



Two dads: Gay male parenting and its politicisation – a cooperative inquiry action research study

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ABSTRACT

Australian Gay men have only recently become parents through surrogacy arrangements. They have had to overcome a discriminatory legal, social, political, cultural and financial environment. A co-operative inquiry action research group was formed, with seven two-father families conceived via surrogacy, to explore their journey to parenthood and their consequent politicisation as gay fathers. This paper reveals how that experience of the co-operative inquiry process strengthened their resolve to be intentionally “out” in their communities to overcome discriminatory and conservative social attitudes. They embraced the political reality of their parenting and were stimulated to create improved support structures for themselves and future parents. This transformed the legal, social, political and cultural environment for their families.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gay male parenting achieved through surrogacy is a highly under-researched area in Australia and internationally. The majority of research on non-heterosexual parents is from the United States and the United Kingdom and is generally on other areas of same-sex parenting, particularly lesbian parenting (American Civil Liberties Union, 2005). The research that currently exists on gay male parenting is largely related to gay couples who become parents through processes such as adoption, co-parenting or children conceived through previous heterosexual relationships.

To date, areas of research interest in gay male parenting have included: the desire and decision to parent (Beers, 1996); parenting arrangements and satisfaction (McPherson, 1993); social support and parenting in families following adoption (Erich, Leung, Kindle & Carter, 2005); gay men negotiating the legal system as parents (Violi, 2004); gay men’s relationships with women who give birth following insemination with their sperm (Dempsey, 2005); experiences of adoption and fostering (Hicks, 1996); the experiences of the children of gay men (Mallon, 2004); fatherhood practices (Schacher, Auerbach & Silverstein, 2005); gay men parenting post-heterosexual divorce (Benson, Silverstein & Auerbach, 2005); gay men negotiating step-parenting (Current-Juretschko & Bigner, 2005); transition to parenthood and resulting heightened self esteem and greater closeness with families of origin for gay fathers (Bergman, Rubio, Green & Padron, 2010) and overviews of these research areas (Barret & Tasker, 2002).

Apart from the recently published study on the transition to parenthood by gay fathers (Bergman et al, 2010), Riggs and Due’s discussion on the ethics of gay men utilising surrogacy in India (Riggs & Due, 2010), and Lev’s (2006) significant contribution on ‘gay dads choosing surrogacy’, there has been minimal research on gay fathers using surrogacy. Moreover, a search of the literature failed to find any evidence that there has been any action research with a social justice focus that seeks to positively transform and support the experiences of gay men who become parents via surrogacy in Australia.

Surrogacy as a parenting option for gay men, and the intentional creation of gay-led families, is a new phenomenon internationally. It was not until just before the year 2000 that any gay men in Australia started utilising the surrogacy process, with the first children born via surrogacy to Australian gay men in 2000 (GayDads, 2010). Internationally, the first child born to gay men through commercial surrogacy was born

around the mid 1990s (Growing Generations, 2010). Prior to this time, gay men were only able to become fathers through various heterosexual arrangements, such as being married (and closeted) or co-parenting with a single female or female couple. In 1996, organisations such as Growing Generations in Los Angeles, California started offering surrogacy services specifically for gay men (Growing, Generations, 2010). In the past fourteen years, at least sixteen other surrogacy organisations in such countries as the USA, Canada, Thailand and most recently in India have also begun providing these services (GayDads, 2010).

Early generations of lesbian-parented families experienced the same lack of social and legal recognition as gay-led families. However lesbian-led families have today achieved a greater level of acceptance as part of the family landscape in Australia (Page, 2010a), This first generation of Australian gay fathers creating their families through surrogacy have virtually no social or legal recognition of their families. Until recently, same-sex couples with or without children were not recognised by the Commonwealth Government in the areas of superannuation, Medicare, social security and immigration (Victorian Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby (VGLRL), 2010). While some Australian states and territories now allow two females to be placed on a child's birth certificate there are no such provisions for gay fathers (Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby (GLRL), 2010). Gay fathers have also entered the parenting journey with few role models and limited social awareness or support for them as families.

