child. Yet this ruling, along with recently implemented laws in some states, allows people to be denied parenthood simply on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation and at the expense of nearly half a million children in need of good homes. This is the climate in which LGBTQ+ parents live and, if they are lucky enough to be able to adopt or conceive, the climate in which their children grow and develop.

Statewide Policies: Texas and New York

In terms of local and statewide policies and legislation, while some states have embraced and instituted policies to validate the LGBTQ+ experience, other states have done the opposite. Over the past few years an increasing number of bills are being proposed or implemented to limit the rights of LGBTQ+ people, particularly in conservative states with predominately Republican state legislatures. Many of these bills were designed to curtail the opportunities for these people to become parents. Texas led the nation in the number of bills proposed to limit the rights of LGBTQ+ people in 2017: seventeen bills were filed in the state which would allow LGBTQ+ discrimination by government officials, private individuals, and local businesses (Vertuno,

20017). Texas Bill 3859, known as the “Freedom to Serve Children Act,” was signed into law in the summer of 2017. This bill allows tax-funded foster and adoption agencies to refuse to place a child in the care of LGBTQ+ couples under the guise of religious freedom (texaslgbtqialaw.com). According to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, the number of children in foster care or other substitute care in Texas was 29,818 in 2020 (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2020). Over a quarter of foster and adoption agencies in Texas are run by religious organizations and these groups now have carte blanche to deny parenthood to LGBTQ+ people without fear of reprisal. This bill can also be used to justify denying a biologically related adult family member, such as an aunt or uncle, from taking custody of a child relative in foster care if that adult identifies as LGBTQ+. Texas’s Freedom to Serve Children Act could also permit foster parents or people within the adoption or foster agencies to require gay and trans youth in their custody to attend conversion therapy (Lang, 2017). This is despite the fact that the American Psychological Association did a thorough review of studies on conversion, or reparative, therapy and found it to be not only ineffective but detrimental to individuals’ psychological health (American Psychological Association, 2015).

Other states have adopted similar bills. Of the anti-LGBTQ+ bills that have successfully been implemented across the nation, a unified goal is clear: “preventing the creation or support of families led by same-sex couples” (Lang, 2017). Texas continues its prejudicial treatment of LGBTQ+ citizens each year as it proposes and implements more and more bills that negatively impact the lives of Texans— adults and minors— who happen to love or self-identify differently than other people. In 2021, 50 bills were proposed in Texas targeting this community, especially gay and trans youth. There are already No Promotion of Homosexuality laws, generally known as “No Promo Homo laws”, in Texas which limit the way educators can talk about gay and trans

people or provide accurate information about sexual safety for non-heterosexual students in health or sex education classes (2022 Texas Equality, 2022). Many of the new bills, if passed, would further infringe on the education and safety of gay and trans youth in school.

One recent and unequivocally unjustified moves by the Texas State Government occurred in October of 2021 when the LGBTQ+ youth suicide prevention resources listed by the Department of Family and Protective Services were removed from their website (Derysh, 2021). Governor Abbott made this move after a gubernatorial candidate running against him accused him of promoting “transgender ideology.” Republican candidate Don Huffines accused Abbott of publicizing “very disturbing information,” referring to the suicide prevention resources. He stated, “They are promoting transgender sexual politics to Texas youth. These are not Texas values; these are not Republican values.” Governor Abbott, also a Republican, had the suicide prevention resources removed from the website within hours. I would be remiss if I did not point out the glaring inaccuracy in Huffines’ statement: gender identity, including transgender identity, has nothing to do with sexual behavior, just as sexual orientation does not equate to atypical gender expression or identity. This is a frequent error and/or a demonstration of purposeful ignorance often found in conservative circles, and this kind of statement about Texas values being anti-LGBTQ+ is sadly not unusual in the political discourse in the state. According to the Texas GOP 2020 Platform’s list of ten key principles, the sixth belief is in “self-sufficient families, founded on the traditional marriage of one natural man and one natural woman” (Republican Party of Texas, 2020, p. 2). Nearly one in twenty Americans, and one in thirteen millennials, identify as LGBTQ+, and Texas has the third highest rate of same-sex households in the country: 77,134 Texas homes included a same-sex couple in 2019 (Taylor, 2019). This

number is likely rising despite Republican politicians in this state claiming gay and trans “politics” are not Texas “values.”

Texas is just one of many states with policies targeting the rights of this community. The 2021 State LGBTQ+ Business Climate Index uses “a multidimensional index based on a broad array of markers of policies, attitudes and measurements relating to LGBTQ+ inclusion” collected predominately through data partners: The Movement Advancement Project, The United States Transgender Survey, and The Williams Institute (Out Leadership Team, 2021). According to this index, Texas ranked 41 out of 50 in its treatment of the LGBTQ+ community. On the other side of the spectrum is New York, which is now considered the best state to live in if you are part of this community (Cerullo, 2021). Historically, New York City was the birthplace of the Gay Activist Alliance, an organization focusing on politics with the goal to “secure basic human rights, dignity and freedom for all gay people”, which began in 1969 following the Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village (Our Family Coalition, n.d.)

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, New York has enacted many policies to protect the rights and dignity of people identifying as LGBTQ+ (The Office of Children and Family Services, n.d.). In 2003, before the fight for LGBTQ+ equality was part of the broader public discourse, New York implemented the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act (SONDA), a comprehensive anti-discrimination act that “prohibited discrimination in employment, housing, education, public accommodations, credit, and the exercise of civil liberties”. Gender identity was likewise protected in New York’s 2019 Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act (GENDA). Along with the protections included in the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act, GENDA also applies to education and expressly “prohibits [schools from mandating] grooming, uniform, or appearance standards based on sex stereotypes.” New York also passed

the Marriage Equality Act in 2011, years before DOMA was overturned on a national level, and banned conversion therapy for minors during the 2019-2020 legislative session. Additionally, the Dignity Act was first implemented in 2012 to protect school age children from intolerance and unequal treatment based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Lastly, but most pertinent for this study design, the Office of Children and Family Services of New York has published the Standards of Practice for Adoption Services which prohibits the rejection of adoption applicants on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

As demonstrated by the policies and court rulings described above, the treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals and their families is highly variable state-to-state. Societal stigma, prejudice, and legal discrimination can greatly impact both personal psychological health and overall family functioning (Golombok et al., 2017). Though more studies on LGBTQ+ families are being conducted today than previously, given how rapidly the rights and social climate experienced by this community can change, it is imperative to explore how sociocultural and political environments impact the lives of LGBTQ+ families.

Gender Development

One of the most studied aspects of lesbian and gay (LG) parented children pertains to gender development and identity. This is based, at least in part, on the pervasive and erroneous belief, largely informed by heteronormative values, hegemonic masculinity, and stereotypical portrayals in popular culture, that gay men are universally effeminate, and lesbians are universally masculine (Connell, 1992). However, gender identity and expression are separate and apart from sexual orientation. Simply because someone is attracted to another person of the same sex, does not mean that their personal gender identity or expression is nonconforming. However, the perception that gender and sexuality are terminally entangled is widespread. This

preconceived notion that heterosexuality is a requirement for gender conformity is a highly problematic conflation and is used to argue that children raised by gay fathers or lesbian mothers will inherently model gender nonconforming behavior.

However, gender development is far more complex and direct modeling is generally not seen as the dominant factor in gender development. If it were, we would also expect to find the sons of single mothers more feminine and the daughters of single fathers more masculine than their peers with heterosexual, cisgender married parents. This is not the case nor is it the case that children of LG parents exhibit significant differences in their gender development, identity, and expression. Many sociocultural influences seem to contribute to gender beliefs and stereotypical behaviors, and parents' gender identity is generally seen as having a limited impact. However, according to the literature, the way gender is perceived by parents does seem to have some influence on children's gender ideology, or "the set of values, beliefs and attitudes a person holds about the meaning of biological sex and gender" (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016).

With few exceptions, societies are organized, first and foremost, by sex, and the labeling of people as male or female has become a necessary and immutable strategy for navigating social relationships and societal organization (West & Zimmerman, 1987). When sex is confounded with gender, however, this dichotomization of the population is detrimental to healthy and unconstrained development of individuals and societies (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016). Hegemonic views of gender are embedded in the socialization of developing children, reflecting the cultural-historical conception of each gender and requiring conformity to pervasive social norms dictating what is appropriate for individuals based on their sex (Connell, 1992).

Gender and sex, though often confounded or used interchangeably, are two separate yet related constructs. Sex refers to the physical body, the biological composition of a person (Fausto-Sterling et al., 2012). Gender, on the other hand, refers to “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex” (American Psychological Association, 2012, p.11). One’s biology does not determine gender: the sociopolitical and historically contingent culture one lives in creates and defines the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that are deemed appropriate for males and for females. Culturally ordained and socially maintained views of normative gender for a male and for a female are transmitted to children and serve to preserve and perpetuate unequal gender relations (Martin et al., 2002).

Gender develops overtime and begins quite early. Habituation studies have demonstrated that as early as 3-4 months of age infants can distinguish between male and female faces, and at around 10 months they can make stereotypical associations between gendered objects (i.e. purse, tie), implying the formation of primitive stereotypes (Martin & Ruble, 2010). Studies such as these suggest that even at a preverbal, sensorimotor stage infants are able to recognize overt physical differences between males and females and have, to some extent, already formed expectations of gender appropriate behaviors and objects. In toddlerhood, children learn to accurately label themselves as boys or girls and, concurrent with self-labeling, show marked preferences for gender-typed toys and activities, and for same-sex playmates (Martin et al., 2002). Gender constancy, the understanding that biological sex is fixed, is achieved around children’s fifth birthday (Fausto-Sterling et al., 2012), and at this time, gender cognitions and stereotypes tend to be rigid but become more flexible with age (Martin & Ruble, 2010).

Constructing Gender

Given that gender is a sociocultural construct that develops over time, it is clear that infants and young children's environments and early socializations play key roles in the development of gender (Moen et al., 1997). Parents in the U.S., for the most part, create and control the environments of their young children and are usually the main socializing force in children's lives before they begin school (Fausto-Sterling et al., 2012). Thus, parents likely influence children's foundational gender development to a large extent, whether it is from direct socialization of gender norms and cognitions, through teaching or conditioning, or indirectly through creating normative gendered environments or modeling gendered behavior (Min et al., 2012). The mechanisms through which parents demonstrate and/or reinforce gender norms and cognitions are still unclear (Fausto-Sterling et al., 2012); however, much of the literature indicates a strong intergenerational transmission of social values and gender notions (Min et al., 2012; Moen et al., 1997).

Literature on the trajectory of gender ideology in the U.S., found that cohort turnover was strongly associated with gender ideological beliefs and successive generations tend to have more flexible views of gender and endorse egalitarianism at higher levels than previous generations (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004). In other words, as each generation ages into adulthood and parenthood, ideas about gender are transmitted to the next generation who, in turn, further shift or expand gender beliefs and norms, and so on. However, recent cohorts have shown greater differences between the ideological beliefs of males and of females than in previous cohorts, with females more likely to endorse egalitarianism than males. Interestingly, men who are more egalitarian are frequently found to have higher levels of marital satisfaction and are more likely to become fathers. Donnelly and Twenge (2017) conducted a cross-temporal meta-analysis of the

Bem Sex Role Inventory to explore changes in men and women's self-identification with masculine and feminine traits between 1974 and 2012. They found that while women have increasingly described themselves as embodying "masculine" traits over the decades, men's self-identification has remained stable. It seems that women have been embracing a widening range of traits while males identify with traditionally masculine traits at similar rates as they did four decades before. It seems that gender may be becoming more flexible for women and the idea of what gender normativity is for females may be broadening, but this trend does not seem to be happening for men and masculinity.

Beyond the historical context in which a person lives, research into the correlates of gender beliefs also consistently point to sociodemographic determinates, such as age, education, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, geographical region, and sex (Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Filler & Jennings, 2015). In one review of the literature on the predictors of gender ideology, researchers found that people living in urban centers held more egalitarian beliefs than did those living in rural parts of the United States, though this trend has lessened as opportunities for education and employment have spread throughout the country (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Regional differences between the South and the rest of the country likewise show differences in endorsement of traditional gender ideologies, but these differences have lessened in recent decades as well. Exposure to egalitarian beliefs, whether through education, socialization, or family process, does predict higher acceptance of gender flexibility, while exposure to traditional beliefs through the same systems have the opposite effect. Religion, particularly conservative Protestantism, typically promotes traditional gender roles, especially within the family, and simply living in a state with a sizable fundamentalist population is negatively associated with the endorsement of egalitarianism.

Much of the research on intergenerational transmission of norms focuses solely on maternal influence (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016). Females typically hold more egalitarian beliefs than men, and mothers generally spend significantly more time with children than fathers. Fathers' are seen as the secondary parent in Western culture and are often expected to provide for the family financially rather than act as emotional, nurturing resources for children (Martin, 2005). When we do examine fathers' impact on children's gender development and beliefs, the majority of the literature indicates that fathers hold more traditional gender beliefs, engage in more sex-typed play with children, and are more concerned with gender conformity than mothers (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Men are also more likely to hold negative views of transgender people and gender nonconformity in general. Fathers are often more involved in their sons' lives than their daughters, and sons' ideology is more influenced by fathers than is daughters (Halpern & Jenkins, 2016).

One study, after controlling for sociodemographic variables, found that parental perceptions of gender, rather than the behavior parents' model, are the strongest predictors of children's gender notions, particularly in same-sex dyads (Filler & Jennings, 2015). In 2002, a meta-analysis of 43 articles examining children's notions about gender as related to their parents' gender schemas was published (Tenenbaum & Leaper). The researchers found a small, positive correlation between parents' gender schemas and their children's gender notions. Interestingly, the impact of parental gender schemas depended on the type of gender schema: gender schemas about others, rather than gender schemas about the self, influenced children. Thus, it was not parents' own adherence to gender norms, but how they viewed gender in society that guided children's understanding of gender. If this is the case, perhaps this partially explains why children of LG parents and those of heterosexual parents do not differ in terms of gender

development/gender notions: whether or not a parent readily adheres to normative gender/sexual roles, he or she may still have internalized and subsequently endorsed traditional gender ideologies which reflect overt societal expectations, and this is what most impacts the gender development of children.

Along with parents' perceptions of gender, some studies have indicated that parents' gendered behaviors and division of labor in the home may impact the gender development of children (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016). Lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents who have instituted a strict division of household labor tend to have children with more traditional gender cognitions and ideologies. The sex composition of the parents had no bearing on children's gender beliefs in these studies. It does not seem that children are simply modeling their same-sex parent to understand gender and gender role adherence: these studies suggest the way parents discuss gender with their children or create gendered/inequitable environments predominately contributes to children's gendered outcomes.

In a ruling in favor of the Defense of Marriage Act, New York Court of Appeals in 2006 stated, "Intuition and experience suggests that a child benefits from having before his or her eyes, every day, living models of what both a man and a woman are like" (Hartocollis, 2006). But intuition and experience should not be used to make such profound judgments about family composition or to enact policies when there are empirical studies showing the efficacy of LG parenting, as well as studies repudiating the notion that gender is simply learned through modeling. Additionally, studies which support the premise that children must have both a male and a female parent in the home for optimal development frequently simply compare samples of biologically intact families and single mother-headed families (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Thus,

what is really being examined is the effect of having two parents in the home versus having one female parent in the home.

Conducting Research with the Families of Same-Sex Couples

Over a decade and a half ago, in 2005, the American Psychological Association released a brief on lesbian and gay (LG) parents and their children (Patterson, 2005). The brief reviewed 59 studies on LG parenting and children's outcomes in an effort to disseminate the mounting evidence that children of gay and lesbian parents are no different than their peers raised by heterosexual parents and to promote gay rights. In this publication, the claim is made 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" (p.15).

According to the APA brief, the main concerns voiced by the courts in opposition to LG parents revolve around their children's gender/sexual identity, psychological wellbeing, and social relationships (Patterson, 2005). As stated in this brief, children raised by lesbian mothers or gay fathers are frequently thought to be more likely to identify as homosexual themselves or show what is perceived to be disturbances in gender role or gender identity. Furthermore, these children are believed to "be less psychologically healthy than other children" (Patterson, 2005, p.8), particularly in terms of adjustment, emotional health, and behavioral problems. It is also presumed that problems with social relationships are a common feature in children of LG parents due to bullying and societal stigma. The brief reviews the literature on these topics of concern and concludes that in each area the available research indicates no significant differences between the children of lesbian and gay parents and the children of heterosexual parents. The research presented by the APA in this brief consistently shows these children to be gender-

typical, psychologically healthy, and socially adept. The gender composition and sexual orientation of parents does not seem to negatively impact child development.

Though this brief was an important contribution to the ongoing debates on gay marriage and same-gender parenting, it has been heavily critiqued by researchers for the sweeping “no difference” claim made therein (i.e. Eggebeen, 2012; Marks, 2012; Perrin et al., 2013). The majority of research on this topic does suggest there is no significant difference between children raised by LG parents and those raised by heterosexual parents (Amato, 2012; Patterson, 2005). However, many of the studies that were included in the APA brief were not generalizable and used suboptimal sampling. When examining the breakdown of the studies included in this brief, the most obvious and important issue is that a resounding statement is made about both children raised by lesbian mothers and those raised by gay fathers when only 8 of the 59 published studies reviewed in the brief included gay fathers and/or their children as participants.

It is fair to say that, in 2005, the APA may have been premature in stating there is no difference between children raised by gay and lesbian parents and those raised by heterosexual parents (Marks, 2012). Though more research has been conducted on this topic in recent years, even current research is limited both by the small percentage of the total U.S. population LG families comprise and by the lack of population-based data on the American LGBTQ+ community in general. Large, nationally representative samples are still rarely being used because national surveys seldom include questions about sexual orientation/gender identity of children’s parents. In fact, activists and researchers have fought to get LG families and LGBTQ+ individuals counted in the U.S. Census for years: the 2020 Census was expected to be the first to include items about sexual orientation and gender identity, thus providing demographic data on this community (Kellaway, 2014). This was greatly anticipated by social scientists wishing to

better understand and study this segment of the population, and it was needed to secure the allocation of resources and access to services needed in the LGBTQ+ community (Visser, 2017).

Though plans for these changes to the 2020 U.S. Census were underway during Barack Obama's presidency, the Trump Administration (2017-2021) halted and/or reversed much of the progress that had been made over the past two decades on LGBTQ+ rights. It was announced in March 2017 that no items pertaining to sexual orientation or gender identity would be included in the 2020 Census (Visser, 2017). Without census data, no accurate estimate of the LGBTQ+ population or their children can be reported. For example, in 2013 the National Health Interview Survey estimated that there were 130,000 married same-gender couples in the country while the American Community Survey estimated 250,000 (Gates, 2015), both of which are government funded, large-scale studies. I have found no estimates of LG families' socioeconomic status or other demographic information, though studies conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015 do suggest that same-sex couples, as compared to opposite-sex couples, are more likely to have higher incomes, higher levels of education, and both partners are more likely to be employed. Census data is needed to define the parameters of the LGBTQ+ community in order to recruit samples reflective of the greater population. Research on LG parented children is often critiqued or discounted because samples are not generalizable (Marks, 2012). Without knowing the precise size and demographic details of the LGBTQ+ population, creating a truly generalizable study is not feasible.

It may not be feasible at this time to conduct population-based studies on LG parents and their children. However, the research that has been conducted does generally confirm the APA's "no difference" claim. Studies conducted on relatively small samples may not be immediately

generalizable but can provide important information on how LG families function and the gender development and well-being of the children in these families.

Current Research on LG-Headed Families

Bills, such as Texas's "Freedom to Serve Children Act," are premised not only on religious freedom but also on the vague legal dictate of doing what is in "the best interest of the child". Support for limiting the ability of LGBTQ+ married couples to become parents comes from preconceived notions about the efficacy of LGBTQ+ people's parenting and the wellbeing of their children (Patterson, 2005). As previously stated, the main concerns voiced by the courts and policymakers in opposition to LG parenting revolve around unsubstantiated fears about children's gender/sexual identity, psychological wellbeing, and sociality. However, the vast majority of studies and meta-analyses conducted in recent years have demonstrated that there are no significant differences between the children raised by heterosexual parents and those raised by LG parents, including in terms of gender development.

The first nationally representative study with a large sample size was conducted by Rosenfeld in 2010. Using data from the 2000 U.S. Census, Rosenfeld analyzed whether there was a difference between the children of LG couples and the children of heterosexual married couples in terms of normal progression through school. In 2000, self-reported married same-gender couples were automatically recoded as unmarried partners so there is no accurate way of knowing how many of the LG couples were actually married. This is unfortunate because studies have shown that children residing with cohabitating parents have more negative outcomes than children residing with married parents (Sarantakos, 1996). Rosenfeld identified 2,030 children living with lesbian mothers, 1,472 living with gay fathers, and 700,000 living with heterosexual

parents. Children were in fourth or eighth grade. Using the age of the child and the grade he or she was in at school, Rosenfeld deduced whether the child had been held back a grade. When socioeconomic level was controlled for, there was no difference in school progress between children with LG parents and those with heterosexual parents in normal progression through school.

This is one of the largest studies of children with LG parents to date. The outcome studied, students' normal progression through school (i.e. not being held back a grade), is narrow because this is the only child outcome variable included in the 2000 Census. The U.S. Census in 2000 also did not count married LG couples, instead recording them as unmarried partners. This is pertinent because child outcomes in heterosexual families, including on aspects of school achievement, are better when parents are not just living together but are legally married. The 2020 Census did separate married and cohabitating same-sex couples for the first time, which could improve research designs like this one, but, as previously stated, it did not include the planned items pertaining to sexual and gender identity (Visser, 2017). Even given the limited scope of Rosenfeld's study, it is the only example in the literature of a Census-based sample that I have been able to locate, and school success is associated with better parenting practices. The fact that there are no differences in school progression for children with LG parents may be indicative of successful parenting by lesbian mothers and gay fathers (Potter, 2012).

Academic achievement of children with LG parents was also investigated by Potter (2012) using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study- Kindergarten Cohort. This study was sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics and surveyed participants at 7 timepoints between kindergarten and eighth grade. Of the 19,043 child participants, Potter identified 158 who were raised by lesbian or gay couples at at least one timepoint. Of the 158

children identified as being raised by same-gender parents, 90% were in lesbian headed households. This is one of the few longitudinal studies conducted using LG-parented children. Survey data collected at each timepoint from both the focal child and a parent were used to assess academic achievement, gauged by age-appropriate math assessments. When only current family structure, based on the adult caregiver(s) in the child's home, and math assessment score were analyzed, children of same-gender parents were expected to score 3.4 points lower on average ($p= 0.001$) than their peers raised by married, biological parents at the first timepoint. Children from nontraditional families, defined as any family not headed by biological married parents, were statistically indistinguishable from each other regardless of parent(s)' gender or sexual orientation when only these two variables were analyzed. Using HLM analyses to examine the association between current family structure, number of family transitions and math assessment scores, Potter demonstrated that differences found between groups were not resultant of having gay or lesbian parents but were instead indicative of the number of family transitions experienced by the child. When the number of family transitions and the family structure, as well as select sociodemographic variables, were factored into analysis, kindergarteners with LG parents scored one point higher on the math assessment test than did their peers with married biological parents. The results of this study suggest that, though there are some differences among children raised in families with various structures, they do not appear to be related to having LG parents. Differences seem to be reflective of the number of family transitions, not the sexual orientation of parents.

This study demonstrates how difficult it is to identify and locate children with same-gender parents. Of the 19,042 participants, only 158 had same-gender parents in their household at any point during their elementary and middle school years, and only 16 of these children came

from gay father-headed households (Potter, 2012). Like many other studies of LG families, analysis was conducted with children of lesbians and children of gay men collapsed into one group. This is problematic, given the possible differences between having two women as central caregivers and having two men as central caregivers. Possible differences between lesbian and gay families include SES, the effects of compounded prejudice (cumulative effects of being a gender minority and a sexual minority), and possible gender-influences (Golombok et al., 2017). Though these families deal with many of the same societal issues and prejudices which may impact family functioning, gay fathers and lesbian mothers comprise two distinct groups and should be treated as such in research examining the efficacy of their parenting and the outcomes of their children.

No other large and/or population-based studies on LG parenting and child outcomes have been published in the U.S. to my knowledge. However, more and more studies are being conducted on LG families and a variety of research methods are being utilized. Studies with fewer participants may lack generalizability but research of this kind still offers important insight into the effects of family structure and often illuminates the ways parents impact development in general.

Another longitudinal study was conducted by Goldberg and Garcia (2016) on adoptive families and gender-typed play behavior. Forty-eight gay, 56 lesbian and 77 heterosexual 2-parent families were recruited during the preadoption stage through adoption agencies across the U.S. Each couple had at least one adopted child at the onset of their participation and researchers investigated children's gender development over three timepoints (mean ages 2.8, 3.9, and 6.1 years). Parent participants were predominately white and their children were racially diverse. At each timepoint, both parents completed the Preschool Activity Inventory (PSAI), a 24-item

parent-report measure gauging children's interest in stereotypical gendered toys and behaviors, as well as their masculine or feminine characteristics. At the first timepoint, reports on the PSAI indicated that children with lesbian mothers were the least gender-typed, particularly their sons, and there was no difference between gay fathers' children and heterosexual parents' children. Additionally, gender-typed play behavior remained stable over time for daughters in all groups but masculine play behavior increased in sons across all groups. It is important to note that these results are based on a parent-report measure, the PSAI, and not on actual observations of children. It is possible that lesbian mothers are more comfortable reporting gender nonconforming behavior in their children, and particularly in their sons, than are other types of parents.

