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“We Don’t Exactly Fit In, but We Can’t Opt Out”: Gay Fathers’ Experiences Navigating Parent Communities in Schools

Objective: This qualitative study, which was guided by an integrative theoretical lens incorporating ecological, intersectional, and minority stress frameworks, examined the heteronormative and gendered contexts of gay fathers’ relationships with other parents in their children’s schools.

Background: Parents’ interactions with other parents in the school environment can be a source of support, connection, tension, and/or alienation, and are significant to parents’ overall school involvement, which in turn has implications for child academic and psychosocial adjustment. Little work has examined gay fathers’ experiences in schools, and with other parents specifically, despite the potential salience of their gender and sexuality.

Method: The sample consisted of 40 gay fathers from 20 couples with adopted elementary school-aged children ($M = 9$ years). The in-depth interviews were analyzed via thematic analysis.

Results: Four main themes were evident: (a) school environments are heteronormative, homonormative, and gendered domains that gay fathers must navigate; (b) parent communities in schools are sometimes sites of disconnection, exclusion, and hostility around intersections among gender and sexuality, and race and class; and (c) parent communities in schools are also environments in which gay fathers experience connection, inclusion, and social support despite the prevalence of stigma.

Conclusion: The school parent community is an important microcosm for children’s academic and psychosocial outcomes. These gay fathers, who were actively involved in their children’s schools, experienced both inclusion and exclusion in this heteronormative, gendered context. Their intersections of privilege and marginalization reveal the need to change institutional norms and advocate on behalf of diverse families in the educational environment.

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Contemporary families are diverse in race, social class, immigration status, parent sexual orientation, and many other dimensions (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020; Goldberg, 2019). Yet despite increasing family diversity, schools continue to lag in their acknowledgement and integration of diverse families, which has implications for child and family well-being. Both children of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) parents and LGBTQ children show compromised psychosocial adjustment when they attend schools characterized by an anti-LGBTQ climate (Bos & Gartrell, 2010; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013). Furthermore, there is evidence that children with multiple minority identities (e.g., racial; sexual) are especially likely to lack a sense of belonging or inclusion at school, which may undermine their academic achievement and well-being (Poteat, Scheer, & Mereish, 2014).

Schools play an important role in not only children's, but parents', lives (Beveridge, 2005; Calarco, 2014). Significantly, parents who are LGBTQ and/or occupy other minority statuses are vulnerable to exclusion by school communities, including other parents. When LGBTQ parents are highly involved in their children's schools—for example, volunteering or joining school committees as a means of directly or indirectly advocating for their children—they may experience alienation in the context of predominantly heterosexual parent communities. Gay fathers may be at particular risk for exclusion, given that the dominant actors in school communities tend to be heterosexual and female (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Reay, 2008).

The current study of 40 gay men (from 20 couples) draws from ecological, intersectionality, and minority stress theories to explore how gay adoptive fathers of school-aged children experience school communities, with a focus on their perceptions and relationships with other parents. We aim to understand how men navigate experiences of marginalization and integration, alienation, and friendship, within the family-school mesosystem: that is, within parent communities in the context of children's academic environments. Our research questions are as follows:

1. How do gay fathers experience their relationships with other parents at their children's schools?

2. How do gender, sexual orientation, race, and class intersect to shape perceptions of and experiences with other parents in the school context?

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND PARENT COMMUNITIES

A large body of literature has focused on the nature and consequences of parents' school engagement (e.g., volunteering; serving on school committees; attending parent-teacher meetings). This work suggests that parents' school engagement has positive outcomes for parents, families, and children (Beveridge, 2005). Donating materials, serving on school committees, and attending school events directly and indirectly benefits children and families by making parents known to teachers and staff and thereby predisposing them toward favorable impressions. Such activities also bring parents into contact with other parents—and the relationships that develop may represent a source of power (e.g., informational) and influence (e.g., via coalition-building; Beveridge, 2005; Sheldon, 2002). Furthermore, inasmuch as parent-school engagement promotes connections between adults in two of the child's key microsystems—home and school—it is not surprising that such engagement has been linked to positive academic (Gordon & Louis, 2009; Jeynes, 2007) and psychosocial (El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Goldberg & Smith, 2017) outcomes for children.

Studies of parents' school engagement tend to focus predominantly on mothers and, specifically, heterosexual mothers (Allen & White-Smith, 2017; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Studies that do include fathers tend to focus on heterosexual fathers (Jeynes, 2007; Lareau, 2003; McBride, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Ho, 2005) and often fail to disaggregate mothers' and fathers' involvement, or focus exclusively on mothers (Muller, 1995; Ream & Palardy, 2008; Turney & Kao, 2009). Studies that explicitly attend to the role of gender in parents' school engagement reveal that, compared to fathers, mothers are more likely to volunteer at school and attend parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings (Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016) and are more aware of what is going on at school (e.g., curriculum, classroom dynamics; Lareau, 2003; Warner, 2010). Gendered expectations about mothers as being

mainly responsible for children's schooling, and practical factors (e.g., fathers may work more hours), likely contribute to these dynamics (Descartes & Kottak, 2008; Reay, 2008). Finally, race- and class-based disparities in access to resources (e.g., financial and social capital; work flexibility) help to explain why White middle class women in particular tend to take on leadership positions in school communities (e.g., head of the PTA; Marchand, Vassar, Diemer, & Rowley, 2019; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999).

Parent involvement at school typically involves engaging with other parents. Even if parents are not highly involved in school communities, some degree of contact with other parents is likely unavoidable. The parent community within schools represents a key aspect of broader school culture that both interacts with and impacts parents' school engagement (Beveridge, 2005; Sheldon, 2002). Sheldon (2002) argues that the social relationships that parents form with other parents' function not just as channels of communication and support, but social capital, such that parents with more ties with other parents draw on these relationships as sources of information and power. Parents obtain valuable insights and knowledge through spending time with parent friends—and may also spend more time engaged with the school via such contact (e.g., as a means of deepening social ties and also advocating for outcomes that will benefit their children; Fong, 2019; Sheldon, 2002). Parents who are involved in many school activities tend to know other parents, and vice versa (Li & Fischer, 2017; Sheldon, 2002). Li and Fischer (2017) used national survey data to determine that parental networks (knowing other parents) in the first grade was related to a greater third-grade school involvement (e.g., participating in PTAs; volunteering), controlling for individual and school characteristics. Strong relationships with other parents may also indirectly benefit children's social relationships by facilitating parents' initiation of playdates and family get-togethers, thereby impacting children's connections and friendships within and outside of school (Ladd, Proffitt, & Hart, 2016).

SCHOOL PARENT COMMUNITIES AND MARGINALIZED PARENTS

Certain types of parents may be especially vulnerable to feeling marginalized by school

communities and parent communities specifically (Calarco, 2014). Parents with fewer financial (Yoder & Lopez, 2013) and educational (Nixon, 2011) resources, parents of color (Marchand et al., 2019; Quinones & Kiyama, 2014), and parents of children with disabilities (Stober & Franzese, 2018), for example, sometimes report feeling unwelcomed by other parents, which discourages their school engagement. Individuals who differ in other ways from larger parent communities (e.g., in family structure) may also experience marginalization (Goldberg, Black, Manley, & Frost, 2017a). Sexual and gender minority parents represent an additional group that may be vulnerable to exclusion in their children's schools and parent communities in particular.