Furthermore, most Australian gay men seeking to create their family through surrogacy enter into this journey knowing that they may have to act illegally in some instances. Commercial surrogacy, wherein a surrogate receives payment for carrying the child, is illegal in Australia. In some states and territories (namely Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)) it is also illegal for people to access commercial surrogacy overseas, even in countries where it is legally available (Page, 2010b). Although altruistic surrogacy, where the surrogate is not paid, is permitted in Victoria, the ACT and the Northern Territory, it is not always easy to access. In addition, when a child is born in Australia through surrogacy, a gay couple will not necessarily have a right to legal recognition as the child's parents. The family court states that for children born via surrogacy the legal parents are the surrogate and her husband irrespective of whether they had donated any genetic material to the child born (Brown, 2003). The surrogate is also able to change her mind until three months after the birth of the child (GayDads, 2010), potentially creating an added legal and emotional pitfall for gay fathers. As such, altruistic surrogacy is a pathway that has not been used often by gay men.

This study explored and documented the experiences of gay couples who pursued their dream to have children within an environment of very limited legal, social, political and cultural support for intentional gay-led families. This paper explores how, for the men in this study, the process of becoming and being a parent has been politicised for these men. These couples 'came out' and confronted discriminatory social attitudes and were motivated to create improved support structures for themselves and others.

II. STUDY DESIGN

This was a qualitative study, involving a cooperative inquiry group method. A co-operative inquiry action research group is a discussion-based group in which members collectively decide the discussion path they will take and participants embark on co-research aimed at producing some social, political and or personal change (Reason, 1988). Cooperative inquiry sits within an action-research framework in which group members are encouraged to reflect on issues that arise in the group discussions with a view to taking action or making changes in their lives. These activities may then become a subject of discussion at future groups. Thus there is a cyclical process between discussion, reflection and action (Owens, Stein & Chenoweth, 1999). The benefit of a cooperative inquiry method, over more traditional focus-group or interview-based qualitative research, is that research participants are encouraged to assist in setting the research agenda and reflecting, in an analytical way, on issues that arise. This method was appropriate for this study because participants were keen to be active in the community and had a varied skill set that enabled them to do this. Further, the cooperative inquiry process also allowed for the documentation of the

stories of this first generation of intentional gay-led families in Victoria. Participants shared their own knowledge and experiences and analysed the key issues they faced with a view to becoming facilitators of positive action for gay fathers, and to creating and facilitating pathways to parenting for future parents. The quotes within the paper are from the research participants in the co-operative inquiry process.

For this study, a cooperative inquiry group was formed in 2007. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling and snowballing recruitment techniques. Members of a loosely formed Gay Dads group in Victoria were invited to participate in the group and to pass the invitation to other people they knew.

The group met every six to eight weeks over a period of eighteen months. A total of ten meetings were held, each lasting two hours. The discussions were facilitated by the researcher/author who also acted as a group participant. During the first meeting the group determined its purpose, direction for the research journey, meeting dates, operating rules and structure of the meetings. Major areas to be discussed were decided upon and modified as the co-operative inquiry process evolved. Discussion areas that emerged and were explored during the course of the action research included: parenting and its definitions; parenting task management and its effect on their relationships; two-father families and male and female role models; definitions and language used to describe their families; family uniqueness; equipping their kids and their teachers; the pathways used to creating families; coming out as parents, and its effect on their kids and their community; the gay and lesbian community's reaction to their families; and the post birth relationship with the surrogate.

At each meeting, the participants reflected on their own and each other's experiences and family practices. Between the meetings participants reflected, read shared literature and explored issues that arose through their own journey and shared these experiences with other group members. The discussions were audio taped and transcribed verbatim, with all comments de-identified to protect the confidentiality of participants. The transcript from each meeting was analysed by the researcher and fed back to the group at a subsequent meeting before the next discussion topic was explored.

III. PARTICIPANTS

The cooperative inquiry group included thirteen men, which comprised of seven couples (in one family just one partner attended) who had all conceived at least one child through surrogacy. The age range of participants was between thirty and fifty five years of age. Families had between one and four children; all aged less than six years old. All couples had been in their committed relationship for between five and 15 years and all couples were cohabiting. Two of the couples were legally married in a country other than Australia. All of the participants had completed at least secondary education and ten had completed at least a tertiary level qualification. Even though all participants were from a relatively high socio-economic background, with an average income of over \$150,000 per annum per couple, it was still a struggle for many of them to afford surrogacy costs.