This study demonstrates that there may be some differences between children raised by lesbian mothers and those raised by gay fathers, and combining the two groups in analysis, at least when examining gender development, should be avoided (Goldberg & Garcia, 2016). Gender development, which encompasses aspects of gender role adherence and gender-typed behavior (Farr et al., 2010), has been shown to be impacted by parents but does not implicate modeling as the main source of gender beliefs or identity (Tennenbaum & Leaper, 2002). It seems logical that peer groups and social climate may direct gender development most strongly. However, the early environment also seems to play a role, as shown in the study by Goldberg and Garcia (2016). If children were simply modeling their parents, the daughters of gay fathers would be expected to be less gender-typed because they do not have a female role model in their home. Yet both sons and daughters of gay fathers demonstrated typical gender-play behavior. However, the sons and daughters of lesbian mothers both showed less gender-typed behavior than children with heterosexual and gay parents, particularly at the earliest timepoint. Perhaps

the environment provided by lesbians is less gender-typed (Goldberg & Garcia, 2016). Also, lesbians have been shown to be more accepting of gender atypicality than heterosexual parents and thus may be more willing to report it on the PSAI (Kane, 2006). It is important to remember that not conforming to gender roles and having more flexible gender schemas is not necessarily detrimental (Bem, 1983), especially in an era when traditional gender roles are rapidly changing and liberalizing. According to the seminal papers by Bem (1983) and West and Zimmerman (1987), being less gender-typed can be psychologically healthier than conforming to traditional, prescriptive gender norms.

Another study using the PSAI was conducted by Farr, Forssell and Patterson (2010). These researchers used 5 other measures alongside the PSAI to explore the gender development and adjustment of adopted children in LG and straight families (2010). Though this study is not longitudinal, only including children averaging 3 years of age, it is unique because multiple measures were used, and both parents and teachers/caregivers participated. This study investigated how parent sexual orientation affects children's gender development and psychological adjustment. Parenting stress and parents' relationship quality with both their children and their partners were also assessed. The study included 106 families recruited through large, corporate adoption agencies: 29 gay couples, 27 lesbian couples, and 50 heterosexual couples. Participants were predominately White, children were racially diverse, and families were similar in terms of SES and length of parents' relationship. The results of this study suggest that children in LG families are as well-adjusted as children in traditional families. Gender-typed play behavior was not significantly different among family types. Analysis also indicated that children's adjustment is negatively related to parental stress and positively related to parents' couple relationship quality.

Farr, Forssell and Patterson's study, though not longitudinal, used multiple measures, as well as teacher-report data, to assess gender development and adjustment (2010). The addition of teachers' reports on the PSAI may explain the differing findings on the gender development of children with LG parents in this study and that of Goldberg and Garcia (2016). It is reasonable to suggest that lesbian mothers may be more likely to report less gendered behavior because they have been shown to be supportive of gender flexibility (Kane, 2006), while parents less supportive of behaviors not congruent with their child's gender may report it less. With the addition of teachers' responses on the PSAI, the actual behavior of the child across settings can be assessed, and this may be a more accurate snapshot of gender development. Alternatively, the fact that these children are in schools or caregiving facilities outside the home and around peers of other family types may have an impact on gender development, including steering it towards a more traditional course. This study also explores the couple relationships within family structures, moving beyond a simply dichotomization of LG parents and heterosexual parents. Sexuality and gender of co-parents have been thought to affect child outcomes, but, given the consistent finding of "no difference", family function seems to be a more salient indicator of child well-being and development (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010).

A similar study was conducted in the United Kingdom and utilized a mixed method approach, including the PSAI among other data collection techniques (Golombok et al, 2014). This was the first study on gay, lesbian and heterosexual adoptive families and their children conducted outside of the United States. Participants included two-parent adoptive families: 41 gay father-headed families, 20 lesbian-headed families and 49 heterosexual-headed families. Each family had a child between 4 and 8 years-old, with a mean age of 6, who had lived with the adoptive family for at least a year. A parent in each family completed multiple written measures

and a semi-structured interview. Both parents and teachers completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the PSAI. Parent-child observations were also conducted. Multiple differences were found between family types. During the observations, gay fathers demonstrated higher levels of warmth, more interaction, and less disciplinary aggression with their children than did heterosexual parents. Gay and lesbian parents reported lower levels of stress and psychological problems than did heterosexual parents on the parental well-being questionnaires. On the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) the children of gay fathers showed less externalizing problems than heterosexual parents' children, particularly in terms of hyperactivity. There were no differences between groups in terms of gender-typed play behavior as assessed by the PSAI.

This is a strong study because it implemented multiple-methodologies (teacher-report measures, parent-report measures, and parent-child observations) . Again, this is a small study in general, but, relatively speaking, 41 gay-father headed families is a reasonable size given the difficulty in locating these families in the general population. It is telling that the first non-U.S. study to be conducted on LG and heterosexual adoptive families was published as recently as 2014. This indicates how new this kind of research is in the field of developmental psychology. The findings that gay fathers in this study were warmer, more responsive, and less stressed than heterosexual parents deserves further investigation. The children in this sample averaged 6 years of age and had been living with the adoptive family for a minimum of one year. Thus, many of these children may have experienced multiple transitions prior to placement. However, the children of gay fathers seemed to be thriving.

Another study by Golombok and colleagues (2017) used a similar mixed-method research paradigm in the United States with 40 gay father-headed families created through

surrogacy and 55 lesbian mother-headed families created through donor insemination. Children were between 3 and 9 years-old and had lived with their same-sex parents since birth. Both parents completed a home observation with their child, as well as measures on quality of parenting, children's adjustment, and perceived stigma (perception of negative consequences associated with being gay). Teachers also completed measures on children's adjustment using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Analysis of data revealed that children of gay fathers showed lower levels of internalizing problems than those with lesbian mothers. There were no differences regarding externalizing problems. There was no significant difference between parenting quality, parent-child interactions, or perceived stigma between gay fathers and lesbian mothers. An interesting finding was that parenting quality and perceived stigma were predictive factors of children's externalizing problems for both children of lesbian mothers and those of gay fathers; specifically, higher levels of perceived stigma were correlated with higher levels of externalizing problems.

Though there was no heterosexual comparison group, in my estimation this study still has much to offer for the following reasons. Golombok and colleagues (2017) included a parent-child observation measure in the home, moving the research beyond parent and teacher reports and allowed the researcher a glimpse of how the family functions in day-to-day interactions within the ecologies of their homes. Furthermore, the interactions between parent and child in this study were analyzed by a psychiatrist who identified problem behaviors, also strengthening the study's validity. This is one of the first studies to use only biological LG parents and their committed co-parents. Though no heterosexual comparison was possible, it was an appropriate sample when the effects of stigma and prejudice on family function and child outcome was being investigated. Heterosexual parents do not have to justify their family structure or fight for the

right to have children, nor do they have to deal with systemic homophobia in order to create their families. If stigma impacts family function and child development, the people who are the targets of stigma are the people who should be studied. The finding that perceived prejudice of the parent may impact children's psychological well-being and development should be further explored. If societal prejudice and homophobia are repeatedly shown to be negative factors in child development, this must be taken into consideration by researchers, lawmakers, and laypeople alike. When the argument against same-gender marriage and adoption/surrogacy is partially based on doing what is best for children, and it is this prejudice against LGBTQ+ families that negatively impacts children, granting rights and liberalizing views on sexuality and family should be the focus for improving the well-being of the children of LG parents.

Meta-Analyses

One of the first meta-analyses on LG parenting, conducted by Crowl, Ahn, and Baker (2007), investigated developmental outcomes of children with straight, gay, and lesbian parents, particularly in terms of gender and well-being. There were 19 studies included in this meta-analysis, each investigating the well-being, gender development, and parent-child relationship of children with straight, gay, and lesbian parents. From the 19 studies, 64 effect sizes were identified. The total number of participants was 564 in LG-headed families and 641 in straight parent-headed households. The mean age of children was 10.4 years, with a range of 5-24 years. The statistical results showed no significant differences in well-being, gender identity, or gender role behavior among these groups of children. In fact, the only significant difference found was in parent-child relationship quality, with same-sex parents reporting more positive relationships with their children ($z = 2.84, p < .01$). Unfortunately, this study collapsed gay father-headed

families and lesbian mother-headed families into the same group and so comparisons can only be made between children of heterosexual parents and those of same-sex parents.

Fedewa, Black, and Ahn (2015) used a meta-analytic approach to investigate the effects of parent's gender and sexuality on adolescents' outcomes. Thirty-three published and unpublished articles from 1979 to 2009, all of which included a heterosexual comparison group, were analyzed. Total number of participants and average age of adolescents was not reported. Studies implemented standardized measures, like the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, structured interviews, and/or observational methods to explore parent-child relationship quality, gender development, cognitive development, and adjustment. The researchers define adjustment as emotional well-being, and ability to engage in socioculturally-appropriate behavior. There was no difference between adolescents raised by LG parents and those raised by heterosexual parents in terms of cognitive development, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Differences did arise when examining children's gender role behavior, measured with surveys like the PSAI, interviews, and observations. Using 18 effect sizes, the overall mean effect size was 0.10 with a standard error of 0.05, indicating a significant difference. Children of same-sex parents exhibited more traditional gender play and behavior than did children of heterosexual parents. There were also differences in children's psychological adjustment. Based on measures like the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist, as well as semi-structured interviews, psychiatric assessments, and observations, children of same-sex parents were found to be significantly better adjusted than peers from heterosexual families.

In 2016, Miller, Kors, and Macfie published the first meta-analysis to specifically compare psychological adjustment of children with gay fathers and those with heterosexual parents. Ten studies, both published and unpublished, conducted over the past 10 years in the

U.S. and abroad were analyzed utilizing the quality-effects model for analysis. The studies took place between 2005 and 2015 and included children between 1.5 and 18 years old. Papers were selected based on having a sample which included gay father-headed families and heterosexual parent-headed families and investigated psychological adjustment of children. “Psychological adjustment was defined as the measure of a child’s emotional functioning, self-esteem, and general mental health” (p. 16). The measures used by the studies in this meta-analysis were generally questionnaires, such as the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist and the Strengths and Weaknesses Questionnaire. Using 35 standard mean differences, tests were run using the fixed-effects model of statistical analysis, as well as the random-effects and quality effects models. The authors found that in all 3 models children raised by gay fathers were significantly better adjusted than children raised by heterosexual parents.

Drawing Conclusions

Over the past two decades, more studies have been conducted on LG individuals and their children. Gay fathers are still greatly understudied, but the literature that has investigated gay-father headed families has resoundingly reaffirmed the “no difference” claim put forth by the APA in 2005 (Patterson), and differences that are significant generally reflect healthier functioning. These families are thriving and more qualitative studies should be conducted to explore the unique ways these fathers parent and how they navigate gender development in their children. More research is needed now, in particular, as many newly attained LGBTQ+ rights are beginning to be stripped away both at the state and federal level in the United States (O’Hara, 2017).

Simply because a study is not immediately generalizable does not mean that it has no merit. In the years since the APA brief, more studies on the efficacy of LG parenting have been published, particularly those investigating the gender development of children with LG parents. The body of research specifically on gay fathers and their children demonstrates the unique strengths of this type of family structure and deserves both further examination and more exploration.

Even with the mounting evidence that children of LG parents are developing similarly to their peers with heterosexual parents, courts and politicians have routinely asserted that children must have a father and a mother, preferably married and living together, for healthy development, especially when it comes to gender development (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). The presumption is that gender is learned through modeling and that mothers and fathers parent in qualitatively different ways, with both integral to healthy development and gender normativity (Gerson, 2002). This is a pervasive heteronormative belief in the United States, and it is prejudicial to both LGBTQ+ parents and single heterosexual mothers and fathers. Though not supported by empirical research, these preconceived notions about gender development, as well as the entrenched desire to maintain traditional values and gender roles in U.S. society, have contributed greatly to policies aimed at barring LGBTQ+ individuals from becoming parents (Patterson, 2005).

Gender Theory

Sex and gender are frequently confounded: gender roles, traits, and identities are thought of as inherent, intrinsic aspects of a person derived from the physical body and to think otherwise is to reject the natural order of humanity. One example of this can be found in reports that the

Trump administration considered implementing a federal definition of gender as a biological endowment that is fixed at birth (Green et al., 2018). This was an attempt to silence people who do not conform to a gender binary based on their sex category, but it also made a clear statement about sex and gender being synonymous. It reflects a belief that gender is innate, masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive, and the traditional roles of men and women are natural and must be maintained.

An everyday example of the compounding of sex and gender in our society can be seen in the recent trend of “gender-reveal” parties (Gieseler, 2018). Expecting parents now frequently hold gender-reveal events to announce the sex of their babies. Typically, there is some type of object, like cake or confetti, that is either pink or blue to distinguish if the baby will be a girl or a boy. Parents wanting to celebrate the impending birth of their child with family and friends is wonderful and completely understandable; however, gender is not what has been identified by the obstetrician, sex is. This new ritual essentializes binary gender and reinforces traditional stereotypes about males and females (Oswald et al., 2021). Culturally, this is a new fad in parenting and gender identity today is understood by many to be distinct from the physical body. Nonetheless, gender-reveal parties, not sex-reveal parties, are becoming more common. This demonstrates that Americans still often see gender and sex as interchangeable constructs and treat them as such without being aware of how problematic this can be in the way we understand ourselves and our place in the world.

Doing Gender

But sex and gender are distinct concepts. Sex refers to the physical, biological make-up of a person, and sex category is the dichotomous labeling of a person based on genitalia,

chromosomes, or appearance. It needs to be remembered that intersex individuals do not fit into a presumed biological sex binary. There are not two sexes, or two genders for that matter, there are many. Or perhaps, more appropriately, we must see sex, as well as gender, as a wide spectrum: to fall anywhere on that spectrum is normal and natural.

Gender is separate from sex but is also continually thought of as binary as well (West & Zimmerman, 1987). While sex and sex category refer to the rigid, and erroneous, binary categorization of the material body, gender is more malleable and encompasses processes and phenomena beyond the body (Fausto-Sterling et al., 2012). Gender is not static, nor is it innate: it is socioculturally constructed and used to divide and organize society into two mutually exclusive segments. In the seminal work “Doing Gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987), the authors argue that gender is something we are constantly doing and held accountable for by society. “Gender... is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (p. 127). Thus, doing gender is about understanding the culturally-contingent social script for each sex and acting “at the risk of gender assessment” (p. 136).

Gender is a performance, a way of presenting oneself to the world, not a static identity which develops exclusively based on genitalia or chromosomes. Socially transmitted beliefs about gender essentially institute explicit and implicit limits on the opportunities afforded to people, beginning the moment a sex category is applied to the prenatal or neonatal body (Bem, 1983). People are held accountable for their gender expression by society, and it is this accountability that perpetuates the need for “doing gender” according to societal norms, rules, and expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gender is an accomplishment and interactional in nature. Gender is not solidified by age five, as some psychologists have postulated, but is an ongoing performance that is necessitated by social institutions and systemic expectations of males and females (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). The theory *doing gender* describes gender as an omnirelevant aspect of social life and determinative of how we navigate our world. This does not mean that at all times we act in accordance with gender expectations; rather that everything we do, whether congruent or incongruent with gender scripts, is being viewed by others, as well as ourselves, through the lens of gender. In interactions it is often assumed that each person has a manly or womanly nature based on physical appearance, or the sex category we assign to that person (West & Fenstermaker, 2002). These ever-present assumptions and the accountability that comes with these assumptions means that doing gender is unavoidable. However, this does not mean gender must be done in the historically and culturally contingent way that pervades society: even if it is not possible to undo gender, we can redo it (Kelly & Hauck, 2015).

Gender is performed in social institutions and is both interpersonal and intrapersonal in nature. The expectations of people based on gender are created and reinforced in various social contexts, such as work, school, and family life. One interesting example provided by West and Zimmerman (1987) is organized sports. Sports can be seen as an “institutional framework for the expression of manliness” (p. 137). Sports provide a context in which men can perform and accomplish their masculinity and be rewarded for that gender achievement by appreciative spectators.

Family life is another institution that is fertile ground for gender performance, and it can also provide an opportunity for the redoing of gender. The division of household labor is closely tied to heteronormative gender beliefs about the complimentary roles and responsibilities people

have based on sex. Though more heterosexual couples are embracing egalitarian partnerships and an equal distribution of household responsibilities than previous generations, we still see that mothers spend more time with children, and fathers are more likely to work outside the home. Even egalitarian heterosexual couples often revert to more traditional distributions of labor when children are born.

Gay and lesbian couples and their families, however, do not have gender as a differentiating variable to base the allocation of childcare, housework, and paid labor responsibilities on. Because of this, these families can be seen as “redoing” gender by simply existing (Kelly & Hauck, 2015). To be sure, the literature is divided on how egalitarian gay and lesbian households are in reality, and many LG couples describe household labor as being performed based on partners’ skills and preferences rather than an even distribution of work. Even with partners specializing in areas they excel at rather than splitting responsibilities evenly between them, same-sex couples are redoing gender because at least one of them is performing household labor thought of as inconsonant with their gender.

Raising children is another site of gender construction and performance. Both parents and children are active agents in the accomplishment of gender and normative gender is historically, culturally, and contextually dependent (Kane, 2006). Over the past few decades research has shown that many parents have continually tried to broaden gender possibilities for their children. Many toys and activities previously viewed as gender specific are now seen as gender neutral. However, even as gender expectations and normative gender expression/behavior has expanded for boys and girls in the U.S., concerns about accountability and an emphasis on gender management can still be seen in parenting practices, particularly with sons.

In one qualitative study, Kane (2006) explored gay, lesbian, and heterosexual parents' reactions to gender nonconformity in their children using *doing gender* as a framework. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the United States with gay and straight mothers and fathers. Congruent with past literature, Kane found that parental acceptance of gender nonconformity was greater in daughters than in sons, and heterosexual fathers were less accepting overall of gender nonconformity than were lesbian and straight mothers and gay fathers, particularly regarding their sons.

Analysis of patterns found in the interviews also demonstrated a significant difference in the motivations behind doing gender with and for their children (Kane, 2006). Notions of accountability motivated mothers and gay fathers in their efforts at gendering their children, whereas heterosexual fathers were more motivated by notions of hegemonic masculinity and pride. For all the mothers and gay fathers interviewed the biggest issue with gender nonconformity related to accountability: how their children would be perceived and treated by society. These parents worried about the negative repercussions a child might face if he or she didn't conform to gender norms, and it was this fear that motivated them to promote gender normative behavior.

For heterosexual fathers, the motivation to instill traditional masculine and feminine ideals was rooted more in hegemonic masculinity and pride than accountability concerns (Kane, 2006). Hegemonic masculinity is culturally/historically variable and, in the West, currently advocates limited emotionality, aggression, and heterosexuality, and these ideals serve to keep the masculine male in power (Connell, 1992). Fathers in this study reaffirmed their own masculinity through gendering their sons and their sons' subsequent accomplishment of gender

normativity. Additionally, some fathers turned the idea of gender nonconformity in their children into a personal affront to their own gender performance and sense of self.

Gender Schema Theory

While West and Zimmerman's *doing gender* conceptualizes gender as a socio-cultural artifact and as a managed performance, *gender schema theory* emphasizes the cognitive construction of gender through socialization and personal experience (Bem, 1983). *Gender schema theory* is a theory of sex-typing, the process by which we categorize and process information in terms of our culture's normative templates for "males" and "females". Bem defines a schema as "a cognitive structure, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perception" (p. 603). Gender schemas develop through social interaction and learning, and, though flexible, they are well formed by middle childhood. This theory is about the active process of perceiving the world and categorizing it based on one's own culture's internalized definitions of masculine and feminine. There is a readiness on the part of the child to divide her/his social and material world based on gender because of the ubiquity of it as a defining feature in society (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017).

Gender schema theory "situates the source of the child's motivation for a match between sex and behavior, not in the mind of the child, but in the gender polarization of the culture" (Bem, 1993, pp. 125-126). A developing child comes to understand himself or herself as a boy or a girl concurrently with his or her development of gender schemas. The child begins making sex-linked associations based on his or her understanding of culturally defined gender norms, and these associations, or gender schemas, become prescriptive for his or her behavior and self-concept. An empirical study conducted in the U.S. and described by Carr and colleagues (2017)

found that 80% of two year-olds could reliably identify the sex of a person based on cultural cues, such as clothing or stereotypical characteristics, but only 50% of three to four year-olds could identify the sex of a person based on biological information. This demonstrates that society transmits ideas about socioculturally contingent gender before children learn about actual biological sex. In this way, it would not be illogical to say that gender organizes society, not sex.

Gender schema theory is a theory of how and why gender schemas are internalized and become prescriptive for an individual's gender presentation. Sex-typing describes the extent to which an individual conforms to these gender schemas (Sumontha et al., 2017). “Sex-typing is derived, in part, from a readiness on the part of the individual to encode and to organize information about the self in terms of cultural definitions of maleness and femaleness that constitute the society’s gender schema” (Bem, 1981b, p. 139). Gender differentiation is an active process wherein the individual accommodates and assimilates information about gender from his or her social world and begins to categorize the world based on gender schemas. Gender norms that permeate society (and are culturally, historically, and sociopolitically specific) are internalized, and the resultant gender schemas become implicit models for roles, behaviors and characteristics appropriate for each sex.

A key aspect of this theory is gender polarization, or the enculturated yet artificial dichotomous social scripts males and females are expected to follow in a given society (Carr et al., 2017). Through the interpretation and internalization of these scripts as part-and-parcel of gender schemas, this polarization becomes normative. It also defines what is nonnormative or deviant. Societal gender polarization effectively relegates people who do not act in accordance with culturally-ordained gender scripts to the margins of society. Gender polarization is also tightly tied to heteronormative values: the poles consist of two opposite yet complimentary

scripts for males and for females so that they can come together to create a whole. Thus, the gender scripts that permeate our society also become cultural mandates for not only gender normativity, but for exclusively heterosexual identities as well (Bem, 1981; Bem, 1993b).

These theories demonstrate precisely why gender development research is so important: gender performativity and gender schemas are integral to understanding one's self, one's relationship to others, and one's place in the world. Children are labeled as one of two sexes at the moment of birth. This dichotomous sex labeling immediately shapes how society views and treats the child (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Children learn about their bodies and what it means to be called a boy or a girl through a sociocultural lens, rife with historical and temporal implications of what is appropriate and what is not based on sex and gender. Cultural gender norms and schemas are internalized and become prescriptive, dictating everything from the clothes one wears to the career path one takes (Bem, 1983).

Current Study

In this study, I explored the ways that sexual orientation and sociocultural environment may influence the way that fathers raise their children, particularly with regard to gendering. Previous studies have repeatedly demonstrated that, despite common negative assumptions and misconceptions, gay couples and heterosexual couples have children who do not differ significantly on measures of gender normative behavior and well-being. Gender develops over time and much of what we see in the literature points not to the simple modeling of parent's behavior but to the intergenerational transmission of parents' gender beliefs about others. The rigidity of beliefs about gender are related to the region of the United States, political attitudes, and sex, among other factors, and straight fathers have been shown to promote normative gender

behavior and traditional roles based on sex more than are straight mothers (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016).

Given that sociocultural and political environments vary greatly state-to-state, it is important to see how the specific context in which fathers live may impact their differential parenting of sons and daughters, their gender beliefs, and the way they feel they would navigate gender nonconformity in their children. Texas is a state dominated by conservative policies that limit the rights and protections of sexual minorities and people who do not readily conform to stereotypical gender expression or identity. Though some urban areas in Texas have local political support for LGBTQ+ people, community centers, and predominantly LGBTQ+ neighborhoods, Fort Worth and the surrounding areas do not. The experiences of gay fathers living in the Fort Worth area may be very different than the experiences that straight fathers have in the same location.

In contrast, the greater New York City area has long been a beacon for this community and statewide policies protect LGBTQ+ rights, validating the experiences of both sexual and gender minorities and their families. The lived experiences of gay and straight fathers raising children in the New York City area may be more similar than different because they are afforded many of the same rights. Prejudice and stigma still persist throughout the country and simply implementing pro-LGBTQ+ policies does not make a city's residents immune from prejudice. However, creating an accepting and inclusive climate through visibility and legal protections likely lessens the degree of self-perceived stigma in the New York City LGBTQ+ community and may impact the emphasis New York straight and gay fathers place on normative gender development in their children.

Through semi-structured interviews with gay and straight fathers living in or near New York City and Fort Worth, I explored the way these men spoke about their children, the gendering of children in general, and how they would navigate gender nonconformity in their sons and daughters ages 2 to 10 years old. Based on previous literature, when discussing fathering in general, I expected fathers to be more similar than different regardless of sexual orientation and sociocultural location. I expected fathers' gender schemas to differ primarily based on the sociocultural environment in which they live, create, and raise their families. I anticipated the way fathers spoke about gender nonconformity in their children to differ based on the sex of the child, the sexual orientation of the father, and the sociocultural environment.

