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Naomi Drexler  
The Kids *Feel* (More Than)  
All Right: A Study Exploring  
the Subjective Experiences  
and Perceptions of Adult-  
Male Children Raised in  
Planned Lesbian Families as  
Relates to Their Gender  
Development

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of adult-male children of planned lesbian families as relates to their gender development. Furthermore, this study sought to explore if/how adult-male children of planned lesbian families perceive their family form to have impacted their constructions and expressions of masculinity and male identity. No study to date has exclusively, nor deeply, explored the subjective experiences and perceptions of this particular population as relates specifically to their gender development. This qualitative study relied on intensive interviewing as its data collection method. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in person or via Skype. The study's sample consisted of 12 participants (all white identified) between the ages of 18-30. The findings suggest that adult-male children reared in planned lesbian families: 1) largely experience themselves as expressing and conceptualizing masculinity in non-traditional ways; 2) feel overwhelmingly positive about the non-traditional ways in which they embody male identity; 3) most frequently name dimensions of emotionality as the qualities and characteristics they possess that constitute non-traditional expressions of masculinity/male identity; 4) experience some form of conflict (internal/external) around their non-traditional expressions of masculinity/male identity, mostly during adolescence; and 5) believe their mothers' gender identities, gender expressions, and gender-related attitudes likely had the greatest impact on their gender

development. This study has implications for future research, as well as for social work theory and practice.

THE KIDS *FEEL* (MORE THAN) ALL RIGHT:  
A STUDY EXPLORING THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF  
ADULT-MALE CHILDREN RAISED IN PLANNED LESBIAN FAMILIES AS RELATES  
TO THEIR GENDER DEVELOPMENT

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Naomi Drexler

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2015

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Lastly, I thank and remember my grandmother, Millie, who was my first role model of a fierce, courageous, and dedicated social worker. You devoted your life to creating spaces for those without voices to be heard. This thesis is dedicated to you.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

*“...It is the truth of our humanity – not the myth of ‘perfect’ conformity – that will one day help LGBT families celebrate full equality.”*

– Abigail Gardner, author and LGBT family rights educator

Since the late 1970s – as an increasing number of lesbian women began coming out of the proverbial closet and raising children openly – academic researchers have endeavored to capture the social, emotional, and developmental outcomes of children raised in lesbian-headed families (Tasker, 1999). Most of the early research on lesbian-headed families came about in a social context where courts regularly denied lesbian mothers custody of their children on the grounds that growing up in a non-heterosexual household would be harmful to children (Allen & Burrell, 1996; Goldberg, 2007). Underpinned by social and political pressure to prove and/or dispel difference, most early research studies with children raised by lesbians were comparative in nature – set up to measure their outcomes against the outcomes of children raised in single or dual parent heterosexual households. Repeatedly, and longitudinally, quantitative comparison studies set up in this way found no statistically significant differences between the groups of children with respect to self-esteem, anxiety, depression, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, behavioral problems, school adjustment, social functioning, and/or family relationships (Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytterøy, 2002; Bos, Balen, & Boom, 2005; Golombok &



Badger, 2010; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Stacy & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). That being said, the literature is far less decisive when it comes to the topic of gender development. In the last 30 years, studies have identified, though inconsistently, differences between the gender development of children raised in lesbian-headed households and that of children raised in heterosexual households (Bos & Sandfort, 2010; Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson, 2008; Goldberg, Kashy, & Smith, 2012; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Hoeffler, 1981; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Stacy & Biblarz, 2001; Steckel, 1987; Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, & Patterson, 2008). More specifically, however, recent quantitative research suggests that particularly male children raised in lesbian-headed families are less bound to traditional gender stereotypes than male children raised in other family forms (Goldberg et al., 2012; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Stacy & Biblarz, 2001).

What meaning to make of the differences in gender development outcomes among children raised by lesbians (both in general and with respect to male children specifically), and how to design future research studies that continue to explore the nuances and long-term impacts of the gender development experiences of this population without further stigmatizing them and their families, has been the subject of recent scholarly debate (Hicks, 2005; Golombok, Perry, Burston, Murray, Mooney-Somers, Stevens, & Golding, 2003; Stacy & Biblarz, 2001). I hope to enter this conversation and fill a gap in the current body of literature surrounding children raised in lesbian families by designing an exploratory, qualitative study that seeks answers to the following research question(s): “What is the experience of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families as relates to their gender development? How do adult-male children of planned lesbian families think about, construct, and express masculinity/their male identity? (How) Do

adult-male children of planned lesbian families perceive their family form as impacting their conception and expression of masculinity/their male identity?”

No study to date has exclusively, nor deeply, explored the subjective experiences and perceptions of adult-male children raised by lesbians as relates solely to their gender development. Not only are the voices and perspectives of adult-male children raised by lesbians largely absent from the literature, but they are also sorely needed to have a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of how growing up in a non-traditional family form may impact a male-child’s sense of self, and experience of self, in relation to others in a heteronormative and heterosexist society. Given the long history of researchers studying children of lesbian/gay/bisexual families like specimens, I hope to change course by providing adult-male children of planned lesbian families the opportunity to give voice to their experiences without the imposition of researcher assumptions or the mediation of measurement tools. This study is not designed to search for difference, nor avoid it. Furthermore, this study does not presuppose that an experience of difference is a sign of deficit, nor does it treat difference as a clear indication of advantage. In other words, this study abandons the better/worse outcome framework of past studies and instead seeks to explore participants’ own perceptions of their experiences coming to know and express themselves as gendered beings.

In an effort to capture the unmediated thoughts and feelings of participants with respect to their gender development experiences, I (the researcher) conducted intensive interviews with 12 adult-male children of planned lesbian families in which I asked a series of pre-planned open-ended questions. Subjects were recruited through snowball sampling methods and interviewed either in person or via Skype. All interviews were digitally voice recorded and transcribed for thorough analysis.