IV. THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A FATHER.

The options for Australian gay men wishing to have children through a surrogate arrangement can include non-commercial (altruistic) surrogacy in Australia or commercial surrogacy overseas. In both these cases, surrogacy can be undertaken in two ways. The first is traditional genetic surrogacy, where a surrogate uses her egg and is inseminated with one of the gay father's semen. The second option is gestational or IVF surrogacy, where the surrogate is implanted with an embryo that has been donated by another woman and has been fertilised by one of the fathers' sperm (GayDads, 2010). Most Australian gay fathers choose commercial surrogacy via the gestational route (GayDads, 2010). All participants in this study accessed surrogacy services in North America.

The financial cost of commercial surrogacy in the USA is extremely high. Each pregnancy can cost up to \$AUD 280,000. While, comparatively cheaper options are now available in India, up until around 2007

the USA was the only feasible option for most Australian men wishing to access commercial surrogacy. This means that surrogacy is not an option for gay men who don't have access to the necessary financial resources. It also means that, in Australia, it is generally affluent, and often older, gay men who have been most likely to become parents using surrogacy arrangements in the USA. The financial cost, while exorbitant, was manageable for all couples in this study, although, as John said, "we mortgaged our home to the hilt and were prepared to sell it completely if we needed too." His partner, Tim, stated, "I remember walking out of the Growing Generations office and thinking we simply can't afford this. It is impossible. Yet we did it, even though we worked six days a week for over two years to do it."

For most couples in the study, the surrogacy process was arduous, referred to by many of the men as a roller coaster ride. It also meant that the couples entered into intensive and extensive discussions about every aspect of the parenting journey, from the impact on their relationship to the logistical organisation of financial plans and travel itineraries to bring the baby home. Some couples felt that they were almost over-prepared by the time the baby was born. Daniel remembers how they had two of every item in the nappy bag, a backup set in the car and a routine mapped out from day one. Nothing was left to chance. Tim and John named their son early, after the sixteen-week scan, in order to buy him his airplane ticket home. For most couples, every facet of becoming a parent was thoroughly discussed, documented and planned for at least two years before the birth of their children.

The men in this study also spoke about how immigration issues created difficulties and stress for them when returning to Australia with a newborn child. There is a citizenship by descent law that allows for any child who has at least one Australian citizen for a parent to be granted Australian citizenship by descent (Australian Government, 2010). Despite this, study participants spoke about the fear and nervousness they felt when coming home to Australia with their children. Only a dozen or so other families had brought their children home at this point and the legal experience of immigration for the fathers in this study had been different for each family. Nevertheless, the experience wasn't entirely negative for all couples. Tim said, "we were so nervous entering the country and walking through immigration. We chose a female officer and her first question was: 'where is the mum?' We answered no mum, two dads. She replied, 'welcome home, that must have been an amazing journey!'"

The difficulties and costs involved in becoming a father for gay men mean these men aren't just ordinary fathers. They are fathers who are acutely aware of the discrimination faced by many gay men who want to be fathers, and are keen to do something about it. The results of their efforts have created a new pathway to parenting for other prospective gay fathers which has now been documented and is available through the gay dad's network (GayDads, 2010).

V. DEALING WITH DISCRIMINATORY AND CONSERVATIVE SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Social attitudes toward gay men becoming parents can be quite hostile. For example, high profile Federal Member of Parliament, Senator Barnaby Joyce once announced "two men naked in bed with a baby on their chest doesn't sit right with me. The whole picture is wrong. The best outcome for a child is a happy family made up of a man and a woman" (Schubert & Schneiders, 2008). More recently, the Australian Christian Lobby declared that "children are not pets and should not be given to anyone who wants one" (Quinlan, 2010), and that gays should not have access to surrogacy because "the problem is that children have the best opportunities in life with a mother and a father. Same-sex couples can't naturally have children...that relationship is not a natural relationship and it is all about self interest and not in the best interest of children" (Spackman, 2009). The Australian Christian Lobby also recently circulated a petition of over thirty thousand signatures claiming that a child deserves both his biological mother and father for the best intellectual, social, psychological and physical outcomes. This was presented to a parliamentary inquiry into marriage in 2009 which went on to reject legalisation of same-sex marriage in Australia (*Marriage Equality Amendment Bill, 2009, Victoria*). Furthermore, in New South Wales, where lesbian couples have been granted birth certificate rights and are now legally accepted as legitimate families, the Attorney General, Mr Hatzistergos, said that the new laws will not cover children with gay

