

From safety in silence to speaking up for LGBTQ+ families: A reflection on the personal, professional, and political through a feminist lens

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Abstract

In this article, I employ a feminist perspective in examining the interconnections across my personal, professional, and political activities. Rather than smoothing out the inconsistencies, tensions, and difficult spots, I strive to engage with them as points of entry to deeper knowledge and understanding. I begin by discussing elements of my personal upbringing, and the ways that it shaped my lens on families and my interest in the hidden and less understood aspects of family life. I then examine my professional career and trajectory, and how it has shifted alongside changes in the sociopolitical landscape, the evolution of scholarship in LGBTQ+ families, and my own privilege. I also explore how I have grappled with but also leveraged the politicized and political nature of my research, and sought to be an agent of change beyond the four walls of the university. I end with my thoughts on the benefits of this type of reflexive exercise for new and seasoned scholars.

KEYWORDS

autobiographical, feminist, LGBTQ, political, reflexive, scholarship

INTRODUCTION

One of the most valuable aspects of a feminist perspective is that it prompts us to incorporate elements of reflexivity and critical consciousness into our work, considering how our personal, professional, and political lives are intertwined, especially as family scholars (Allen, 2000, 2023). Specifically, it asks us to interrogate and lay bare how our own positionality with regard to our intersecting identities, and social locations vis-à-vis systems of oppression and privilege, have impacted us and informed our scholarly and political activities, products, and tensions. Particularly for those of us who study and teach about families, it asks us to consider how our relationships and family lives impact how and what we see with regard to families, and what families we choose to center in our work. And, a feminist perspective engages us to consider the

tensions and contradictions inherent to family life, and to recognize these as reflections and products of larger “truths” in society—including systems of power that govern relationships, such as our own. Finally, a feminist perspective asks us to consider: What do we want to do with our personal experience? How do we want it to galvanize us to engage with the world, to seek justice, and to commit ourselves to using our scholarship—and, inherently, our privilege—to better the lives of those around us (Allen et al., 2022)?

In this article, I employ a feminist perspective in connecting the dots across my personal, professional, and political activities. Instead of smoothing out the inconsistencies, tensions, and difficult spots, I seek to engage with them and consider them as points of entry to deeper knowledge and understanding. First, I discuss elements of my personal upbringing, and the ways that it shaped my particular lens on families, and my specific interest in the hidden and less understood aspects of family life. Then, I examine my professional career and trajectory, and how it has shifted alongside changes in the sociopolitical landscape, the evolution of scholarship in LGBTQ+ families, and my own privilege. Finally, I explore how I have grappled with but also leveraged the politicized and political nature of my research, and sought to be an agent of change beyond the four walls of the university.

Engaging in this exercise—a feminist, reflexive analysis of the interconnectedness of the personal, professional, and political—has the potential to benefit both the individual scholar as well as the academic field(s) in which that scholar is situated. It is both an acknowledgment and assertion of the deeply intimate, personal nature of knowledge production, and a contestation—and ultimately rejection—of the notion that subjectivity is a “dirty word.” Researcher reflexivity, whereby one interrogates one’s relationship to and impact on the research “subject” and the individuals being “studied,” can help to identify the ways in which our particular lens has informed and in some cases constrained our research questions, processes (e.g., interpretation of data), and scholarly products (Allen, 1999; Rossiter et al., 2020). Such reflexivity helps to “keep us honest,” and may ultimately free us to pursue new collaborations, lines of inquiry, and methodologies out of a deeper awareness of how our positionality has informed our ways of knowing (Oakley, 1998) in powerful but perhaps also limiting ways.

PERSONAL

In this section, I outline aspects of my personal background and identities, as a means of situating myself in relation to my professional and political identities and endeavors. I am a White, Jewish, cisgender woman. I am married to a man, whom I have been in a relationship with for over 20 years, although I do not tend to define myself as heterosexual. I am also a parent.

My mother and father divorced before I was 10, and my mother began spending a significant amount of time with a new friend, “Shari.” Shari did not live with us but spent weekends and some weekday evenings at our house. We—my parents, siblings, and Shari—did not name or define this relationship, other than to reference her relationship to me and my siblings as akin to that of a “godparent”—which in a sense marked her special role in relation to us but also said nothing about her relationship to my mother. It was the 1980s, after all—a period marked by the AIDS crisis, a resurgence of conservative politics, and associated vitriol directed at gay people (McCormack, 2012). Yet the books on my mother’s shelf slowly shifted to include more texts on women, feminism, and queer politics. We went to marches and parades, but we did not talk about what it all “meant.” I tried to push out of my head what I suspected: after all, I wanted a “normal” divorced family. I knew and loved gay people, including two close family friends, Lily and Andrea, and my mother’s longtime friend and hairdresser, Peter. But I did not want to have a gay mom. I lived with the tension of fearing that my mother and Shari were a couple, vaguely concerned that others would find out. I was aware of the ways in which courtship stigma (Goffman, 1963) placed me in a position of having to navigate the management and