The term *gender development* is multi-faceted and encompasses a number of psychosocial and cognitive processes. For the purposes of this study, gender development refers to the process by which children: 1) come to know themselves as gendered beings; 2) construct certain ideas and meanings about gender roles, characteristics, attitudes and behaviors; and 3) come to express their gender through particular roles, characteristics, attitudes and behaviors. For the purposes of this study, the term gender development does not refer to the process by which children come to determine whether their biological sex matches their gender identity. While this exclusion may seem arbitrary to some, research has not found that children of lesbian families are any more or less likely than children growing up in other family forms to experience gender identity confusion and/or be gender variant (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Patterson, 1992). Therefore, I will employ the term gender development in a way that assumes the subjects under study self-identify as male.

The phrase *adult-male children of planned lesbian families* is used to describe the study's sample and operationally breaks down to mean that subjects are male-identified, are at least 18 years of age, and were either born to, or adopted at birth by, a lesbian couple intending to raise the child together as a family. My specific choice of *planned* lesbian families is designed to eliminate the variable of an in-the-home biological father's potential influence on a male-child's gender development. My decision to only study adult-male children of planned *lesbian* families – as opposed to planned lesbian and gay male families – is multi-purposed. First, the population of children raised in planned lesbian families is much larger than the population of children raised by planned gay-male families; narrowing my study to children of planned lesbian families ensured my ability to access an appropriate sample. Secondly, the current body of literature on this topic is mostly concerned with the experiences of children raised in lesbian families;

therefore, in an effort to design a study that emanates from and fills a gap in the current body of literature, I remained within the frame of studying children of lesbian families, yet took a qualitative, rather than quantitative, approach. Lastly, I limit my study to adult-*male* children of planned lesbian families for two reasons: 1) developmental theories and research suggests that there may be something unique about the gender development experiences of males raised in lesbian families; and 2) it has never been done before.

For the purposes of this study, the term *masculinity* broadly refers to the qualities, characteristics, attitudes, and roles that participants themselves associate with being male in the context of our society. Similarly, the term *male identity* refers to how participants themselves think about, feel, and express their gender identity as male. Operating from a social constructionist and queer theoretical framework, I (the researcher) will not further define these terms nor make assumptions about what qualify as an expression of masculinity or male-identity. To the contrary, this study aims to explore precisely how adult-male children of planned lesbian families make meaning of these terms and their relationship to them. Further explanation and justification of this methodological choice, as well as the employed theoretical framework, will be discussed in Chapter II, the Literature Review.

Overall, I hope this study adds a human quality to the body of literature surrounding the gender development experiences of children/adult-children raised in planned lesbian families, and sheds new light on how this population makes meaning of the impact of their family form on their experiences of coming to know and express themselves as gendered beings. In addition, I hope this study illuminates key areas for future research on the gender development experiences of children/adult-children of lesbian families designed to explore and accurately capture the complexity and nuance of their lived experiences, as well as further de-stigmatizes growing up in

a non-traditional family form. Lastly, I hope this study will inform social workers and other practitioners about the unique service and support needs of this rapidly growing social group.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

The process by which children come to know themselves as gendered beings, and develop particular conceptions and expressions of their gender identity, has been the focus of innumerable psychological theories and academic studies. The following literature review will focus specifically on theories and studies that pertain to the research question(s) at hand: “What is the experience of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families as relates to their gender development? How do adult-male children of planned lesbian families think about, construct, and express masculinity/their male identity? (How) Do adult-male children of planned lesbian families perceive their family form as impacting their conception and expression of masculinity/their male identity?” More specifically, for the purposes of justifying this study, the literature review will do the following: 1) outline three major psychological theories of gender development and what each perspective assumes about the experiences of adult-male children of planned lesbian families; 2) summarize the findings of empirical research to date on the gender development of children raised in lesbian-headed households; 3) explore critiques and underlying assumptions of such empirical studies and their methodologies; and finally 4) identify a gap in the literature where a qualitative study exploring the subjective experiences and perceptions of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families as relates to their gender development is indicated.

## Psychological Theories of Gender Development

Since Freud put forth his theory of the Oedipal conflict, developmental theorists have endeavored to capture and redefine the process by which children come to know themselves as gendered beings and express particular gender roles, characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors. The three major developmental theories concerned with gender development – psychoanalytic theory, social learning theory, and cognitive development theory – all assume a child’s family form impacts his/her gender development, though differently.

From a *classical psychoanalytic theory* perspective, a child’s gender development depends on the resolution of the Oedipal conflict, and it is only after this resolution occurs that healthy psychological development is possible. According to Freud, the resolution of the Oedipal conflict looks different for boys and girls, but always requires the physical or imagined presence of a mother and a father. For boys, resolving the Oedipal conflict involves the following intrapsychic processes: repression of the natural desire to sexually possess one’s mother and kill one’s father (competition); identification with one’s father, who is understood to be more powerful than the child, as a way of increasing affinity and maintaining safety (avoiding castration); and finally, incorporation of one’s father’s masculine characteristics into one’s identity as a heterosexual male (as described in Berzoff, Melano Flanagan, & Hertz, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, without the physical or imagined presence of a father, Freud assumes male children will experience gender confusion – not fully understand themselves as male and/or become “feminized” (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 219). It follows, then, that male children reared in

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<sup>1</sup> Freud conflates gender and sexuality in his theory, which this study does not, and so I will tease them apart and focus solely on Freud’s teachings about gender.

planned lesbian households would be subject to this fate, as well as subject to more pervasive psychological problems.

Freud's Oedipal theory, and by extension his theory of gender development, is rooted in the assumption that gender is "fundamental and unchangeable," and that anatomy is "destiny" (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 219). In other words, Freud conflated biological sex with gender roles, behaviors, attitudes and beliefs and presumed that certain gender roles, behaviors, attitudes and beliefs are innate to boys and girls. Freud also privileged masculinity, and assumed that both girls and boys "inevitably and universally" assigned greater value to it (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 220). It is from this essentialist perspective that Freud concluded that disruption in the psychological process of attaining masculine or feminine qualities for boys and girls, respectively, would result in developmental arrest and/or psychological disorder.