With that in mind, I hope this social justice-oriented study will shed light on the experiences of gay and straight fathers residing in vastly different sociocultural-political settings in the United States. More research is needed on fathers in general and on gay fathers specifically. Additionally, with the proliferation of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation in conservative states and the distinct possibility of continued curtailing of rights at the federal level, it is important to examine how living in certain areas may implicitly influence the way fathers raise their children. If the overarching goal of many anti-LGBTQ+ policies in America is to promote the health and wellbeing of children, consideration needs to be given to the way the sociocultural environment created by these policies actually affects the parenting of children.

Chapter 2: Method

Participants

There were a total of 32 participants interviewed for this study. There were four distinct groups: straight fathers from Fort Worth, Texas, and the surrounding areas (FW) ($n= 10$), gay fathers from Fort Worth and the surrounding areas ($n= 10$), straight fathers from New York City and the surrounding areas (NY) ($n= 7$), and gay fathers from New York City and the surrounding areas ($n= 5$). These fathers all grew up in the United States, though not necessarily in the area they are now raising children, and had at least one child between two and ten years old.

The criteria for participation included raising children between two and ten years-old, living in NY or FW, identifying as homosexual or heterosexual, and having grown up in the United States. The age of children was set based on gender development trajectories. By two years old, most children can self-identify as a “boy” or a “girl” and, concurrently, begin self-socializing into these categories through increased activity with same-gender playmates and gender-typed toy preferences. The cutoff age of ten was set because this is the average age early pubertal changes begin for females. Gender takes on new meaning in puberty for both children, who are going through rapid bodily/hormonal changes and start to develop a sexual identity, and for parents, who gradually become less of a socializing influence while peers become more important in adolescent development.

Sociopolitical location is a key part of this research design. Texas, as discussed in Chapter 1, is one of the least supportive states regarding sexual and gender minorities while also having the third highest number of same-sex couples out of all fifty states. Fort Worth was selected specifically because it is the only large city in Texas that continues to be more

politically conservative than other urban areas in the state, such as Austin and Houston, that have become increasingly liberal and inclusive in recent decades. New York City was chosen because it is a highly diverse, progressive urban center, it has historical significance for the LGBTQ+ activist community, and New York state was named the most LGBTQ+ friendly state to live in by the 2021 State Climate Index. Because the social, cultural, and political environment of the United States is unique, particularly regarding our democratic two-party political system, high rates of religiosity, and very distinct notions (and contentions) about sexuality and gender, I limited recruitment to fathers who were raised in the U.S.

I chose to focus on fathers for several reasons. There are relatively few studies on parenting that focus on fathers rather than mothers or both mothers and fathers. Fathers have become more involved with childrearing in the past few decades and therefore have more opportunities to help guide their children's development. Also, fathers have been shown to put more emphasis on gender normative behavior in their children, particularly sons, than do mothers (Kane, 2006), and men in general are less supportive of gay and trans rights than are women. I recruited men who were exclusively homosexual or heterosexual due to widely held assumptions that gay and straight men are inherently different, both in gender identity and lifestyle, and it is often these assumptions that anti-gay rights activists and politicians use to argue erroneously that gay men do not make good parents.

Participants were recruited between the summer of 2019 and the summer of 2021. Recruitment and data collection were affected greatly by the COVID-19 crisis and shutdown, such that no participants were recruited and interviewed between March 2020 and February 2021. All Texas fathers were interviewed in-person in the summer and fall of 2019, prior to the onset of the pandemic. These fathers were recruited through social networks, though none were

previously known to me, as well as through referrals from LGBTQ-inclusive churches in Fort Worth and Dallas. Fort Worth does not have a formal LGBTQ+ community center, thus churches that cater to LGBTQ+ people in FW were deemed the most efficient way to contact gay father-headed families in the area. These churches were sent flyers and emails about this study, which church administrators then sent to congregants.

New York fathers were contacted through social networks, though none were personally known to me prior to recruitment, as well as through neighborhood social media groups in Brooklyn and Queens. The initial study design included equal sample sizes for each group. However, due to the devastating effects of the pandemic in New York City specifically, recruitment efforts were halted until early 2021. LGBTQ+ community centers and parenting groups were completely remote and contact was not able to be established between myself and administrators and/or members throughout 2020. This greatly hindered my ability to recruit gay fathers in particular. Four straight fathers and two gay fathers from New York were interviewed in-person in the Winter of 2019/2020. The remaining three straight fathers and three gay fathers from New York were interviewed online using Zoom in the spring and summer of 2021.

Unexpectedly, recruitment of gay fathers in FW was much easier than it was in NYC. To me, this seems to be connected to the differences in lived experiences of gay men in Texas versus gay men in New York. The gay fathers I spoke to in Texas were acutely aware of their limited rights in relation to other parts of the country. Many of these fathers had to fight to adopt or foster, repeatedly facing rejection based simply on their sexual identity. Nearly half of these participants had to be persistent and go outside of North Texas to find an agency who would work with them. Because of this, I believe, they were motivated to participate in this study and to help me get in contact with other gay fathers. They saw this study as unique and timely, and they

were excited to be a part of it. In New York, I feel, beyond the COVID-19 pandemic making recruitment difficult, there was also some complacency because the New York City LGBTQ+ community may feel more supported by both their community and their local government. While the groups I reached out to in Texas invariably responded with interest and assistance, the community centers contacted in New York either did not respond or told me they do not work with researchers.

Texas Straight Fathers (TXSF)

Ten participants identified as straight and lived in the Fort Worth/Dallas Metroplex in North Texas. These fathers were between 31 and 47 years-old, with an average age of 36.8. Fathers had a total of 14 children who fit the age requirement, eight boys and six girls. The average age of these children was 6.07. Though four of these fathers had additional children older than ten years-old or younger than two years-old, they were asked to limit their responses to their children within the target age range. All fathers were the biological parents of their children. Three fathers were divorced and seven were married to their children's biological mother. Two fathers identified as Latino while the rest identified as White.

Texas Gay Fathers (TXGF)

Ten participants identified as gay and lived in the Fort Worth/Dallas Metroplex in North Texas. These fathers were between 46 and 55 years-old, with an average age of 49. Fathers had a total of 11 children who fit the age requirement, eight boys and three girls. The average age of these children was 7.44. Only one father had an additional child outside of the two-to-ten age range. All of these fathers were married and had adopted their children with their husbands. Three fathers adopted their children at birth, while the other seven fostered children prior to

adoption. None of the fathers were biologically related to their children. Six fathers in this group identified as White, three as Latino, and one as Native American, while their children were ethnically diverse.

New York Straight Fathers (NYSF)

Seven participants identified as straight, and lived in New York City or the surrounding suburbs. These fathers were between 36 and 48 years-old, with an average age of 40.7. Fathers had a total of 11 children who fit the age requirement, five boys and six girls. The average age of these children was 5.09. Three fathers had children outside of the age requirement. All fathers were the biological parents of their children and only one father was divorced. The remaining fathers were currently married to their children's biological mother. All fathers in this group were White.

New York Gay Fathers (NYGF)

Five participants identified as gay, and lived in New York City or the surrounding suburbs. Fathers were between 38 and 56 years-old, with an average age of 47.8. These fathers had a total of 5 children who fit the age requirement, two boys and three girls. The average age of these children was 5.8. Only one father had an additional child outside of the two-to-ten age range. All of these fathers were married, and had created their families with their husbands. Three fathers fostered their children prior to adoption, one father adopted at birth, and one father had his children through surrogacy. All fathers identified in this group as White, though two had husbands of Asian descent. Children were ethnically diverse.

Measures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each father individually. The majority of the interview items were taken from a pilot study I conducted in 2015. Additional questions were added about fathers' perceptions of their neighborhood/sociopolitical environment, as well as how they viewed gender equality and historical changes in masculinity/femininity. These items were added based on patterns of responses that emerged in the 2015 study.

Interviews for the present study consisted of 20 questions for all fathers, and gay fathers were asked an additional question at the beginning of the interview: Is it difficult being a gay father in your community? Why or why not? Fathers were also frequently asked to clarify or elaborate on certain points they made in their responses. Following the interview, they filled out a form with open-ended demographic questions. A complete list of interview items can be found in *Appendix A*.

Interviews began with general questions about being a father and how fathers viewed their children and their children's futures. These questions constituted nearly a third of interview items and did not include any direct reference to child's sex or gender. They were created to elicit implicit notions about gender roles and trajectories, as well as to get a sense of what was important to fathers in parenting.

The next group of questions were created based on the theoretical foundations of *doing gender* and *gender schema theory*. Gender schema theory focuses on the gender schemas we internalize based on our experiences, culture, and socialization. Therefore, I asked a set of questions about gender stereotypes to get a sense of what fathers' gender schemas were. I then asked about the ways parents may purposefully or subconsciously gender their children to get a

sense of how they viewed gender as innate and/or learned. Interspersed with these questions, participants were also asked about how they felt about raising children in their present community and whether their children “fitting in” with peers and following social expectations was important. These questions were constructed based on *doing gender*, which paints gender as a performance we are judged on based on how well we fit cultural beliefs about gender expression and identity. These questions were asked to establish how rigidly fathers viewed social and gender norms prior to the next section of the interview on nonconformity.

The last section of the interview consisted of specific hypothetical questions about gender nonconformity in sons and daughters. These questions purposefully proceeded questions about the importance of fitting in and views of gendering children to lessen social desirability issues in their responses. Since they had already told me about how they viewed parenting priorities, “fitting in”, gender stereotypes, and differential parenting based on gender, I hoped they would be more honest with me about how they would react to gender nonconformity. It also allowed me to probe or ask for elaboration to clarify previous answers and the logic or emotions behind them.

Procedure

Once fathers contacted me about their interest in participating in the study and they met the general requirements for participation (lived in NYC or FW, grew up in the United States themselves, and were parents to at least one child between the ages of 2 and 10 years-old), a one-on-one meeting was scheduled. All meetings conducted prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic were done in-person. These meetings took place at father’s homes, offices, or coffee shops. I met them whenever and wherever was convenient for them. I did have the opportunity to

meet some of the children but not all, and actually witnessing father-child interaction was beyond the scope of this study. Fathers who participated in 2021 were all interviewed on Zoom. In total, 20 Texas fathers and 6 New York fathers were interviewed in person. The remaining 6 New York participants met with me via Zoom.

When participants were recruited, they were not told this would be a study predominantly about their views of gender and the gendering of their children. Straight fathers in New York (NYSF) and Texas (TXSF) were unaware that gay fathers were included in the sample to lessen the chance of answers being constructed based on social desirability concerns. Most gay fathers in New York (NYGF) and Texas (TXGF) did know I was looking at diverse experiences within the context of fatherhood. All participants did know, however, that I was interviewing fathers in North Texas and in the greater New York City area. I was transparent about this because I felt it may influence fathers to reflect on their sociocultural location, which was important to this work.

Positionality in qualitative work is important, particularly for face-to-face interviews like the ones employed in this study. Many gay fathers knew that I am a member of the LGBTQ+ community myself. I was open about this because I wanted these fathers to feel free to speak about their thoughts and feelings and understand that I can relate to some of their experiences. Conversely, I did not share my sexual orientation with straight fathers, and I am stereotypically “feminine-presenting.” Again, not “outing” myself to straight fathers was purposeful and meant to make them feel comfortable in sharing their views of gender and nonconformity.

Fathers were given a consent form to read and then verbally consented to being interviewed and voice recorded prior to the first question being asked. Interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 128 minutes. Though this is a large range, only three interviews were under 20

minutes long and only four were over 90 minutes. If a father wanted to tell stories or share a lot of detail, I didn't interrupt or redirect, and this resulted in a few lengthy, elaborate interviews. Conversely, if fathers answered very directly and did not elaborate when asked, I moved on to the next question, resulting in a few short yet concise interviews. The median interview length was 36 minutes. Interviews were later fully transcribed. After the interview was completed, fathers filled out a form with open-ended demographic questions. All fathers were thanked for taking part in this study and given a \$20 gift card for participating.

Analysis

I analyzed interviews primarily through inductive content analysis, although I did use *gender schema theory* and *doing gender* to inform much of my coding system. Once all interviews were conducted, they were transcribed verbatim. This resulted in over 900 pages of text. Each transcript was read repeatedly, and patterns became clear. After open coding of each transcript had been completed, I wrote in-depth memos about the overall impression of the participant, as well as discrepancies or contradictions in responses. I then created a spreadsheet with notes on every participants' response to each question to make the text more manageable. That spreadsheet was then coded based on the patterns already identified and defined in my codebook. Lastly, I created a table recording the prevalence of every code in each of the four groups. Although I conducted this study and analysis independently, I did make an effort to insure intra-rater reliability by creating a detailed codebook and rereading every interview at least twice before creating the spreadsheet and table.

Chapter 3: Results

Three main themes emerged through analysis of the transcripts: the role of being a father, views of gender normativity and gendering, and hypothetical reactions to nonconformity. Each theme will be discussed separately in this chapter. In order to clearly present the prevalence of patterns within and between groups, I will use the acronyms “TXSF” and “TXGF” for fathers living in Fort Worth and the surrounding areas who identify as straight and who identify as gay, respectively. I will use the acronyms “NYSF” and “NYGF” for fathers living in New York City and the surrounding areas who identify as straight and who identify as gay, respectively. There was a total of 20 Texas fathers, half gay and half straight, and there was a total of 12 New York fathers, five gay and seven straight. I will indicate how many fathers from each group responded in similar ways by presenting the number of fathers who responded similarly over the total number of fathers in the group. For example, if five straight Texas fathers answered “yes” to a question, it would be written as “(TXSF 5/10).”

Theme 1: The Father Role

The beginning of the interview revolved around parenting in general and what these fathers wanted (and did not want) for their children, both in childhood and adulthood. This first section of the interview tended to take the longest amount of time: fathers loved talking about their children. Overall, the vagueness of the questions initially made fathers uncomfortable, and they frequently asked me to be more specific. I told them to tell me whatever they wanted, to interpret the question in their own way. After doing so, they seemed to feel freer in their responses. Given the differences in sexual identity and region of the country, the many

similarities in responses in this section of the interview were remarkable. However, there were also some key differences between groups, particularly in terms of geographic location.

Specific Interview Items:

Is being a father difficult? Why?

Describe yourself as a father.

What are your hopes and dreams for your child?

What are your worries and fears for your child?

Describe how you would like to see your child as an adult.

By the numbers

Of all the questions asked in the interview, the question “is being a father difficult?” was the easiest to answer as demonstrated by response time. The vast majority of fathers, 75%, immediately said “yes,” “of course,” or “100%” regardless of their demographic characteristics, biological connection to their children, or the gender of their children.

Oh, hell yes. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life and no matter what people tell you, there’s no way you can fully understand how challenging it is to be a parent until you experience it firsthand. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Of the remaining 25%, half (2/10 TXGF, 1/7 NYSF, and 1/5 NYGF) said being a father was somewhat difficult, somewhat not. One father explained it this way:

I’ve always felt I wanted to parent. So not a calling, nothing special like that, but just simply yeah, I have wanted that. I’ve wanted it, but the want does not make it easy. (TXGF of a daughter)

Only four fathers stated it was not difficult (3/10 TXSF and 1/10 TXGF), all from Texas.

I wouldn't say it's difficult being a father. I've absolutely enjoyed it. It's been an awesome experience raising boys. I think it might've been a different experience if they were girls. (TXSF of twin boys)

Many fathers followed up their answer as to the difficulty of raising children (whether they initially said “yes”, “yes and no”, or “no”) with a statement about how rewarding and important it is to be a father.

It is the most difficult thing, but it's also the most rewarding and most fulfilling thing. There is nothing more important and more awesome than being a parent. That should be and will be your biggest responsibility in life. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

But it's amazingly rewarding, and I wouldn't trade it for anything. (NYSF of daughters)

It's challenging, but in the best possible way. I love her so much and sometimes, of course, it's overwhelming and exhausting. The minute she's not here, I miss her. (NYGF of a daughter)

Top Difficulties

Time.

The most common pattern found for why being a parent is difficult was based on the sheer amount of time and energy spent in raising children day-to-day. The words “time”, “exhaustion” and “juggling” were spoken by 22 fathers in explaining the challenges of fatherhood. Fathers across groups claimed all of their time is focused on raising their children when they aren't working.

... This sounds terrible, but sometimes I just can't wait to get to work on Monday because it's easy. I can go to work, I can work all day and not be as tired as spending Saturday with my kids. That's not to say that I don't love it, but man... (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Fathers in all groups also spoke of how exhausting, both physically and mentally, it is to raise young children.

It takes a lot of energy. It's exhausting, and it takes a lot of energy, and it takes a lot of balancing of priorities. (NYSF of daughters)

It's physically taxing to be a father in the same ways that it's physically taxing to be a mother minus the breastfeeding... the physical act of making meals, and even carrying a child for long periods of time. (NYSF of daughters)

Fathers in all groups except TXSF, spoke about the difficulty in juggling a multitude of tasks on a daily basis and trying to keep their kids on a schedule.

I say it is difficult because of school schedules. Trying to get dinner on the table and homework done, and quality time. I think those are the difficult pieces. (TXGF of sons and daughters)

It is possible that gay fathers and New York straight fathers felt the pressure of daily routines more acutely because straight fathers in Texas were more likely to either be divorced with split custody arrangements (3 of 10) or have stay-at-home wives than those in other groups.

A few fathers explained why they think not having time for oneself and giving so much energy to your children occurs for some parents and not for others. One young straight father in Texas explained that some parents change their lives for their children, like he does, while others make children fit into their lives without changing the way they live and how they spend their time. An older gay father in Texas, who spoke about not hovering over his children, explained it in the following way:

I don't know. No, I don't think it's hard. I see other parents seem to make it harder than I think it is. I've seen there's this tendency when kids need help or they want help, to kind of just do it for them and it's a lot faster, certainly, but I guess I take a little more hands-off on things, and let them struggle a little bit, and let them learn to do things on their own. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

As demonstrated by this statement, parents who made comments about prioritizing freedom for their children and trying not to hover were less likely to see fatherhood as difficult.

No Manual.

The second most common pattern regarding the difficulties of fatherhood revolved around the inability to know if they are parenting correctly. Two TXSF and two TXGF actually used the phrase “there’s no manual”.

And you know, there's not a manual for it. There's nothing that says that you're doing it right or wrong. And it's pretty much hope that it's right in the end. (TXSF of a daughter)

There's no manual, and it's never easy, and no child's the same. (TXGF of sons)

Interestingly, there were three gay fathers in Texas, two began as foster parents and one adopted at birth, who explicitly spoke about the parenting manuals they devoured when first becoming parents.

I didn't know much about babies. And year one, year two, year three, so between the two of us, I'm the one who, "I've got to..." I read. I try to figure it out. I'm online looking for resources. I'm reading books. (TXGF of a daughter)

Others, within their answers about their priorities in parenting or why fatherhood was difficult, added the caveat that they don’t know what they’re doing.

I don't claim to know what I'm doing. (NYSF of a daughter)

First-time dad like me, it's hard to figure everything out. I don't think you ultimately figure it all out. You just kind of play it all by ear. (TXSF of a daughter)

A Shift in Focus.

Fathers in all groups also emphasized how important the role of parenting is and the need to prioritize their children, rather than themselves. Having a child shifted the focus from themselves and their romantic partnerships to their child’s needs and development.

Virtually all fathers in this section of the interview, as well as in response to later questions, talked about how the most important part of their world is their child's well-being. They consider how integral it is to model good behavior for their children and help them grow by example.

I think one of the hardest things that I wrestle with is realizing I'm molding a human and just the influence that I have on someone and their life can be a lot of pressure sometimes. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

So with boys, you're also setting that example. So I feel like we are setting an example of what a responsible adult male does. Goes to work every day, cleans the house, cooks, has family over. (NYGF of sons)

Others spoke about coming to the realization that their children are not carbon-copies of themselves; they are individuals with their own personalities that need to be supported and validated.

When I had kids, I was like, "Oh cool, I can form these kids, make them into little 'mini mes,'" and then once they start growing up, you're like, "You know what, that's not really what I want to do." You want them to be their own person, help guide them, but the weird thing is... Letting him do his own thing, it's just so obvious he's my son. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

I don't have a specific desire. I don't want her to be a doctor as some parents might. Because she is not me. Right? She's not me. You have to recognize the otherness. She's not an extension of me. She isn't. (NYSF of daughters)

Some fathers also mentioned the need to make personal sacrifices in order to promote their child's growth.

I mean, it's a lot of fun too, but then, you realize that you're giving up some of your hopes and dreams to focus on the kids. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

You have to know there's certain times where your needs are not the priority. So you need to be there for your kid when they're awake essentially. And then when they're not, you're back to doing what you need to do for yourself. (NYGF of a son)

A few gay fathers in both New York and Texas, but not straight fathers, spoke specifically about not being able to concentrate on their couple relationship as much as they had before becoming parents. This difference could be partially explained by the relationship trajectory norms for heterosexual people versus those for LGBTQ+ people. The majority of heterosexual marriages include children. It is an expectation that many straight couples take for granted and have also seen modeled by family and peers throughout their lives. With children comes less time for your spouse, at least when children are young. There are far fewer same-sex couples with children so perhaps the expectation that during some periods of a marriage the focus will shift to children isn't as anticipated or planned for at the onset of LGBTQ+ marriages.

It's difficult being a parent. Not specifically father or mother, because especially a man in his fifties who always made him or his husband the center of the world? Suddenly your whole energy shifts. (NYGF of a daughter)

One interesting and unique response to why being a father is difficult came from a straight, newly divorced, Latino father living in Texas. He fought for joint-custody of his three-year-old daughter, and he spoke throughout the interview of his love of parenting and wanting to be there for his daughter in every way. The only thing he saw as difficult was the way that fatherhood is perceived in his community. Throughout the interview he expressed his hope that fathers' engagement with the daily lives and needs of their children be seen as a norm, not as something that falls solely on the mother.

When we were getting the divorce, most of my friends, colleagues, et cetera, were kind of shocked that I was seeking to make sure that I have 50% custody... They think that the upkeep of a child is the mom's job. But to me, no. I love it... The main thing I want- I would like at some point for it to be more acceptable, or not even so much acceptable as just the norm or not even considered to be out of the ordinary, would be for dads to do the stuff that apparently is supposed to be only for the mom... more than just the supervisory role... A lot of my single dad friends, whenever they're taking care of their kid, they tell

me, "Oh, I can't do that because I'm babysitting this weekend." And I'm like, "Dude, you're not babysitting. You're raising your kids. That's all there is. I don't think you're on one of those apps where people look for babysitters, and you're babysitting. No. You're raising your child." So I would prefer- I'm seeking for that world where that's more the norm. (TXSF of a daughter)

How is it Not Difficult?

Origin Stories.

Half of TXSF spontaneously told me the entire story of their children's birth. In telling these stories, it was clear that one of the reasons they love being a parent is because of the difficulties they and their wives went through to have biological children or the health issues their children overcame in order to now thrive. They spoke about their "miracle babies" to demonstrate the deep desire they had to become parents and the happiness they derive from being able to raise a healthy child.

So, he was our million-dollar child. He got put in the hospital for a week with RSV. He had pneumonia- it was really rough. From the time that he was born until his third birthday it was very stressful, very intense. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Gay fathers in both Texas and New York also told me about the complexities and occasional devastation they went through before finally being able to adopt through the foster system (only one gay father in my sample had his children through surrogacy). Raising a child who spent time in the foster system presents its own difficulties, but the resounding truth behind these stories was the struggle and heartbreak many of these fathers navigated in their dream of becoming a father. Though the systemic homophobia faced by many of the Texas gay fathers and the uncertainty of whether the child you foster will be taken back by their family-of-origin faced by all adoptive New York and Texas gay fathers was excruciating, in some ways it made their eventual adoption a "miracle" as well.

Well the second that the social worker brought her into our house- we were her foster parents initially- I knew that she was going to be our child. I felt connected to her immediately, and people thought I was naïve, and I didn't care. And the odds were absolutely against us, but I still didn't care, I just knew she was ours. (NYGF of a daughter)

But it's a joy for us. It really is. And you know, I've learned a lot from both kids and continually learn a lot. (TXGF of sons)

This last quote came from a father who was turned down by 14 foster agencies in Texas because of his sexuality before finally finding an LGBTQ+ friendly foster agency in Austin, Texas. His perseverance was remarkable but not uncommon among the Texas gay fathers I spoke with.

It's Fun!

The other main pattern found in all groups was that being a father is fun. It being “fun” was discussed in a couple different ways. Half of TXSF (but no NYSF or foster fathers) stated repeatedly throughout the interview that their kids are just like them and it is very “cool” to see. These fathers felt an acute sense of pride in their children’s characteristics and accomplishments because it reminded them of themselves. They enjoyed seeing themselves reflected back.

It's funny, because we- I hear it from my wife all the time, that he's just like me in the things that he says and does and what he loves. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Many fathers from all groups also talked about being able to do fun activities with their children and teach them about the things they love.