LGBTQ people face marginalization within the larger heteronormative societal context. In turn, when they become parents, they are thrust into heteronormative parenthood culture, where their sexual and/or gender minority status marks them as "other" (Goldberg, 2012; Goldberg & Allen, 2007). Other potential markers of difference from dominant parent communities include their family building route (they are at least four times as likely to build their families through adoption than heterosexual parents; Gates, 2013) and, because of their greater propensity to adopt, their multiracial status (LGBTQ people often adopt across racial lines; Gates, 2013; Goldberg, 2019). LGBTQ parents are increasingly likely to find themselves interacting with heterosexual parents as their children grow older, in part because of their shared experiences as parents, and also because of constraints on their time and mobility (Goldberg, 2012). Indeed, children act as catalysts for certain types of social integration: they direct and narrow their parents' social worlds, such that parents' networks are often comprised mostly of other parents (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003).

LGBTQ PARENTS' EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOLS

Research on LGBTQ parents' school experiences suggest that they are vulnerable to marginalization in multiple intersecting ways, including via curricula, class assignments, and interpersonal interactions. In a study of LG and heterosexual adoptive parents of preschool- and kindergarten-aged children, Goldberg, Black, Sweeney, and Moyer (2017b) found that

parents' perceptions of early childhood teachers' inclusion of family structure, adoption, and race varied widely, and sensitivity and inclusion in one domain (e.g., family structure) did not always coincide with a similar approach in another (e.g., race). Some parents spoke to how teachers modified activities in response to their presence (such as suggesting that a Mother's Day craft project could be made for any important parent or parent figure in the child's life), whereas others noted that teachers tended not to add or modify, but to flatten and simplify, such that they emphasized universalizing principles (e.g., all families are the same) and downplayed difference and diversity, with "not a lot of proactive stuff" (p. 151).

Significantly, LGBTQ parents' experiences in schools may be impacted not only by their sexual orientation, family building method, and racial makeup, but also their social class status. Middle-class heterosexual parents tend to devote significant money, time, and labor to their children's schools, both public and private—and thus possess a certain amount of power and influence in relation to schools (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Calarco, 2014; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999). Likewise, in a study of LG parents, most of whom were White and middle class, with kindergarten-aged children, Goldberg, Allen, Black, Frost, and Manley (2018) found that some gay fathers used their economic and educational privilege to "buy out" of the local public school experience and send their children to private schools. Others moved to diverse and inclusive areas to ensure more enriching, progressive public school experiences. Gay fathers with limited financial and/or geographic options, who send their children to "not the best" public schools, may try to offset this reality with high levels of engagement, investing time and effort into schools with the goal of enhancing their children's educational experience (Goldberg, Black, Manley, & Frost, 2017a; Leland, 2017).

Again, other parents are an important part of the school community, and parent–parent interactions have the potential to be important sites of connection, as well as points of tension and alienation (Beveridge, 2005; Sheldon, 2002). Some research has examined LG parents' experiences with other parents specifically (Goldberg, Black, Manley, & Frost, 2017a; Goldberg & Smith, 2014;

McDonald & Morgan, 2019). This work focuses predominantly on parents of preschool- and kindergarten-aged children, a stage when parents may face particularly high expectations, by teachers and themselves, for school involvement; indeed, as children enter elementary school and middle school, parents tend to be somewhat less involved (Trends, 2019). These studies found that LG parents were more likely than heterosexual parents to perceive other parents in schools as unwelcoming and rejecting (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). At the same time, LG parents recognized the importance of coming out to other parents, wishing to model comfort with their families for their children (Leland, 2017; McDonald & Morgan, 2019). LG parents in these studies often felt compelled to be involved (e.g., to volunteer) because they perceived important benefits of such involvement, including a reduced chance of marginalization of their children and families (Carroll, 2018; Goldberg, Black, Manley, & Frost, 2017a). Concerns about mistreatment, then, may spur LG parents to be involved, whereby involvement functions as a form of protective self-advocacy. Yet LG parents may also experience costs of (or barriers to future) involvement in the form of marginalization by other parents.

In a study of 45 LG and heterosexual parent families with preschool- and kindergarten-aged children, Goldberg, Black, Manley, and Frost (2017a) documented a few patterns of interest related to how gay fathers specifically may experience school parent communities. The authors observed that gay fathers often contextualized their own involvement by comparing themselves to their female and/or male heterosexual counterparts. Several gay fathers mentioned that their high levels of involvement distanced them from other (i.e., heterosexual) fathers; indeed, heterosexual fathers were the least involved compared to all other groups. A few gay fathers also said that they felt stereotyped by other members of the parent community: for example, a heterosexual woman commented on how well one man's daughter was dressed, thus invoking stereotypes of gay men as feminine and fashion-conscious (Cotner & Burkley, 2013). Carroll (2018) reported similar findings of gay fathers' alienation from feminine-coded family spaces and uncomfortable interactions with heterosexual women (see also Vinjamuri, 2015). For example, gay fathers

were often offered unsolicited advice or asked if it was “mom’s day off” when alone with their children, both of which were interpreted by men as microaggressions that signaled to them the cultural significance of women in children’s lives (Carroll, 2018). Collectively, these studies suggest that gay male fathers may experience high levels of visibility in female-dominated parent communities; whereas heterosexual fathers have encountered warmth and appreciation for their participation in feminized spaces and domains (Harvey Wingfield, 2009), gay fathers are vulnerable to intrusion and diminishment, perhaps in part because of their marginalized status as gay men (Williams, 2013). These findings also raise important questions about how gender—and race, class, and other social locations—interact with sexual orientation to shape parents’ relationships with other parents.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical lens that incorporates ecological, intersectional, and minority stress frameworks. An ecological perspective emphasizes an interconnected system of ever widening layers of influence on individual and family processes, from the micro level to the macro systemic level. This framework layers the historical, social, and familial space around which individuals relate and develop (Perry-Jenkins & Wadsworth, 2017). Of relevance to this study is not only the school and family contexts (i.e., microsystems) in child development but also the bidirectional relationship between these microsystems (i.e., the mesosystem) in shaping child outcomes, including academic achievement (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Fine & Carlson, 1992). Our research explicitly addresses the parent–school mesosystem, with attention to parents’ relationships with other parents, who represent a key component of the cultural environment of the school community. We are also attentive to the ways in which the schools that parents and children inhabit reflect and are shaped by the broader social and cultural contexts in which schools are embedded (e.g., with regard to state and local politics, economic and social capital, and attitudes; Calarco, 2014; Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2013).

From an intersectionality perspective, parental marginalization is differentially shaped

by the interlocking systems of oppression generated among the parent’s race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, and other sources of identity and institutional stratification across time and geography (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). Gay men’s relationships to schools, and with other parents, may reflect not only heteronormative and gendered meaning systems surrounding school engagement (e.g., women are expected to be more involved than men; Fleischmann & de Haas, 2016) but also the reality of their own lives as same-sex male couples who cannot “opt out” of labor based on gender (difference) (Goldberg, 2013). In turn, gay men’s relationships with other parents (i.e., heterosexual women, who are likely similarly or more involved; and heterosexual men, who are likely less involved) are shaped by their status not only as men, but also gay men, who violate dominant standards of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Complicating the particular intersection of gender and sexual orientation is gay men’s racial and class status: that is, many gay fathers are likely to occupy privileged positions as White, wealthy men, whose social and financial capital afforded them the opportunity to become parents (Goldberg et al., 2018; Green, Rubio, Rothblum, Bergman, & Katuzny, 2019). In turn, gay fathers’ race and class statuses, in relation to those of the larger parent-school communities, are likely to impact their encounters with other parents. Gay fathers may find race and class intersections to be a source of connection and shared experience; or, alternatively, differences in these domains may be the site of uncomfortable and alienating interactions, which may in turn foster a less involvement.