disclosure of privacy-related information (Petronio, 2002, 2013), and as a fairly typical teenager, I sometimes resented my mother for placing me in the difficult position of having to bear the impact of “her” choices. My internal struggles were intensified amidst a mother–daughter dynamic marked by clashing personality differences, whereby I was outgoing, strong-willed, assertive, and ambitious, while my mother was quiet, emotionally restrained, deliberate, and insular.

When my mother officially “came out” to me as a teenager, in the early 1990s, I was not surprised. In retrospect, what was most surprising is that we had all lived with the unspoken truth of her sexuality and relationship for so many years—acknowledging it in various ways (e.g., including Shari in family celebrations and vacations) yet not naming it. It was only as I stood on the cusp of my college years that I began to really consider the ways in which my fear—and hers—reflected larger systems of homophobic oppression and discrimination. In the 1980s, women who divorced their husbands and went on to have relationships with other women were at risk of having their children removed from their care (Rivers, 2010; Tasker & Lavender-Stott, 2020). My mother, in turn, was aware of the possibility that she could lose custody of me and my siblings, had my dad been the kind of man that would have used this against her (he was not, by any means).

The uneasiness and tension I felt during much of my childhood—worry about being outed, concern with keeping up appearances (which involved turning the spines of my mother’s more “political” books around when I had friends over)—was augmented by the tensions that emerged around money. During my early life, my family could best be described as upper-middle class—but shortly after my parents’ divorce, my father’s employment was severely impacted by the economic downturn of the late 1980s.

I have since reflected that the loss of our class status was perhaps one of the best things that ever happened to me, as it made me much more aware of privilege—both my own and in the world around me. At the time, however, it was profoundly destabilizing, as I wondered about an unknown future (Jetten et al., 2017; Tevington, 2018). I went from not thinking much about money to witnessing my mother’s car be repossessed outside of our window and worrying about whether we would have enough money for back-to-school shopping, no doubt concerned that I might start the school year off with the “wrong” jeans or shoes. Yet in some ways, our lives went on undisrupted, in part because my father was committed, perhaps desperately so, to preserving some sense of normalcy for us, which at times meant living above our means and getting accustomed to “living in the red” (Talbot, 2020). The adults in my life did not name, much less discuss, our unstable and ever-changing financial situation; it was a vague, unsettling, and unspoken reality.

The unease and tension that I felt surrounding my mother’s closeted relationship, and our precarious financial situation, can be summed up in contradictory terms, such as, *Things Seem Fine, But They Are Not*. I felt as though I was living a double life at times: My mother was just a single mom, but on the weekends, Shari slept over at our house. I lived in a nice house, but we could not pay our bills on time.

I have come to see that these experiences led me to deeply engage with issues of what is both contradictory and hidden in family life, as well as how and why we disclose our truths to others. It has also led me to consider how family truths are shared and contested: that is, I have grappled with the question of, *Whose story is this, and who gets to tell it? (How) do I share (parts) of my story, theoretically in the service of sharpening and informing collective understanding of the personal–professional–political, while also honoring my mother’s (and father’s, and siblings’) privacy and respecting family boundaries (Petronio, 2002, 2010; Rizzo Weller & Hosek, 2020)?*

PROFESSIONAL

In the late 1990s/early 2000s, I pursued a doctorate in clinical psychology with a feminist, interdisciplinary scholar and mentor, Maureen Perry-Jenkins. Maureen studied families, parenting,

and social class, and was wholly committed to considering the broader contexts and systems of power and oppression that shape mental health and relationships (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2007). Working with Maureen heightened my awareness of an often invisible and notably understudied element of family life: social class. It also exposed me even further to my tremendous privilege. Even amidst the worst of my family's financial tribulations, we had intergenerational wealth, a function of our racial and educational privilege (Pfeffer & Killewald, 2019). My ability to pursue and enact my goals was facilitated by my parents' access to financial and educational resources (Pfeffer, 2011), affording me the ability to imagine and ultimately attend a selective private university—and, even though I was fiercely determined not to rely financially on them as I began graduate school, I knew I had a safety net, even if it was a precarious one. My lived experience informed my scholarly interest in the intersectional nature of identity and privilege, whereby one can occupy both privileged and marginalized statuses (e.g., as I have found in my research on racially and socioeconomically diverse gay fathers; Goldberg, Allen, & Carroll, 2020; Goldberg, Manley, et al., 2020; Goldberg, Smith, & Ross, 2020).