I love them fiercely. I am the fun dad. I'm the disciplinarian too, but I love to play with them, especially with our son. I like to wrestle with him. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

So when I had kids, I'm like, "well, those days are over," but they weren't because now instead of doing it by myself, being a loner, I take my kids with me...and now they both love the outdoors, they love hiking, they love going out in the water. And then I just

thought how sad that I was out there doing all this by myself and now I'm enjoying it with the kids. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Intergenerational Transmission

When asked to describe themselves as parents, the majority of fathers in every group spoke about their own upbringing: the good, the bad, and the abuse. There were no questions in the interview that asked about their own childhood or their parents. Even so, referring to their own experiences as children occurred in the vast majority of interviews at some point. There were no differences between groups in how childhood was spoken about. The pattern, rather, was that nearly every father evoked intergenerational transmission as central to how they think about their own parenting. Given the prevalence of intergenerational references, I think one father summed it up succinctly:

I can't tell you what I try to do unless I tell you about how I was raised. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Intergenerational transmission is the concept that ideas, patterns, behaviors, and issues are often passed down from one generation to the next (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016). Our formative experiences inform what we do in our subsequent role as parents. These fathers were explicit in the ways the parenting they received influenced how they raise their children. If their experience was positive, they strove to replicate it. If their experience was negative and/or simply antiquated (as was the case for some of these fathers), they endeavored to break the cycle and avoid continuing that type of parenting with their own children.

Both my wife and I have good relationships with our parents, which I'm sure plays a huge role. We go to them for a lot, but also use them as examples of what not to do. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

The good.

Some fathers spoke about their parents and their childhoods in positive ways. They appreciated the lessons taught to them and strove to teach their children the same values. They wanted to model the same good behavior they witnessed growing up, and they now see how right their parents were in their approach. Some spoke about their childhood experiences and the opportunities available to them idyllically and hoped to be able to give that to their own children.

I want them to experience the same thing as I did growing up, because I feel like I had a good childhood... My parents took us on trips and we did a lot of outdoor things like camping and stuff. (NYSF of sons and daughter)

The bad.

Others didn't appreciate some of the pressures placed on them by their parents and vowed not to do that to their own children. They hoped to stop the cycle of inappropriate parenting and, with their own experiences as a reference point, wanted to give their children what they themselves didn't have but needed. One straight father in Fort Worth spoke about not pressuring his daughter to go to college because he was pushed into going even though he knew it wasn't right for him. Other fathers spoke in generalities.

Whenever I was growing up, my parents split early. My parents didn't have any money for any kind of school, and whenever I was growing up, it was, "College, college, college, college." (TXSF of a daughter)

And a lot of my parenting is truly doing the exact opposite of what my parents would've done. (TXGD of sons)

I think most of my motivation is driven by what I didn't have growing up. (NYSF of sons)

The abuse.

Several parents discussed the abuse and trauma they experienced growing up. These experiences contributed to their lives being less stable and their early choices unhealthy. One even spoke about how the trauma he experienced made him fearful of and ambivalent about becoming a parent.

My dad was... I'm still scared of my dad. He whipped me with a belt and stuff like that, which I think is somewhat excessive. Nowadays, he could probably get arrested... my main goal was for [my son] not to ever be scared of me (TXSF of a son and daughter)

My family was not healthy. Parents divorced early, mother was abusive, who I lived with. So I just thought we didn't want to continue that.... I very often have to do things in ways that I've never had modeled for me. I have to go from what I wish I had had. So, that can be challenging. (TXGF of sons)

Parenting Priorities

Be Present.

A wide variety of parenting priorities were spoken about, but the one spoken about the most by fathers in all groups was the desire to simply be there for their children (TXSF 3/10, TXGF 3/10, NYSF 2/7, NYGF 1/5).

He is definitely my main squeeze, so I'm trying to do everything with him. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

It was just that I knew that I wanted to give the time that my mother gave to us. I think as a male, there wasn't any question of a gender role to take on. Just simply that, as a man, I wanted to be able to give that kind of time. (TXGF of a daughter)

I also choose to not be the distant father who just works and then comes home. I have a much more intimate or closer relationship with my kids than my dad did. (NYSF of sons)

Texas Specific Priorities: Christianity, Southern Hospitality, and Independence.

Priorities unique to Texas fathers included religion, politeness, and independence.

Religion was referenced by the majority of TXSF (7 of 10) but only two Texas gay father. This is especially interesting because I recruited some TXGF from LGBTQ+ majority churches, but given the ease at which I could find straight fathers to participate, I did not recruit from mainstream Christian churches. Most of the Texas fathers who spoke about religion primarily hoped that their children would grow up with a strong commitment to Christianity (TXSF 5/10 and TXGF 1/10).

We try and take them to church and Sunday school when we can get out the door on a Sunday, and try to educate them. I was raised in a Christian family. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

And we go to church. Church is really a big, important part of our lives. We feel like it's a great support system. (TXGF of sons)

However, two of TXSF were atheists and spoke about Christianity in a decidedly different tone.

My wife and I are atheist...but if [my daughter] has friends who go to church, and she wants to go to church, cool. You can go to church. You can learn about Catholicism, Christianity, whatever church that you're going to, but we're also going to learn other things. We're not going to learn just the one. Ultimately, all religions say the same thing, but people can't seem to get it through their head that they're the same things: "Be cool to each other." That's what all religions are saying... If she wants to learn about the Bible, she's also going to learn the Torah and the Koran and Buddhist teachings. We're going to go all in. If we're going to go in, we're going to go all in. We're going to learn everything, and then you make an educated guess on what you want to keep following. (TXSF of a daughter)

Additionally, one TXGF graphically described his summer in conversion therapy "camp" in the 1980s. He mentioned later in the interview that it was his Southern Baptist upbringing that contributed to his parents placing him in the facility.

Though none of the fathers from New York spoke about their own religious beliefs, over half of straight New York fathers did express satisfaction in the diversity of cultures and religions exhibited in their neighborhoods. New York fathers, both gay and straight, also wanted to raise their children to be compassionate, kind, helpful individuals to the same extent as did the religious fathers in Texas. The difference was that fathers in New York did not speak of these traits as springing from a religious foundation, while the six Texas fathers who prioritized raising Christian children did.

Another interesting difference between what Texans and what New Yorkers prioritized in raising their children was being polite and exhibiting good etiquette. No NYSF or NYGF specified this as a priority (although 2 of 12 did prioritize respect in general). However, both the majority of TXSF and of TXGF spoke about raising “gentlemen,” children who say “yes, sir/yes ma’am,” and children who epitomized “Southern Hospitality.”

My core beliefs are manners and respect. So, growing up as a kid, my dad always taught me... He said, "You could be dumber than a box of rocks, but as long as you have manners and respect, you can basically go anywhere in life." So, as far as when it comes to my kids, whenever I ask them a question, it's "yes, sir" or "no, sir," "yes, ma'am," "no, ma'am." So, if they don't do it, I 100% say, "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you. Could you please repeat that?" Southern hospitality is so different, and I didn't understand it until I went outside of [Texas]. (TXSF of a daughter)

Independence was also more of a parenting priority for Texas fathers, although many fathers in all groups did reference independence when talking about their children as adults. Nearly a third of all Texas fathers spoke specifically about encouraging their children to be independent, even at a relatively young age. This may be connected to the fact that there is relatively less crime and more physical space in North Texas than in the greater New York City area. Thus, there are simply more opportunities to allow their children to be outside by

themselves in rural areas or even in neighborhoods in Fort Worth. In many ways, independence is part of the Texas zeitgeist, both politically and in regard to personal freedoms, and this may also contribute to independence being on the forefront of these fathers' minds when discussing parenting priorities.

I like to foster her independence and I like to foster important lifelong lessons, such as being able to have some semblance of autonomy, even though she's young. (TXSF of a daughter)

I think we both aspire to a '70s model of parenting- the way we grew up, which is a lot less work than all of this oversight that takes place these days..... We want our children to be independent, to solve their own problems, be responsible for things. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

New York Specific Priorities: Curiosity and Screen Time.

The priorities that arose unique to the New York sample were nourishing curiosity and limiting screen time. It is somewhat difficult to define “nourishing their curiosity” but it seemed to refer to fathers' desire to expose their children to many different aspects of the world and support whatever their children choose to explore. Half of all New York fathers spoke about their wish that their children would have a curious spirit and engage in the world with an open mind.

I also want her to have that intellectual curiosity to keep learning. (NYSF of a daughter)

A huge priority is to maintain curiosity. I think that can get snuffed out if you're not careful..... It's really simple. It's just I want her to stay engaged and stay curious. And that's pretty much it. (NYSF of daughters)

These fathers were also focused on limiting the time children spent watching television and/or playing on their iPads and smartphones. Later in the interview many fathers in all groups talked about their fears surrounding social media and the need to protect their children from

much of what the internet has to offer, but it was only NYSF and NYGF that specified their efforts to curb screen time as a priority.

So a good example of this is screen time. So watching TV is something that we really limit in our house...Okay, she can watch a movie. But she doesn't watch TV. There's a separation between a very passive story experience where you're just clicking through episodes, versus having a movie that you are following a more developed narrative.
(NYSF of daughters)

I'm concerned that she's on her iPad too much. God knows what's coming into her brain.
(NYGF of a daughter)

The abundance of technology, just a lot of [kids] become wrapped up in that. So kind of controlling that, so that they don't almost go down, like, rabbit holes. Even myself, I find myself distracted by technology, so I think that's probably one of the biggest things.
(NYGF of a son)

Hoping to Launch

“Launching” refers to sending one’s adult child out into the world with the developmental task of differentiating from the family-of-origin and becoming fully responsible for the decisions she/he makes. Parenting in this country is intricately connected to the individualism valued in American culture, and thus preparing children to be autonomous is of the utmost importance for the majority of American parents.

The main questions related to this notion were: “What are some of your hopes and dreams for your child’s future?” and “Describe how you would like to see him/her as an adult”. Though there was some variability, for the most part, fathers, regardless of sexual identity or sociocultural environment, wanted the same things for their children

No specifics.

The predominant pattern in all father's answers was that they did not want to steer their children towards particular roles in adulthood. Nearly half of both New York fathers and Texas fathers said they didn't have specific expectations for their children's careers or the way they live their lives (TXSF 6/10, TXGF 3/10, NYSF 4/7, NYGD 2/5). Many of them also said they just wanted their children to do and be whatever they wanted when they grow up.

I know that a lot of people want certain cookie cutter occupations or careers or things for their children. And I don't think that there's anything wrong with wanting that, but for me, all I want is for her, at some point in her life, to find something she's passionate about. (TXSF of a daughter)

Happiness.

Second only to "no specifics" was the hope that their children would be happy. Some fathers admitted happiness means different things to different people and/or that it is a bit "cliché" to say. Even so, 14 of 32 participants (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 4/10, NYSF 2/7, NYGD 4/5) simply wanted their children to be happy, and for many of them, it was the very first thing they said when asked about their hopes for their children. It was also echoed in a quarter of responses about their children's adulthood.

Happy. I want them to be happy with whatever they do or whatever they become. Happy with themselves. (TXGF of sons)

I just want her to be both physically and mentally healthy, and part of being mentally healthy is being happy. (NYSF of a daughter)

Texas Specific...

Though there were no distinct patterns for New York fathers beyond hoping their children find happiness and expressing openness to whatever their children wish to pursue in the

future, two patterns did arise for Texas fathers. Half of TXSF and nearly a third of TXGF hoped that their children would be well educated. This may be related to the fact that Texas fathers in my sample were less likely to have a college degree than were New York fathers. Perhaps these fathers were more aware of the necessity for higher education in the job market because of their own career struggles.

I definitely want them to get a good education. I want them to see a lot of the world. Want them to travel as much as possible, just to be cultured. I think that's really important. I was pretty cultured growing up and I've been trying to pass that along to them also. (TXSF of twin sons)

Gay fathers in Texas were also far more likely to hope that their children would have a good relationship with their families, both biological and adoptive, than were straight Texas fathers and New York fathers. Given that all TXGF adopted children, and seven of these fathers adopted from the foster system when their children were four years-old or older, it is understandable that good family relationships are at the forefront of these parents' minds. The familial trauma experienced by many of these children and the multiple foster family placements prior to being adopted contributed to attachment issues for many of them according to their fathers. The desire for these children to feel fully connected to their adoptive families was of the utmost importance for parents in this subsample. Additionally, many of them felt it important that their children maintain some sort of connection to their biological families if possible.

Be able to have healthy relationships with his family. We have reintroduced visits with extended biological family. At some point, maybe his mother. Right now, she is a trigger. (TXGF of a son)

I guess I tell them, "The three of you are connected. You'll have each other the rest of your life. I want you to be loving and kind. I want you to be good to each other, and I want you to depend on each other." Because I'm 48. (TXGF of sons and daughters)

Who will they become?

Answers in response to imagining their children as adults were varied. None of the fathers specified a profession or intellectual pursuit and many spoke about general personality traits they hoped their children would embody.

Veritable “Good Person.”

The majority of all fathers, with the notable exception of straight New York fathers, spoke about their children becoming good people (TXSF 6/10, TXGF 7/10, NYGD 4/5). Some used the term “good person;” others emphasized positive interpersonal traits, such as kind, caring, and empathetic.

I want them to be able to be just loving, caring, genuine people as adults. (TXSF of twin sons)

Be kind to other people and be able to help other people in the world as well, you know? (TXGF of a son and daughter)

Texas Religion.

The only specific path fathers spoke about came from Texas fathers, primarily those that identify as straight, who wished to see their children as adults continue in the Christian faith (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 1/10).

From a religious standpoint, I do hope that she follows the same path that we do. She does love God and loves Jesus and has those beliefs. (TXSF of daughters)

I don't know how to say it.....With you living in New York City and all. But, we're religious... I still have doubts, but I'd like him to have a belief. I don't want to offend people talking about this. Because I've had conversations, I'm not trying to push anything on people. But I don't think there's anything unhealthy about living by Christian values and respecting people. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

New York Passion.

One concept that came up repeatedly throughout the interviews, and particularly when thinking about their children's futures, was the idea of passion and fulfillment in whatever children pursue. For fathers in New York, finding one's passion was spoken about most frequently when asked about adulthood (NYSF 4/7 and NYGF 2/5). At least one father in each Texas group also brought up fulfillment and/or passion, but for many New York fathers it seemed to be their greatest hope for their children's future.

Be able to do things you enjoy instead of slaving at a pointless job. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

She could just, like, love science or photography or macrame and find a passion that can ignite her emotions. (NYGF of a daughter)

All the Fears

As general and unspecified as fathers' hopes for their children in the present and future were, their fears were extremely specific and lengthy. Fears ranged from catastrophes like mass shootings, a contentious political climate, and the downfall of capitalism to fears about their children's teen years and the moment when children "don't need me anymore". Strong patterns did emerge in three specific areas: psychology, sociocultural environment, and gender.

Mental Health and Trauma.

The top recurrent fear for Texas fathers and straight New York fathers was mental health, followed closely by children being hurt or dying. Interestingly, no gay fathers in New York spoke about their children's mental health or being hurt/dying. This could be due to their children being slightly younger on average than the children of other fathers and/or the simple

fact that this was the smallest group, with only five fathers with five children 10 years-old or younger between them. Additionally, at least one child in every other group had already been diagnosed with a psychological disorder, predominately oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD). In this sample, foster children adopted in mid-childhood were most likely to have a diagnosis. For foster fathers in Texas, an additional fear revolved around their children becoming like the biological parents who abused them.

Psychological Disorder.

Thirty-five percent of Texas fathers and about seventy percent of straight New York fathers worried about their children either developing a drug addiction or some other psychological disorder, specifically depression and anxiety, or that their children's current diagnoses would worsen or hinder day-to-day life (TXSF 3/10, TXGF 4/10, NYSF 5/7). Fathers that specified a fear of addiction also reported personal battles with substance abuse or that they had close friends who had struggled with drugs. They knew firsthand how difficult overcoming addiction can be and hoped their children would not go down that path.

Well, I'm in recovery. I went to a meeting tonight before I got here and I hear [my children's] story throughout the meeting.....So, I'm hoping we can avoid some of that. (TXGF of sons)

That's manifested in things that I think that are more talking points in our society, like depression, or substance abuse, or getting addicted to abusive relationships, or all of those things. But I see the root of that as internal. (NYSF of daughters)

Fathers who worried about psychological disorders affecting their children's future either had children that already had a diagnosis (TXSF 2/10, TXGF 4/10, and NYSF 1/7) or had themselves been diagnosed with depression, ADD, or an anxiety disorder. Fathers who had children with current diagnoses spoke about getting their children therapy and various strategies

they had learned to diffuse situations or help their children cope. They feared that their children would continue to have mental health issues in the future.

I worry that [he's] going to continue to be reactionary, continue to not disobey but be oppositional. (NYSF of sons)

So, she definitely has that predisposition, that proclivity if you will of being somewhat of a hypochondriac, and she's very anxious. She has a lot of anxiety, which I do too. So, I'm concerned about that. I don't want that to get out of control. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

One straight father in Texas with a child with ADD, spoke openly about his own negative experience with ADD medication and how he was resisting implementing daily medication for his son.

I always hate taking medication, I've always been against it. They put me on Ritalin. Now they're talking about putting my son on Ritalin, and at this point I refuse to because I think it's a crutch. I don't want to jump straight to that. It did help me in school, it helped me, but it made me kind of a zombie. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Still other fathers feared their children would inherit psychological disorders from them.

My family has a lot of depression issues and apparently it must be hereditary, because it's unbelievable. I was dangerously depressed in the early nineties... So I think my greatest fear is [that] because he's a lot like me, (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Being Hurt or Dying.

Having their children be hurt or dying early was spoken about by a third of Texas fathers and New York straight fathers. In discussing his fears, one Texas straight father spoke about how hard it would be to lose his son, in part because he and his wife cannot have more children.

The only thing that ever concerned me is, obviously, no one would ever want to lose a kid. But we've tried so hard to have a second kid, and it's not in the deck of cards that is dealt for us at this time. I know we have my stepdaughter, but it's, I guess it's different knowing that he's your blood. (TXSF of a son and stepdaughter)

Others spoke about how the mere idea of their children being hurt or killed was difficult to even think about.

I can't watch a movie where a child gets abused or hurt. It just kills me. It just tears me up. I can't think of my children going through that. That would just kill me. (TXGF of sons)

My Child's Biological Parents.

Nearly half of gay fathers in Texas feared that their children could grow up to be like their biological parents. In discussing this, many of them spoke about their understanding of "nature versus nurture." They were doing everything they could to promote healthy development and healing for their adopted children. Even so, they still had the fear that no matter how well they parented, their children could still go down the same path as their biological parents.

And to try to break the cycle in his family, because there is a lot of abuse in his family so we are hoping he can break that cycle. One of my primary fears is that he is going to make some of the mistakes that his family made. (TXGF of a son)

You know, I don't want them to turn out like their birth fathers. That's my biggest worry. (TXGF of sons)

The men that they saw don't have to be the men that they become. (TXGF of sons)

In addition, one TXGF with three children adopted from the foster system feared the day that one of his sons would ask about his biological father. He would have to tell him that his biological father, whom the boy had never met, was in prison for murder. He described his son as a sweet, sensitive boy, and he was worried about how that information could affect him.

We try to be as truthful as his age would allow. You don't tell everything. But there's going to come a time when he asks about his dad, and his dad's in jail for murder. And so, I think that's going to be devastating. (TXGF of sons and daughters)

The World.

When asked what they worry about or fear for their children, some fathers said “society in general” before elaborating or referencing stories they’d seen on the news. One straight father in Texas with twin nine-year-old sons summed up this viewpoint well when he exclaimed, “I’m not so much worried about them. It’s everybody else.” (TXSF of twin sons)

Social Media and Technology.

Some fathers across groups, particularly those with daughters, fear the role social media may play in their children’s lives (6/32). They spoke specifically about online predators taking advantage of their children in some way, the wealth of adult information available online, and cyberbullying. Some also worried more generally about younger generations’ preoccupation with technology as opposed to real-life experiences.

Social media is a huge thing. My son loves to get on YouTube Kids and he watches all the podcasts. Some of the stuff out there, if it’s not monitored, it’s bad. It’s very bad. So, I would probably say society and social media image [are the things I worry about]. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

I think society’s getting so mean, and I think social media plays a big role because you can just be mean to somebody and not have to do a face-to-face. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

YouTube, Google. Google just drives me insane, “what are you googling?” And as they progress, that technology scares me. People just, I don’t know, having trouble with relationships and status. I don’t know, it’s good and bad. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Climate Change.

In thinking about the future and their children’s roles in it, some fathers across groups worried about climate change (5/32). They feared that as the physical environment continues to change, their children will have less opportunities to travel and experience all that the world has

to offer. They were also concerned about what the environmental changes will mean for their children and their grandchildren's health and happiness.

You have people who don't believe in climate change, and don't believe that the world is changing. You want to leave the world better. If you have a kid, you want to leave it for them, to be a place that they can actually grow up in. But more and more, it just seems like that's not going to be the case. (TXSF of a daughter)

They'll hear something at school about politics or ozone or environment. It just makes me worry that they won't have some of the things that I was able to see and experience twenty-thirty years from now. (TXSF of twin sons)

I worry about the future because we're all affected by these systemic problems of climate change, and her generation will feel it more than my generation and if she has kids, her kids would feel it more than her generation. So, I mean, I'm generally worried about the future of the planet. (NYSF of a daughter)

I worry about the world collapsing. It's been a tough couple of years, right? I just worry about the future of the world and the planet and everything. (NYGF of twin daughters)

Living as a Woman in America.

After analyzing the responses given for the interview question about fathers' fears, there were a total of 23 separate codes. Of those 23 codes, none were specifically directed at sons. However, five were specific fears for daughters. There are 32 fathers in my total sample, 22 had at least one daughter (TXSF 9/10, TXGF 4/10, NYSF 6/7, NYGF 3/5). These fathers worried about how American society would affect their daughters as they grew up. Given the difference in gender specific fears- there being none for boys but comparatively many for girls- this seems to speak to the heightened need to protect daughters (rather than children in general), which many of the fathers spoke about throughout the interview. One NYGF with a five-year-old daughter put it this way: "I think I innately, as a man, feel like I need to protect her." One TXSF with a nine-year-old daughter put it more bluntly when he said, "I think in my eyes... being a female fucking sucks."

Devalued and Abused.

Nearly half of all fathers raising daughters spoke about their worries in how people, and men specifically, will treat them. Without using the actual term #MeToo, these fathers nonetheless spoke directly about rape, sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and the general devaluation of women (TXSF 3/9, TXGF 2/4, NYSF 3/6, NYGF 1/3).

Then the fear, because she's going to be a woman... The real fear for me is something happens to her and then nothing happens to that person. My wife took krav maga, so I feel like she can thoroughly kick most anybody's ass. I'm going to suggest that [my daughter] definitely take some kind of self-defense, because I want her to be able to kick somebody's ass if she needs to. If a guy is forcing himself on her, I want her to be able to take care of herself and not be dependent on somebody else. (TXSF of a daughter)

[My fear is] her safety. Men. She's incredibly beautiful, and men are going to be attracted to her, and that freaks me out now. (NYGF of a daughter)

Structural Inequality.

Nearly a fourth of fathers with daughters worried about continual inequality between the sexes in the workplace. These parents talked about the wage gap which they prayed would at least shrink before their daughters join the workforce. They also feared that their daughters may be discriminated against in terms of employment opportunities.

I think, especially for parents of girls... I think there's a concern with how society is going to treat her, manage her, and try to manipulate her and judge her. I hope by the time that she's in a position to really make great, great strides in the world, that there's not ridiculous stigmatic barriers in her way. (TXSF of a daughter)

The other hard thing about raising a girl, at least in America, is how to counter the implicit expectations on girls these days, which is something I feel very overwhelmed with.....Will she feel like she has to do things in a certain way or that she can't do things because she's a girl? (NYSF of daughters)

Her affliction is being a woman. Women are oppressed. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

Body Image and Self-Esteem.

Nearly a fourth of fathers with daughters also spoke about the intense pressure put on girls to look a certain way, especially regarding their weight. These fathers also believed that social media would exacerbate the problem once their daughters were old enough to have social media accounts.

She's got a little bit of a tummy, very common for girls before they hit their growth spurt... That obviously is the big concern, just with body images these days with social media and TV... The unrealistic editing they do and all that crap. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

For [my daughter], being a girl, where her figure and image is a little bit more pressed as opposed to male guys. Guys kind of get to skate where women are ridiculed, depending on their body-type. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

I'm just talking about the media and everything that she's exposed to and what her friends are saying about things affecting her self-esteem and making her think that she needs to really just sort of limit her diet. Or just to otherwise be so self-conscious of her appearance, that it affects her emotional state. (NYSF of a daughter)

Theme 2: Gendering Children

In the second portion of the interview, fathers were asked general questions about gender and parenting. These questions were the first to zero in on gender specifically, as well as the parenting practices of others, and the order of the questions was important. It began with the simple question of how boys and girls are different or similar, followed by questions about other parents' gendering of their children and whether it was viewed as necessary by these fathers, and then concluded with a hypothetical question about their own beliefs about raising sons versus daughters. The questions were structured in this order to prime fathers to first identify gender norms and stereotypes they see as permeating society, and then analyze how parents (themselves included) may raise children in ways that reinforce normative gender expression. Interestingly,

their answers often did not reflect previous statements they made about gender. Some fathers realized over the course of their responses that they did have assumptions about boys and girls which affects how they raise their children and that they had been unaware of; others did not see the discrepancies in their responses, such that they would say parents do need to raise their children differently quickly followed by professing they would raise boys and girls the same.

Specific Interview Items:

Are most boys different than most girls? In what ways?

Do you think parents generally raise sons and daughters differently? How?

Do you think parents need to raise their sons and daughters differently? Why?

Would you raise your own child differently if he or she was the opposite sex?

Does Sex Matter?