This study is also grounded in minority stress theory, which emphasizes that minority populations are exposed to unique stressors—from institutionalized discrimination to personal microaggressions—that stem from their stigmatized status(es) within a largely heteronormative society (Meyer, 2003). These stressors constitute several major categories: experiences of stigma; anticipated stigma; concealment of one’s stigmatized identity; and internalized homophobia (Meyer, 2003). Thomeer, LeBlanc, Frost, and Bowen (2018) have observed that anticipated stigma or stressors (i.e., negative events that can be viewed as potential realities) are the subject of less focus than

discriminatory events. Yet they note that the frequency and impact of anticipatory stressors are probably greater than scholars have assumed to date, and warrant more attention. People who have experienced discrimination (e.g., because of sexual orientation or race) may approach certain situations or settings—or live their lives in general—in a state of vigilant anticipation, bracing for future negative treatment, which can cause distress (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013).

Related to the issue of “anticipatory anxiety” is ambiguous discrimination, which may result when one occupies multiple marginalized statuses and is uncertain about the source of discrimination, which creates stress in terms of both anticipating and interpreting the source of discrimination (Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Amidst their particular set of intersecting identities and social structures, multiple marginalized men may be especially vulnerable to anticipatory stress framed around the possibility of discrimination based on sexuality, gender, race, and other statuses. An African American gay father, for example, may anticipate more discrimination based on the unique intersections of racism and homophobia than a White gay father, and experience uncertainty about its source, when he encounters a negative event. In addition, certain privileged statuses may mitigate anticipatory stress. An affluent White gay man may anticipate less stigma from other parents than a working-class White gay man, given his social and economic capital, especially if the school community comprises other privileged White parents (who in turn may be primed to accept him based on his seeming embodiment of hegemonic family values and norms; Allen & Mendez, 2018; Williams, 2013). Significantly, the relative salience, meaning, and marginality of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation statuses inevitably varies by context, such as the gender, race, class, political affiliation, and sexual orientation makeup of the members and leaders within a given domain (Pew Research Center, 2019; Williams, 2013).

Gay fathers, then, may be vulnerable to multiple forms of marginalization, and find it especially difficult to integrate into parent communities, which tend to be primarily run by women. Those who occupy multiple identity categories that set them apart from the dominant school parent community may encounter

particular challenges, such as avoidance from other parents. Yet gay fathers who possess social, educational, and material resources may find that such privilege enables access to more inclusive, diverse communities in which to live and send their children to school, perhaps facilitating contact with parents who are more likely to accept them—particularly if men embody other forms of privilege, such as Whiteness and conformity to expected gender roles (Allen & Mendez, 2018). Gay fathers with less privilege may find certain types of school communities easier to inhabit: for example, multiracial gay father families might face a more welcoming reception in racially diverse schools that are also characterized by an ethos of progressive values than in mostly White, similarly progressive schools.

METHOD

Description of the Sample

The sample consists of 40 cisgender men from 20 couples. All of the men had become parents via adoption, about 8 years earlier, in the context of a male-partnered relationship. In 19 of these couples, the men were still together; one couple had split up and the men were coparenting their child while living separately. Men were asked whether they identified as exclusively gay, mostly gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, or something else; 33 (82.5%) men identified as exclusively gay, 6 men as mostly gay, and 1 man as queer. Three mostly gay men were partnered with exclusively gay men, two mostly gay men were partnered with each other, and one mostly gay man was partnered with the queer man. For ease, we refer to the sample as a whole as gay men.

Most men ($n = 33$; 82.5%) worked full time, or at least 35 hours per week (median = 40; $SD = 15.5$). Four men worked part time (<35 hours), and three men were not employed. In two of these three cases, the men were stay-at-home parents to younger children (i.e., children the couple adopted after the target child—meaning, the oldest adopted child, about whom the men were interviewed). Most men were affluent, reporting an average combined family income of \$177,500, but there was notable variability in family income across families ($SD = \$100,892$). The men were also well educated on average, with two reporting a high

school diploma or GED, three reporting some college or an associate degree, 12 reporting a college degree, 15 reporting a master's degree, and 8 reporting a professional (PhD/JD/MD) degree.

Thirty men (75%) were White, and 10 were of color, including biracial/multiracial. In two couples, both men were of color, and in six couples, one man was White, and one man was of color. Racial breakdowns are included in Table 1. Most (16) of the 20 target children were of color; four were White. Most (13) were adopted via private domestic adoption; six were adopted via public domestic adoption (foster care) and one was adopted internationally. Most (15; 75%) were boys; five were girls. Children were 9 years of age, on average, and in third grade: namely, two were in second grade, 10 were in third, four were in fourth, one was in sixth, one was in seventh, and one was in eighth. Most (15; 75%) attended their local public school; one attended a public charter school, one attended a private religious school, and three attended private independent schools. All children had been at their current schools for at least 1 year, and at least 2 years in all but three cases (one family changed schools for access to better special education services; one family moved, necessitating a school change; and in one case, the child's prior school ended after first grade). Eleven of 20 couples had adopted other children—one in nine cases, and two in two cases. Families were spread across 12 U.S. states, with 8 on the West Coast, 6 in the Midwest, 3 on the East Coast, and 3 in the South. Thirteen families lived in areas they described as urban, and 7 in suburbs. Data were collected from 2015 to 2017, soon after the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed federal protections for same-sex marriages and public opinion remained relatively divided on the issue (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Procedure

Participants, who lived across the United States, were assessed approximately 8 years after becoming first-time parents via adoption, in 2014–2017. Inclusion criteria for the original study were that both partners must be first-time parents, and adopting for the first time. Participants were originally recruited from adoption agencies and LGBTQ organizations in the United States for a study of the transition to

adoptive parenthood. A selective subsample of parents was re-contacted 8 years postadoption and invited to complete an in-depth interview. In determining whom to contact from the larger sample, the principal investigator (PI) aimed to include both couples who adopted both inracially (i.e., a child of the same race) and couple who adopted transracially. The PI also sought to create a sample of families in varying geographic locations. This type of selective sampling technique, wherein a subsample of participants from Study A is invited to participate in Study B (or a later time-point of Study A), is advantageous in that it saves investigator resources (e.g., time and money) without sacrificing data richness (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). The study was approved by the Clark University internal human subjects review board.

Each parent was interviewed individually, separate from his partner, by the PI and trained doctoral students in psychology. All participants completed a consent form prior to the interview. Interviews lasted 1–1.5 hours and were transcribed and de-identified. Interview questions were developed by the PI (first author) in collaboration with the research team and were informed by the patterns that emerged in earlier interviews, and relevant research on (a) LGBTQ parent-families and (b) families and schools. The interview was modified somewhat after the first few participant interviews, whereby certain questions were revised or dropped, and others added.