In the last half-century, psychoanalytic theorists have put forth vast and virulent critiques of Freud's conceptualization of gender development (Mitchell & Black, 1995). The body of literature comprising contemporary psychoanalytic thought on gender is diverse and divergent, and by no means comes to an agreement about how people become gendered beings; that being said, *contemporary psychoanalytic theory* largely rejects Freud's assumptions about the natural superiority of masculinity (Mitchell & Black, 1995). The challenge of this fundamental premise made room for new ideas about the role of social and cultural forces on shaping individual gender development, each theory unique in what it suggests about the experiences of male children raised by lesbian mothers (Benjamin, 1988, 1998; Chodorow, 1974, 1978, 1990; Thompson, 1942).

While there are a number of contemporary psychoanalytic theorists writing about gender, Nancy Chodorow's contribution to the field is notable. Chodorow suggests that "gender



difference is not absolute, abstract or irreducible; it does not involve an essence of gender. Gender differences, and the experience of difference...are socially and psychologically created and situated” (Chodorow, 1990, p. 421). In her writings, Chodorow emphasizes how social structures – especially the inequality between the sexes with respect to participation in child rearing – impact the gender development outcomes of boys and girls. More specifically, Chodorow argues that differential relational experiences during infancy orient boys and girls toward different developmental paths. In traditional heterosexual households, where the mother is the primary caregiver for the children and the father is working outside the home, Chodorow argues the following about male gender development: in order to attain a masculine identity and identify with their father’s social power, boys must reject and separate from their primary attachment figure (their mother) and deny their need for dependence; in the process, boys learn that to be male is to be autonomous; similarly, boys learn to devalue femininity within themselves and within others as a way of disavowing the parts of themselves that crave intimacy and dependence (Chodorow, 1974). Chodorow’s boys, then, are psychologically primed to be less capable of intimate personal relationships, more oriented towards the self, and more prepared for success in the public sphere.<sup>2</sup> Chodorow, therefore, views gender differences between boys and girls as “artifacts of cultural inequalities,” rather than innate or pre-determined qualities (Mitchell & Black, 1995). Furthermore, Chodorow suggests that more equitable division of labor among the sexes would generate less differentiated and more balanced gender development outcomes for both boys and girls, and that this would subsequently lead to greater respect and equality between the sexes and greater self-fulfillment for men and women alike. From this theoretical

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<sup>2</sup> For Chodorow’s take on female gender development, refer to *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Chodorow, 1978).

perspective, it could be argued that male children of planned lesbian families would be more likely to exhibit a balanced, or less rigidly masculine, gender expression; they may not disavow the feminine qualities in themselves, nor be as quick to devalue them in others.

Similar to classical psychoanalytic theory, *classical social learning theory* asserts that children learn how to express and adopt appropriate gender roles, characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors through a form of identification with the parent of the same-sex. However, in contrast to classical psychoanalytic theory, classical social learning theory emphasizes that the primary mechanism underlying identification with one's same sex parent is "differential reinforcement and modeling," whereby the same-sex parent reinforces a child's gender appropriate behaviors with rewards, and the child simultaneously models the behavior of the same-sex parent (as described in Golombok & Mooney-Somers, 2000 and Golombok et al., 2003; Bandura, 1977; Mischel, 1966). Again, classical social learning theory presupposes that without a father, male children raised by lesbian mothers are likely to experience atypical gender development.

*Contemporary social learning theory*, however, de-emphasizes the role of parents in the gender development of children and instead purports that children model themselves off of the pervasive gender stereotypes in their wider social world (school, peers, the media, etc.). Parents play a role, and certainly model and reinforce gender roles, characteristics, attitudes, and behavior, but parents are not the sole determinants of a child's gender development. Therefore, sons of lesbian couples are likely to learn about gender through the modeling and reinforcement of their mothers, but parents do not wholly determine their children's gender development outcomes (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; as described in Golombok et al., 2003 and Golombok & Mooney-Somers, 2000).

Further de-emphasizing the role of parents in the gender development of children, *cognitive development theory* assumes that children become gendered by becoming aware of gender categories in their environment, becoming aware that their gender is fixed and irreversible, and then reinforcing those gender categories by seeking out for themselves activities that they perceive to be appropriate for their biological sex (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Kohlberg, 1966; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). Much like contemporary social learning theory, cognitive development theory places the locus of gender conforming pressure in a child's wider social world, but name gender stereotypes and the need for "cognitive constancy" as the driving forces behind gender development (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 677). In this way, both contemporary social learning theory and cognitive development theory presuppose that the typical gender development of a male child reared in a lesbian household is dependent on the extent to which his lesbian mothers expose him to traditional or non-traditional stereotypes of male identity and masculinity, within and outside the home (Golombok & Mooney-Somers, 2000).

### **Summary of Empirical Research on the Gender Development of Children Raised by Lesbians**

Since the late 1970s – informed by developmental theory and what it suggests about the possible influence of a parent's gender and sexual orientation on a child's gender development, and responding to the widespread social fear that lesbian mothers pose a risk to their children's psychological health – academic researchers have attempted to measure and describe the gender development outcomes of children raised in lesbian-headed families as compares to the gender development of children raised in heterosexual single mother or dual-parent households. Research on children raised in lesbian-headed families can be categorized into two distinct

phases: the first phase consisting of studies on children born to a heterosexual couple, but whose mother subsequently came out as a lesbian; the second phase consisting of studies on children born to lesbian mothers outright (planned lesbian families). While comparison studies measuring the outcomes of children raised in planned or unplanned lesbian families (single and dual parent) against the outcomes of children raised in heterosexual households (single or dual-parent) have repeatedly, and longitudinally, found no statistically significant differences between the groups of children with respect to self-esteem, anxiety, depression, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, behavioral problems, school adjustment, social functioning, and/or family relationships (Anderssen et al., 2002; Bos et al., 2005; Golombok & Badger, 2010; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Stacy & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Golombok, 1995), the literature is less decisive when it comes to the issue of gender development.