In addition to sensitizing me to the important ways that social class shapes processes within families as well as the study of families in general, Maureen's mentorship also enabled me to trust and believe in my own power. I knew I wanted to study and work with LGBTQ+ parent families, in part because they were so invisible in the larger literature on families. I also felt compelled to resist and combat the erasure, stigma, and silence that characterized my childhood, and was increasingly emboldened to do so amidst the slowly shifting sociopolitical landscape surrounding LGBTQ+ rights and families. Indeed, I was living in a community where both my social circles and research activities (which involved interfacing with perinatal health care settings) reinforced for me that an increasing number of queer women were pursuing parenthood, making this not only a ripe but feasible area of study. Yet at the time, my research focus was not broadly encouraged; I recall one faculty member telling me that I showed great promise while also commenting that my research area was not "fundable." In turn, the support that I received early on in the form of a few small grants and several emails from leaders in the field of LGBTQ+ studies were of great value to me as I began this work. Ultimately, I was able to secure both federal and private grant funding for this research—but such triumphs were punctuated by multiple failures and disappointments, with both ups and downs seemingly tied not only to the merit of my ideas but to the ever-changing sociopolitical climate and historical context.

The transition to parenthood among "invisible families"

At the time I entered the fledgling area of LGBTQ+ family studies, the focus was, understandably, largely on establishing, via quantitative analyses, the normal adjustment of our families (e.g., Flaks et al., 1995; Golombok et al., 1983). Amidst harrowing custody cases in the 1980s and 1990s where lesbian mothers lost custody of their children in the context of heterosexual divorces, there was a need to establish for the legal community and society at large that sexual orientation does not impact one's ability to parent, and that the kids—well, we turn(ed) out all right. The result was an array of studies that focused on lesbian mothers and/or their children, which determined that parents' and children's psychological adjustment were similar to their counterparts in heterosexual parent families (Biblarz & Stacey, 2001; Patterson, 1992). A feminist lens, as deployed by critical views of this literature (e.g., Allen & Demo, 1995; Clarke, 2000) enables us to both acknowledge the power structures that led to these arguably necessary studies, and also critique the framework that informed them: namely, our families were compared to heterosexual two-parent families, which were also implicitly or explicitly White, cisgender, and middle-class.

For my dissertation, I conducted a longitudinal study of lesbian couples becoming parents via donor insemination, which involved quantitative assessments and semi-structured interviews. I recruited participants while they were pregnant, and followed them across the transition to parenthood. I was fortunate enough to be trained in qualitative and quantitative methodologies, although my training leaned quantitative. My personal inclination, however, was always toward stories, which provided the nuance and substance to the numeric data that I equally respected. I was powerfully impacted by courses I took during college at Wesleyan University, such as Writing Biography (where I wrote my mother's biography under the tutelage of the great Phyllis Rose) and Black Women Writers, a course taught by the amazing poet Kate Rus-hin. While in graduate school, I had the fortune of being introduced to Katherine Allen, who became one of my greatest mentors, collaborators, and friends, and whose cultivation of my burgeoning interest in qualitative research enabled me to fully capitalize on the data I had collected in my dissertation research.

My dissertation work on lesbian couples pursuing parenthood revealed to me how the most interesting findings are often hidden by, or simply evade, quantitative measures—or, they lie within the cracks or fissures between the qualitative and quantitative data: they are the discrepancies, tensions, and inconsistencies. One example concerns how nonbiological lesbian mothers constructed their parental roles. The quantitative data told a story about how they did less childcare than biological mothers (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007). But, their stories revealed greater complexities to this pattern—highlighting, for example, painful feelings about not having been pregnant, having tried (unsuccessfully) to conceive, as well as caregiving activities that were not captured in our questionnaires, such as unsuccessful attempts at stimulating lactation (Goldberg, 2006; Goldberg et al., 2008; see also Wilson et al., 2015). Another example involves women's reports of social support across the transition to parenthood. Women generally reported more support from friends than family—but, support from friends declined, while support from family increased across the transition to parenthood. These patterns, on their own, are provocative, and could generate a variety of potential interpretations. Yet the qualitative data enabled me to avoid unsubstantiated speculation, such as assuming that friends became less important and family of origin more important across the transition. Some women explained that their friendship networks mostly comprised lesbians without children, and they cited divergences in time, leisure activities, and interests as key factors in narrating the shifts in their social lives (Goldberg, 2006). Women also shared that having a child brought them closer to their families of origin, some of whom were able to put complex or ambivalent feelings about women's sexuality aside in favor of forming a relationship with their child (Goldberg, 2006, 2010). Interesting, too, and nowhere "visible" in the quantitative data, was some women's evolving desire to have their brothers and other male family members involved in their children's lives as "good male role models", thus performing a relational function that would be wholly missed by any standardized measure of "social support" (Goldberg & Allen, 2007).