male parents. "That raises complex issues," he said, "... it's not appropriate for us to move in that direction before national discussion is able to proceed and is able to resolve issues as far as possible" (ABC News, 2008). The 'national discussion', however, appeared to stop before the issues of commercial surrogacy or gay fathers reached the agenda. This has affirmed the perception that gay fathers are on the bottom rung of what constitutes an "ideal" family, even below lesbian mothers who sit on the lowest rung of the 'motherhood hierarchy' (Di Lapi, 1989).

Negative, discriminatory and conservative social attitudes present a challenge in the day-to-day lives of gay fathers. The fathers operate under a perceived pressure to do everything really well to avert the possibility of receiving criticism. It was described by the men in the study as an accepted part of the reality of being a gay father that they must be above reproach in their parenting. On top of this, the unfounded belief that paedophiles and homosexuals are somehow connected was a source of frustration for these gay fathers. Sam explained, "deep down we've heard it. It's in the back of people's minds, and you can see it in their eyes when you mention you have two kids...and you feel that back in the recesses of their mind, it will never be mentioned, but they think we are unfit to be parents." Tim shared that "the male in general is seen as somehow not as nurturing (as women)... there is a sexual aspect to our parenting?" The fathers in this study responded to these challenges by embracing the reality of living in an often homophobic and heterosexist environment, and chose to educate those with whom they came into contact.

Having a child forces people to engage with a range of mainstream services (such as childcare and medical clinics) and with families from a range of different backgrounds. In their Australian study of lesbian-parented families, Perlesz, Brown, McNair et al, (2006a) found that, because of this, having children jettisoned lesbian parents into the mainstream, often forcing them to come out. It was a similar situation for fathers in this study. These fathers understood that they could no longer hide in the background. They decided to be 'out' as much as possible about their sexual orientation, family make up and relationship to their children, even if this caused discomfort for themselves or for others.

Perlesz et al (2006a, 2006b) concluded that parents being 'out' achieved significant social, emotional and psychological benefits for the children of lesbians. The fathers in this study held similar views to this; intuitively feeling that being out was important for their families and important to bringing about social and legal change. "I think once the (children) understand, if you want your kids to be proud of the family and proud of you as parents we have to be honest", shared Mark. The fathers spoke about how they, on a daily basis, would have to reveal their relationships to supermarket staff, workplace acquaintances, childcare staff, and in many social situations. Most participants in the study embraced this as a political and educational act. For example John said, "I never back away from outing myself, when someone asks, albeit innocently, where is mum? I try and make it a teaching moment to educate rather than be offended." Similarly, Jack said that when at the supermarket he was asked a question such as, "so, you are out babysitting today? What is mum up too?" His response is a firm and educational, "I don't babysit my own child, and my son has two dads." This simple approach has filtered through to his son, who at four when asked the question, "where is your mum?" replies clearly and matter-of-factly: "I don't have a mum, I have two dads".

Group members also spoke about how impending parenthood was a prompt for them to come out in situations where they had previously not disclosed their sexual orientation. For instance, Nathan revealed that he was selectively 'out' at work before having children. Yet with the impending pregnancy he chose to become more open. Nathan explained "normally when there is a pregnancy (in our workplace) it is put on the noticeboard. Do we put ourselves on the noticeboard?" Nathan decided to put himself and his partner on the noticeboard. On top of this, family members can find it difficult to understand why these fathers felt it was important to be out. Cameron's mother said, "It's ok that you are gay and stuff, but you don't have to tell everyone in the village." His response was, "yes, I do need to say something!"