In our analysis, we primarily drew on men's responses to the following interview questions, which were often accompanied by spontaneous probes and clarifying questions: (a) tell me about the school or schools your child has attended. (b) Tell me about your experiences with your child's teachers. (c) How connected do you feel to your child's school? (d) Have you been involved in any school events and activities? Tell me about that. What were those experiences like? (e) Do you feel like there are barriers to being more involved at your child's school? Tell me about that. (f) Tell me about your experiences with other parents at your child's school. (g) Tell me about your relationships with the parents of your child's school friends. Do you socialize with any of them? What types of activities do you enjoy together? Are any of these families two mom or two dad families? Adoptive families? Families that

Table 1. Demographic Data

Parent names	Parent races	Work status	Region (coast, urbanicity)	Child race	Child gender	Child age	Siblings race, gender, age	Adopt type	School type
1. Trevor	White	FT	South, urban	Biracial (African American/White)	Boy	9	Biracial (African American/White, Boy, 4)	Private domestic	Private religious
Chris	White	FT	West, urban	Latino	Boy	10	Biracial (African American/Native American), Boy, 7	Private domestic	Public
2. Brent	White	FT	West, urban	Latino	Boy	10	Biracial (African American/White) Boy, 1.5	Private domestic	Public
Kyle	White	FT	West, urban	Latino	Boy	10	African American, Boy, 8	Public	Public
3. Joel	Latino	PT	East, suburb	Biracial (African American/White)	Girl	9	African American, Boy, 7	Private domestic	Public
Derrick	(Latino/White)	FT	East, suburb	Biracial (African American/White)	Girl	9	African American, Boy, 8	Private domestic	Public
4. Zach	White	FT	Midwest, suburb	African American	Girl	11	African American, Boy, 7	Public	Public
Randy	African American	FT	Midwest, suburb	African American	Girl	11	African American, Boy, 7	Public	Public
5. Troy	White	FT	West, urban	Latino	Boy	9.5	None	Public	Public
Jeff	Latino	FT	West, urban	Latino	Boy	9.5	None	Public	Public
6. Monty	White	FT	West, urban	African American	Boy	9	None	Private domestic	Private independent
Joshua	African American	FT	West, urban	African American	Boy	9	None	Private domestic	Private independent
7. Sam	White	PT	West, urban	White	Boy	9	None	Private domestic	Public
Jamie	White	FT	West, urban	White	Boy	9	None	Private domestic	Public
8. Aaron	White	FT	East, suburb	White	Boy	12	Latino, Boy, 14	Public	Public
Shawn	White	FT	East, suburb	White	Boy	12	Latino, Boy, 16	Public	Public
9. Marcus	White	FT	South, suburb	Latino	Boy	12	None	Public	Public
Tom	White	FT	South, suburb	Latino	Boy	12	None	Public	Public
10. Richard	White	PT	East, suburb	Biracial (African American/White)	Boy	8.5	White, Boy, 6	Private domestic	Public
Barry	White	FT	East, suburb	Biracial (African American/White)	Boy	8.5	White, Boy, 6	Private domestic	Public
11. Will	White	FT	West, urban	Biracial (African American/White)	Girl	9	None	Private Domestic	Public
Kevin	Asian American	FT	West, urban	Biracial (African American/White)	Girl	9	None	Private Domestic	Public
12. Nate	White	FT	Midwest, urban	African American	Boy	10	None	Public	Charter
Frank	White	FT	Midwest, urban	African American	Boy	10	None	Public	/Public
Jeremy	White	FT	Midwest, suburb	Latino	Girl	10	Latino, Boy, 8	International	Public
Andre	Latino	FT	Midwest, suburb	Latino	Girl	10	Latino, Boy, 8	International	Public

Table 1. *Continued*

Parent names	Parent races	Work status	Region (coast, urbanicity)	Child race	Child gender	child age	Siblings race, gender, age	Adopt type	School type
14. Noah	White	FT	Midwest, suburb	Latino	Boy	8	None	Private domestic	Public
Ben	White	FT	Midwest, urban	Latino	Boy	8	None	Private domestic	Public
15. Patrick	White	FT	West, urban	Multiracial (Latino/Native American)	Boy	11	White, Boy, 13	Public	Public
Christopher	White	FT							
16. Eddie	White	FT	West, urban	Multiracial (Latino/Native American)	Boy	11	White, Boy, 13	Public	Public
Phil	White	PT							
17. Martin	Latino	SAH	West, suburb	Multiracial (African American/White/Latino)	Boy	9	White, Girl, 4	Private domestic	Public
Leo	White/Native American	FT					Native American, Boy, 3		
18. Greg	White	FT	West, urban	Multiracial (African American/White/Native American)	Boy	8	None	Private domestic	Private independent
David	Asian American	FT							
19. Gary	White	FT	South, urban	White	Boy	8	White, Girl, 4	Private domestic	Public
Dominick	White	SAH							
20. Luke	White	FT	Midwest, urban	White	Girl	8	Biracial (African American/White, Girl, 3)	Private domestic	Private independent
Jonas	White	SAH							

FT = full-time employed; PT = part-time employed; SAH = stay-at-home parent.

share your child's race/ethnicity/cultural background?

Data Analysis

Participants' responses were transcribed and examined using thematic analysis, which is a rigorous and deliberate, but also theoretically flexible, approach to analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and involves exploration of recurrent patterns in the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Our analysis focused primarily on parents' descriptions of their relationships with and perceptions of other parents. Drawing from ecological, intersectionality, and minority stress frameworks and the relevant literature, we attended to parents' descriptions of (dis)comfort and (dis)connection in relation to other parents, particularly in the context of their school involvement, with attention to the explicit and implicit ways that parents' and children's social locations may have shaped the nature and nuances of these relationships.

The first author was the primary coder of the data. She first read through all of the interview transcripts multiple times, to gain an in-depth understanding of each family's story and each parent's perspective. She wrote memos to process her understanding of the data and develop preliminary ideas about emerging codes. To develop themes, she then engaged in line-by-line analysis to generate initial theoretical categories that stayed fairly close to the data (Patton, 2002). For example, in considering how participants characterized their relationships to other parents, initial codes included "positive, good relationships formed" and "negative, uncomfortable interactions noted." These codes were refined and elaborated upon as she moved through the coding process. For example, "negative, uncomfortable interactions noted" was replaced by codes denoting the nature of the interaction (e.g., generalized across all parents or specific; implicitly or explicitly exclusionary) and the perceived reason(s) for marginalization (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race, class), as well as the men's level of (un)certainly regarding the source(s). She paid attention to how these codes varied according to family members' race, geographic location, school type, and other key demographics. These focused codes, which can be understood as being more conceptual and selective in nature, became the basis for the "themes" developed in the analysis

(Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002). At this stage, the first author paid close attention to how key concepts and themes varied across families and within each individual family (i.e., between partners). Notably, parents within each family tended to provide similar accounts, and no major discrepancies between partners were observed.

At this point, the second author examined a subset of transcripts (one-third, chosen at random) as a way to evaluate the emerging coding scheme, using the evaluative concepts of credibility (e.g., Are the data sufficient to merit the research claims?) and resonance (e.g., Do the analytic categories portray the fullness of the studied experience?) (see Charmaz, 2014, p. 337). The second author, for example, highlighted the emotional nuances of fathers' narratives to ensure that these were meaningfully reflected in the coding scheme (e.g., regarding men's disposition toward heterosexual mothers, and their capacity for self-reflection and critique as parents and partners). The second author also examined demographic divergences within the sample, and how the men's intersecting identities (and those of their families) were present in the organization and storyline of the scheme.

The three authors (combining disciplinary expertise in psychology, family science, and sociology, respectively) collaboratively reviewed the coding scheme in light of the credibility and resonance feedback, and made a number of modifications to tighten the analysis, address the research questions, and apply the overarching theoretical framework informed by ecological, intersectional, and minority stress frameworks. After returning to the data once more, the first and second authors made several additional refinements to the scheme. At the final stage, we attended closely to the "storyline" of the findings, whereby we organized the data in terms of the major themes that were prevalent across the sample of 40 fathers: (a) navigating involvement in heteronormative school structures; (b) school parent communities as sites of disconnection, exclusion, and hostility; (c) school parent communities as sites of inclusion and connection; and (d) other LG parents as sources of connection and distance. The final scheme, which we used to organize our results, was established once we verified agreement among all of the coded data.