As mentioned above, the first phase of research on children of lesbian mothers consisted of studies on children born to mothers through a heterosexual relationship. These children have father figures and, in many cases<sup>3</sup>, spent the first few years of their development in dual-parent, heterosexual households. One of the earliest comparison studies designed to measure the gender development outcomes of this population of children raised by lesbian mothers was conducted in the United States by Hoeffler (1981). Using children's preferences for sex-typed feminine, sex-

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<sup>3</sup> This is noted in a number of studies, but not explicitly controlled for. Therefore, these studies had mixed samples with children who spent varying amounts of time living/visiting with their fathers.

typed masculine, and/or gender-neutral toys and activities as a proxy for gender-role behavior,<sup>4</sup> Hoeffler compared the gender-role behavior of 20 children raised by single lesbian mothers to 20 children raised by single heterosexual mothers. In addition, Hoeffler (1981) measured mothers' levels of encouragement of sex-typed gender-role behavior, and compared the two groups. All children were between the ages of six and nine; each comparison group consisted of 10 boys and 10 girls. While children in both groups showed no statistically significant differences in their gender-role behavior (both groups of children showed preference for activities and toys typically associated with their gender), the study found that lesbian mothers were "more willing to encourage, or at least less likely to censor," their children playing with less sex-typed toys than heterosexual mothers (Hoeffler, 1981, p. 542).

Hoeffler's (1981) findings regarding gender-role behavior<sup>5</sup> among children raised in lesbian families were echoed by a group of researchers in the United Kingdom (Golombok et al., 1983). Employing systematic standardized interviews with mothers, children, and teachers to make psychosocial appraisals of children, Golombok et al. (1983) found no differences in the gender-role behavior between school-aged children raised by single lesbian mothers compared to children raised by single heterosexual mothers. In other words, "daughters of lesbian mothers were no less feminine, and the sons no less masculine, than the daughters and sons of heterosexual mothers" (Golombok & Mooney-Somers, 2000). Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy (1981) and Green et al. (1986) conducted similar comparison studies between children raised by

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<sup>4</sup> Hoeffler (1981) uses the term "sex-role behavior" in a way that is synonymous with the term "gender-role behavior." For the sake of consistency, this author will use the term "gender-role behavior" when referring to Hoeffler's (1981) findings, as well as those of other researchers.

<sup>5</sup> Golombok et al. (1983) did not measure parental encouragement.

single lesbian mothers and children raised by single heterosexual mothers in the United States (the former with 40 children between the ages of five and 12; the later with 104 children between the ages of three and 11). Utilizing a variety of assessment tools to measure children's preferences for toys, television characters, games, activities, occupations, and the gender of first drawn figures as evidence of sex-typed or neutral gender-role behavior, both studies found no statistically significant differences in gender-role behavior outcomes between the two groups of male children (Green et al., 1986; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981). Green et al. (1986), however, found that daughters of lesbians more often preferred male sex-typed clothes, activities, and occupations than daughters of heterosexual mothers.

As third-party reproductive technology (i.e. sperm donation/insemination) and child adoption became widely available to lesbian women, and increasing numbers of lesbian women began forming families outside of heterosexual unions, the research on children of lesbian families shifted its focus to children born to lesbian mothers outright (planned lesbian families). Previous studies on the gender development outcomes of children raised by lesbian mothers could not necessarily be generalized to this growing population of children of planned lesbian families due to the fact that they did not necessarily have a father figure in their life, nor did they live with a father during their earliest years of development. McCandlish (1987) was the first researcher to endeavor to assess the gender development of children of planned lesbian families. Through direct observation and qualitative interviews with five lesbian couples and their seven children conceived through donor insemination, McCandlish (1987) found that "the children demonstrated no observable problems in gender identity or behavior" (p. 32). In 1994, Patterson conducted a qualitative study with a broader sample of planned lesbian families (37 children between the ages of four and nine of both lesbian couples and lesbian single mothers). These

children were either adopted or conceived through donor insemination. Using standardized, open-ended interviews and questionnaires with the mothers, Patterson (1994) found that children of lesbian mothers demonstrated gender-role preferences that were within the expected range for their age.

Steckel (1987) conducted one of the first comparison studies on children of planned lesbian families with respect to their gender development. Comparing 11 preschool-aged children of lesbian mothers and 11 preschool-aged children of heterosexual couples, Steckel (1987) found that daughters of lesbian mothers demonstrated less sex-typed gender role behavior with respect to their occupational aspirations. Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, and Golombok (1997), however, found no such statistically significant differences in their study comparing 30 lesbian families with a child conceived through donor insemination to 38 heterosexual families with a child conceived through donor insemination and 30 heterosexual families with a naturally conceived child. It is worth noting that Brewaeys et al. (1997) used a parent self-report screening instrument (Pre-School Activities Inventory) to differentiate between the masculine and feminine qualities in children's play behavior, which leaves room for biased results. As is also true for Patterson (1994) and McCandlish (1987), it cannot be known to what extent fear of being stigmatized may have influenced how lesbian mothers reported their children's gender role preferences and behavior to the researcher/interviewer.

In 2001, Stacy and Biblarz published an article entitled "Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?" in which they put forth a meta-analysis of 21 research studies published between 1981-1998 that compare the outcomes of children raised in lesbian and gay headed households to children raised in heterosexual households. Eighteen of the 21 analyzed studies involved lesbian-headed families, though not exclusively planned lesbian families; the remaining

three also included gay-male headed families. In this article, Stacy and Biblarz (2001) sharply critique the methodologies of past studies – including Brewaeys et al. (1997), Golombok et al. (1983), Green et al. (1986), Hoeffler (1981), Kirkpatrick et al. (1981), and Steckel (1987) – and argue that they collectively, and individually, under-represent “meaningful differences” in the gender preferences and behaviors of children raised in lesbian/gay families (p. 168). More specifically, they argue that when controlling for “conceptual, methodological, theoretical limitations” in past studies, the research does in fact show that boys and girls raised in lesbian/gay households “[depart] from traditional gender role expectations and behaviors – in dress, play, physicality, school activities, [and] occupational aspirations” at statistically significant rates as compares to children raised in heterosexual households (Stacy & Biblarz, 2001, p. 176; 169). When controlling for studies of lesbian-headed households, Stacy and Biblarz (2001) suggest that the “sexual orientation of mothers interacts with the gender of children in complex ways to influence gender preferences and behavior,” and that sons in particular “appear to respond in more complex ways to parental sexual orientations” than do daughters (p. 170).