However, while most of the fathers were already 'out' in at least some capacity, some men in the study were hesitant about always being out. For instance, Matthew reported that he had asked a gay fathers'

group of which he was a member, “can I have it both ways and not reveal my family situation and raise my girl?” The overwhelming response from the other fathers in the group was ‘no’! Cameron responded that “we have a duty to say, actually there is no mum, and the children have two dads. I’m gay.” Some of the fathers had not thought about the “why” of being out. The discussion that followed encouraged Matthew to explore what this meant for his child and his family. Matthew is more comfortable about being out now. The fathers, within the cooperative inquiry group, worked through the concept of “matter-of-factly” being out about themselves in public situations. Mark shared how, “I was at (a gay and lesbian) carnival with my son and met another dad with his son who was an early teenager and they were throwing a Frisbee. But his dad started kissing men hello and then his son was just, you know, oh well dad’s kissing more men, so hurry up and throw the Frisbee. You don’t modify your behaviour.”

The co-operative inquiry process encouraged the fathers in this study to think about their own experiences, the experiences of those participating in the group, and of other gay fathers in Australia. Participants explored how they might change their own attitudes and behaviour. This included being honest about their sexual orientation and their family structure, and open about whom their partner is, and their parental status. The fathers in this study used a number of different disclosure strategies depending on the circumstances or organisation with which they were dealing. Some of the men took the initiative in outing themselves as the opportunities arose during the eighteen-month period of the study and reported positively back to the group the outcomes of this action. The proud and out strategy which involves open disclosure of the family structure and sexual orientation of the parents (Perlesz et al, 2006a) was the most commonly used. One father shared how he had changed from using a private non-disclosure strategy, that is not disclosing his gay family structure (Perlesz et al, 2006a), to a proud strategy. He went out the next week and embraced the opportunities to ‘out’ himself to people, and he felt that he was empowered by the experience. Paul shared how his being out as a parent at work allowed another woman, whom he had not known personally, to approach him and ask for his email. She wanted to help her gay brother who also wanted to be a parent. This educative process started early and was initiated by the gay fathers. Tim said, “when I meet someone for the first time, I introduce myself and then my husband and our son. It’s a habit now. I don’t even think about it anymore.”

For many fathers in the group, being ‘out’ led to positive and meaningful outcomes, both before and after their children were born. John explained that “I felt like I was missing out on what everyone else gets when they fall pregnant. As soon as I came out about it, I felt supported and loved”. He now felt connected to this other world “of being a parent” that they had not been a part of before. Similarly, Jack shared that he was “really pleasantly surprised at the support and complete acceptance of us as a family by neighbours and local community.” Cameron said, “our friends and families and people we come across on a daily basis embrace our family and there are no major problems”.

Coming out was a strategy used by the fathers in this study to successfully confront the discriminatory, conservative, heterosexist and sometimes homophobic attitudes toward gay men and gay fathers particularly that prevail to this day. But the result of this enhanced consciousness among the fathers and their day-to-day pride in being open as gay fathers allowed the men in this study to enjoy being a part of the “parent club” in both public and private contexts and created an improved environment for their families. Jack declared, “there is not a day (that) goes by where I don’t think of us as being the luckiest people in the world. I sit on my children’s bed at night.... giving them a kiss when they are asleep, and say how much I love them.”

VI. CREATING SUPPORT STRUCTURES

The lack of legal and social support for gay-led families, negative social attitudes, and the need to come out and be out has meant that the fathers in the study became committed to creating support structures and being involved in political change for themselves and other gay dads.

There are a number of formal supports in place in most communities for new parents and participants in this study did access them. For example, approximately sixty percent of the participating fathers stayed at home to be the primary caregiver after the birth of their children. A large proportion of these stay at home fathers participated in local parent groups that were formally known as “mothers’ groups” run by the local council. David shared that he “still go(es) to mothers’ group... about once every three or four weeks and they’ve been very accepting of me and there is just not even an issue, we talk about the kids and have a chat.” For the most part, the fathers found these to be an affirming and positive experience, indicative of a growing awareness within the community that these groups are no longer the sole domain of mothers.