To me, one of the most compelling aspects of my findings was that not all couples divided up labor equally, despite the dominant mantra that all same-sex couples want to, and do, embody egalitarianism. Indeed, lesbian feminism, which emerged in the 1960s and 70s in part in response to the women's liberation movement's exclusion of lesbians (as well as sexism in the gay liberation movement), emphasized a (re)defining of intimate relationships in which power patterns were upended and equality was the ideal (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984; McCoy & Hicks, 1979). The lesbian parents whom I interviewed, as well as many other LGBTQ+ parents I encountered through my research, experienced a tension between what was expected of them, and what was good for them and their family. I explored these tensions in a series of papers, which established that the "egalitarian ethic" of lesbian women is an oversimplification of the multiple ways that women develop, and feel about, their division of labor, particularly when it involves children (e.g., Downing & Goldberg, 2011; Goldberg, 2013). Indeed, a variety of factors impact how female couples enact the division of labor, including interests and work

schedules; and, the nature of “who does what” may shift at various points over the family life course (Goldberg, Smith, & Perry-Jenkins, 2012). Same-sex couples are aware of the gendered construction of domestic and paid labor in society, and resist the notion that the heteronormative template that frames forms of work as feminine versus masculine is relevant and meaningful when imposed on same-sex relationships (Downing & Goldberg, 2011; Goldberg et al., 2008). Even when they take on different roles (e.g., one partner works more hours, one does more childcare), women in same-sex couples often regard their arrangement as equitable, which is not true as often in heterosexual couples (Goldberg, 2013; Maltby, 2022; Miller, 2018). By extension, couples who enact an arrangement that is mutually agreeable and equitable, even if proportional contribution to specific tasks differ, will likely be more satisfied (Goldberg, 2013). Yet significantly, couples do not divide up housework, childcare, and paid work in a vacuum: the ease of achieving relative equity is facilitated by flexible work hours, a well-paying job, and the ability to outsource forms of labor (e.g., via day care and restaurant take-out; Goldberg, 2012, 2013), again revealing the relevance of economic well-being for these primarily White families.

Of note is that my efforts to bring a critical gender perspective to the study of the division of labor in parents in same-sex relationship were not always met with enthusiasm. I recall a journalist from a major newspaper who interviewed me about my research, and who expressed surprise at my findings. The stories I shared seemed to disrupt the evolving narrative of strident egalitarianism in same-sex couples—as well as the gist of this journalist’s article, which centered on how same-sex couples’ relational harmony surrounding “who does what” could be a model for heterosexual folks. This journalist chose not to include my quotes. Although I cannot be certain as to the reasons for this omission, I did wonder whether including my observations might have introduced a level of messiness and complexity that was deemed “too much” for mainstream audiences, inasmuch as my data and interpretation deviated from the idealized and monolithic portrait of egalitarianism that this journalist sought to capture—a portrait that I continue to view as oversimplified and failing to capture the reality of families’ lives.

Getting messy: Researching and telling complex stories

In the mid-2000s, I began two streams of research: one on lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parent families, and one on young adults with LGBTQ+ parents. The first area of research blossomed into a 17-year longitudinal study that has permitted me insights into queer and adoptive family processes, including socialization around family structure and race (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2016; Goldberg et al., 2022; Goldberg & Smith, 2016), parent advocacy and involvement in the school setting (e.g., Goldberg, Black, et al., 2017; Goldberg, Ross, et al., 2017; Goldberg & Smith, 2014, 2017), and parent and child mental health (Goldberg & Garcia, 2020; Goldberg & Smith, 2008, 2013). The second stream of research, on young adults with LGBTQ+ parents, has been especially personal. Propelled by my own experience, conversations with a growing number of friends and colleagues who were raised by LGBTQ+ parents, and the nascent literature in the area, I was curious about how individuals raised by LGBTQ+ parents may experience dual membership in the dominant heteronormative community as well as at least adjacent or partial membership in the LGBTQ+ community. I was also interested in the tensions and decision-making surrounding disclosure of our family structures, and the contexts, systems, and relationships that encouraged secrecy versus disclosure. And, I was interested in documenting the pressures that individuals with LGBTQ+ parents face related to demonstrating positive adjustment (in part to ward off heteronormative critiques of their parents’ “right to parent”) and how they seek to balance these pressures against telling their own truths. I published my findings in a series of papers that illustrated some of the unique dynamics and experiences associated with growing up with LGBTQ+ parents (e.g., Goldberg, 2007a,

2007b; Goldberg, Kinkler, et al., 2012). I also conducted subsequent research exploring ideas and intentions surrounding marriage among adults with LGBTQ+ parents—work that was strongly impacted by my long-standing collaboration and friendship with Kate Kovalanka, who also possesses insider experience as an adult child of a queer parent (e.g., Goldberg, 2014; Goldberg & Kovalanka, 2012).