At the time of publication, Stacy and Biblarz’s (2001) findings posed a challenge to the prevailing belief among researchers that family form does not bear on the gender development of children at all, or at least not in statistically significant ways. They argued that “children and young adults of lesbian or gay parents do differ in modest but interesting ways from children of heterosexual parents,” and that these differences are likely “indirect effects of parental gender or selection effects associated with heterosexist social conditions under which [lesbian and gay] families currently live,” not parental sexual orientation in and of itself (Stacy & Biblarz, 2001, p. 176; 177). In their discussion, Stacy and Biblarz (2001) encourage researchers to delve deeper



into the experiences of children raised in lesbian/gay families and explore not only the prevalence, but also the impact of gender development differences among this population.

Since 2001, a number of academic researchers have responded to Stacy and Biblarz's (2001) controversial findings and published new studies that attempt to quantify and qualify the gender development of children raised in lesbian-headed households. While Golombok et al. (2003) continued to find no differences in the gender role behavior of seven-year-old children raised in lesbian households compared to those raised in heterosexual households, a variety of other studies have come up with contrary and more nuanced findings. In a study comparing the responses of 8-10 year-old children raised in lesbian families (n=63) and heterosexual families (n=68) to a series of standardized questionnaires, Bos and Sandfort (2010) found that children of lesbian families (regardless of gender) felt less pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, and were less likely to view their gender as superior, than children of heterosexual families. Goldberg et al. (2012), when comparing the gender-typed play behavior of 126 adopted children (between the ages of two and four) raised by lesbian, gay-male, and heterosexual couples, also found differences among the sample with respect to family form. Utilizing the same parent self-report psychometric as Brewaeys et al. (1997) – the Pre-School Activities Inventory – to assess a child's gender-role behavior through play, Goldberg et al. (2012) found that “the perceived play behavior of both boys and girls in same-gender parent families were more similar (i.e., less gender-stereotyped) than the perceived play behavior of boys and girls in heterosexual-parent families (which were more divergent; that is, gender-stereotyped)” (p. 503). Additionally, Goldberg et al. (2012) found that sons raised by lesbian mothers in particular “were less masculine in their play behavior” than sons in other family forms (p. 503).

In a rare follow-up study of adolescent children raised in lesbian-headed households since infancy, MacCallum and Golombok (2004) scaled the level of femininity and masculinity in children's attitudes and self-perceptions (not activities and behaviors as most previous studies had done) compared to those raised in single mother and dual parent heterosexual households. Using the Children's Sex Role Inventory (CSRI) as their standardized measure of gender role orientation, MacCallum and Golombok (2004) found that adolescent boys raised in father-absent families (lesbian households and single mother heterosexual households) scored higher on measures of feminine personality than adolescent boys in father-present families (dual-parent heterosexual households). However, there were no differences in boys' masculinity scores between the three family types (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004, p. 1415). There were also no differences in girls' femininity or masculinity scores across family type. These findings suggest that adolescent boys raised by women may be more feminine in their attitudes and self-perceptions, but no less masculine, than adolescent boys raised by a heterosexual mother and father. Moreover, these findings tentatively suggest that it is not parental sexual orientation, in and of itself, that determines whether male children adopt more feminine or masculine qualities.

This tentative conclusion is further supported by a study conducted in 2008 by Sutfin and her colleagues. Comparing children between the ages of four and six in 29 lesbian families and 28 heterosexual families, Sutfin et al. (2008) found that children of lesbians, regardless of gender, grew up in less gender-stereotyped environments than children of heterosexual families, and demonstrated less traditional attitudes about gender (as evidence by their greater tolerance of gender transgressions in their peers). Sutfin et al. (2008) also found that children in heterosexual families who grew up with less gender-stereotyped environments similarly demonstrated less traditional attitudes about gender. In other words, "regardless of sexual orientation, parents who

held liberal attitudes about children's gender-related behavior were less likely to provide their children with physical environments that were highly gender stereotyped and had children whose own attitudes about gender development were less stereotyped as well" (Sutfin et al., 2008, p. 509). The associations and conclusions purported by Sutfin et al. (2008), as well as by MacCallum and Golombok (2004), echo the assertions of Stacy and Biblarz (2001); namely, these studies point to a parental gender identity and/or embodiment of less traditional gender roles, characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors as the agent of difference in children's gender development outcomes.

The most explicit attempt to differentiate between the influences on a child's gender development was a study conducted by Fulcher et al. (2008). In this study, researchers explored associations between parental sexual orientation, parental gender related attitudes, parental division of labor, and children's gender development in both lesbian-headed families and heterosexual families. Children's gender development was measured by the traditional or non-traditional gendered quality of their occupational aspirations. With a sample of 66 preschool-aged children and 132 parents, Fulcher et al. (2008) found that parents who had less traditional attitudes about gender, and more egalitarian divisions of labor in their households, had children with less traditionally gendered occupational aspirations, regardless of family form. Fulcher et al. (2008), however, also found that lesbian parents were more likely than heterosexual parents to demonstrate more liberal attitudes about gender and more egalitarian division of labor arrangements, and therefore had children that were less stereotyped in their occupational aspirations. Fulcher et al. (2008) thus concludes that "it seems that sexual orientation can predict parental attitudes which in turn may predict flexibility in children's own attitudes," but it is not the underlying cause of differences in gender development outcomes (p. 339).

Taken together, these more recent studies (published after 2001) suggest that there may be statistically significant differences between the experiences of children raised in lesbian-headed families and those raised in other family forms. What in particular about growing up in a lesbian-headed family contributes to such differences (gender, sexual orientation, progressive attitudes, division of labor among parents, etc.), and how those differences meaningfully impact the lives of children as they become adults, however, is still largely under-studied.