RESULTS

*School Parent Communities
as Heteronormative, Homonormative,
and Gendered Domains*

Many of the gay fathers in the study described themselves as very involved in their children's schools. Specifically, all but one of the men reported having attended a parent-teacher conference or meeting in the past year, 36 of 40 men reported having visited their children's school for a special event in the past year, and 33 of 40 shared that they had volunteered at their children's school (with 13 of these 33 saying they volunteered frequently or very frequently). Men detailed their volunteering at holiday events, the Fall Fair, fundraisers, and school clean-up days, as well as chaperoning school trips. Twelve men specifically described being on a school committee, such as the PTA ($n = 6$) or the school diversity committee ($n = 3$). Two men stated that they were classroom parents. In only four families, one (in two) or both (in two) men asserted that they "didn't do much" in terms of school involvement. A typical response came from Luke, a White gay father of a White daughter at a private independent school, who said: "Jonas and I have volunteered at several events, I've been a room parent for the school... We've also been involved in helping with the school play and some of the fundraising."

The men's high levels of school engagement brought them into regular and sometimes frequent contact with other parents, especially mothers; indeed, they were often the only father in a "sea of women" (Jonas, gay Latino father) when it came to volunteering, coordinating school events, and attending PTA meetings. Yet significantly, the presence of these active and engaged (gay) male parents rarely seemed to prompt administrators, teachers, or other parents to challenge or interrogate the assumptions embedded in the language of school participation. In this way, they were highly visible as involved, gay male fathers; however, this visibility (as different from the majority) did not translate into structural change or accommodation (i.e., they were overlooked within the large school system; Harvey Wingfield, 2009), thereby highlighting their marginality and limited power. Ben, a White gay father of a Latino son at a suburban public school in the Midwest, shared that he was:

the only room dad. And it's funny, because whenever we have meetings or whatever—they're always used to saying "room moms," because it's always room moms. And then you see their eyes kind of scan the room and come across me and they'll pause and go, "oh, or room parent."

Men like Ben gave examples of how schools acknowledged their presence as engaged parents, but did not appear to meaningfully revisit or revise the gendered and often heteronormative language that they used in referring to parent roles in the school. Indeed, school structures often communicated a particular, unquestioned set of gendered roles regarding parent involvement, and parent communities by and large accepted and enacted them, only briefly noting interruptions or inconsistencies in institutional norms that privilege female involvement in school communities.

The men sometimes invoked gendered comparisons when articulating their involvement, explaining their engagement in terms of the typical (heterosexual) father as well as the typical (heterosexual) mother. They simultaneously highlighted their superior levels of involvement over most heterosexual men's, while also emphasizing that they were not as involved as many of the women—a discrepancy that they framed as largely a function of employment status (involved female parents did not participate in the paid labor force; they did). Trevor, a White gay father in a Southern city, whose biracial son went to a private religious school where they were "the only gay dad family," said:

We're not as involved as some of the moms, but we're more involved than the dads. Some of the moms don't work and that is their life and it all revolves around PTO. If we go do the mom event or any of the other stuff, or volunteer, you get all of these "Oh wow...!" because the bar is so low (*laughs*), whereas with moms, the bar's really high.

Trevor's partner, Chris, who was also White, shared a similar perspective, stating:

Because we're working parents we're not there all the time, like some of the stay-at-home moms are—but with that, we have relationships with all of the families and...we're real connected and we volunteer for things when they come up, and we're helping some of the new families as they come in... We take them under our wing and we

talk about the school [and] try to make them feel welcome. So we're very involved.

At the same time, several men noted that they would be more involved if they worked less—but they still maintained fairly high levels of involvement. Marcus, a White gay father in a Southern suburb, who volunteered “semi-regularly” at his Latino son’s public school, offered:

Tom and I both work, even though my job has greater flexibility in terms of things that I need to do for school, for appointments. Neither of us are stay-at-home caregivers. The committee meetings, you have to be there every other Thursday; we can't do that.

Thus, some men drew on work status and hours to underscore further distinctions between themselves and other (female) involved parents, as well as to point out systemic barriers that favored stay-at-home parents—who were mostly female—and thereby precluded certain types of engagement by working parents within the culturally feminized domain of school volunteerism (Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; Williams, 2013).

School Parent Communities as Sites of Exclusion and Hostility

Disconnection, Exclusion, and Hostility: Gender and Sexuality. The men’s high engagement in classrooms and schools meant that they were predominantly interacting with (heterosexual) women. In the majority of cases, men simply noted the salience of their own gender in these interactions: they were among the few highly involved fathers in the school, not to mention the only gay father. They described the female-dominated nature of the school parent community as a less-than-ideal reality, and also did not appear to experience it as overtly exclusionary. In other words, even if they did not exactly feel like they “fit in” with the other parents (e.g., based on gender and sometimes class, as evident in the next theme), men did not feel persecuted, pushed out, or discouraged from being involved. Troy, a White gay father with a Latino son who attended public school in what he perceived to be a fairly progressive city on the West Coast, shared his sense of the parent community: “I personally find it a little cliquy. [But] we’re very active...I am on the diversity committee and Jeff is on the

parent council for the second year; he does a lot.” Andre, a Latino gay father with a Latino daughter who attended an academically rigorous public school in a Midwestern suburb, asserted that one fairly engaged contingent of the parent community was the “mean moms,” a group of “skinny cliquish women [who] don’t work...and they drop the kids off at school, and they have their little clique group to chat with and then they all go jogging or whatever.” In ending his statement with “or whatever,” Andre hints that he is facetiously drawing from a stereotype of White, suburban women to illustrate the social ties between mothers at his children’s school and his exclusion from them. Yet despite his dislike for these women, Andre and his husband “never felt shunned or not included” by them, or by other parents, and had not been discouraged from participating at his children’s school: indeed, Andre regularly donated his time and talents within and outside his children’s classrooms, and had met several parents with whom he “clicked.”

In a few cases, however, these female-dominated, “cliquy” parent communities did influence and in some cases discouraged men’s school involvement. Zach, a White gay father whose daughter and husband were both African American, described how he had had recently moved from a diverse urban community to a predominantly White suburb, where the public school “moms community” was characterized by a “high-school feeling...you can feel the competitiveness.” Finding this dynamic to be a “turn off,” Zach explained that they minimized their involvement in the school, whereby contact with other parents was on an “as needed basis.”

More dramatically, a few men described encountering tensions with other parents—all of whom were women—that they cast as examples of “mom drama,” thus invoking gender not only as a central feature of their interactions, but as an explanatory component of the type of conflicts that arose. Ben, a White gay father whose Latino son attended a suburban Midwestern public school, shared the position of room parent with a heterosexual mother, with whom he navigated tension around who would plan the end-of-the-year party. Ben did not want to take the lead, as he had planned the mid-year holiday party. In turn, he confessed, “I think I made her mad.” Then, Ben discovered that he had been

“left off the emails” about the end-of-the-year party:

I feel like it was a slight, like, “You weren’t going to help me so I’m just going to make sure you’re not part of it.” I’ve heard other people talk about high school drama between room parents... This is my first experience with it, so I’m just kind of overwhelmed.

In another case, “mom drama” was described as an oppressive and exclusionary dynamic that impacted them directly. Will, a White gay father with a biracial daughter attending public school in a relatively diverse urban area on the West Coast, shared a story that reveals how gender normativity, heteronormativity, and homophobia were occasionally inextricably linked in the context of (heterosexual) female-dominant parent communities:

We had some really horrible experiences with a few parents who were extremely condemning and aggressive with us... [One mother] told us that our child’s a sociopath and that’s because we don’t know what we’re doing raising a girl, and that if we want the help of any of the moms in the school, all we have to do is ask. Because “in *mom culture*”—which we probably don’t know about, but “in *mom culture*, we do these things to support one another.” So really explicit homophobia; it was awful.