Twenty-five fathers believed that boys and girls are different (TXSF 7/10, TXGF 9/10, NYSF 4/7, and NYGF 5/5), and gay fathers were more likely than straight fathers to see distinct gender differences, which they described in detail. Of these fathers who said they are different, four of the Texas straight fathers and one of the Texas gay fathers added the caveat that not everyone fits the general stereotypes associated with boys and girls. These Texas fathers seemed to consciously backtrack, perhaps because they realized that making a universal statement about boys and girls doesn't allow for individual differences or because they felt the need to answer in socially desirable ways while speaking to a cisgender female researcher who lives in New York City.

You're trying to get me in trouble out here. I absolutely believe [boys and girls are different]. I absolutely believe it, without question. Now you're going to have... I hate the

broad stereotype, but I think without question, boys and girls are just built differently... it's not everybody. But I think generally speaking, yeah. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Four straight fathers, two in Texas and two in New York, believed children differ by sex in some ways but not in other ways. They spoke primarily about the nature of play and how boys and girls may play with the same toys or do the same activities differently. One of the New York fathers, who has sons and a daughter, answered this question by first insisting that children are different based on personality, not sex. However, he finished his statement by adding that we “can’t discredit that boys are from Mars and girls are from Venus.” He gave the example that his son plays with his daughter’s princess gloves but “in a different way”.

Only two straight fathers, one in Texas and one in New York, said they did not believe boys and girls were different from one another. The father in New York, who had both a son and a daughter, saw individual differences as stemming from unique, inborn personality characteristics rather than an inherent gender difference or an environmental/parenting influence at play.

Every child has their own personality. [My kids] are different because they're different people. And their personalities have been pretty stable since a very early age. Which I understand to be just kind of how personalities work. But I don't really see much of that being determined by sex or gender. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

The Texas father’s only child, a daughter, was still a toddler and he said there were not gender differences at such a young age. A few other fathers also referenced age related differences: they saw young children as being relatively similar but as they age, gender differences emerge.

There was only one father who affirmatively said he didn’t know if there were differences between the sexes. This was a gay father in Texas who had two adopted sons in middle childhood and worked with the LGBTQ+ community in Dallas. He believed that given

the visibility of trans individuals in the media and society in general, views of gender have changed. He thought that these changes are affecting sex roles and younger generations will be more unencumbered by gender norms.

I don't know. I think now we've been more open about gender identity and gender choices are being made younger. .. So I think right now the roles and sex roles, societal roles are changing and actual sex roles are changing even down at their age. I think the roles are becoming a lot more liquid. I don't think they see the same sex roles that we do. (TXGF of sons)

Overall, the pattern that emerged regarding sex differences indicated that nearly all gay fathers affirmed natural differences between the sexes. Straight fathers echoed that belief to some extent but were more likely to add comments about individual differences or that there are many similarities between boys and girls as well. Differences in responses could be due to a number of factors. Although people in the Southern United States do tend to endorse and reinforce specific roles and traits based on sex more frequently than those in the Northeastern part of the country, the fathers in these four groups may have other demographic differences that influence their beliefs about sex and gender. Generational shifts in gender beliefs are well documented (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004) and the average age of gay fathers in this study is higher than straight fathers, which could account for all but one gay father agreeing that boys and girls are different.

Additionally, gay fathers were more likely to have only one child or two children of the same sex, whereas half of straight fathers in Texas had both sons and daughters, and all straight fathers in New York, with one exception, had at least two children. In explaining why children are different depending on their sex, fathers often used their own children as examples. If fathers have more than one child, perhaps they have more opportunities to see individual differences between children irrespective of sex.

Stereotypes and Schemas

Regardless of whether fathers believed girls and boys were generally different, the same, or somewhere in between, they were able to easily identify the stereotypical traits associated with each sex.

“All Boy.”

Five fathers in Texas used the term “all boy” to describe their own children or their nephews. This includes nearly half of straight fathers in Texas but only one gay father (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 1/10). Simply using this term implies two things: that there is a universal understanding of what “all boy” means, and traits, activities, and roles are binary, such that they can come together to make a child completely masculine, with no feminine traits diluting his gender performance. These five fathers also believed there were clear differences between boys and girls and used their families as points of reference. These men seemed to define “all boy” as physical, energetic, and fearless.

He's all boy. My son is very physical, both affectionately and just being raw in expressing himself physically in a way that [my daughter] just doesn't. I think that's very stereotypical, at least. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

My son likes to roughhouse and just, [people] would get mad at me, but be a boy... I'm guessing the guys from Texas probably say that more than the guys from New York. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Physical, energetic, and fearless were characteristics echoed by many of the other fathers as well when describing how boys are different from girls. The most common way to describe boys (in comparison to girls) was physical, with nearly half of all Texas fathers describing boys in this way (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 5/10, NYSF 2/7, NYGF 2/5). The code “physical” included

references to “playing rough”, “roughhousing”, and “wrestling”, as well as using the actual word physical to describe little boys. These fathers spoke about parents having a different reaction to girls getting hurt versus boys getting hurt, specifically because boys are expected to play in rougher ways and, in turn, get hurt more often.

They get cuts or bruises. I'm kind of like, “okay, you're supposed to.” If it was a girl, I'd probably be more, like, just hovering and caring. (TXSF of twin boys)

Boys being more energetic, wild, or active than girls was also referenced by fathers across groups. Many saw energy level as the defining difference between boys and girls. One straight father in Texas specified that his twin boys were more energetic than his daughter, and then quickly amended that by saying maybe she was just energetic in other ways. Perhaps the idea is that boys are overtly energetic or rambunctious precisely because they are more physical, and thus each sex is using their bodies in different ways.

You've got to keep a trapeze net under boys, you know what I mean? (TXSF of a daughter)

She is less energetic and fear free than I guess I might see with my nephew. In that sense, she is like a lot of girls, I guess. (TXSF of daughters)

The majority of fathers in Texas, regardless of sexual orientation, also indicated that their sons or nephews were more fearless or risktakers as compared to girls who they saw as more cautious. For some, this seemed to be a point of pride: their sons were daredevils just like they were as children. For others, they mentioned it because they felt boys acted without thinking, for better or worse.

[My son is] much more of a risk-taker. He's all boy and she's a girly girl. And so, they're very polar opposite in that respect. They have a lot of similar personality traits and characteristics, but my son is like me. He's got one speed, full speed. [My daughter is] a little more cautious. A little bit more careful. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Their thought process isn't as advanced, I would say... They still have that reckless abandonment that a boy has, I guess, or that I see in the boys. It's just this, "Oh, I'm not even thinking. Oh, I didn't even think about the repercussions. Oh, I didn't even consider your feelings." (TXGF of sons and daughters)

Three-quarters of fathers in Texas, both gay and straight, also mentioned football as a societal expectation for boys or as an example of a gendered activity. Only one gay father in New York referenced football specifically, and he had grown up in Texas before moving to New York City. Football to Texas fathers was the quintessential gendered activity and one that many of them spoke about at length. One gay father who had recently moved to Texas from Ohio said:

I've noticed in Texas in general, but it's probably everywhere, boys are supposed to be into sports, football. And girls are doing other things. I'm not quite sure what but with boys it's always the focus: boys sports, boys sports, boys sports. They push it. (TXGF of a son)

One straight father in a suburb of Fort Worth specifically worried for his son because he didn't like sports or football and their community is "all about" high school football.

It's sports, sports, sports. So my son, yes, he's like other kids, but doesn't do sports. He's not really interested in sports, which is strange because he loves all the boy stuff... so I think that makes it a little tough for him, and it makes him feel kind of like a weirdo, or an outsider. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Another straight father who lived in that same community spoke about his openness to whatever his son wants to do and that he doesn't mind that sometimes he plays with dolls with his big sister. Immediately after making that statement, he added, "But he loves anything with a ball, just like me... he's a natural athlete. It runs in the family." Later, he spoke about his hope that his son will get a football scholarship to college.

One Texas gay father spoke about how he knew it was silly, but he loved that his son wanted to be a football player because the idea of being the quarterback or head cheerleader still seemed like an elite high school experience, something he wished he'd been a part of.

I think [the expectation] is still football. Texas is football. The girls do cheerleading. And so, I think we also as parents, we put those kids on paths sometimes, putting the little girl into ballet class, and put the little boy in karate, or in sports. I think growing up in Texas, growing up in that kind of culture, it doesn't bother me that those expectations are there... We do everything to try to not force them into that, but I'll tell you, it doesn't do me any harm when [my son] picks up a football... I'm like, "Well, let's do it!" (TXGF of sons and daughters)

Overall, fathers in Texas, both straight and gay, were much more specific about male stereotypes than were New York fathers. Additionally, the traits identified the most revolved around physical prowess and aggression. They spoke about roughhousing and football to a large extent and accepted those aggressive, and sometimes violent, activities as what sets boys apart from girls. This relates to the theory *doing gender* and the performative nature of masculinity, as well as to the continued dominance of hegemonic masculinity in Texas.

“Girly girl.”

Four fathers, one straight father from Texas, two gay fathers from Texas, and one gay father who lives in New York but was raised in North Texas, specifically used the term “girly girl” to describe their daughters. Additionally, nearly half of the 22 fathers in the entire sample who had daughters described them as “girly” or “a stereotypical girl” daughter, including all but one gay father (TXSF 3/9, TXGF 4/4, and NYGF 2/3). Notably, though six straight New York fathers had daughters, none of them described their child as girly.

I think the family is a good indication of the nature versus nurture, in the sense that you've got two dads. This is an improper thing to say, but she's such a girly girl. She insists that she has everything pink. (TXGF of sons and daughters)

Two fathers, one straight father from Texas and one gay father from New York, proudly stated their daughters were tomboys. This is illustrative of the greater acceptance of girls exhibiting supposedly masculine behaviors and characteristics. Not a single father with sons proudly described them as having “feminine” traits. In fact, the only father who spoke about his son being effeminate was a gay foster dad in Texas who worried about what his child would experience in Fort Worth given that he had three areas of difference already: he is a black, foster child who has experienced incredible trauma resulting in behavioral issues. To add gay or trans on top of that was something this father was directly trying to prevent, even while knowing from his own experience as a gay man that this child will identify in the way that is right for him despite the potential for compounded prejudice.

Additionally, of the 22 fathers with at least one daughter, six (TXSF 1/9, TXGF 3/4, NYSF 2/6), directly spoke about how they purposefully do not promote gender-typical behavior. This included nearly all gay Texas fathers with daughters but no New York gay fathers with daughters. These six fathers see their daughters as picking up stereotypically feminine behavior and developing preferences for toys and television shows geared towards girls because of their friends at school, not the parenting provided or due to some innate proclivity. Some went so far as to say those gender norms are in the environment or floating freely through the air.

I think both me and her mom were not on board for any of those [gender-specific] distinctions and didn't push that at all, and it just happens anyway... Even in preschool, I remember the preschool teacher ... you sort of give your kid over to these people. The preschool teachers saying things like “girls and boys,” and “girls’ toys and boys’ toys.” (NYSF of a daughter)

Before we had kids, we didn't want to paint the room pink ahead of time, and we were going to not impose these sorts of gender roles on our kids, and they just did it themselves. Grandmas don't help, especially with girls. Just dresses and everything. But they definitely took stereotypical gender roles very early on. So we lost control over that. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

The only father of sons to speak specifically about not pushing gendered objects or behaviors on his sons was a straight father from New York.

As far as separating [them] from boy and girl stuff, we don't do that. Like if they want to play with dolls, or since mom paints her nails... if you want to get your nails painted, get your nails painted. We try not to separate any of that. (NYSF of sons)

It's interesting that fathers of daughters, and particularly gay fathers, felt the need to say they didn't teach their daughters to be stereotypically girly. One gay father from Texas, who initially described his daughter as a girly-girl, pointed out how interesting it will be to see whether his daughter will develop a more even balance of masculine and feminine traits considering she is growing up without a mother modeling feminine behavior.

She's young yet to know, but I think she may have, and I think that she may continue to have more of a balance of male and female qualities, just because of having two dads. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

Another gay father in Fort Worth saw his daughter's girliness as an indicator of the strength nature has over nurture. His family structure includes two dads, two adopted boys, and one adopted five-year-old girl. He said she has always been drawn to pink and makeup and cuddling despite having no other females in the house.

It's a unique situation, because she doesn't have a mother to impose ... she picks up all of the stereotypes. They float freely in the world. (TXGF of sons and a daughter)

As compared to talking about typical boys, who were generally described in terms of personality and behavior, girls were more frequently associated with toys and colors. There were

very few references to “boy” toys when talking about sons. This could be due to fathers’ familiarity with what being a young boy is like, making it easier to identify psychological and characteristic differences. It could also be due to the wider range of personality traits now acceptable for young girls, such that there isn’t a unified view of an “all girl” personality type, even though there are toys and colors directly associated with being a young girl.

Playing with dolls and liking the color pink were evoked most often when explaining how boys and girls are different. Dolls were included when describing gender differences by a quarter of all dads (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 3/10, NYSF 3/7, NYGF 1/5), as was the color pink (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 4/10, NYSF 3/10).

I would say that a lot of parents think little boys need to have little boy things. They need to be outside. They need to be rough. They need to be just the general idea that society tells everyone what little boys are supposed to be. Little girls are supposed to play with dolls or maybe not necessarily be outside but should be doing other things. (TXSF of twin sons and a daughter)

I think she is [like other girls] in that I think she's drawn to being the mommy with her dolls and playing through that kind of stuff. So I think that there's a certain kind of normality in that. (NYSF of daughters)

I do feel like on her own she has chosen, "Pink and purple are my favorite colors and I want everything to be pink and purple." (TXSF of daughters)

One straight father in New York spoke about how his daughter is picking up gender norms at school that sometimes frustrate him. However, he is very happy that at least she hasn’t picked up the need for everything to be pink and purple: her favorite color is brown.

Even choosing colors or offering colors, for example. Her favorite color is brown right now. And there's something about that that makes me so happy. “Yeah, have brown!” And so brown is the color now. It's great. I'm glad it's not purple or pink. (NYSF of daughters)

The two most common ways to describe girls beyond their choice in toys or color scheme were that they are expected to be “prim and proper” (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 3/10, NYGF 2/5) and “more mature than boys” (TXGF 2/10, NYSF 1/7, NYGF 1/5).

A boy is raised to be tough and be a man, and a girl is raised to be prim and proper so that a man will be attracted to her. (NYGF of a daughter)

I would have to say that I think the intellectual development and maturity is real for girls. They mature and articulate a lot earlier, including emotional stuff. (TXGF of a daughter)

Texas fathers alone spoke of girls being emotional, cautious, or rule followers. Emotional often has a negative connotation and, in discussing gender differences, it certainly seemed, to Texas fathers, to be a subpar yet common trait in girls (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 3/10).

Absolutely. The level of activity. The way they go about solving problems. Even as a little kid, the little boy is more likely to knock a barrier down or climb over it. The little girl will cry to get what she wants. (TXGF of a son)

Boys, oh, I didn't want to say this, because it sounds so bad, but don't tend to be so emotional. Where girls are really emotional. (TXGF of sons)

It is interesting that the descriptors “cautious” and “rule following” were also spoken about only by Texas fathers. In the previous section, Texas fathers were far more likely to emphasize teaching their children to be independent from a young age. One could argue following the rules is antithetical to independence and being overly cautious would make striking out on one’s own or making one’s own decisions, as independent people do, difficult. It seems that independence, which is highly valued by many Texans, is at odds with the stereotypical female traits identified by these fathers.

[My nephew is] all boy, I guess someone would say. Just full of energy and wild and no fear, whereas [my daughter] is cautious and safe and a rule follower. From that aspect, I would say they are very different. (TXSF of daughters)

Fathers in Texas, three straight and three gay, were also the only participants who saw inherent differences in the thinking and general mentality of boys and girls. Fathers in New York, on the other hand, made very few statements about ingrained, natural gender differences, though they did emphasize inborn personality differences. When it came to identifying stereotypical gender norms for boys and for girls, fathers in this sample differed more by location than by their sexual orientation. Additionally, though Texas fathers were more specific about gender differences and more uniform in the differences they identified, gay Texas fathers were more likely than their straight counterparts to say that they actively do not promote stereotypical femininity in their daughters.

Who is harder to raise?

There was no consensus as to whether girls or boys are harder to raise based on stereotypical traits. Five fathers proactively said one gender is easier to raise when young as opposed to the other gender. These statements were made when asked about gender differences; there was no actual question about which gender is more difficult to parent. Three of these fathers believed young boys were more difficult to raise, one straight Texas father and two gay New York fathers. Their reasoning centered on young boys' propensity to break objects and get hurt.

You know, there's that old saying about girls being easy when they're young, boys are trying to kill themselves or somebody else." (TXSF of a daughter)

Two fathers, both Texas gay fathers, believed that little girls were more difficult to raise because they are more likely to want pretty clothes or expensive toys.

Oh god, yes [boys and girls are different]. What I've heard from other adoptive parents that have had boys and girls is that girls are much more difficult. Boys don't care so much

about certain things. They don't have to have fashion. They don't have to have the latest. I mean, when you're part of gay parents, then you have to look good. But boys can take a stick out there and go play a gun with it, where a girl would not. (TXGF of boys)

The subject of puberty and teenage dating was also raised by some fathers but only in reference to daughters. They spoke about needing to learn how to deal with female puberty and there seemed to be an underlying concern about their daughters inevitably becoming sexually mature.

As a male, having gone through puberty is completely different than a girl going through puberty? I'm going to have to try to understand that experience as it happens. (TXSF of a daughter)

Most of us have double standards for our boys versus our girls. One of them is sex, dating, things like that. (TXGF of a son)

There's still that: a girl shouldn't be dating boys, but a boy can go around dating girls and multiple girls. That's something almost to be proud of, but then the girls... they tend to be embarrassed about it. So there's still old stigmas and expectations I see. (NYSF of a daughter)

No father brought up their son's future sexual behavior or how to navigate male puberty with them. It should go without saying that all of these cisgender men experienced male puberty for themselves and understand the biological changes their sons will go through. It does seem telling, however, that none of them talk about their sons dating or possibly getting someone pregnant while still in their teens. The only reference to male sexuality came when fathers talked about teaching their boys to respect women and know the importance of consent.

Why are boys and girls different?

In answering questions about gender differences and differential parenting, many fathers expressed their opinions about "nature versus nurture". This phrase, or allusions to the interplay between the environment and biology, were spoken about by half of all fathers across groups.

However, there was a variety of philosophies expressed regarding the effects and the supposed supremacy of nurturance and/or genetics.

Differential Parenting.

In this section of the interview, I directly asked, “Do parents in general raise their sons and daughters differently?” This seemed to be a very easy question to answer for many of the fathers. Of the 32 participants, almost in a consensus across all fathers, 28 affirmed that parents raise children differently, though they explained why parents do this in a variety of ways.

Yeah, definitely. I don't know if it's subconscious or not though. (NYGF of twin daughters)

I think boys get a lot more freedom than girls. I don't know. I think it's a... Just as like a man, I guess we always protect our... A natural born-in gene that we have to protect women. (TXSF of twin boys)

So I think definitely yes, parents do raise them differently, but how much of that's the kid pushing them versus just the world around us versus what you want to do? I don't know. (NYGF of twin girls)

Four of the fathers who believed parents raise children differently attributed it to intergenerational transmission.

Without a doubt and it depends on how you were raised. You're either gonna raise them the same or the total opposite. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Of the four participants who didn't affirm universal differential parenting based on sex, two Texas straight fathers and one New York gay father said yes and no.

I think some parents just guide them to become who they're naturally supposed to be, which is what we're doing. (NYGF of a daughter)

The only father who answered no, a gay father from Texas, said parents raise children the same because the values they are teaching sons and daughters are universal.

I think everybody wants the same for their kids, and everyone has a different way of teaching them those things. But no, I think everyone raises their kids with the same basic and foundation things. (TXGF of sons)

A few fathers believed there are innate differences between boys and girls that necessitates raising them differently. Others believed, though parents raise children differently, it is a function of the sociocultural environment rather than parents essentializing gender and this will be further discussed in the next subsection.

Raising a Daughter Versus a Son.

The main ways that parents raise their children differently, according to the entire sample, revolved around discipline and protection, the activities/opportunities afforded to boys versus girls, and concerns about physical appearances, as well as emotionality.

Regarding discipline and protection, many fathers made clear that they and/or other parents are “softer” on daughters. The belief that parents are “softer” on girls encompassed comments like “not as hard on girls,” “protect girls more,” and “are softer on girls.” Six Texas straight fathers, two Texas gay fathers, three New York straight fathers, and one New York gay father, a total of 12, believed this was the main difference in gender-based differential parenting. The pattern seems to indicate that straight fathers, regardless of geographical environment, see parents as gentler with daughters than with sons.

I can count on one hand [how many times I’ve spanked her]. It's harder to discipline her than it is for [my son]. And I catch myself- the way I vocalize to him to stop doing

something, and the way I talk to her to stop... I'm way softer, and she gets away with more. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

For me personally, I know that I've been... People have pointed this out, I'm a little easier on my daughter. I have absolutely never even thought of spanking her. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

Six fathers (TXSF 2/10, TXGF 1/10, NYSF 2/7, NYGF 1/5) said one of the main parenting differences is simply the toys and activities offered to children based on their sex.

[To our daughter] we were like, "Do you want to do ballet?" whereas [with our son] it was soccer. Where they could either both be doing... if he wants to be a dancer, he could be a dancer... You don't think of it first. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

A few fathers from each group also specified that there is more effort put into and concern surrounding how girls look.

I'm very conscious of, any time a family member, or even out in public, someone says to my daughter, "Oh, you're so cute." I would say, "Yes, and she's also brave, and smart, and funny." So things like that, just trying to balance some of that out. Yes, other people put more effort into a girl's appearance, always making it like, "You can't leave the house until you're dolled up." We don't really do that with [our daughter], because we're not hairdressing-homo-types or anything. We let her get dirty... (TXGF of a son and daughter)

Three fathers (TXSF 1/10, NYSF 1/7, NYGF 1/5) believed that parents seem to directly teach little boys to be unemotional. One father with both a son and daughter linked his differential parenting surrounding emotion as an artifact of his own upbringing.

It's sad, because my dad kind of raised me this way, but the stereotype is you can't show emotions if you're trying to hold the family together. My dad never cried, never this, never that. It kind of rolled over to me a little bit, just because you don't want to feel weak when you're supposed to be the concrete that holds the family together. I've tried my best not to be as critical or harsh [with my son] when it comes to showing emotion, but it's definitely... It's tough. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

A quarter of fathers believed that children need to be raised differently, particularly Texas fathers (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 2/10, NYSF 2/7). They saw gender-based differential parenting as necessary because of the unique challenges children will face as men or as women in the future. This was primarily a reference to the dangers that come with being female.

They're going to face different challenges. If we had a girl, I'd be trying harder so that she feels she can say what she says, to feel strong about herself. (TXGF of sons)

I do think with our [Christian] beliefs, there are different roles and different ways to raise girls. With my girls, I want to raise them to feel love without feeling they have to get it from some boy and to love themselves. Whereas with a boy, I feel like I would want to raise them on how to love a girl properly and how to do that respectfully. (TXSF of daughters)

Where you would tell a girl like, you should stand up for yourself and you should not let anybody say "no girls allowed..." So I wouldn't say those things to a boy, presumably. I might tell them not to treat their peers in those ways, but it wouldn't be the same, as pressing of a concern as when you're trying to tell a girl not to get discriminated against by a sexist culture. (NYSF of a daughter)

Taken together these responses seem to reflect beliefs about the essential danger garnered simply from being a female in America. There was not a worry about boys surviving or thriving as adult men. Rather, fathers in this sample believed that boys must be taught to be allies and trusted partners of girls, and girls was explicitly empowered.

The unique challenges that boys were expected to face as they grow into manhood mainly pertained to the roles they will need to fulfill. Texas fathers, both straight and gay, were more likely to reference male gender roles like husband and provider than were New York fathers. These Texas fathers believed they needed to prepare their sons for their future responsibilities to society and family.

Raising him to be a man, you want him to be independent, you want him to be able to take care of his family. Where, with [my daughter], you want her to grow up to be a good person so that she is a good wife, but at the same time she knows, “hey, it's okay to say no. It's okay to be an independent woman, but at the same time not let somebody walk all over you. Don't let somebody take advantage of you.” But at the same time, I'm not as hard on her because, in society, the majority of the responsibility falls on the man. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Unprompted by a question, nearly half of gay fathers in Texas told me they believed that same-sex couples were less likely to raise their children differently, though no gay fathers in New York made similar arguments. Perhaps this was mentioned by gay fathers in Texas, but not those in New York, because differential parenting based on gender is more pronounced in Texas and LGBTQ+ parents are perceived as less likely to enforce gender norms than their straight peers.

I'm not so sure that that's something that would be common in the same-sex community or parents, because it's not to purposely go against the grain, but it's when you're aware of it... I think being more aware of transgender possibilities, then I think that shifts how I perceive gender anyway. (TXGF of a daughter)

I do feel LGBT families have this distinct advantage of being able to kind of make up our families, and we as gay men that have experienced societal expectations from us in the past, you either care or you don't. I guess we've moved on. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

Environment.

A total of 15 fathers (TXSF 5/10, TXGF 6/10, NYSF 3/7, NYGF 1/5), nearly half of the entire sample, saw societal influences, gendered physical environments, and/or sociocultural gender expectations, rather than parents' deeply held beliefs about gender or inherent natural differences between sexes, as the main catalysts for gender differences.