### **Critiques & Underlying Assumptions of Empirical Research on the Gender Development of Children Raised in Lesbian Families**

Underneath Stacy and Biblarz's (2001) global encouragement of researchers to delve deeper into the experiences of children raised in lesbian/gay families lies a more virulent critique of past studies, as well as a mandate for researchers to develop new models of studying lesbian/gay families. More specifically, Stacy and Biblarz (2001) argue that the collective body of research that has 1) compared the experiences of children raised in lesbian/gay families against children raised in heterosexual families, and 2) insisted that there are "no differences" between the two groups, is fundamentally constrained by a "defensive conceptual framework" underpinned by heteronormativity and homophobia (p. 159). In other words, studies set up in this way assume that the experiences of children living in heterosexual families is the norm, and implicitly communicate that difference, if found among children raised in lesbian/gay families, would be a sign of abnormality at best, and an indication of deficit at worst. In an effort to combat the heterosexism that they see embedded in past research methodologies, Stacy and Biblarz (2001) call upon social science researchers to develop a new relationship to the notion of difference: namely, to de-pathologize difference by embracing it, by being curious about its underpinnings, and by further exploring the implications of such differences on children's

subjective experiences in a heterosexist world. Underlying this call to arms is a suggestion that difference may actually be quite positive.

Stacy and Biblarz (2001), however, are not the only scholars critiquing the methods of past quantitative studies. In 2005, Stephen Hicks published an article entitled “Is Gay Parenting Bad for Kids? Responding to the ‘Very Idea of Difference’ in Research on Lesbian and Gay Parents,” in which he not only critiques past quantitative studies involving children of lesbian and gay families in similar ways to Stacy and Biblarz (2001), but also counters Stacy and Biblarz’s (2001) blanket assertions that searching for and embracing difference in research on children of lesbian and gay parents is a good and important move for the social science field. More specifically, while Hicks (2005) agrees with Stacy and Biblarz’s (2001) “anti-heterosexist stance,” he argues that embracing and seeking out difference in the experiences of children raised by lesbian and gay parents still operates within the heterosexist paradigm that there is something inherent to being lesbian or gay that is “discernable and transmittable to children” (Hicks, 2005, p. 163). Moreover, Hicks (2005) argues that this “difference paradigm” still operates within the socially constructed, heteronormative notions of what is normal (p. 160). Instead of searching for differences, Hicks (2005) calls for social science research that “employs interpretivist methodologies, which do not rely upon statements of fact, and which move away from an obsession with outcome-based evidence” (p. 165). In other words, Hicks (2005) calls for “qualitative, in-depth studies, and even personal accounts by lesbian and gay parents and their children” (p. 165).

### **Re-Approaching the Study of Children Raised in Lesbian-Headed Families**

While Bos and Sandfort (2010), Fulcher et al. (2008), Goldberg et al. (2012), MacCallum & Golombok (2004), and Sutfin et al. (2008) arguably move the literature forward in terms of

exploring the nuances of gender development differences among children raised in lesbian families (as Stacy and Biblarz [2001] call for), these studies still rely on quantitative, comparison methods to make their claims, as well as operate within socially constructed, heteronormative notions of what is normal or typical gender development. Almost entirely missing from the literature are the unmediated voices, perspectives, and reflections of the children themselves – both as children and as they’ve become adults – which Hicks (2005) vehemently argues is needed.

All the aforementioned quantitative studies use standardized measures, expert observation, and/or parent self-reports on rigid questionnaires to gather data and make inferences about these children’s gender development. These instruments and methods, while given the seal of approval by academia, are entirely rooted in socially constructed notions of what is typical for each gender, and do not leave room for subjects to weigh in on what feels like an accurate representation of their subjective experience. To date, only a handful of studies have explicitly endeavored to explore the subjective experiences of young people and/or adults raised by lesbian and gay parents through qualitative methods (Breshears & Lubbe-De Beer, 2014, Fairtlough, 2008; Garner, 2004; Goldberg, 2007; Jedzinak, 2004; Joos & Broad, 2007; Kivalanka & Goldberg, 2009; Saffron, 1998; Sassnet, 2015; Welsh, 2011). With respect to the specific topic of gender development, however, only three<sup>6</sup> studies to date have explicitly asked a small sample of adults raised by at least one lesbian/gay/bisexual parent about their experiences and/or how they perceive their family form to have played a part in their process of coming to know themselves as gendered beings (Goldberg, 2007; Jedzinak, 2004; Kivalanka & Goldberg, 2009).

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<sup>6</sup> To this researcher’s knowledge.

One of these three studies solely explored the experiences of adult women raised by lesbian mothers (Jedzinak, 2004). Jedzinak (2004) asked participants a number of questions about how growing up with lesbian mothers impacted different aspects of their lives, among which were three questions pertaining specifically to the topic of gender development and the perceived influence of their mothers' gender identity on their personal constructions and expressions of gender identity (What is your understanding of how people develop a gender identity? How do you see your gender identity? What influence, if any, has your mothers' gender identity had on the way you understand your gender identity?) (p. 60). Jedzinak (2004) found that the majority of her participants "viewed gender as being diverse and unique to each individual, regardless of sex," described their mothers as "gender fluid," and described themselves as having a "flexible" gender expression both in childhood and adulthood (p. 98; 99; 113; 115). Furthermore, Jedzinak (2004) found that participants described their mothers as explicitly encouraging their non-stereotypical gender expression through the provision of gender non-conforming or gender-neutral toys and clothes for them to play with or wear as children (p. 97).

While Jedzinak (2004) supposedly asked participants how they believe their mothers' gender identity impacted their own ways of thinking about and expressing gender identity, participant answers to this question are not addressed in her results nor in her discussion. Conversely, in a study exploring the gender and sexuality development experience of adult-children of lesbian/bisexual mothers who themselves identify as LGBTQ, Kusalanka and Goldberg (2009) did specifically attend to how participants believed their family form might have impacted their sexual/gender development. Kusalanka and Goldberg (2009) found that many of their participants believed that having "queer parents" impacted their sexual/gender

development by broadening their “conceptualizations of the potential sexual/gender identity options available to them” (p. 915).