I have also explored these themes of finding and navigating community, navigating disclosure about sexual identity and complex family structures, and managing outside scrutiny of one's families and identities in a variety of other research studies. For example, I have conducted studies focused on bisexual mothers partnered with men (e.g., Goldberg, Manley, Ellawala, & Ross, 2019; Goldberg, Ross, et al., 2017), women who used unknown donors to conceive their children (e.g., Goldberg & Scheib, 2015, 2016), transgender students in higher education (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2021; Goldberg, Kovalanka, & Dickey, 2019), and parents who adopted their children via private domestic, public domestic, and international adoption (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2018; Goldberg, Manley, et al., 2020; Goldberg & Smith, 2014).

As I continued my research in these diverse areas, I became increasingly emboldened to explore the elements of our messy family lives. However, as I did, I weighed the precarious balance of risks and rewards of doing so. Researchers studying “sensitive” or “taboo” topics, including those involving stigmatized groups, have written about the risks associated with such work, such as external criticism or demonization of the researcher for “speaking truth to power” as well as the misrepresentation or politicization of one's research findings (Chelli & Cunliffe, 2022; Lev, 2010; Stahlke, 2018). In turn, I grappled with the question of how my work might be misused in ways that could cause harm to the very families I sought to center and validate. By exposing the challenges that LGBTQ+ parent families face, would I provide fuel for queerphobic politicians and agitators and risk attacks on our families' rights? Would my work disrupt the narrative of “just as good” in ways that could ultimately be used to justify denying LGBTQ+ people and parents certain rights? Yet I also believed in the benefits of truth-telling, feeling that by exploring the challenges of family life within these families—including mental health challenges, violence, and loss—suffering would emerge from the shadows, resulting in greater authenticity and support for members of diverse families.

Recently, I have pushed the boundaries further in my research on young adults and adults with LGBTQ+ parents. With two collaborators, Katherine Allen and Caroline Sanner, I have purposefully set out to study some of the most stigmatized topics within family life, in LGBTQ+ parent families specifically. We designed a study aimed to develop understanding of how individuals raised with LGBTQ+ parents experience, navigate, and disclose about difficult family issues, including mental illness and violence. By explicitly inquiring about such challenging topics, I am acknowledging that they exist within all types of families, including LGBTQ+ parent families—a move that will likely strike some as bold and even unwise, amidst a long history of scrutiny and politicization of our families that seems particularly heightened even today. But as scholars like Clarke (2000, 2008) and others have asserted, it is time for a paradigm shift away from framing our research questions in terms of the relative “goodness” or “badness” of LGBTQ+ parenting to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ parent families, and to recognize the dangers of designing and interpreting research studies aimed at defensively establishing the normalness of our families. Instead, we should be “setting our own agendas” in our research, and resisting the urge to engage with offensive and anti-LGBTQ+ research and theorizing (Clarke, 2000, p. 157). Setting our own agendas may lead us to explore long-understudied and difficult topics within LGBTQ+ parent families—as well as, or perhaps in concert with, choosing to focus on the many strengths and resilience of LGBTQ+ parent families (e.g., Farr et al., 2022; Gartrell et al., 2019).

Indeed, I am now at a place in my personal and professional journey where I believe that avoidance of such family taboos actually serves to uphold and instantiate heteronormativity, wherein LGBTQ+ parent families are held to different standards and are expected to

participate in a culture of silence and secrecy where family challenges are concerned. I reject the position that liberty and access to equal rights will be achieved through a defensive and fearful stance. Rather, I seek to tell stories that reflect families' lived experiences, with attention to the systems of power and oppression that have contributed to family suffering and resilience. Here, I share a quote from a research participant in my current study of adults with LGBTQ+ parents, which illustrates the revelatory insights that are gained when we listen to the real, and sometimes painful, stories of individuals in LGBTQ+ families with an ear for the historical and societal contexts that shape their experiences:

When I think about all of the issues my parents and family have faced since I was born, I truly believe most of them can be traced back to some version of homophobia. My moms wanted to live in Massachusetts, but could not because my dad said no and they did not have power as lesbians. So we had to live in [state], where the laws and social beliefs were extremely conservative. My moms wanted to adopt a baby from the United States, but were not allowed to adopt as gay people and so adopted as single moms (separately) internationally and had almost no control over which children they were allowed to adopt, so were given older children who had already experienced lots of trauma. When they turned to the medical system for support when one of my sisters had a seizure, they were laughed at and not allowed to both be present in the room. When they needed community support when my brother was acting out, other parents ostracized them and the school district refused to accept them as a couple and real family. When they asked the police for help, they said my brother needed a male role model. We may have still experienced pain and trauma, but because our family was queer, we were shut out for both formal and informal support systems, and I think we are all still processing the pain that caused us.

This participant's powerful narrative highlights the pain and suffering that they experienced in part because of societal heteronormativity, and points to the multilayered systems of oppression that served to exclude and stigmatize their family. It also calls attention to the ways in which individual and family agency are in "conversation with" (and in many cases constrained by) broader societal forces, such as laws and policies that delimit family-building options for LGBTQ+ people, and community resources that are neither inclusive nor responsive to LGBTQ+ family needs. Finally, it encourages us to attend to the pain of living in silence and secrecy, and to push for change for the current generation of LGBTQ+ parents and their children, because they deserve better.

Yet researching and telling "messy" LGBTQ+ parent stories still feels risky, especially at the current sociopolitical moment, when the question of whether children with LGBTQ+ parents can even talk about their families in their kindergarten classrooms is up for debate in some states (Goldberg, 2023). Whereas research focusing on individual suffering (e.g., trans college students' feelings of marginalization) has often sought to highlight the harms of systemic oppression (e.g., the structures that caused such marginalization), in a family context—and the LGBTQ family context specifically—focusing on parents' or children's suffering carries unique risks. What if suffering and other negative "outcomes" are pinned on individual (as opposed to systemic) processes or forces? The potential consequences of such inappropriate attributions are catastrophic: For example, parents are blamed for their own or their children's suffering, and their deservingness or capacity to parent is called into question, possibly resulting in the loss of parental rights. In turn, to the extent possible, critical family scholars must always advocate for an understanding of individual lives in context—as well as boldly calling out politicized and harmful efforts to decouple individual suffering from systemic oppression.

POLITICAL

One of the reasons that I have become more bold in exploring difficult topics within families and members of the LGBTQ+ community is that I have more professional power and social capital than I did in the past. As my scholarship and professional identity have become more established, I have continued to delve into research on a number of challenging topics, including same-sex divorce (Goldberg & Romero, 2019), trans college students' help-seeking (Goldberg, Kovalanka, Budge, et al., 2019), postpartum depression in bisexual women (Goldberg, Smith, & Ross, 2020), and reproductive and adoption loss within LGBTQ+ parent families (Goldberg & Allen, 2022). I have also sought to act as a mentor to students and junior colleagues who wish to explore messy topics and/or marginalized communities, cognizant that it is the institutional structures of heterosexism, racism, classism, and cissexism that often result in the silencing of ideas. I have also tried to communicate my research to broader audiences, by writing Op Eds and multiple articles for *The Conversation*, speaking with journalists and podcasters, writing a family-building book for LGBTQ+ prospective parents (Goldberg, 2022a), and creating online resources that are free to the public (e.g., www.teachallfamilies.com).

It is increasingly impossible and undesirable for me to treat my research as apolitical, and I have increasingly resisted pressures—which in part stem from the positivist values embedded in traditional scientific psychology (Bornstein, 1999)—to do so. Amidst the attacks on LGBTQ+ youth and parents, and especially the attacks on trans children, I have become more purposeful about ensuring that the general public understands the social science research on these subjects, such as the benefits of having a trans-affirming parent for trans children, or speaking about sexual and gender identity in elementary school classrooms. An uncomfortable but indisputable truth for me is that as my own reputation and credibility have become more established, I have had the power to resist my own, and others', internalized concerns—which reflect the values and biases of a positivist social science agenda—that my credibility and worth will be called into question on the basis of my involvement in “political” activities, such as writing an Op Ed about the harm that a piece of anti-trans legislation would cause (Goldberg, 2018). In wrestling with this reality, I also have to acknowledge my own class, (cis)gender, and racial privilege in enabling me this “seat at the table” in the first place, and that as bad as the backlash might be to whatever I put out in the world, it would be far more negative for many others who do not share my privileged statuses. Indeed, my Whiteness especially has facilitated my entrance into various professional spaces, informing how people see me and respond to my work. My appearance as a White, able-bodied person—whose Jewish identity may or not be rendered visible and therefore the subject of scrutiny (Dworkin, 1997)—also interacts with my gender presentation, presumed sexuality, and other factors to shape others' perceptions and attributions of me, including my overall “threat” level: that is, the degree to which I am seen as likely to disrupt versus abide by (assimilate to, accept) dominant disciplinary and methodological norms and conventions.