Will’s partner, Kevin, who was Asian American, shared how this experience impacted their school engagement: “As a result [of this experience] we really pulled out of the school. Like, I’m not at all engaged with many parents there. I’m pretty nervous about it.” This nervousness persisted despite the fact that school staff had been very proactive in addressing the situation, making it clear to the parent community that this type of social aggression by parents was not acceptable: “The school administrators stepped in and shut that shit down pretty fast.” Significantly, although they had pulled back from formal school involvement, Kevin and Will did seek out and find alternative sources of community within the school—what they creatively referred to as the “B side PTA.” Kevin stated,

The family that lives up the street go to the school and we’re really close. They’re like us. In some ways we feel like we’re the—you know how vinyl albums have a B side? That’s kind of more alternative, underground? We often call ourselves the

B side PTA. We’re the ones that don’t quite fit in. There are a couple other [parents who] don’t fit in with the majority that we’re really good friends with. [like] a single mom... I kind of feel like that’s our community in that school... parents that feel like they’re not the perfect family that [looks] this way or has these kinds of jobs, and so on.

Disconnection, Exclusion, and Hostility: Race and Class. In some cases, parents occupied school communities dominated by parents who also differed from them in terms of social class and/or race. Thus, in addition to noting gender and sexuality as sites of contrast between themselves and other involved parents, gay fathers sometimes highlighted class and race—at least implicitly. These men balanced discomfort about the degree to which they “fit in” with these communities with awareness that they needed to be proactive in schools on behalf of their child (e.g., via volunteering), especially when they were of color and/or had children of color, and thus vulnerable to multiple forms of marginalization. In such cases, the potential barriers to parent engagement were greater, but so were the risks of nonengagement.

Often, these parents described a chilliness or mild hostility toward them and/or their children, the source of which was difficult to pinpoint given the multiple ways in which they deviated from the larger school community. Confronted with ambiguous discrimination (Major et al., 2002), they were left to speculate about what particular identity or intersection of identities might be the cause of their exclusion or alienation. Randy was an African American gay father whose African American daughter Arianna attended public school in a predominantly White, affluent suburb of the Midwest. Randy noted,

I think there is some stuff that we don’t get invited to just ‘cause I think—we are such a different family in some ways... sexual orientation, race... that, I think, there’s probably some discomfort on the part of some people.

Yet while Randy sensed that his family was not fully accepted by other parents, he was undeterred when it came to “showing up” for his daughter, in terms of volunteering, advocating for her at school, and so on. Even though “race and class [differences]” sometimes made it “uncomfortable, I have gotten involved in the PTA.

I *do* want to be involved. I *do* really want to have a [voice]. Being involved in the school, in Arianna's learning—is a high priority.” Randy, then, overrode his discomfort to participate as fully as possible in Arianna's school community, in part out of acute awareness of the high potential for marginalization based on the fact that Arianna had two fathers and was adopted, but especially because of race and class.

Similarly, Martin described how he and his family—gay, multiracial, and middle-class—were not accepted but “barely tolerated” in their wealthy conservative community and local public school. Martin was a Latino gay father with a Latino son and a biracial husband who lived on the West Coast and had recently moved from an urban center to a nearby suburb for a “better school system”—yet the tradeoff was a parent community that was “very rich, very Republican and conservative,” and Martin felt a sense of alienation from other parents: “It's all very polite but it's all very artificial. [Teachers and parents] are very civil, but they won't have anything to do with us.” Social class was one component of this disconnect; as Martin noted, “We're not like [the other parents]...We're very middle class but we live on the poor side of town,” resulting in anxiety as he prepared for his son's birthday party, whereby he worried that “they're gonna be looking at everything.” In addition to the issues raised by his family's multiracial and middle-class status, Martin's sense of being unwelcome within his son's school community was further compounded by their status as a two-father family:

I feel the dishonesty in the relationships that we have with the school and the other parents. It's all very artificial. They tolerate us because they have to, because they're afraid of a lawsuit, because they're afraid of conflict. But...if they had a choice, we would not be here...I think it's the two-dad family [thing], [and] because we are two-dad family it's assumed that we are more liberal and that we're trouble in their eyes...If we're forced to be in the same room, or the same space, they immediately congregate at another end, or pull their children, or leave. That sends that signal to me.

Leo, Martin's husband, described his anxiety and frustration related to the anticipatory stigma he navigated in relation to how his family might be treated by other parents:

Martin's been called a nanny before...it's not many parents but you only have to have a couple of those experiences for it to really stick with you. The family who lived across the street from us, they were very homophobic. Julian went over there a few times to play with their kids [who are peers at school] and they sent him home...I really would at times like to just be a regular parent...without worrying about whether or not we're going to get some kind of weird vibe from the parents. So you're extra vigilant about these things in a way that I just wish wasn't there...You take a little bit of pause when you're going to a birthday party with 30 kids and their parents and you're walking in as two men with a [multiracial] family.

Here, Leo's narrative illustrates the complex ways in which race, class, gender, and sexual orientation combine to fuel a generalized sense of anticipatory anxiety—and also reveals how racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia are leveraged in such a way so as to reduce a Latino gay father to a cultural stereotype of a feminine subordinate.

In rare cases, parents found themselves confronting other parents amidst evidence of homophobia, racism, and other aspects of bias. Nate, a White father of an African American son who attended public school in an urban area of the Midwest, noted that the majority of involved parents at his son's school were not only heterosexual and female, “but also White.” As the father of a child of color, Nate felt that it was important for him to be involved, and he had joined several parent committees and regularly attended school events. Nate described interacting with several parents with whom he encountered friction, including a White father who was critical of his efforts to facilitate greater attention to Black history in the curriculum, declaring that his own (White) daughter “didn't see race.” Nate also described several unpleasant encounters with a heterosexual mother whose son was in his son's classroom in previous grades, noting that she:

told the teacher that she didn't want to have our kids together in groups because she wanted to discourage their friendship. Basically she is a homophobe. That ties politically to her very conservative values. She also didn't think they should do Black history.

Despite his discomfort (“There were a couple of parents I wanted to slap. I refrained because that would not have been helpful”), Nate

remained firm in his efforts to push for curricular change, staying involved because “there has never been anything explicitly done in relation to Black history, and if you don’t enumerate it or talk about it, you’re perpetuating the problem.” Notably, Nate ultimately formed a coalition with several Black mothers to push for change (“now...there are more African American, largely African mothers who are taking more of a leadership role...which is awesome”), demonstrating how some men crossed racial lines to rally for systemic change that directly impacted their children—a strategy that may serve to amplify minority group members’ agency amidst broader systems of power (Quiñones & Kiyama, 2014).

School Parent Communities as Sites of Support and Connection

Many men encountered parents whom they experienced as accepting, even welcoming. In fact, more than half of the men described having made at least one positive connection with another family at their child’s school, and some of them had developed solid friendships with other families. They described how they organized barbecues at their homes for other (typically heterosexual parent) families, invited parents over for trivia nights, visited other families’ homes for informal dinners and bonfires, and even vacationed with other families. These friendships had developed over time, facilitated by familiarity forged through regular involvement in the school, as well as, implicitly, their shared identity as parents. Greg, a White gay father whose multiracial son attended a private independent school in a West Coast city, stated that he and his husband regularly volunteered at the school, and had cultivated “really nice connections with the parents of Ryan’s classmates. Some we’ve vacationed with, some are neighbors, and we’ll pop in and have social visits.” Jeremy, a White gay father whose Latino daughter attended public school in a Midwestern suburb, stated:

We are good friends with many of the families, especially those who we’ve been in school together with for four years now. We love the school, we love the school community—it’s a very involved set of parents. A part of our social life has now become the other kids’ parents. We do babysitting for each other, or they’ll come over for dinner.