While these two studies (Jedzinak, 2004 and Kovalanka & Goldberg, 2009) reveal important new information about how adult-children of lesbian/bisexual mothers understand and make meaning of their gender development experiences, they shed little light on the particular experiences of adult male-children raised by lesbian mothers. Jedzinak (2004) only explores the experiences of adult-women raised by lesbians, and Kovalanka and Goldberg’s (2009) sample and methodology greatly limits its ability to illuminate trends among the sub-group population of adult-male children of lesbians. With respect to the later, Kovalanka and Goldberg (2009)’s sample only included three male-identified participants. All three of these participants also identified as gay and/or bisexual. This is significant because Kovalanka and Goldberg (2009) do not make distinctions in their findings about whether or not respondents are discussing their thoughts about their gender identity or their sexual identity when responding to their interview questions. This is likely because Kovalanka and Goldberg (2009) inquire about participants’ sexuality and gender identity development experiences jointly in the same interview question. All in all, it is impossible to know to what extent the male-identified participants in this study were referring to their sexuality or their gender identity when responding to questions about the impact of family form.

Abbie Goldberg is the first researcher to endeavor to explore and differentiate the experiences of male and female adult children raised in non-heterosexual households with respect to their gender development. In her study entitled “(How) Does It Make a Difference? Perspectives of Adults With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Parents,” Goldberg (2007) asked a sample of 36 female-identified and 10 male-identified participants a range of open-ended



questions about their experiences growing up with a lesbian/gay/bisexual parent, and whether and how they perceive their parent's sexual orientation to have impacted them generally. Among the list of questions, subjects were asked about their constructions of gender, whether or not they believe they resist traditional gender norms, and to what extent they believe their family form impacted their constructions and expressions of their gender identity. Goldberg (2007) found that the majority of her sample (all 36 female subjects and six of 10 males subjects) felt that having a lesbian/gay/bisexual parent had led them to develop less rigid and more flexible notions and ideas about gender. With respect to adult-male children of lesbians in particular (four of the six aforementioned male subjects), Goldberg (2007) writes: "sons of lesbians observed that growing up 'in a household of strong women' encouraged them to be more sensitive, to feel free to pursue stereotypically unmasculine interests (e.g., art, dancing), and to value strength and capability in female partners" (p. 558). Goldberg (2007) also notes that some adult-male children struggled to negotiate the tension between how they were raised and the heteronormative model of masculinity that is pervasive in our society (p. 558).

While Goldberg's (2007) findings related to the gender development experiences of children raised in lesbian and gay families are illuminating, they are limited. Her sample, though not particularly small for a qualitative study, was broad with respect to gender and family form. More specifically, her findings related to the gender development experiences of adult-males raised by lesbian mothers are solely based on the responses of four subjects. In this way, Goldberg (2007) leaves ample room for future researchers to pick up where she left off in exploring the gender development experiences of adult-male children raised by lesbians.

## **Justification For This Research Study**

No study to date has exclusively, nor deeply, explored the subjective experiences and perceptions of adult-male children raised by lesbians with respect to their gender development. The voices and perspectives of adult-male children raised by lesbians are largely absent from the literature, and yet sorely needed in order to have a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of how growing up in a non-traditional family may impact a male-child's sense of self and experience of self in relation to others in a heteronormative and heterosexist society. In light of the gaps and limitations of the current body of literature, I chose to conduct a qualitative study that builds off of Goldberg's (2007) findings and holds the appeals of both Stacy and Biblarz (2001) and Hicks (2005) in mind. This study consists of intensive, exploratory interviews with adult-male children of planned lesbian families about their subjective experiences and perceptions as relates specifically to their constructions and expressions of masculinity and their male identity. This study is the first of its kind.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilizes an integrated theoretical framework, drawing from both social constructionist theory and queer theory. From a social constructionist viewpoint, families, sexuality, and gender are seen as socially and materially constructed categories void of essential characteristics or inherent meaning (Dunne, 2000; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). This theoretical orientation challenges both the notion that being raised in a particular family form is more natural, valid, or functionally better than another, and that being raised in a particular family form necessarily leads to particular gender development outcomes. Relatedly, social constructionist theory disputes the idea that there are essential masculine and feminine traits that male and female children are born with (respectively), and instead assumes that a complex array

of social, biological, and cognitive processes interact and shape how individuals come to think about gender categories and express themselves as gendered beings in the context of a particular society (as described and cited in Goldberg, 2007 and Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009). From a social constructionist perspective, individuals “use their available social context to understand, create meaning out of, and assign labels to their experiences, behaviors, and identities” (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009, p. 905-906). It follows, then, that being raised in a planned lesbian family may indeed have an impact on how adult-male children conceptualize and express masculinity/male identity. The nature of this impact, and what meaning to make of it, however, depends on the subjectivities perceptions and expressions of adult-male children themselves as they negotiate the social context in which they live.

Queer theory is a framework that also challenges essentialist notions of gender, sexuality, and family. Queer theory deconstructs and invalidates socially constructed binaries (like male/female, masculinity/femininity, gay/straight, real families/pseudo-families), viewing them as “arbitrarily determined and defined by those with social power” (Dilley, 1999, p. 460). Queer theory challenges the primacy of heteronormativity, and views those whose behaviors and/or attitudes challenge gender, sexuality, or family norms as actively deconstructing and reconstructing the notion of gender, sexuality, and family (as described by Goldberg, 2007). Someone who “queers” gender then, refers to someone who resists heteronormativity and expresses gender in ways that go against gender norms present in our society (Oswald et al., 2005). Because lesbian families inherently challenge heteronormativity, it is possible that male-children raised in lesbian families are more likely to be exposed to people expressing gender in non-conforming ways and/or are more likely to be encouraged to express their own gender in non-conforming ways. The extent to which adult-male children seem to be “queering” gender is

of interest in this study, as is whether or not adult-male children perceive their family form to have played a role in their gender development in this way (Oswald et al., 2005).