Eight fathers, four Texas straight fathers, three Texas gay fathers, and one New York straight father, saw societal influences as the primary cause of gender differences in children.

This was a clear location-specific pattern. Fathers in Texas saw society, including expectations, norms, and structure, as the source from which gender differences spring and as a source they have little to no control over.

But I think it's just the instinct to kind of do whatever society norms are. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

So it starts with exposing them more to the Disney princesses and the Frozen's, as opposed to the Batmans and the Supermans and that kind of thing. So I think that all of that exposure does begin to sort of reflect their perception of their gender. And so, yeah, I think that kids grow up gendered in most environments from a very young age. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

Some fathers also saw sociocultural differences in specific parts of the United States as determining gender norms and trajectories. Only Texas fathers spoke about geographical regions. More than a third of all Texas fathers in this sample specifically saw Texas as having stronger gender expectations than other parts of the country (TXSF 4/10 and TXGF 3/10).

I think, because it's Texas, it's, I guess, more traditional family values of going to church and yada yada. I feel like, in that whole situation, you have the wife stays at home with the kids and the dad makes the money, and boys will be boys. I feel like that's, in certain parts of the country, that's not the case, but I feel like in Texas, that's the case. I feel like there's a small niche of the community that isn't like that. (TXSF of a daughter)

Fort Worth, or Texans in general, stick to the norms. That little boys are supposed to be exactly what I said- outside. They're supposed to go play football or baseball, sports and everything, instead of just letting them be little boys. (TXSF of twin sons and a daughter)

I would say down here [in Texas], yes. I would say there are different expectations put on boys versus girls. Just from my experiences, it seems like there's this tough mentality on boys, that they're rough, tough, and boys are going to be boys. Almost like stricter, harsher expectations on them. With girls, it's more of this idea that they have to be protected, and they're delicate and soft. (TXSF of daughters)

One gay father who grew up in a traditional Mexican American family in Texas spoke about how the expectations of behavior for boys and girls when he was growing up were strongly enforced.

I do [think boys and girls are raised differently]. I think it comes from my own family. I come from a very close-knit Hispanic family, I would say almost backwards culturally nowadays, where people had roles based on your sex. I grew up where the role and the structure of the male and female were set. From that perspective, yeah, I think people do raise them differently. (TXGF of sons and daughters)

Hypothetical Opposite Sex Child

Fathers were also asked to imagine if they would raise their child differently if he or she was the opposite sex and what those differences would be. Though a quarter of fathers either declined to answer this question or said they did not know, ten fathers said they would not change the way they raise children based on sex, while fourteen fathers said they would make changes to their parenting if their child was the opposite sex. One New York straight father with a young daughter said he didn't know and made an insightful comment explaining why he was unsure how to answer: I want to say no but I don't know because I've been socialized that way too.

Parent the Same Despite Sex.

Ten fathers, four TXSF, one TXGF, two NYSF, and three NYGF said they would raise their children the same no matter the sex. These fathers believed their parenting priorities and the things they enjoyed teaching their children about were not (or should not be) related to gender. One Texas straight father with a 2-year-old daughter said it well:

I've had friends and family ask, "Oh, wouldn't you have preferred a boy to do things with?" I'm like, "No." I'm currently, at this point, able to do anything with her that I would do with a son. And the funny thing is, even later on in life, I'll still be able to. There's no difference there at all. (TXSF of a daughter)

While some of these fathers simply said they wouldn't raise their children differently without elaborating, those that did expand on their answers tended to talk about activities and values. The quality time activities and things they wanted to teach their children about would be the same regardless of if they had a boy or girl.

I would teach my son to appreciate botany as much as I would teach him how to throw a ball, which I'm doing with her. (NYGF of a daughter)

Three Texas straight fathers and one New York gay father, who was raised in Texas, related this question to the core values taught to children and adamantly said they would raise both sons and daughters with the same values.

Well, it depends on what you value as a parent. If you value empathy and kindness, then no. Raise them the same. I believe that if we had a boy, we'd be raising them the exact same way as [our daughter]. There would be no difference in the way we would raise a son. But that's us. (NYGF of a daughter)

Two of the ten fathers who said they would raise sons the same as daughters and vice versa did add exceptions. One Texas straight father with daughters said he would teach a son to never abuse women or people in general. One New York gay father with sons said he would warn a daughter about sexism, that she needed to be prepared for that in the future unfortunately.

I think girls need to be prepared for the reality that other people will treat them differently. Do I think girls should be treated differently? No. But do I think they should be prepared for what the world will expect them to be? Yes. (NYGF of sons)

Adapt Parenting to Sex of the Child.

Fourteen, nearly half of fathers in the total sample, believed they would raise sons and daughters differently (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 5/10, NYSF 4/7, and NYGF 1/5). Of these fourteen fathers, nine had sons and five had daughters. When thinking hypothetically about how one would raise a child of the opposite sex, fathers of sons were much more likely to see a need to change their parenting to accommodate the special needs of girls than were the fathers imagining raising a son.

Six fathers, across all groups (TXSF 2/10, TXGF 2/10, NYSF 1/7, AND NYGF 1/5), said the main difference they would implement in raising daughters would revolve around protection and nurturance. These fathers saw a need to hover more over daughters and to be “softer” in dealing with them.

I give the boys a lot of love and attention, [and I would] give a girl a lot of love and nurturing. I'd probably be a little bit more hovering over her. Like the boys, now I'll let them ride bikes around my neighborhood without supervision. If it was a girl, I'd probably put, like, GPS on her bike. (TXSF of twin boys)

Two fathers, one Texas gay father and one New York straight father said they would specifically teach a daughter how to be strong and confident.

Half of the gay fathers in Texas spoke about changing their parenting if they had a girl in more stereotypical and specific ways: one said he wouldn't encourage outdoor play as much, two said they would focus more on (and have to learn about) female hygiene, one said he would promote proper etiquette more, and one said he wouldn't be as physically affectionate with a daughter in middle childhood.

The five fathers of daughters, including nearly half of straight fathers in New York (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 1/10, NYSF 3/7) who thought they would raise a son differently than they currently were raising daughters did not elaborate beyond saying the activities would be different with boys with two interesting exceptions: One New York straight father said he would use different terms of endearment and one Texas straight father said he would have higher expectations for a son.

I've thought about this. Would I use the same terms of endearment? Would I say "honey" as much as I say "honey" or "sweetie" if I had a boy? I don't think I would. I think it would be different. And I don't really understand why. I talk about it with my wife. It's really messed up, but I don't know. I think it'd be different. (NYSF of daughters)

If I had a son instead of a daughter, I feel like my natural inclination would be to be harder on him, and I feel like that would be something I would have to battle. I feel like I would automatically set higher expectations on him as a boy. I don't know exactly why, but I feel like that would be my natural. (TXSF of daughters)

Theme 3: Gender Nonconformity

Directly following questions about gendering children and gender conformity came hypothetical questions about gender nonconformity. Fathers were asked to imagine what they would do if they had a son or daughter who wanted to bring cross-gender toys or wear cross-gender clothes to school. The majority of fathers said they would allow their children to dress in gender nonconforming ways and to play with toys generally viewed as appropriate for the opposite sex; however, their initial reactions to being asked these questions were very different as were the actions they would take with gender nonconforming children. Responses also varied greatly depending on the sex of the hypothetical child and the region of the country in which fathers lived, while personal sexual orientation did not seem to be a factor in most responses.

Specific Interview Items:

If your son wanted to take a barbie to school, how would that go?

If your daughter wanted to take a boy toy to school, how would that go?

If your son wanted to wear a dress to school, how would that go?

If your daughter wanted to wear boy clothes to school, how would that go?

“Yes,” “No,” or “Man, that’s a tough one!”

The majority of all fathers, regardless of geographical location and sexual orientation, said they would support their children’s gender nonconforming behavior. For some, it seemed to be viewed as a natural variation on the norm and not something to worry about. For others, the idea of having a nonconforming child, particularly a son, was seen as a problem they did not quite understand or know how to navigate. For example, one Texas straight father of daughters reacted to the first question in this series, whether he would let a hypothetical son bring a barbie to school, like this:

My first reaction? Oh man... That is super not normal. That’s not cool or macho. I don’t know. I would hope, I guess, that I would support that. (TXSF of daughters)

This Texas father wasn’t sure if he would be able to support his hypothetical son, let alone whether he would actually allow him to go to school with a “girl toy.” He and one other father, also a straight Texan, said they weren’t sure what they would do in that situation. Only one father said no, he would not let his son take a doll to school. That father was also a straight father from Texas, and he conflated the idea of a boy playing with a doll with his beliefs about trans people. He began by telling a story about a trans 6-year-old he had heard about. He believed that the reason this child, born a biological female, identified as a boy was because he

idolized his athletic big brother, and the parents were remiss for allowing their “daughter” to behave and dress like a boy. He concluded:

As an adult, sometimes trying to pick between a donut and a cinnamon roll I can't make up my mind. At six-years-old I personally have a hard time finding it that you could identify “I'm a male” or “I'm a female.” (TXSF of a son and daughter)

All fathers in the total sample, other than these three Texas straight fathers, said yes, they would allow their sons to take a doll to school. Some were clear about how they would support their sons and that it wouldn't be a big deal to them, while others struggled with the idea before concluding they would allow it. The varying degrees of acceptance demonstrated by fathers' answers will be discussed in the next section.

When discussing a daughter taking a “boy toy” to school, all fathers in all groups said they would allow it. Some fathers were enthusiastic about the prospect of their daughters playing with trucks and action figures, others said they wouldn't care, and many proclaimed that was a much easier question to answer. A good indication of how differently many fathers responded to questions about sons versus daughters comes from the same Texas father quoted above. In response to what he would do if his daughter wanted to play with “boy toys” he said:

My daughter actually has a dirt bike... She's a little tomboy. She'll tell you "I don't like to wear dresses." Sometimes she does, but she'd rather wear shorts and a t-shirt... Just let them be kids. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

He then showed me a picture of his daughter covered in mud and laughed. The idea of his daughter being a tomboy was something he was proud of, and he did not associate it with gender identity in the same way he did when thinking about his son. This was typical of many fathers, particularly those in Texas.

The next question, how they would respond to a son who wanted to wear a dress to school, yielded a myriad of strategies, misconceptions, and degrees of acceptance. These will be discussed further but in terms of total responses, twenty-one fathers said yes, they would allow it (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 7/10, NYSF 7/7, NYGF 4/5), six fathers said no, they would not let their sons wear a dress to school if they wanted to (TXSF 3/10, TXGF 2/10, NYGF 1/5), and the remaining five essentially said they didn't know or refrained from giving a direct answer (TXSF 3/10, TXGF 1/10). Texas straight fathers was the only group in which the majority would not support their hypothetical sons' wearing stereotypically female clothes to school, and Texas gay fathers, while two-thirds expressed support, were less accepting than New York fathers as well. One of the Texas gay fathers who said, in no uncertain terms, he would not let his son wear a dress to school, said jokingly, "See, you're gonna put me more in that straight dad category now."

The final question was about how they would respond to a daughter wanting to wear "boy" clothes to school. Only two fathers said no, their daughters would not be allowed to wear clothes made for boys and both were from Texas, one straight and one gay. The other thirty fathers in the total sample tended to view this as a much "easier" question, some joking that girls already wear "boy" clothes anyway.

Yeah, that would be much easier... There would be less mental processing on my part to get to that point. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

Initial Reactions

In recent years, many toys previously considered to be appropriate for one sex or the other are now being seen as gender neutral. It is more acceptable for boys to play with toy kitchens and girls to play with building blocks, for example (Kane, 2006). Some toys, especially

those previously seen as “boy toys,” are now being marketed to both boys and girls, often the only difference being the colors the toys are available in. Though “boy toys” are increasingly being produced in pinks and purples to make them more attractive to girls, dolls and barbies are still seen as feminine toys and only appropriate for little girls.

This trend can also be seen in children’s clothing. While it was against the norm for females to wear jeans and t-shirts fifty years ago, and many school dress codes today still require girls to wear skirts and boys to wear pants, clothing styles and what is appropriate for females to wear has broadened considerably. The same cannot be said for male fashion. While girls can wear both traditional feminine attire and types of clothes previously considered masculine in a wide variety of colors, boys do not have that freedom. They have less choice in color scheme and style than do females. One New York straight father said it best when discussing girls’ freedom in clothing selection in comparison to boys:

It's not symmetrical, because she wears shorts and pants all the time...She has this pink t-shirt that says Star Wars on it, and I'm like, “That is exactly a shirt that I would have worn as a kid, except it's pink.” It's like, how much are we still policing this boundary at this point? (NYSF of a daughter)

“I Wouldn’t Care.”

All fathers in all groups said they would not have a problem with their daughters taking a “boy toy” to school. To be fair, it was difficult for me as a researcher to define what a toy that is still seen as just for boys would be and opinions about gender norms in play objects vary greatly, with the default being that girls aren’t necessarily judged by the toys they play with. I generally asked how fathers would react to their daughters only wanting to play with “boy toys” and wanting to take those toys to school. The examples I gave were action figures, trucks, and sports

balls. Again, all fathers said they would allow their daughter to take a “boy toy” to school. Nine fathers went so far as to say “It wouldn’t even be a problem” or “I wouldn’t care” without elaboration, with half of New York fathers, regardless of sexual orientation, giving this blasé response to cross-gender play in their daughters (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 2/10, NYSF 4/7, NYGF 2/5).

There were also five fathers who made a point of telling me that they actively want their daughters to play with “boy toys” or think it’s great if they do, three Texas straight fathers, one Texas gay father, and one New York straight father.

I think that would be fantastic. I would know that we've done something right if she felt so unencumbered by expectations. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

She used to [play with “boy toys”], and I thought it was kind of cool... because she'd also read her books and play dolls... I thought that was cool, that she did it all. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Right now, my daughter is drawn to things that are stereotypically for girls...But I've tried- for example, we have trucks in the house for her to play with. We have books on transportation and things like that. Books on science for kids, which unfortunately, I think is more masculinely valanced for some reason. (NYSEF of daughters)

An additional father, gay and from New York with daughters, told a story about how his mother always wants to buy his girls “boy toys” because they are more engaging.

My mom always complained about things for little girls. She'd go, "Should we get them boy gifts?" because they were more engaging. They were more thought-provoking, like a set of Legos for a boy versus, like, a Barbie doll, right? You do much more thinking-wise with the Legos. (NYGF of twin daughters)

Unsurprisingly, the responses to questions about their sons playing with and taking dolls to school was not met with quite so much openness. Though all fathers, save three Texas straight

fathers, said they would allow their sons to take dolls to school, there were only three fathers who indicated they wouldn't care at all, one New York gay father and two Texas straight fathers.

Go for it. What the fuck is a GI Joe anyway? (TXSF of a daughter)

Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't think anything different about it. I don't have any problems with it. I know a lot of people would, but as a parent, I wouldn't. (TXSF of twin sons)

Though a few straight fathers, two in Texas and two in New York, mentioned that their sons play with their sisters' toys, and they don't mind, no father in any group said they actively wanted their sons to play with stereotypically feminine toys.

Throughout this section, questions about clothing were much more difficult for fathers to answer than were the questions about toys. No father said they wouldn't care if their son wore a dress to school. Many rightfully pointed out that the repercussions for a boy wearing a dress in public could be extreme. However, when thinking about a daughter wearing "boy clothes", four fathers, two Texas straight fathers, one Texas gay father, and one New York straight father, did say they wouldn't care.

I don't think I would- I wouldn't care. I would just be worried for my boys more so. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

It'd be fine. But if she wanted to wear boots and, I don't know, I guess general boy clothes... Yeah, who cares? (TXSF of twin sons and a daughter)

Additionally, eight fathers, two in each group, made the point that girls are wearing "boy clothes" on a daily basis.

They already do. But once again, you really can't tell a boy's red shirt from a girl's red shirt, right? (NYGF of twin daughters)

That's interesting because my first thought with that was that it is different [than a boy wearing "girl clothes"], and I don't know why. I feel like I don't think it's as weird. When

I say weird, different from the norm, for girls that just want to wear jeans and a t-shirt. That is more accepted, I guess. A lot of times, it is just a tee shirt that could be for a boy or a girl. (TXSF of daughters)

Tough Question, Easy Question.

The most prevalent initial type of response from fathers was that questions about sons doing gender atypical things were tough, and questions about daughters doing gender atypical things were easy. Two straight fathers in Texas said that answering how they'd react to a son taking a doll to school was tough, and nine fathers said that the question about sons wearing dresses was tough (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 3/10, NYSF 4/7, NYGF 1/5).

If my son wanted to wear a dress, man. That would be tough. I think if that happened, I would definitely want to try to navigate some kind of conversation with him and see what's making him want to wear the dress and try to have a conversation to the best of my ability without making him feel judged or like I'm telling him it's wrong. That would be tough. I think I'd want to see how that conversation went [first]. (TXSF of daughters)

I think that would be more difficult... And it would be more of a statement. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

Interestingly, though the majority of New York straight fathers found this to be a difficult question, this group of fathers was also the only group in which all fathers said they ultimately would support their sons wearing a dress to school.

It is also important to remember that only four Texas straight fathers said they would allow their son to wear a dress to school, less than half of all fathers in that group. The reason only one Texas straight father viewed this as a difficult question could be that it was *not* difficult to answer for most of them: the answer was either a definitive no or they avoided giving a yes or no answer altogether.

It's not a hard answer for me. I know the answer, I just don't want to say it out loud... Yeah, I couldn't. I mean, when I say it out loud I feel like a bad person. I watch Modern Family, I'm hip. I think they're great dads...but no. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Again, toy and clothing choices for girls are much broader now, encompassing both traditionally feminine and what was previously considered traditionally masculine objects and styles. It comes as no great surprise that two-thirds of all fathers saw questions about daughters playing with or wearing cross-gender things were easier to answer. It was, however, quite telling that so many of these fathers literally said the word "easier" when answering questions about daughters. Considering the questions about cross-gender behavior began with a question about sons, followed by a question about daughters, perhaps these fathers were simply relieved to not have to keep considering what to do with a son who resisted masculine gender norms.

Five fathers specifically said they found it easier to think about and hypothetically allow their daughters to bring "boy toys" to school (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 3/10, NYSF 1/7). This may seem low but consider that nine aforementioned fathers simply said they wouldn't care at all.

See that's a whole lot easier to answer, isn't it? I mean yeah, it would definitely be easier for me to let a little girl do little boy things than let a boy do traditional girl things. I already told you I corrected [my son] for calling himself a princess so...(TXGF of sons)

For [my daughter], I think it's a little bit easier. To be quite honest, she could take that, and I don't think there would be a question. (TXGF of sons and daughters)

Seventeen fathers, including three-quarters of New York fathers (TXSF 3/10, TXGF 5/10, NYSF 5/7, NYGF 4/5), said that allowing daughters to wear "boy clothes" to school was easier to allow.

I don't know, I just feel like girls have it a lot easier. They can get away with- well girls can wear a flannel shirt and jeans and boots and be cool. (NYGF of a daughter)

Yeah. Because girls now, especially at their school, are just naturally wearing more boy [clothes]... It's not as divided. I'd be fine. It's easier to switch to boys' clothes. (TXGF of sons)

“We Need to Talk...”

In response to how they would deal with their children wanting to wear clothes or play with toys typically associated with the opposite gender, many fathers explained how they would navigate this with specific examples of conversations they would have and actions they would take. This was particularly the case when discussing atypical gender behavior in sons. In fact, answers to questions about sons were significantly longer than they were for daughters. Once fully transcribed, fathers used nearly 6700 words to explain what they would do if their sons wanted to wear a dress or bring a barbie to school; fathers only used about 2600 words when answering questions about daughters. This is a good barometer of the heightened amount of “mental processing,” as one New York straight father put it, that was involved for many of these men to talk about gender nonconforming sons.

The vast majority of fathers, regardless of whether they said they would easily support cross-gender behavior or found it difficult to discuss, said first and foremost they would talk to their children about it before sending them off to school. These conversations took two different forms: talking about why the child wanted to do this in the first place and preparing him/her for the possible reactions he/she may receive from peers.

Fathers were slightly more likely to say they would talk to their children about why they wanted to play with or wear cross-gender things than they were to say they would prepare them for reactions. In total, 27 fathers said they would ask why and discuss the decision with their children, and 23 fathers said they would prepare their sons for what they worried might happen.

Again, these conversations were more likely to be seen as necessary for boys than girls, and in regard to clothing rather than toys.

Talking to Understand.

Talking to daughters and understanding their motives was mentioned by three gay fathers when discussing toys (TXGF 2/10, NYGF 1/5) and by five fathers when discussing clothing (TXSF 2/10, TXGF 2/10, NYSF 1/7).

I think there would be guidance around just me knowing her, in the sense of saying ... “Is this really what you play with every day? Why are we taking this? What’s going on here?” (TXGF of sons and daughters)

I know [my husband] and I would support that child. And we’d want to have conversations about it, and we’d want to make sure it’s done in a very positive way for them. (TXGF of sons)

Considering that Texas fathers were more likely to talk about stereotypical gender norms being important in Texas, it makes sense that they would be slightly more vigilant about their daughters’ gendered behavior and concerned or confused by feminine gender transgressions than their New York counterparts.

Nineteen fathers said they would talk to their sons about why they were drawn to stereotypically feminine things. Eight fathers, all but one from Texas, said they would discuss their son wanting to bring a doll to school prior to allowing them to do so (TXSF 3/10, TXGF 4/10, NYSF 1/7).

We’d have the conversation of why they would want to. But I mean, I wouldn’t, like, take it away from them and switch it with a G.I. Joe or anything. (TXSF of twin sons)

I would say something, I’d want to know, “Why do you want to? Do you just like Barbie?” (TXSF of a son and daughter)

An additional father, gay and from Texas, made an interesting argument in terms of when to have a conversation: he would talk to his son afterwards to see how he feels and how it went. This father worried that questioning the son's motives could prime the child to think it was strange for him to bring a doll to school and possibly enhance the likelihood that the situation would not go well.

I'd say "Go." And then if something happened, we'd talk about it. Not going to cloud his mind with what I think may happen. It's like, then I'm putting my expectations of somebody else's reaction [on my child]. So he could be very defensive. Like "who's going to think it's weird?" Instead of going with happiness and abandonment and the kids go, "Oh, cool." As opposed to [my son being like], "It's my Barbie, what about it?!" I couldn't put that in his mind. (TXGF of a son)

Ten fathers, again predominantly those from Texas, said they would definitely try to understand why their son wanted to wear a dress before possibly allowing him to do so in public (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 4/10, NYSF 1/7, NYGF 1/5).

That would be fine, but that also brings in a bunch of other aspects that we have to deal with. It's really not about him wearing the dress or not. It's about what will happen to him while wearing the dress. But then, that brings up even more personal discussions at home trying to figure out is this something that he's going to continue to struggle with. Not struggle. He's going to have to live with this, and not in a negative way, but it's going to have negative connotations towards it. (NYSF of sons)

I would be- I would be fine with it personally. If my child decided that that's what they were going to do, I would be fine. You know, obviously after having talks and understanding where they're coming from and why. (TXSF of a daughter)

Fathers wanting to understand why their son would want to wear a dress, something that is overtly cross-gender behavior, is not surprising. What was surprising was that four of the Texas fathers, three straight and one gay, said they would think it could be a joke or that their son was being influenced by someone.

Is there a sensible reason to it or is it just being a jackass? Trying to get the clown of the year award or is it something personal? (TXSF of a daughter)

I would, for one thing- see how important it is that they do it. Is it just kind of a flip thing that you just want to do? Or how important is it to you? And if it is something that's that important, not just to be funny... (TXGF of sons)

Interestingly, one additional New York gay father began by saying he would talk to his son about why he would want to wear a dress and then realized that his son shouldn't have to justify himself.

I would have to be open to it. But I would probably ask him why. But I don't think that's fair to ask him why, I guess. You should be able to wear whatever you want but I don't know. You caught me off guard on that one! It's a big one. Maybe I'm not as progressive as I should be but-That's tough because I would want to protect him. (NYGF of sons)

Even for fathers who are very open to diverse expressions of gender or individuality, including those in the LGBTQ+ community, this can be a difficult path to navigate. It can also bring implicit biases and preconceived beliefs about gender to the forefront.

Talking to Prepare.

The majority of fathers also believed they must prepare their children for the reactions they might face if they choose to wear or play with something at school that was stereotypically associated with the opposite gender. Of the 23 fathers who spoke about preparing children, only five of them were talking about daughters. One Texas straight father believed he needed to prepare his daughter for possible negative consequences if she brought a "boy toy" to school and four fathers, one from each group, believed daughters must be prepared if they wear "boy clothes" to school. A typical response about preparing daughters is demonstrated by this New York gay father:

I'd be more hesitant and more concerned if my son was doing it for what other people are going to say than a girl, but I'd still have a similar conversation. (NYGF of a son)

There were nearly four-times as many references to preparedness when discussing boys than there were when discussing girls. Nine fathers believed sons must be prepared for repercussions if they bring a doll to school (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 5/10, NYSF 2/7, NYGF 1/5).