Accepting the truth about my own privilege does not mean that I am complacent to it. Rather, I have tried to use my privilege in ways that can amplify other voices—such as the authors I invite to contribute to various book projects, the speakers I seek out in my capacity as the Director of Women's & Gender Studies, and the scholarly collaborations I pursue. None of these things will ever be enough to right the institutional injustices that structure our world every day. But, they are a starting point for using my own lived experience, accumulated knowledge, skillsets, and personal connections to center and elevate long-silenced voices and experiences.

At the same time, as I push for more expansive research agendas and challenge myself to ask (and support others asking) difficult and complex questions (Goldberg, 2022b), I continue to engage with various dialectics related to family disclosure and privacy (Petronio, 2002, 2010). I am continually navigating what it means not only for myself but my family of origin

and family of creation for me to share versus hold back various pieces of information. There are both costs and advantages of sharing (and concealing) information, and choices about when and how to share certain stories or experiences inevitably involve negotiating principles of fairness, communication, trust, and control, whereby I consider not only myself but other members of my family and the broader public, including the media and various scholarly communities (Roded & Raviv, 2017). My family members and I “co-own” certain pieces of (private) information, and navigating selective or partial disclosure of such information requires reflection, coordination, and/or review of family boundaries, rules, and communication (Rizzo Weller & Hosek, 2020). My own child, for example, deserves their privacy as they navigate their transitional teenage years and the discovery and evolution of their sexual and gender identity. My mother deserves her privacy as she enters yet another chapter of her life—one currently without a partner, but rich in community and support.

As I explore what I am personally comfortable sharing with various audiences, I find myself also considering whether and when it would be appropriate to consult with my family members regarding certain details of my (our) story. For example, when I was being interviewed by a major media outlet about my personal and professional journey, I asked my mother whether she was comfortable with me sharing a photo of the two of us together from my childhood. A photo, to her, felt too personal, reflecting her preference for a high level of privacy in general. Out of respect for her wishes, I did not include such a photo. In another example, as I was writing this article, and reflecting on the ways in which my recollections of childhood are highly personalized and ultimately different from those of my other family members, I asked my younger brother what he recalled of the time when my mother came out—and whether it would be all right to include his perspective. Like me, he recalls a slow, gradual realization of her sexuality, but, unlike me, does not recall an actual coming out moment that punctuated or confirmed this realization. He easily offered up this impression and voiced no hesitation in my sharing it. A final example concerns my child. As I was preparing to give a talk to a diverse group that included stakeholders and parents of LGBTQ+ youth, I inquired as to whether it was okay to mention to my audience that my child identifies as queer (at least right now). Ultimately, my child was comfortable with me sharing details that were far beyond what I would have wanted to provide—perhaps highlighting generational and also developmental differences in disclosure and privacy concerns and preferences (Vijayakumar & Pfeifer, 2020) or perhaps reflecting elements of our family communication style, which is generally marked by an open exchange of ideas and self-disclosure (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

There are indeed potential relational ramifications to doing public scholarship as a critical family scientist. Family scholars must ask ourselves at various stages of the family life cycle: How does my choice to publicly challenge, reflect, or share impact my own family—including parents, siblings, partners, and children? There may ultimately be gaps in what we are willing to share about our family life out of consideration of the very real people with whom we share kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms—or holidays, family vacations, or simply a shared history. Such gaps may, for our audience or readership, seem disappointing, as it is natural to crave a full story with resonant details and rich characters; yet any holes in the family tapestry that we are weaving should be respected as a component of the reflexivity practice that we are trying to cultivate—one that is honest, considered, and relational.

THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING REFLEXIVITY: POSSIBILITIES FOR NEW AND SEASONED SCHOLARS

There are a variety of rewards and potential challenges associated with studying LGBTQ+ parent families as researchers who are LGBTQ+ parents, adults with LGBTQ+ parents, or have some other intimate connection to LGBTQ+ families. The intimacy of hearing and reflecting

on mutual experiences can be emotionally powerful, both unearthing the “euphoria of connection” as well as experiences of (re)traumatization—and, at times, reminding one of their insider and outsider status, given that no two individuals share the same lived experience (Nelson, 2020). Further, such research may involve a fair amount of identity management and emotional labor as one navigates both their internal emotions and interpersonal engagement with participants (Rogers, 2021). A reflexive stance while doing, writing up, and sharing research on an area that is inherently personal—and political—is of great benefit to emerging scholars. If we attend to how our identities and lived experiences, as well as our unresolved and messy feelings about such identities and experiences, impacts our research interests and questions, we are emboldened to understand how our unique frame both illuminates and constrains what we can see or imagine. In turn, such understanding may lead to collaboration across identity and social location (e.g., age, race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and relationship to the research population), as a means of enriching and expanding our lens through a blending of perspectives. As Adams and Jones (2011) note: “The reflexive means listening to and for the silences and stories we can’t tell—not fully, not clearly, not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never unquestionably, *know*” (pp. 111–112). In my own career, I have continued to be reminded of the ways in which my own positionality, lived experience, and identity (e.g., as a child of a queer parent, as a White cis woman) constrains what I attend to and imagine vis-à-vis research topics, findings, and interpretations. In turn, I continue to be inspired and frankly dazzled by the contributions and insights of both long-time and new collaborators who differ from me in race, gender identity, positioning vis-à-vis the LGBTQ community, age, and various other social locations. I encourage all scholars, but especially new scholars, to recognize the strength of their unique lens, while also remaining cognizant of how it may orient them to some insights and not others, and may shift as a function of time, ongoing and deeper connections to the research subject, or collaboration with others.

For scholars wishing to engage in reflexive work, I suggest doing it a way that involves collaboration, vulnerability, and accountability. For example, a core groups of trusted colleagues could engage in reflexive exercises over the course of a year or more, sharing drafts of their work, reading and discussing the reflexive work of scholars they admire or enjoy, and/or presenting their work at professional conferences or in other public spaces. For scholars who feel that their identities, professional rank, geographic location, employer, or other personal and/or structural factors might inhibit their ability or willingness to engage in collaborative reflexive practice, such work can certainly be done privately, or perhaps in concert with a close and trusted colleague. Regardless of approach, there are benefits of doing such reflexive work in collaboration with others: indeed, it can mitigate the possibility of overintellectualizing, “naval gazing,” or the reification of experiences that fit neatly into categories or boxes.

As scholars consider whether to take their reflexivity “public,” it is worth noting both benefits and risks of engaging in reflexive practice in a public way. Almost 20 years ago, I, along with Kate Kuvalanka and several other members of the National Council on Family Relations as well as activists in the Minneapolis MN area, organized a session on the voices of individuals with LGBTQ parents. This session was well attended, standing room only—perhaps speaking to the enduring interest in “reflexive voices.” For myself and my fellow junior colleagues, the professional risks of speaking about our personal and scholarly connections to LGBTQ parent families, and our observations regarding the invisibility of our families in the family science field, were muted and perhaps offset by our shared commitment to this work, and the positive response that our efforts received. Furthermore, we spoke about our families in the context of an unrecorded presentation at a small conference at a time when no one was “live tweeting” our session; we were not giving the plenary at a major conference, speaking on a podcast, or publishing our stories in a top journal. In other words, our decision to engage in this type of reflexive exercise felt risky in that we were junior scholars with a lot to prove and everything to lose,

but also worth the risk given the enthusiastic support behind us, our shared camaraderie and commitment to our work together, and the relatively private nature of our disclosures amidst the various constraints to information wildfire. Furthermore, there was the less easily measurable value of speaking our truths to a room full of people—truths that for most of us had previously been partially submerged. In considering public reflexivity, scholars' calculus should consider not only the discernable risks and benefits, but also the less concrete but arguably meaningful and significant value of public truth-telling.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Reflexive practice should “keep us honest”—ideally enabling us to reflect on how our own positionality and personal vantage point function as sources of vulnerability and strength, both of which are assets in our quest for knowledge that advances the rights and well-being of marginalized individuals and families. As we move into positions of leadership—and, yes, power—we must seek to recognize and honor the ways in which we can be authentic agents of social change, using the tools that we have developed and honed as a result of our lived and professional experiences. When we speak about how, for example, our own membership in a marginalized family structure impacts how we understand, study, and teach about families, people listen. Although some might try to argue that such disclosures mark us as unreliable narrators or biased scientists, a more compelling interpretation is that they actually serve to signpost a process of deep and engaged reflexive practice, whereby one understands and is willing to share their positionality vis-à-vis their scholarly work. Personally, I admire leaders and scholars who are committed to such reflexive practice. In turn, I am hopeful for a future where we encourage our colleagues and students to engage in such work, while boldly and thoughtfully modeling it ourselves.

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