Jeremy further reflected on how their social world had shifted over time, to become more parent-centered—and thus dominated by heterosexual friends: “I would say that our social world, our social life—can be overwhelmed by the straight parents, interacting with those folks as opposed to our gay friends.” Richard, a White gay father of a biracial son who went to a public school in an East Coast city, detailed a similar sentiment with regard to how their social lives had changed, contrasting their friendships with (heterosexual) parent friends and gay (non-parent) friends:

In a sense, we have a lot more in common with these straight couples at the school than we do with some of our gay friends who we’ve lost contact with, because our life is just focused around the kids...With these couples you can talk and laugh about the nonsense that’s going on with your kids, which is kind of fun.

Here, it is possible to regard what Jeremy, Richard, and others are describing as traces or evidence of homonormativity, whereby dominant discourses of (heterosexual) parenthood are privileged and serve as the basis for friendships, and more resistant or disruptive strains of men’s past or current lives or identities are muted (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Vinjamuri, 2015).

Significantly, many of the men who described positive relationships with other parents nevertheless recounted how, particularly when navigating transitional periods (e.g., the beginning of a new school year) or events (e.g., all school events; birthday parties), they tended to approach school communities and other parents with a sense of trepidation, bracing for the possibility of hostility or exclusion. Sam, a White gay father of a White son at a public school in a West Coast city, said, “I always anticipate the potential for having a negative interaction with parents...I’m always guarded before we’re put into a new situation.” In reality, Sam had not encountered such negativity: “Nobody drops their coffee or anything; they’re fine with us.” Marcus, a White gay father of a Latino son in public school in a suburb in the South, shared:

Certainly as gay parents, from the beginning we went in just trying to do a matter-of-fact, “Hey, look two dads, adopted son, this is how it is,” but then fully expecting something horrible to occur at any point and preparing ourselves for it...[But our]

fears turned out to be...unfounded on that front, which has been wonderful.

Lesbian and Gay School Parent Communities as Sources of Connection and Distance

Some fathers spoke to their relationships with other LGBTQ parents at their children's schools. Several men described forming relationships with other LGBTQ parents, which often grew out of school-facilitated opportunities for connection based on shared identities or affinities. These men—all of whom resided in what they described as LGBTQ-friendly urban areas, and whose children attended private schools—noted that these schools had affinity groups for LGBTQ parents, adoptive families, and/or multiracial families. In such settings, which were uniquely characterized by their privatized nature, “progressive” philosophies, and urban surroundings, LGBTQ parents were presumably large enough in number so as to warrant a group, resulting in “normalization” of their presence, and in turn less visibility (Williams, 2013). Monty, a White gay father whose husband was African American, and whose African American son attended what he described as a “progressive” private school in a diverse city on the West Coast, appreciated that there were “structures in place within the school [that address diversity],” which provided a forum for parents to connect over shared identities and experiences. Greg, a White gay father whose husband was Asian American and whose son Ryan was multiracial, shared that Ryan's private school, located in a diverse city on the West Coast, held “potlucks for different types of families—one month [it's] adoptive families, another month it's LGBT families, another one is Latinx families...We go to all of them.” Greg and his family had met and formed friendships with several families via these avenues.

In several cases, the presence of other LGBTQ parents at the school, and gay father families specifically, did not inevitably lead to connection or friendship. In two families, men shared experiences or perspectives that deviated sharply from the assumption that gay father families in a given school would automatically gravitate toward one another. Both sets of fathers described a sense of disconnect from other gay father families that seemed to be related to parenting values—and, indirectly,

social class, thus underscoring the intersectional nature of men's sense of belonging, connection, and affiliation. Phil, a White gay father of a multiracial son who attended public school in an urban area of the West Coast, shared that he and his partner “socialize[d] plenty with straight families,” but had struggled to connect with gay father families, finding them “exhausting” and into “competitive parenting”:

They're so over the top. I think it's because it's kind of new. It's like—they're worse than the, you know, the rich White moms...it's all about, “Oh, well, you know, so-and-so is scoring this well on her tests and we gave her an iPad for her fourth birthday and she's already done blah blah blah.” And I just can't stand that shit, so I'm just like “Whatever.”

Thus, similar to how some men described heterosexual mothers in broad stroke terms, Phil depicted gay fathers as materialistic and hyper-competitive, thus deploying a negative stereotype of gay fathers while implicitly excluding himself from this generalization—and also distancing himself from homonormativity, whereby affluent gay White men may be especially likely to pursue and benefit from capitalism and consumption (Allen & Mendez, 2018). Indeed, Phil implied that differences related to class, privilege, and parenting philosophy were so great so as to override any potential connections to other gay father families, whom he in fact described as “worse” than similarly wealthy White (and presumably heterosexual) mothers.

Although Phil spoke in generalities, David, an Asian American gay father of a multiracial son who attended a private independent school in a West Coast city, spoke about a specific two-father family that he had felt “really put off by.” Although David found the overall parent community to be “warm and welcoming,” he found the only other gay father family at his son's school less than easy to connect with:

You would have thought because we are both two-dad families, we both have children the same age, they would have been a little more outgoing and interested. I tried to talk to them whenever I saw them and I would kind of get the cold shoulder. [At some point], someone asked one of the dads, “Is your child adopted?” and he was like, “No, they are *surrogate*,” and was very snobby about it. I don't know if they had some sort of antiadoption bias; it felt like it sometimes.

David suggested that the divide that he felt between his own family and the other two-father family might in part be rooted in class differences—and the accompanying judgment that results from and is enacted to maintain such differences—whereby adoption was devalued as a family building route, and surrogacy, which typically costs over \$100,000, was implied as the “ideal.” In this way, David and others described as a sense of discovery and dismay over their discovery that other parents, who were presumably similar in terms of gender and sexual orientation, were highly dissimilar from them in terms of their competitive and materialistic approach to parenting.

DISCUSSION

Parents are an important part of the school community (Beveridge, 2005), and parent–parent interactions have the potential to be sites of connection and information, and/or alienation and marginalization (Marchand et al., 2019; Sheldon, 2002). As our findings highlight, gay fathers were, overall, fairly involved in their children’s schools—and high levels of engagement in school activities (e.g., membership on the PTA; being a room parent) often meant more interactions with other parents, which in turn have the potential to influence gay fathers’ future school involvement (Li & Fischer, 2017) and social capital (Sheldon, 2002), and, by extension, children’s academic and psychosocial outcomes (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Jaynes, 2007).

Building on prior work that has hinted at the school context as a site of gender salience for gay fathers specifically (e.g., Carroll, 2018; Goldberg, Black, Manley, & Frost, 2017), our findings highlight the centrality of gender in men’s experiences of the school–parent microsystem—as well as social class, whereby men often felt compelled to detail the ways in which the dominant parent community was not just women, but wealthy, suburban, and not employed outside of the home. Their pointed differentiation of “us versus them” speaks to the gulf they often seemed to perceive between themselves and other parents, and to the intersecting roles of social class, gender, and sexual orientation in fostering their experience of disconnection, alienation, and/or invisibility. In a few cases, men experienced the heterosexual mothers in the parent community not simply as

implicitly marginalizing, but explicitly exclusionary, as illustrated in the example of the couple who described how a mother used the term “mom culture” to underscore the couple’s failure in parenting as men and also as gay fathers. This couple’s story revealed the power of heteronormative, gendered assumptions related to “proper” parenting in shaping their own, and their daughter’s experience at the school. This couple, however, demonstrated resilience in the face of experiencing adversity, forming new friendships with other similarly marginalized parents—thus exemplifying the powerful potential for minority group members to show agency amidst broader systems of power, particularly when they form coalitions with other minority group members (Quiñones & Kiyama, 2014; Sheldon, 2002).