[We'd talk about] what effect the doll will have. Not necessarily that he'd be ridiculed or anything. We'd have that discussion too, and say that not all kids understand why a boy would bring a Barbie doll to class. And not all grownups would understand, either. So, I wouldn't want him hurt. Saying, "Okay, I want you to have a loving experience going to school, but I also want to be caring and protective." (TXGF of a daughter)

We would have a very long conversation. Um..... I would probably encourage him not to. The conversation would be if you bring a barbie doll to school or just to explore, you are gonna definitely get picked on. And I don't want that. Even for a girl, ya know. Because that opens up bullying and so forth. If he still is adamant about bringing it, we will deal with the consequences later and chalk it up to a learning experience. (TXGF of a son)

Nine fathers also believed their son must be prepared for what could happen if he wears a dress to school (TXSF 2/10, TXGF 4/10, NYSF 2/7, NYGF 1/5).

I think I'd have to warn him what would probably happen and then see from there. Because I don't want him to... If he would want to wear something that's typically girl clothes, I don't want him to think that like, "No one's going to make a comment. No one's going to say something." Yeah. You have to do something like that. You're going to have to be very prepared to deal with it. (NYGF of a son)

Oh man...Do you want me to be honest, or do you want me to be politically correct? I would say something. I would be like, "People are going to say stuff. They're going to-," well, I don't know if I'd say "make fun of," but "they might pick on you, or something." (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Gay fathers in Texas were at least twice as likely as fathers in all other groups to feel the need to prepare their sons for what they may face at school. In interviews with fathers, nearly half of gay dads in Texas mentioned attacks they had experienced over the years without

prompting. One stated he no longer has pride rainbow decals on his car because “things have happened on the road and to the car,” and now he has sons to protect. Two others specifically spoke about being physically beaten up “just for being who I am,” and one described how he was sent to a gay conversion camp when he was a young teen where “everything bad you could think of” occurred.

Gay fathers, particularly those raised or living in a state that continually tries to limit the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and does not consider violence committed on transgender people because of their gender identity a hate crime (Movement Advancement Project, 2022), were aware of the hostile responses their sons could receive if they chose to go against the traditional masculine ideal. These fathers were less likely to stop their son from wearing a dress than were straight Texas fathers, but they were adamant about their sons understanding and weighing the consequences before venturing out into the world.

Prepare for...

Many fathers had distinct ideas about what their children could experience were they to be gender nonconforming. Twenty-two fathers spoke about what the actual consequences could be for their sons’ cross-gender behavior, while only two straight fathers, one from Texas and one from New York, specified that they worried their daughters may be made fun of or bullied for wearing “boy clothes”.

Girls are catty, but she would be... she probably would be verbally attacked, but it wouldn't be physical; where guys would totally physically try to flex their muscle [if they saw a boy wearing a dress]. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

And I would just try to prepare her and say, "There's going to be some girls that see you wearing boy clothes and they may say you're not a girl because you're wearing boy

clothes. And don't get upset by that. If you feel like you're a girl and you still want to wear boy clothes, you can just say, 'Well, I am a girl. And I just like wearing these clothes.'" So I would try to not just let it unfold. I would try to prepare the child for what they're likely to experience because of that. I think that way, they would be more likely to not be traumatized by whatever unfolds. (NYSF of a daughter)

Worries of the hypothetical repercussions that sons could face spanned the gamut. Fifteen fathers believed their sons may be bullied or made fun of for wearing a dress and/or playing with dolls (TXSF 4/10, TXGF 6/10, NYSF 2/7, NYGF 3/5), including the majority of gay fathers in Texas and New York.

I would probably let them and preface it with letting them know that they might get made fun of. Yeah, because most boys don't ever do that or want to. Or their parents wouldn't let them. (TXSF of twin sons and a daughter)

I'd probably say, "Okay, let's try it. Let's see how it goes. Let's see if you like wearing a dress." Probably there will be name calling. And if you still feel like you want to wear the dress, notwithstanding that, I would say as long as the happiness that you get from wearing the dress, or the sense of belonging, the sense of that this is right for me, outweighs and you're able to tolerate everything that goes with it and it's not affecting you. (NYSF of a daughter)

Two straight Texas fathers were positive their sons would be bullied.

I'd be worried. I'm going to be honest because I know, especially out [in the suburbs of Fort Worth], they would definitely say stuff. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

[I would] make sure they know that kids are cruel. Kids are harsh, and they're going to judge and they're going to say whatever comes to their mind. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Lastly, five fathers, four gay and one straight, thought their sons would be beaten up and/or traumatized for doing something cross-gender (TXSF 1/10, TXGF 2/10, NYGF 2/5).

I wouldn't want to make him feel bad or shame him. But I just don't want the shit kicked out of him, and sometimes it's reality. (TXGF of sons)

No, I think I'd probably draw the line [at wearing a dress to school]. I would probably say no to that. And once again, it's the sort of social norms. The girls can wear pants, but a boy can't wear a dress, right? And I wouldn't want him to be traumatized because of how everybody reacted. (NYGF of twin daughters)

Gay fathers in both Texas and New York seemed highly aware, perhaps from their own experiences, of the possible consequences sons could face. Eight of the ten gay fathers in Texas and all the New York gay fathers specified what those consequences could be while only seven Texas straight fathers and two New York straight fathers did so. This likely indicates a heightened awareness of the physical violence gender nonconformity can unintentionally incur.

Actions

Though many fathers answered questions about children hypothetically engaging in cross-gender behavior at school by saying they would try to understand why and/or attempt to prepare them for possible peer responses, some fathers gave specific examples of actions they would take.

School.

The most common action fathers would take involved schools. Seven fathers, including a third of all New York fathers, brought up schools as an important factor in both allowing their children to wear clothing typically associated with the opposite gender and in how to make the experience safer for their children in general. Of the seven fathers, one Texas straight father, two Texas gay fathers, three New York straight fathers, and one New York gay father, all brought up the topic of school acceptance when discussing sons wearing dresses.

The main concern these fathers voiced regarded dress code and school accommodations. Five of these fathers wanted to make sure their sons would be able to attend classes wearing a

dress or by abiding the female dress code rather than the male (TXGF 1/10, NYSF 3/7, NYGF 1/5).

That would be fine, but that also brings in a bunch of other aspects that we have to deal with. It's really not about him wearing the dress or not. It's about what will happen to him about wearing the dress. That's partially a female thing, but also is the school structured in the way that that's doable? (NYSF of sons)

They have uniforms at her school, but if there were no uniforms, I would probably double check. (NYSF of a daughter)

These fathers, predominantly from New York, knew they would need to speak to schools about their children but seemed to have an assumption that something could be worked out.

Two Texas fathers, one straight and one gay, spoke about finding the “right” school for their son before allowing them to attend classes in feminine clothing.

If I had a son, and he wanted to go in a dress to school...Let's face it. Chances are, I'm going to try to get them into a charter school or some kind of not “public school” school. (TXSF of a daughter)

Or, as a boy, say that he wants to be gender fluid and one day he wants to wear a dress, and one day he wants to be in pants. But it would have to be the right school, and I think those are tough to come by. (TXGF of a daughter)

It is telling that it was only fathers in Texas who anticipated actually needing to find a different school if their child exhibited gender nonconforming preferences/behaviors. Conservative politicians and school districts in Texas still vociferously oppose gender neutral bathrooms and allowing students to use bathrooms based on identity rather than anatomy. Though these questions were not asking what they would do if their child identified as transgender, many fathers associated cross-gender behavior as either a clear preliminary step towards a gender variant identity or as synonymous with being transgender, which I will discuss further..

Other Steps.

A few fathers had other novel ideas for how to navigate cross-gender behavior in their sons. Two gay fathers, one in New York and one in Texas, believed the best thing to do would be to slowly transition.

I would worry for his safety. We would talk through it. I would probably step it in slowly. Start with a bracelet. Start with a more feminine shirt. And then get to a skirt. And just to take him through it and “what are you feeling?” (TXGF of sons)

One Texas gay father joked that his son would need to be able to handle himself at school so he would sign him up for martial arts classes before allowing him to wear a dress.

That would be a tough one. We would have the conversation again and I think I'd be more persistent on “No.” Because you'd definitely be opening yourself up to bullying and probably getting beat up. I think if he was persistent, we would enroll him in karate and once he got through karate, then you can defend yourself! (TXGF of a son)

A gay father in New York responded to the prospect of a son wearing a dress to school by saying he would ask for advice from LGBTQ+ community centers that specialize in parents with trans youth. He explained that simply because he was gay did not mean he understood what it meant to be transgender or gender nonconforming.

I may be a gay man, but I'm still born in 1962. And I find terminology and phraseology that even at my age, my head is opening up to understand. Hurts sometimes because I find myself with prejudices I didn't expect. So if [my son wanted to wear a dress], I would ask for help. I wouldn't say no. I'd say, "How do I handle them using the they/them until they determine their own pronouns? How do I let them go to school and what do I say?" Because they may be hurt. So I would seek advice. I wouldn't change or I wouldn't stop them. But I would seek advice. (NYGF of a daughter)

These four gay fathers were the only fathers to have clear steps they would take beyond talking with their child and their schools. Slow transitioning, self-defense training, and reaching

out to experts are all solid ideas for how to help their sons explore their gender identity in a healthy way that could mitigate the effects of negative reactions. No straight fathers offered thoughtful strategies for helping their child navigate their personal gender exploration; rather, straight fathers tended to stop at having conversations that would help *them* understand their child's motives.

Sociocultural Justifications

Many fathers struggled with these questions as previously discussed. Fathers used different approaches in justifying their answers and concerns. They mentioned social norms most frequently, as well as age and location, to explain why they would or would not let their children go to school exhibiting cross-gender behaviors. Another interesting pattern emerged regarding anecdotal information infused in their responses. In previous parts of the interview, anecdotes came up and were virtually always about intergenerational transmission, birth/adoption stories, or the self-reflection of the father. In this section, however, half of all Texas fathers brought up stories (or expressed fears) about gay or trans youth.

Double Standards That Benefit Women!

Twelve fathers, with twice as many gay fathers as straight fathers, blamed social norms for why these questions about gender nonconformity were so hard to answer (TXSF 2/10, TXGF 4/10, NYSF 2/7, NYGF 4/5). These fathers made the point that women can “get away with” a lot more in terms of gender nonconformity, particularly in terms of fashion. Two gay fathers, one in Texas and one in New York, used the specific term “double standard” when explaining why they would be less worried about their daughters wearing “boy clothes” than they would be about

their sons wearing dresses. The Texas father, who happens to work in the court system and has both a son and daughter, put it this way:

It's a double standard. The social consequences for them are much different too... I feel this way too about stuff like that. Sometimes you're different, and you have to suck it up... I'm gay. I tone that shit down when I go into court. Everybody there knows I'm gay. They just don't know I'm *that* gay. There is some amount of conformity that, I don't know, I think is just a part of being a part of society. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

The other ten fathers whose responses fit this pattern did not use the term “double standard” but specifically said things like society, societal consequences, social norms, or simply made a direct point that people wouldn't judge a girl who isn't gender conforming as much as they would a boy.

The way that society has kind of integrated the sexes in terms of clothing is that women are allowed to wear men's clothing now, but men kind of still aren't allowed to wear women's clothing... If he wants to do it, I would, ultimately, I think support him. But it would give me more pause just because I've internalized that I think. (NYSF of sons and a daughter)

I feel like for girls it's more socially acceptable. So a girl could do it and no one really makes a comment... I'd be more hesitant and more concerned if my son was doing it because of what other people are going to say. (TXGF of a son)

Location.

Some fathers also justified their responses by providing their own theories about age-related gender performances and sociocultural environment. I expected geographic location to be mentioned frequently when fathers thought about allowing their children to go to school playing with or wearing things associated with the opposite sex. However, only four fathers brought up location, one from each of the four groups. The consensus was expected, though, with all fathers

saying having a nonconforming child would be more difficult outside an urban center like New York City.

But you get a guy in middle America and he's wearing a dress and going to the 7-Eleven, he'd probably be attacked in some way. (NYGF of a daughter)

I think a lot of it depends on if we lived in [Manhattan] at that time- I think I'd allow it. Because this is a pretty openminded place. But if we lived in, like, Ohio, I think I might discourage it. (NYSF of daughters)

An additional father, a gay Texan who had lived in New York City as a young adult, provided an apt and humorous metaphor illustrating the differences between the two locations in terms of nonconformity. I asked him, based on his experiences living in both places as a gay man, did he see the need for conformity or the gender expectations in Texas and New York as different. He said:

Massively. I was just reading this story about a man in a housing project in New York City. He lived there with a 400-pound Bengal tiger and an alligator. The tiger died and was buried, and they put up a memorial in reference- just sort of told this story. Here's the thing: for a long time, he lived like that, and nobody said anything. Because snitches get stitches. He's got a Bengal tiger in his apartment- you do you! There's just so much more of that in just being liberal. I'll fight for your right to express your gender here [in Texas] pretty strongly, but it's a lot. You have to fight a lot harder. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

This is an extreme example, to be sure, but it also illustrates how different he sees the two cities. He still sees the fight for inclusion and acceptance for a range of gender expressions as essential, but the barriers can be immense in places like Fort Worth, making the fight that much more difficult.

Age.

Unexpectedly, age was mentioned by eight fathers as a factor in whether they would support cross-gender behavior. Six Texas fathers believed children were too young to be allowed to dress like the opposite gender or identify as transgender (TXSF 3/10, TXGF 3/10).

Now, at a young age, I'm not quite sure if I would agree with trying to reassign gender, or anything like that. Only because I have a feeling that, as people age and especially when they hit their teens and early adulthood... I just know how I was, when I was 18, is way different than I am today. So I would hate to make that decision when the kid is seven or eight versus 18, you know what I mean? (TXSF of a daughter)

This seems to reflect a conflation of cross-gender behavior in childhood with identifying as transgender and expecting parents to support gender reassignment at a young age. These Texas fathers thought if their child was to identify as part of the trans community, it needed to happen when they were older.

One Texas gay father argued that it would be easier when the child is older for a completely different reason. It wasn't that children weren't old enough to want to explore gender expression or have a unique gender identity, it was the power that adult opinions and prejudices have over other children.

At the elementary and middle school level, it's harder. It's harder. Because you've got all of the grownups represented by the kids, and the way they are thinking may not be LGBTQ friendly or sensitive or knowledgeable or affirming. And so, those poor kiddos come in, as the judgment guns... "This is weird," they're taught by their parents that, "It's weird. They're just weird." (TXGF of a daughter)

This father was a stay-at-home dad who used to be a high school teacher. He spoke about how more and more kids are dressing and acting in gender nonconforming ways as teens. His view seemed to be that young people today are much more accepting of gender diversity; however, he

feels that children in elementary school are greatly influenced by their parents and could lash out at a gender nonconforming child not based on their own burgeoning beliefs, but as parrots for their adult parents who are less likely to be accepting than younger generations already are.

Two New York fathers, one gay and one straight, felt the opposite way about age and nonconformity. They believed it would be easier to exhibit cross-gender behavior at a young age.

I think I might feel more uncomfortable [with my son wearing a dress]. But certainly at three years old, I think I would allow it. Maybe also at six or seven. (NYSF of daughters)

These New York fathers, unlike some of the fathers living in Texas, seemed to take the question about a son wearing a dress at face value and believed that children explore and try out things when they are young without it necessitating an identity change or coming-out process.

LGBTQ+ Assumptions.

Though at no point in the interview did I mention sexual orientation or gender identity, let alone specifically refer to homosexuality or transgenderism, ten fathers brought up beliefs about the LGBTQ+ experience or told anecdotes about trans youth when answering questions about hypothetical sons' gender nonconformity. All of these fathers lived in Texas, four were gay and six were straight, and this constitutes half of the total sample from Texas.

Fathers speaking about trans youth was somewhat understandable when imagining a boy wanting to wear a dress to school. However, six of the Texas fathers who told anecdotes, half of them gay and half straight, used these stories to explain that they did not agree with parents allowing children to live as the gender they identified as and/or that they did not think children could have a sense of their own gender identity in the first place.

They aren't old enough to identify as male or female. Some may be born that way, but they can say that when they're older. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

Associating sons exhibiting cross-gender behaviors with homosexuality occurred four times, with nearly a third of Texas straight fathers confusing gender nonconformity with sexual orientation (TXSF 3/10, TXGF 1/10).

There are no known truths there, but... I don't know, maybe... depending on the age, sit down and kind of understand more of why he wants to [wear a dress]. That's a hard pill to swallow, to know that... your child likes the same sex people. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

If [my daughter] played with a monster truck? I don't think that she's going to grow up to be a lesbian because she decided to play with that monster truck. [If it was my son playing with a doll], then maybe I would question it a little bit. (TXSF of a son and daughter)

I think they need to understand we're supportive of it, we love them, but there's going to be repercussions because of [wearing a dress]. We're not trying to tell them no, but we just need to let them know being gay is tough, and it's hard. (TXGF of sons)

In addition to the ten Texas fathers that compounded gender nonconformity with identifying as trans or gay, there were four gay fathers, three from Texas and one from New York, who brought up the topic of LGBTQ+ in a different way. These men were uncomfortable with their sons wearing a dress to school at least in part because some people may view them as trying to make their children gay or trans and hold them accountable for their children's gender expression.

I don't know, that would be... I would almost worry that other people are thinking that we are sort of doing that to him. I would worry about that more than his expression of his gender or sexuality. (TXGF of a son and daughter)

It's funny because this is on us, we put this on our heads, are people going to turn around and think that we're forcing this boy? Like we're trying to turn him gay? (NYGF of sons)

This last quote seems to suggest that this father at least partially believes these worries are unfounded and based on his own insecurities. Sadly, this concern is not unfounded. A big part of the argument against LGBTQ+ individuals becoming parents is the inaccurate belief that their children will also be LGBTQ+ (Patterson, 2005). Those talking points may be internalized by some parents in this community and impact how gay fathers gender their children or lessen their ability to support open gender expression. These gay fathers' responses demonstrate that these inaccurate assumptions can have real consequences for them and their children.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion

Overview

This study was designed to explore the ways that fathers' sexual orientation and the sociocultural-political environment in which they live may influence how they raise their children and, in particular, how they perceive and navigate the gendering of their children. Given the extreme differences in LGBTQ+ protections and the rights afforded to this community between states in the U.S., it is important to see how sociocultural climates created through inclusive policies and those created through prejudicial anti-LGBTQ+ policies may permeate gender notions, views of nonconformity, and parenting practices. To investigate this, I created an interview agenda, based largely on a pilot study I conducted. I utilized a semi-structured approach and interviewed gay and straight fathers raising children 2 to 10 years old in the New York, New York area and the Fort Worth, Texas area. In total, thirty-two fathers were interviewed: ten Texas straight fathers, ten Texas gay fathers, seven New York straight fathers, and five New York gay fathers.

Interview items revolved around three different themes: perceptions of fatherhood and raising children, gender stereotypes and the gendering of children, and hypothetical navigation of gender nonconformity in children. I expected gay and straight fathers to be more similar than different in how they perceived their roles as fathers, with any differences being rooted more in geographical location than sexual orientation. I assumed there would be differences in beliefs about gender and the gendering of children, but again primarily based on location rather than sexuality. Lastly, I believed there would be strong differences in how fathers thought they would navigate gender nonconformity in their children, and I expected these differences likely to be

based on the sex of the child, the geographical location, and the sexual orientation of the father. Though there were patterns that emerged that were unanticipated, the expectations I had were met and were congruent with the small body of literature related to the different concepts explored in this study.

Fathers were more similar than different in how they perceived fatherhood, despite negative assumptions about LGBTQ+ individuals' parenting practices or styles. Additionally, in this study, beliefs about gender and the gendering of children were greatly influenced by sociocultural location, congruent with literature on demographic differences in gender ideology. However, it also appeared that the gay men in this study, particularly those living in Texas, held more rigid beliefs about gender differences than straight fathers, which was unexpected. Lastly, there were sizeable differences in acceptance of nonconformity based on the sex of the child; specifically, gender nonconformity in daughters was generally accepted without question and sometimes promoted by fathers across groups, while nonconformity in sons was supported far less by fathers, particularly straight fathers living in Texas. Interestingly, though straight fathers in New York had many of the same concerns about sons dressing in nonconforming ways as Texas fathers did, all of them said they would support their sons' gender expression. Additionally, gay fathers from both Texas and New York seemed to understand sons' nonconformity on a deeper level than Texas straight fathers and were the only fathers to propose specific ways to help guide their sons in his gender nonconformity beyond simply talking about it and preparing them for peer reactions.

Discussion of Findings by Theme

Fatherhood.

As expected, most of fathers' responses to questions about their roles as parents were similar, despite where they lived and their sexual orientation. No matter where the fathers were raising their children or whether they were straight or gay, the vast majority of these men (87.5%) found fatherhood difficult to some degree. In describing why it is difficult, the strongest patterns emerged when discussing time constraints, the inability to really know if they were parenting correctly, and the shifting of priorities. Time constraints and actual exhaustion were spoken about by all fathers; however, straight men from Texas were the only fathers who did not describe the "juggling act" daily routines often require. This may be due to the fact that Texas straight fathers were more likely to be divorced or have stay-at-home wives than other groups. It could also be rooted in the strength of traditional gender roles in North Texas, which may leave much of the daily upkeep of the home and children in the purview of mothers rather than fathers. Fathers across groups also lamented that they didn't know what they were doing and spoke about the need to shift their energy from focusing on themselves or their couple relationship to their children. Virtually every father in the sample also evoked intergenerational transmission of parenting priorities and practices when discussing fatherhood. Unprompted, half of Texas straight fathers added that, though difficult, having children was fun and they expressed pride in their children, especially their sons, being similar to themselves.

Parenting priorities did have a few key differences based on location and, to some extent, sexuality. Many fathers in Texas strove to teach their children about Christianity, southern hospitality, and independence, while none of the New York fathers emphasized these topics. Regardless of sexual orientation, the majority of Texas fathers put a premium on teaching

children to be polite and have good etiquette, and a third of Texans wanted their children to be independent from a young age. Lastly, the strongest group-specific pattern was religion, specifically Christianity. Though only one gay Texas father spoke of a desire to impart a love of God and Jesus Christ to his children, seventy percent of straight Texas fathers referenced religion in some way. Half of Texas straight fathers hoped that their children would continue in the Christian faith while two were skeptical of religion. Having a strong Christian belief system was also spoken about by straight Texas fathers when discussing their hopes for their children's future. No New York father spoke about religion at any point in the interview.

New York fathers, on the other hand, prioritized fostering curiosity and limiting screen time for their children. Half of all New York fathers wanted their children to explore, try new things, and maintain an open mind. This was echoed when New York fathers discussed their hopes and dreams for their children's future as they spoke about their desire for their children to be passionate about whatever they choose to do in the future. Limiting screen time was an interesting, and quite specific, parenting priority focused on only by gay and straight fathers in New York. This relates to curiosity somewhat because, in discussing screen time, fathers emphasized the passive nature of watching videos and television. Passively consuming media could be seen as counter to individualistic curiosity to some extent.

Incongruent with research on parenting, no fathers specified a profession or hobby they wanted their child to pursue in the future. They solely spoke about wanting their children to find something they liked and to be happy with themselves. Texas fathers alone, however, emphasized the importance of education and knowledge, which may be related to the fact that Texas fathers were less likely to have an undergraduate or graduate degree than were New York

fathers. There were also no differences in fathers' parenting priorities or hopes for the future based on the child's gender.

In speaking about their personal worries and fears for their children, patterns emerged but not as anticipated. The differences between fathers were based on individual differences in children and/or the fathers, rather than sexuality or location. Many fathers expressed fears about the impact of social media and climate change, with no clear pattern between groups. The fear spoken about most frequently was that children would develop a psychological disorder, including addiction, or their current diagnosis would worsen and continue into adulthood. This fear was spoken about by the majority of New York straight fathers and a third of all Texas fathers. The fathers that voiced worries about children's psychological health either had children already diagnosed or had personal experience with mental health or addiction problems.

An additional pattern about psychological well-being emerged with Texas gay fathers, none of whom were biologically related to their children: nearly half worried that their adopted children would have some of the same mental health or addiction problems as their birth parents. Though four of five gay fathers in New York also adopted from the foster system, they were more likely to have adopted when children were below the age of four whereas the majority of Texas fathers adopted children in middle childhood. Given the systemic barriers in the Texas foster system, the foster children many of these men were able to adopt had had many placements prior to coming into their home and a more unstable family history than the children fostered and adopted by gay New York fathers in this study.

The most striking trend regarding parental fears for their children was found when looking at the sex composition of each dyad. Fathers who had daughters, about two-thirds of the

total sample, expressed many gender-specific fears. Half of all fathers of daughters worried about them being devalued or abused by men, and a quarter of them expressed worries over how their daughters will navigate structural inequality and the emphasis American society places on women's weight and beauty. These are very real problems and all the more visible due to the 2017 #MeToo movement and an increase in mainstream rhetoric about the wage gap and body shaming. It is understandable that fathers of daughters would worry about these issues, and it is promising that they want to bolster their daughters in navigating these hardships. However, there were no gender-specific fears for sons. This may speak to an implicit assumption that males either will not have to deal with abuse/sexual assault, body image issues, or systemic economic inequality. It may also be indicative of an ingrained paternalistic benevolent sexism in these fathers, such that sons are seen as strong enough to weather various hardships or challenges while daughters are weaker and need allies and protectors. It is important to note, however, that though the children of gay fathers were ethnically diverse, the majority of all fathers in this sample were White. It is possible, if not likely, that fears about inequality and abuse would be spoken about by fathers of color given the systemic racism that pervades this country.

Gendering.