The fathers in this study have also reached out to other gay fathers for social support and to organise play dates with their children. In Victoria, where the study was conducted, there is a group that has been set up for gay fathers who became parents through surrogacy. The fathers in the study were involved in creating this network. This group organises Father’s Day events, weekend retreats and a Christmas function every year. The group also helps to ensure that the children know they are not alone in having two dads. John shared that “I love the network we have formed, I don’t feel alone and we do have something very special in common.” David shared that “it’s great to know the email group is there to answer any questions and the get together at Christmas and on Father’s day and for weekend retreats are really important, I don’t feel alone”. John declared, “I am just so glad that my kids won’t feel alone; they will know many other gay dad families.”

One unique aspect of the gay fathers’ support group that distinguishes it from other parent groups is that, as well as providing support for fathers, the group tends to be highly politically motivated. This strength, desire and nous for increased political ‘outness’ was borne from consciousness raising and politicising discussions about the legitimacy of gay parenting within the co-operative inquiry group. Most members were keen to increase political support for same-sex parenting. Members of the group appeared on television (60 Minutes, Insight and various talk shows) marched in rallies, appeared at senate inquiries, wrote to and met with politicians, and appeared in local, national and international press, talking publicly about their experiences as gay fathers. They publicly shared intensely personal stories with the aim of decreasing ignorance and showing that the reality of two men raising a baby is very similar, if not boringly the same, as a man and a woman with a baby. The gay fathers in this study actively supported other gay dads and encouraged future parents, provided information, support, advice and feedback. They set up not-for-profit, community-run forums for new fathers, which have been held every 9-12 months in Melbourne, and attracted participants from all over the country. This complements the gay dads’ online news group that operates nationwide. The third surrogacy forum was held in May 2010 and attracted eighty-five potential gay male parents from all around Australia. The Gay Dads group has raised the profile of surrogacy amongst the Victorian and NSW gay communities and has empowered many men, particularly isolated men, by making contact available with other gay fathers. “I’m so glad this forum exists and it has helped me immensely” said Trevor. The group works alongside organisations such as the Rainbow Families network, which, while still predominately lesbian-led family focussed, has embraced gay men and they have worked together to improve rights for all same-sex parented families. There has been recent discussion within these groups about formalising a political organisation with the prime purpose of extending gay fathers’ rights.

The process of becoming and being a parent has been a political experience for these dads. Tim said, “I accept that the very notion of me being a gay dad is a political statement in itself.” While some members in this study were politically active before they became parents, the experience of becoming, and being, a parent – and realising the need to create support structures for themselves as a parent – transformed them into agents for political change. Paul stated (in reference to public displays of affection) that “there is a political aspect to this as well. If I can’t get out there and overcome any uncomfortable feelings I have for the sake of my son, then what am I doing? What message am I sending my son? I want him to be proud of and happy with all of the choices he has made.” Sam expressed the fear when the group was formed that the group members would assimilate too much and become too much like each other. Instead the opposite

occurred as the group explored each other's journeys and learned from each other. Luke said, "I now realise that in the whole situation we are doing something that is completely out of the box, completely new...unique...pioneering which involves something that is incredibly emotional such as children, and we are immersed in the medical, legal and government sectors in two countries".

Study participants had various motivations for becoming politically active around the issue of gay parenting and were stimulated by the cooperative inquiry process to become more active. It was a way to connect to other gay fathers and to increase the visibility of gay fathers so they and their children did not feel isolated or invisible. Participants were also acutely aware of the lack of information and support available for prospective gay parents and were keen to share their experiences with a view to helping other gay men and couples. John expressed this by saying, "I am glad to help others after me just as people helped us create a family".

VII. CONCLUSION

This study adds some depth to the paucity of research on gay fathers and gay-led two father families. This first generation of surrogate conceived, gay-led families have overcome legal obstacles, financial costs, social expectations, lack of support and few role models to create their own families. They have embraced the politicisation of their becoming parents, by being 'out', and it has enhanced their day-to-day experience of being a family. They have also helped pave the way and provided role models for future gay fathers, through their political activity, and the creation and improvement of social networking and support structures. They have gravitated towards other gay fathers for support. Most of the men in this study were acutely aware that gay fathers are effectively the 'bottom of the rung' in terms of social attitudes towards parenting. In spite of this, they embraced the politicisation of their parenting which has improved the legal, social and political and cultural environment for their families.

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