Our intersectional lens facilitated an analysis of how both privilege and marginalization characterized the daily lives and interactions of the gay fathers in our study. Some fathers were marginalized across multiple dimensions of their identity, including gender, sexual orientation, race, and class, in the context of other parents—who were mostly female and heterosexual, and often White and affluent. Yet such differences generally did not discourage men’s participation in the school community; it also did not lead them to consider other school options. Men likely endured the status quo because they felt that the academic opportunities offered by their child’s current school (or the difficulty of trying to switch schools) outweighed their own discomfort amidst difficult encounters with other parents (Goldberg et al., 2018; Leland, 2017). Indeed, they sometimes pushed through discomfort (such as in the case of the White father who called for a racially conscious curriculum despite resistance by White heterosexual parents) out of awareness of the need to advocate on behalf of their children, who possessed even less power and whose well-being would be affected by the (in)actions of the larger parent community. Such findings echo those of Williams, Banerjee, Lozada-Smith, Lambouths, and Rowley (2017), who documented how Black mothers advocated on behalf of their children, regarding themselves as “protective agents” via their school involvement.

When faced with rejection or simply “attitude” by other parents, men sometimes struggled with ambiguous discrimination (Major et al., 2002), unsure of the source—race, social

class, gender, sexual orientation, and/or political orientation—of the stigma they were experiencing. Not only did a lack of clarity regarding the exact target or source of discrimination cause stress, but anticipating stigma also created strain for gay fathers as they navigated parent–parent relationships within school settings coded as feminine and heteronormative, as well as outside of school, such as with regard to birthday parties and playdates. This anticipatory stress was present even among gay fathers who reported many positive interactions with other parents; indeed, they experienced anxiety and vigilance surrounding the potential for rejection when encountering other parents. Anticipatory stigma is a major stressor that can interfere with individuals' willingness to enter into certain situations (Thomeer et al., 2018), possibly constraining their range of lived experiences and undermining their well-being.

That so many men—more than half of the sample—reported positive and supportive friendships with other parents underscores how the status of “parent” has the potential to serve as a bridge across differences, even those related to gender, race, family building status, and class (Goldberg, 2012). Some men did connect with other gay parents, such as through affinity groups formed by the urban private schools their children attended. Indeed, such affinity groups were mentioned only by men whose children attended private schools, illustrating how privilege enables men to “opt in” to settings that serve to normalize as opposed to stigmatize men's identities, and which promote connections with other families like their own against a broader backdrop of shared progressive values, tolerance of diversity, and middle-class standing. Such findings build on prior research showing that the marginalizing potential of gay fathers' sexual minority status was offset by their social class and geographic privilege (Goldberg et al., 2018).

Yet shared sexual orientation was not always sufficient grounds for friendship, complicating the dominant narrative that parents generally seek out and desire schools where they will be surrounded by families like their own—and underscoring how multiple components of “likeness” and similarity may matter to parents (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2013; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). In fact, several men noted that they had more in common with the heterosexual parents in their children's school communities

than the gay parents, and/or they highlighted specific gay male parents whose values and attitudes were so unappealing (e.g., in their centering of consumerism and competitiveness) so as to outweigh any commonalities the two parties might share based on gender and sexual orientation. Such findings are a reminder that although positive relationships with other sexual minorities may serve as a buffer to internalized and external stigma (Meyer, 2003), such relationships by themselves are not necessarily the most important dimension of gay fathers' social experiences within school communities. Furthermore, tensions and differences may exist within LGBTQ parenting communities, whereby, for example, one type of parenthood (e.g., biological parenthood) is valued more than another (e.g., adoption), thus revealing different hierarchies of privilege within LGBTQ parents and gay male parent communities specifically (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2018). Ultimately, what may be more important than other parents' sexual orientation is gay men's feelings of connection, mutual respect, and camaraderie: indeed, positive experiences with and perceptions of support by both heterosexual people and other sexual minorities appear to buffer minority stress (e.g., by facilitating more positive self-perceptions; Meyer, 2003; Mohr & Sarno, 2016).

Limitations and Future Directions

The gay father families in the current study were largely middle-class, dual-earner families. Only three couples were single-earner. Notably, we did not detect patterns in men's relationships to school communities or involvement/volunteerism based on work status, and thus this was not a focus of our presentation of findings or analysis. Future work might seek to include a larger number of single-earner gay father households to determine whether men in these families have distinctly different relationships to the gendered school and parent communities they inhabit. Also, inasmuch as our primary source of data were men's interviews, we could not verify whether, for example, their perceptions of sexuality, gender, class, and/or race-based exclusion were indeed grounded in these axes of difference, or whether they may have reflected some other factor(s), such as children's adoptive status or emotional/behavioral difficulties. However,

we did not seek to validate their narratives with “factual” data. As we note, the specter of heteronormative stigma in school-based environments confers a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the presence of exclusion, which in turn affects the ease with which gay fathers navigate their children’s school communities. Future ethnographic or observational research would be useful in enabling a more in-depth portrait of the ways that parents’ intersectional identities shape dynamics in diverse school communities.

Parent–parent relationships have implications for child outcomes (Fine & Carlson, 1992; Ladd et al., 2016). In turn, future work can build on these findings to inquire as to how gay fathers’ relationships with other parents directly impacts children. For example, when gay fathers are valued members of the school community, accepted by other parents, and invited to participate in both official (i.e., school sanctioned) and unofficial (i.e., parent-initiated) family activities, this may benefit children’s sense of inclusion and acceptance. Furthermore, the degree to which parents engage in school networks likely impacts their children’s own approach to community building and engagement, wherein parents serve as models for community participation. Future work can also investigate the role of children in gay parents’ relationships with other parents, exploring, for example, how children’s characteristics—such as behavioral, social, or learning difficulties—may in some cases function as an added source of difference that distances children from their peers and shapes their parents’ interactions with other parents. Also of interest is the degree to which gay fathers’ relationship with parent communities that exist beyond the school—such as parents involved in youth sports or other extracurricular activities—are similar to and different from those that we observed in this study.

Although not a major focus of our analysis, some families moved and experienced accompanying shifts in their schooling options and experiences. Future work should explore social, geographic, and economic mobility of gay father families, and how these intersect with school choices and concerns. Finally, future work can explore how school authority systems might mitigate gay fathers’ marginalization. It is possible, for example, that school staff and teachers who embrace an ethos of inclusion can create an environment that protects gay fathers from

homophobia. It is also possible that schools that embrace inclusive philosophies fall short in their ability to implement them. Future research can explore connections between gay fathers’ social and economic status, their access to schools with inclusive philosophies, and whether those philosophies successfully mitigate anticipatory stress.

CONCLUSION

Schools are heteronormative structures and gendered spaces, and heterosexual women often shoulder a great deal of the responsibility, labor, and influence with regard to parents’ involvement in and contributions to schools (Reay, 2008). Gay fathers may seek to become involved in their children’s schools, recognizing their own parental involvement as a source of power and advocacy. In turn, connections with other parents serve to support gay fathers’ involvement, constituting a source of social capital, information, and connection (Sheldon, 2002). But to the extent that gay fathers feel on the margins, excluded, or disregarded on the basis of their sexuality, gender, and other social locations such as race, class, and family building route, they may retreat from and/or fail to benefit from school communities. Schools have a role to play in fostering an environment where differences are valued, diverse perspectives and opinions are sought, and community across difference is fostered. Linguistic and visual shifts (e.g., revision of language such as room mom; depiction of diverse parents on school websites and materials) as well as direct outreach to men and members of the LGBTQ community can help to promote such changes. Far from being peripheral members of their children’s school communities, the men in this study seek engagement and connection—and their presence, energy, and dignity should be valued.

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