The first question about gender asked if boys and girls are different. Nearly 80% of fathers in the total sample affirmed that there are key differences between sexes. This included all gay fathers except for one from New York. As a whole, Texas fathers were more rigid in their gender notions than were New York fathers, and Texas fathers who identified as gay were the most open about stereotypical beliefs. Straight fathers in Texas, on the other hand, spoke about gender stereotypes to the same extent as Texas gay fathers but frequently backtracked, adding that some children do not fit the stereotypes they had just affirmed existed inherently. There is

evidence that men living in the Southern United States hold more stereotypical views of sex and gender than do men from other regions of the country (Davis & Greenstein, 2009), and Texas fathers' responses were congruent with previous research. However, gay fathers living in Texas unabashedly holding more rigid beliefs about gender was unexpected and could be explained in a few ways. Demographically, gay men were more likely to have only one child and were, on average, older than the straight men in the total sample. Given that gay fathers in this sample were more likely to have only one child or two children of the same sex than were straight fathers, they may have had less opportunity to witness individual differences between children separate and apart from gender identity. There is also ample evidence of gender beliefs becoming more flexible for individuals in more recent generations (Donnelly et al., 2016).

New York fathers, particularly those who identified as straight, were less likely to talk about gender differences as innate or to dichotomize characteristics and behaviors based on sex, even though they were equally likely to believe girls and boys are generally different. Texas fathers, on the other hand, frequently spoke about their children as “all boy” or “girly girls”, while no New York fathers, other than a gay father who was raised in North Texas but now lives in New York, labeled their children in this way. Texas fathers were more likely than New York fathers to describe boys as physical and fearless and describe girls as cautious or emotional. Nearly all Texas fathers, regardless of sexuality, also mentioned football as a sex-specific cultural norm when talking about boys and how boys are raised differently than girls are. Arguably the most aggressive and physically harmful of American team sports, football as a masculine activity falls in line with the belief that boys are more physical and fearless than their female peers. It is also emblematic of the supremacy of hegemonic masculinity in Texas: males are expected to be dominant and aggressive, and it is celebrated (Connell, 1995). Additionally,

West and Zimmerman used sports as an example of the performativity of gender and an arena (literally) to showcase masculinity (1987). Interestingly, girls were more frequently spoken about in terms of toys and colors, while boys were spoken about in terms of traits and activities. This may be because cisgender fathers have personal experience with boyhood and can describe it in more depth, and in less superficial ways, than they can girlhood. It could also show that men's female gender schemas are more rudimentary, or that femininity has broadened to a point that material things are easier to sex-type than are traits (Bem, 1983).

Though the majority of fathers perceived boys and girls as generally different, there was even more unanimity when it came to questions about differential parenting. Eighty-eight percent of fathers believed that parents raise children differently depending on sex, though there was a wide variety of justifications for why and how they believed most parents do this. The primary difference spoken about by over half of straight fathers was in protection and discipline, and this was one of the only patterns identified for straight men specifically regardless of region. Straight fathers, as compared to gay fathers, were more likely to speak about parents being "softer" on daughters and punishing them less than sons. Additionally, fathers in all groups, again, brought up concerns about female sexuality and appearance.

Fathers in both geographic groups, over half of Texas fathers and a third of New York fathers, also saw environmental factors as key to gendering and gender differentiation. However, it was almost exclusively Texas fathers who specified rigid social norms as the primary aspect of the environment that affects gendering and gender development. Only Texas fathers spoke about their being stronger gendered expectations put on children due to growing up in a certain location. No fathers from New York mentioned regional differences in parenting or the imparting of gender norms based on context-specific sociocultural norms. Nearly a third of all Texas

fathers, on the other hand, justified differential parenting based on the gender expectations that pervade society, specifically- and explicitly stated- Texas society.

Fathers were asked, after responding to questions about differential parenting and whether parents should raise children differently based on sex, if they would raise their children differently if their children were the opposite sex. The majority of fathers said yes, they would parent a boy differently than a girl, and there was no pattern based on fathers' sexuality or location. However, fathers who had sons and were directed to imagine raising a daughter instead were nearly twice as likely to say they would parent differently than fathers who were currently raising daughters. Fathers of sons believed that if they were raising daughters they would need to be "softer" and more protective than they currently were while raising their sons. Again, there was a propensity to speak of daughters as having special needs and vulnerabilities based on their femaleness, and the urge to protect and coddle daughters was apparent. Sons were not spoken about as needing to be prepared for the way the world will treat them as men or their need for oversight. Worrying about boys' safety did not come up until I questioned them about gender nonconformity, which seemingly shows that these fathers believed sons who conformed to traditional masculine gender expression were self-sufficient and able to take care of themselves.

Gender Nonconformity

The last section of the interviews required fathers to imagine their reactions to gender nonconforming behavior in their sons and daughters. Fathers' reactions differed greatly depending primarily on the sex of the nonconforming child, but there were also distinct patterns based on sociocultural location and fathers' sexuality, as expected.

The main consensus among fathers was that gender nonconformity in daughters was easier to navigate than sons' nonconformity: all fathers said they would allow daughters to bring "boy toys" to school and only two Texas fathers, one straight and one gay, said they would not allow their daughters to wear "boy clothes" to school. Half of New York fathers said they wouldn't care if their daughters took "boy toys" to school, and nearly a third of Texas straight fathers said they actively encouraged their daughters to play with masculine-typed toys. Additionally, fathers were far less likely to feel the need to discuss their daughters' choice of toys or clothes before allowing them to go to school with a "boy toy" or in "boy clothes" or to say they would prepare them for possible peer reactions to nonconforming behavior than they were when discussing sons' nonconformity. To be sure, "boy toy" and "boy clothes" was somewhat vague wording; however, I did specify, when asked, sports balls and action figures as "boy toys" and suits and male superhero shirts as "boy clothes". It was difficult for me as a research to identify a toy or type of clothing that would universally be thought of as male-typed and gender nonconforming for girls. Though the lack of specificity was certainly a limitation, I feel it was somewhat unavoidable given the breadth of expression now deemed appropriate for females in this country.

Answers about how to navigate gender nonconformity in sons were quite different and lengthy. While only three fathers, all straight and from Texas, said they would not allow their sons to take dolls to school, a third of the total sample said they would not allow their sons to wear a dress to school or avoided answering the question at all. This included the majority of Texas straight fathers and a third of Texas gay fathers. No New York straight fathers and only one New York gay father said they would not let their son wear a dress to school.

Fathers' responses to questions about navigating sons' gender nonconformity were more than twice as long as responses about daughters' nonconformity, demonstrating the difference in "mental processing," as one New York straight father put it, needed when considering how to navigate gender nonconformity in sons and in daughters. About two-thirds of all fathers definitively said questions about female nonconformity were easier to answer than were questions about male nonconformity. No fathers said they wouldn't care if their sons wore a dress to school, and although three fathers, two Texas straight fathers and one New York gay father, said they wouldn't mind if their son brought a doll to school, no fathers spoke about actively encouraging their sons to play with feminine-typed toys.

The most frequent topic brought up when considering how to deal with gender nonconformity in children was the need to speak to the child. Texas fathers were more likely than New York fathers to say they needed their children to explain why they wanted to wear or play with things thought of as incongruent with their sex category. Additionally, four fathers, all from Texas, insinuated that their child would only be acting in gender nonconforming ways as a joke or at the behest of someone else. Fathers in the total sample were four times more likely to say they needed to prepare sons for peer reactions than they were when discussing daughters.

Texas gay fathers were the most adamant about preparing their sons. Gay fathers, both in Texas and New York, also identified what sons needed to be prepared for more frequently than straight fathers. The majority of both gay fathers in Texas and those in New York believed their sons would likely be bullied for cross-gender behavior, and of the five fathers who believed their sons would be beaten or traumatized, all but one identified as gay. This seems to be associated with their own experiences being hurt for being "different," as many gay fathers, particularly those in Texas, told me about trauma they had been subject to in the past for being gay. Perhaps

also due to personal experience, it was only gay fathers who proposed specific steps for navigating gender nonconformity beyond checking with school procedures and having conversations with their children.

Many fathers across the sample interpreted my questions about children wanting to bring a cross-gender toy to school or wear cross-gender clothing as me asking them about having a child identify as transgender, as opposed to the child simply exploring gender or identifying as gender nonbinary, gender fluid, twospirited, etcetera. I purposefully never spoke about gender identity and focused solely on expression. However, fathers, particularly those in Texas, frequently spoke about identity and assumptions about the trans and/or gay community. Nearly a third of Texas fathers, gay and straight, believed children should wait to express nonconforming behavior until they are older. Texas fathers were also the only group to bring up personal beliefs about sexuality, transgenderism, and the LGBTQ+ community in general, with thirty percent of Texas straight fathers confusing cross-gender behavior as a clear sign of homosexuality. Lastly, gay fathers, three from Texas and one from New York, worried about their children's hypothetical cross-gender behavior not because they had an issue with it, but because they felt that other parents would assume they had somehow forced gender nonconformity onto their children. This seems to indicate that anti-LGBTQ+ family political rhetoric and popular misconceptions about families headed by LG parents have been internalized to some extent for these gay fathers.

Holistic Analysis of Patterns

Regional Differences in Gender Norms

Overall, when there were distinct patterns identified between groups, the geographical location fathers were raising their children in was more salient than fathers' sexual orientation. The strongest differences found based on sociocultural location alone were statements about gender norms and the gendering of children. Fathers in Texas were more likely to describe their children as "all boy" or "a girly girl", with the presumption being that there is a universal understanding of what these terms mean. These fathers were also more specific about gender-typed traits, describing boys as fearless and girls as cautious and emotional. Though the majority of all fathers believed that parents raised children differently according to sex, nearly a third of all Texas fathers believed it was necessary to raise children differently. Lastly, Texas fathers were far less likely to say they would allow their children, sons and daughters, to wear clothes associated with the opposite gender than were fathers in New York. This pattern is congruent with previous literature indicating that gender norms are more rigid and traditional in the southern United States than in other parts of the country (Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Filler & Jennings, 2015). There is also evidence that people with conservative political and religious beliefs are less likely to promote gender equality (Hackimer et al., 2021), and given Texas straight fathers' emphasis on religion, their essentializing of gender is not unexpected.

Reactions to Nonconformity Contingent on Sex

The ways fathers spoke about gender nonconformity were highly contingent on the sex of the child in question. Questions about gender nonconformity were difficult for many fathers to answer, but the general consensus across groups was that allowing daughters to behave or dress

in gender nonconforming ways was far easier than allowing sons to do the same. Some fathers specified that the theoretical consequences of nonconformity would be much greater for sons than for daughters, stating that sons were more in danger of bullying or physical violence than were girls. While questions about daughters wearing “boy clothes” or playing with “boy toys” were often met with indifference, no father was indifferent to questions about a boy wearing a dress. Though the only group in which the majority of fathers said they would not allow their sons to wear dresses to school if they wanted to was the straight fathers from Texas, all fathers worried about the repercussions.

Fathers spoke about being proud that their daughters liked playing sports or with “boy toys,” and some went so far as to say they promoted cross-gender play in their daughters. Fathers, particularly gay Texas fathers, also frequently said they did not raise their daughters to conform to feminine stereotypes. No fathers made similar statements about raising their sons. This is congruent with previous literature indicating that nonconformity in daughters is more readily accepted by mothers and fathers, gay and straight, than is nonconformity in sons (Kane, 2005).

In many ways, this speaks to the premium placed on stereotypical masculine traits, like agency and ambition, and the devaluing of feminine traits, like nurturance or sensitivity. Today, there is a lot of focus placed on broadening possibilities for girls, both in terms of acceptable characteristics and future roles in society. The same cannot be said for boys. A meta-analysis of the Bem Sex Role Inventory, based on *gender schema theory*, indicates that in recent decades women are increasingly describing themselves as exhibiting stereotypically masculine traits in addition to stereotypically feminine traits (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). However, men’s scores

on this trait inventory have remained stable since the 1970s, showing no increase in men ascribing feminine traits to themselves.

While we are frequently talking about how girls can be brave and strong, and become engineers, CEOs, and presidents, the same trend is not happening for boys. There has not been an equivalent shift for boys, one that says boys can show emotions and nurture others, and become stay-at-home dads, nurses, and preschool teachers without people questioning their “manhood”. Both for New York fathers and Texas fathers, gay and straight, gender normativity and gender roles were far more important for sons than for daughters. This speaks to the continued supremacy of hegemonic masculinity in the United States and it is congruent with literature indicating fathers promote traditional gender in their children, particularly their sons, more than mothers do (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Kane, 2016).

Fathers and Their Daughters

An unexpected and recurrent pattern throughout interviews was the special attention given to raising daughters. While there were no gender-specific worries or fears about boys’ futures, there were many worries about how daughters would be treated by society, and by men in particular. Fathers of daughters often worried their daughters would be abused, devalued, or victims of systemic sexism. They also were more concerned with social media, body image, and self-esteem when thinking of their daughters’ futures than when considering their sons’ futures. These are understandable concerns, and these issues have become more and more incorporated into mainstream discourse in recent years, and a few novel qualitative studies are exploring how fathers navigate discussing these issues with their daughters (Siegel, 2021). However, males suffer sexual abuse as well, are bullied for not looking a certain way, and are more likely to be

the victims of violence than women. It is odd that not only did no fathers speak about those worries when discussing their sons, but when fathers with sons and daughters brought up these issues they made it very clear that it was a worry solely directed at their female children.

Fathers also spoke about the need to protect and guide their daughters more than their sons. This is emblematic of the cognitive dissonance associated with how they thought about young girls. They wanted their daughters to be strong and embrace what used to be considered masculine traits, and they were proud when their daughters were tomboys or played with cross-gender toys. However, they still felt that their daughters were weaker than their son and more in need of a father to show her the way. In these fathers, paternalistic benevolent sexism seemed to motivate them to be more concerned about protecting their female children than their male children (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Conclusion

This study yielded many interesting findings on the differences and similarities between fathers depending on their sexual orientations and the sociocultural contexts in which they raise their children. However, this study was also designed with a more general question in mind: why is binary gender expression intergenerationally perpetuated? Before we can have a truly accepting and inclusive society that allows for free expression, including gender expression, we must first understand the psychology behind the promotion of conformity. When examining fathers' responses in their entirety, it seems as if many fathers believe they are required to promote gender conformity in their children due to societal constraints while also feeling uncomfortable with and confused by the idea of gender nonconformity in their children, especially their sons.

The Perpetuation of Gender Conformity

Gender and sex are two separate concepts, and yet continue to be compounded by lay people and policymakers alike. Gender is a sociocultural construct which dictates what characteristics, behaviors, and appearances are socially appropriate and “normal” for males and for females. Gender is both temporally and contextually dependent, and this can easily be seen when examining how socially acceptable gender expression for females has been broadening (to some extent) over recent decades. What is exclusively a “boy toy” or “boy clothes” after all? An expansion of what masculinity is has not mirrored that of femininity for the most part, as demonstrated in this study by fathers’ readiness to accept nonconforming behavior in daughters coupled with their intense worry over sons’ nonconforming behavior. Though some, particularly younger generations and the LGBTQ+ community, see gender as a spectrum, the masculine-feminine binary is still firmly in place for many people, particularly those in conservative regions of the United States.

Sex is based on the physical body of an individual. When gender and sex are seen as interchangeable, gender becomes an inherent aspect of a person determined by their material body and any gender expression by males that is not traditionally masculine or by females that is not traditionally feminine is seen as problematic, or even aberrant and dangerous, for society as a whole. But ample research on gender development affirms it does in fact *develop* over time. Femininity is not an inborn characteristic that comes with having XX chromosomes or having been placed in the female sex category, just as masculinity is not inborn and natural based on chromosomes or physical appearance.

Gender is learned through social interactions, and gender schemas based on this life-long learning are internalized. When gender schemas are rigid and externally enforced, due to overt cultural messages or legal policies, for example, implicit limits are placed on individuals ranging from the clothes they wear to the career path they take. When gender schemas are flexible, individuals have more freedom to live the life that is right for them and be their authentic selves without fear of crossing some arbitrary gender line. This in no way means that being cisgender and traditionally masculine or feminine is inauthentic; it may be completely authentic for many individuals. The point is that everyone should have the freedom to express who they are in a way that feels right for them. In order for this to happen, however, social and cultural binary gender dictates must cease, and gender expression as a sexless spectrum of characteristics, behaviors, appearances, etcetera must be incorporated fully into society.

The fathers in this study all seemed to love and care about their children and strove to be the best parents they could be. They spoke about wanting their children to be themselves, be independent and curious, and become whatever they wanted to be in the future as long as it made the children happy. Theoretically, this should translate to gender expression and supporting their children if that expression is seen as nonconforming by much of society. Many fathers in this study, however, particularly those living in Texas, did not see their children's gender expression as fluid and individualistic or as a realm in which their children should be free to explore without constraint. Concerns about safety and accountability are understandable: no parent wants their children to be hurt. However, in monitoring and requiring normative gender expression, their children and others' children *can* be hurt and their curiosity and agency stifled.

Many fathers, again particularly those in Texas, justified their negative responses to sons' gender nonconformity through blaming the social environment which, in their minds, will never

accept a fluid gender expression, especially in males. In doing so, however, they are perpetuating traditional gender and reinforcing the norms of the social environment they claim is the culprit. They are complicit. This, again, is not to say they are bad fathers in any way. What it does indicate is a cognitive dissonance in how they raise their children to “be whoever they want to be as long as they’re happy” while also maintaining gender expression is not to be individually interpreted.

Straight fathers in New York shared the same fears about the repercussions for sons wearing dresses as did fathers in other groups. However, this was the only group that unanimously affirmed they would allow their children to wear what made them happy. Gay fathers, on the other hand, though less likely to forbid their sons to wear “girl clothes” than Texas straight fathers, had additional concerns. The erroneous and empirically disproven anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in this country that claims the children of people who are not solely heterosexual or cisgender will raise LGBTQ+ kids adds an additional layer of concern and accountability for gay fathers. Many of the gay fathers in this study made clear that they personally would not have a problem with their children being gender nonconforming; it was the all too real worry that other people would believe the gay father was to blame for somehow “making” their child gender nonconforming which motivated them to promote gender conformity.

At this time, there is no quick fix to stop the perpetuation of gender conformity as a social necessity. In some places, like New York City, things are changing, and this is greatly due to pro-LGBTQ+ policies and the visibility and acceptance of people who are gender nonconforming. In other places, like North Texas, it is anti-LGBTQ+ policies and rhetoric about gender and sex being synonymous and an inherent, essential aspect of every human that makes

parents feel they have no choice but to stifle free gender expression in their children. The answer, I believe is three-fold: education, advocacy, and policy-reform.

Education is key to universally changing the now archaic definition of gender as a normal, inherent outgrowth of sex. When people come to understand that gender develops and is socially, culturally, contextually, and temporally specific, it is impossible to see gender as a natural binary of human nature. It is not natural, and it is everchanging. Further research needs to be done on the fluidity of gender and the psychological health of people who embrace the notion of gender on a spectrum and an individual expression, not a binary societal requirement. And educators need to take more time to talk about the nature of gender, the historical changes and cultural differences in gender expression, and to speak inclusively rather than perpetuating a gender differences stance. Advocacy and policy-reform may be a slow process, but as many other civil rights issues have shown us over the last century, change can happen, and we can progress to a more inclusive, equitable, and accepting society through protests, marches, voting, and not staying silent about the things that truly matter.

Limitations

This study was designed to explore the nexus of geographical location and sexual orientation in the way fathers parent and gender their children. This study did have some novel findings: it illuminated the many similarities fathers have regardless of their sexual orientation and generally found geographic location to take supremacy in how one parents. This study was an exploration of these topics and was not designed to yield generalizable data. Though many thought-provoking patterns were identified and fathers seemed to be more open to gender nonconformity than previous generations, there were limitations to this study.

The most significant limitations are found in the sample itself. It would have been useful to have more participants, particularly in the New York City groups. Additionally, though many of the gay fathers had children who were multiracial or from racial backgrounds different than their fathers, the majority of fathers were White. This is unfortunate because the experiences of gay and straight fathers from diverse backgrounds needs to be taken into account to fully understand how they perceive parenting and gender. Also, if the emphasis is on geographical location, a sample which is representative of the population in each location is key to a deeper understanding of the sociocultural constraints felt by fathers in a particular city or region.

Perhaps the biggest limitation in this study was inevitable for a sample of this size that, by necessity, used snowball sampling. Straight fathers were relatively easy to identify, contact, and recruit in Texas and New York. However, simply given the small population of gay men coparenting their own children, it was difficult to find gay fathers to participate. This being the case, I was unable to recruit only gay fathers who were biologically related to their children. Only one of the gay fathers in this study, a man from the New York City area, had his children through surrogacy. Surrogacy is prohibitively expensive for many people, and many of the fathers I spoke to wanted to adopt children in early to mid-childhood rather than raise a child from infancy. This study would have been stronger if, regardless of sexual orientation, all fathers had adopted or if all fathers had had biological children. As same-sex marriage becomes more accepted, systemic barriers against LGBTQ+ people lessen, and gay fathers come to be seen as equally effective and loving parents there will be more opportunities to work with gay father-headed families with biologically related children. It seems to me, however, the fears, hopes, priorities, and gender perceptions of fathers in this study were not contingent on

biological connectedness. These fathers were proud of and loved their children no matter how they went about creating their family.

Another, and wholly unavoidable, limitation was the timing of the study and the modality of interviews. Because I expected recruitment of gay fathers to be more difficult in Texas, I began my study in Fort Worth in mid-2019. I was pleased to find that gay fathers in the Fort Worth area were excited to be a part of this study and helped me get into contact with foster agencies, churches, and their friends who were also gay fathers. In 2020, I returned to New York City to conduct interviews right before the world stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic. New York City was shut down for much longer than many other parts of the country, and it was difficult to get in contact with LGBTQ+ groups or to recruit fathers in general. The recruitment process for this study was halted for much of 2020 out of necessity. Therefore, my interviews with Texas fathers were almost exclusively conducted in-person in 2019, while my interviews with New York fathers were partially done in-person in the Winter of 2020 and partially done online in 2021. In analysis of interviews, answers did not seem to be affected by the pandemic or the possible differences in sociocultural/political changes between fall 2019 and summer 2021. Additionally, the length of the interviews and depth of responses were not affected by in-person or online meetings.

Future Directions

I believe this research design was effective in examining the differences and similarities between fathers based on their sexual orientation and city in which they lived. Future studies using this interview agenda should focus on including people of color and those from diverse socioeconomic positions within society. The inclusion of more fathers, both gay and straight, is

necessary going forward, and including female, nonbinary, and transgender parents would allow analysis of possible differences in parenting based on gender identity as well as sexual orientation. It also would be interesting to look at same-sex dyads versus opposite-sex dyads with cisgender samples. The way fathers spoke about sons and daughters were similar until they discussed nonconformity and fears/worries about children's futures. Through looking deeper into this trend by grouping parents based on the sex composition of the parent-child relationship, perhaps we can begin to understand how parents view children differently based on their personal experience or personal inexperience with their children's sex.

This research design allowed for an exploration of fathers' views of gender and after working with larger, more diverse samples, I believe the next step is the creation of a survey to identify differences in the gendering of children based on sexual orientation, sex of the child, and sociocultural location. Gender ideology and roles are changing, particularly for women, and same-sex couples have achieved some new rights in recent years, but there is a large contingent of the U.S. population that hopes to roll back these changes. If we can identify the demographic components that relate to particular attitudes about gender and parenting, we can hopefully do two things: show that there are far more similarities than differences between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ parents, and understand where education and advocacy is needed most to promote inclusion and acceptance of diverse family structures and gender expression.

Appendix

Interview Items

1. Tell me about yourself as a parent: what is important to you? What are some of the joys and challenges of parenting? What are some of your priorities as a parent?
2. Do you think it is difficult to be a father? Why/why not?
- *Do you think it would be/is difficult to be a gay father in your community? Why or why not?
3. Tell me about your child and what is special about her or him?
4. What are some of your hopes and dreams for your child's future?
5. What are some of your worries or fears regarding your child's future?
6. Describe how you would like your child to be as an adult.
7. Do you think the way most boys are is different from the way most girls are? How so?
8. Do you think your daughter/son is like most girls/boys? Why or why not?
9. Is it important to you that your son/daughter is like most other boys/girls? Are you thinking about things like this in your parenting?
10. Do you think most parents raise sons and daughters differently?
11. Do you think boys and girls need to be raised differently? How and why? Would you say there are differences in general about raising boys as compared to raising girls? What are these?
12. Would you raise your child differently if your child was of a different gender?
13. Do you think most people in your community have particular expectations for raising children? Are these different for boys compared to girls? Do you think those expectations impact how you raise your child?
14. How do you feel about these societal expectations? How are your own expectations for your child similar to these societal expectations? How are they different?
15. How can your son/daughter best fit in with his peers? Is it important for your child to "fit in"? Why or why not?
16. Would you raise your child differently if there were no societal expectations? How so? Why?
17. If you had a son who wanted to take a barbie doll to school, what would you do? Why?
18. If you had a daughter who only wanted to play with trucks and action figures and never with dolls, what would you think/do?

19. If your son wanted to wear dresses, what would you think/do? If your daughter only wanted to wear boy clothes, what would you think/do? Why?

20. How do you feel about raising your child in your present community? Tell me if you think there is something special about your community in terms of raising girls compared to boys? Do you see your community as generally accepting or rejecting of diversity or nonconformity? Why?

*Only asked to gay fathers

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