Drawing from social constructionist and queer theoretical concepts, this study makes no attempts to quantify better or worse outcomes through comparison, and abandons both the search for difference and urge to prove sameness that characterizes much of the literature on this topic. Instead, this study asks adult-male children of planned lesbian families to give voice to their lived experiences as relates to their gender development, and maintains curiosity about how they make meaning of having grown up in a non-traditional family form. In order to explore and capture the ways in which adult-male children subjectively experience and perceive their gender development and the impact of their family form, this study makes no assumptions about what constitutes masculinity or male identity and explicitly treats the masculinity/femininity binary as a social construction. All interview questions rely on participants' subjective conceptions of masculinity and male identity. In this way, participant responses reflect their individual perceptions of themselves in relation to their individual perceptions of socially constructed notions of gender.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of adult-male children of planned lesbian families as relates to their gender development. Furthermore, this study attempted to explore if/how adult-male children of planned lesbian families perceive their family form to have impacted their construction and expression of masculinity and male identity. Because no study to date has exclusively, nor deeply, explored the subjective experiences and perceptions of this particular population as relates specifically to their gender development, I chose to conduct a flexible methods, qualitative, inductive, exploratory research study using intensive interviewing as my data collection method (Anastas, 1999, p. 353; Engle & Schutt, 2013, p. 272; 288). As Anastas (1999) describes, “in flexible method research, intensive interviewing is generally used because the research question springs from a desire to explore and learn more about some phenomenon that has not been previously studied or has been poorly understood” (p. 353).

In line with intensive interviewing methods, I developed and utilized a semi-structured interview guide with pre-planned, open-ended questions, as well as standard probe questions to further clarify and deepen interviewee responses when necessary. Interviews were conducted in-person or via Skype (video conferencing) depending on the physical location and availability of the participant. All interviews were digitally voice recorded and later transcribed for thematic coding and analysis.

## **Participant Recruitment**

This study's sample consisted of 12 adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families. In order to participate in this study, subjects had to meet the following criteria: 1) be 18 years of age or older; 2) be male identified; 3) be the child of a planned lesbian family (defined as a child born to, or adopted by, a lesbian couple with the intention of raising the child together; the couple does not need to still remain a couple for the child to participate in the study); 4) be born, reared, and currently residing in the United States; 5) be willing to provide basic demographic information about themselves and their families; 6) consent to be audio recorded; and 7) consent to participate in this study.

In order to access my sample, I posted a flyer (Appendix B) advertising my study on a number of online public social media forums (my personal Facebook page, two Smith School for Social Work group Facebook pages, and LGBTQ-affirmative organizational Facebook pages). I also sent an email to friends, family, and colleagues (with the same flyer attached) informing them of the nature of my research study and requesting that they forward my email widely to people they believed might be interested in participating in the study (see Appendix C for template email). A number of these personal contacts, occupying a wide geographic area, reposted the flyer on their individual Facebook pages. I also used my personal connections with planned lesbian families and their children to reach participants through word of mouth. In this way, this study relied on "snowball sampling" methods, and resulted in a non-generalizable convenience sample (Engle & Schutt, 2013, p. 126).

Understanding that my sample consisted of individuals who represent a marginalized minority community, and that such communities have a historically warranted right to mistrust the intentions and findings of academic research, I endeavored to employ the following

strategies, as instructed by Engle and Schutt (2013), to recruit my sample. Firstly, I involved LGBTQ-affirmative community organizations and LGBTQ-identified community members (as noted above) in my outreach to potential participants. I was also fully transparent about the purpose and scope of my exploratory study in both the flyers posted on public Facebook pages of LGBTQ-affirmative organizations, in my appeals to my community of friends and family that have personal connections with planned lesbian families, as well as in my conversations with prospective subjects.

### **Description of the Sample**

Twelve participants were interviewed in total for this study (n=12). Eight participants were interviewed in-person; four participants were interviewed via Skype. Participants ranged in age from 18-30 years old: four were between the ages of 18-24; seven were between the ages of 25-29; and one participant was 30. The study's sample was homogenous in terms of racial identity: all 12 participants identified as white or Caucasian; two additionally identified as Jewish. The sample was also quite homogenous in terms of the state/geographical region in which participants grew up: 10 participants grew up in the San Francisco/Bay Area, CA; two participants grew up in Boston/Cambridge, MA. Participants currently lived in the following states: NY (2), CA (7), MA (1), LA (1), OR (1). Eleven participants were cisgender men; one identified as a transgender man.

Due to the limited size of the study's sample, and the sampling methods employed, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the wider population of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families. Additionally, this study's sample is too small to draw any systematic conclusions about demographic subgroup trends (i.e. white-identified adult-male children of lesbians raised in the San Francisco/Bay Area, CA or Boston/Cambridge, MA). Suggestions for

future research that could potentially generate generalizable findings for this population and/or capture trends among demographic subgroups are presented in Chapter V, the Discussion.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

To protect the confidentiality of study participants, all in-person interviews were conducted in a neutral, private or semi-private location of the participant's choosing. With respect to video conferencing, I conducted all Skype interviews in my home when no one else was present; the physical location of study participants varied, but each was informed of the threats to confidentiality associated with more public locations.

All interviews were digitally voice recorded with the consent of the participant. All individuals who helped transcribe the digitally voice recorded interviews signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix E). With respect to data storage, all digital and paper files were labeled with pseudonyms, rather than participant names. Furthermore, all consent forms, confidentiality agreements, and recorded/analyzed interview data (digital and hard copy) were password protected for the duration of the thesis process and will be kept in a secured location for three years thereafter, as is required by Federal law. After that point, all aforementioned materials will either be destroyed or maintained in a locked file cabinet.

While no financial compensation was offered to study participants, participants stood to benefit from this study in the following ways: it provided a rare and unique space for adult-male children of lesbian planned families to give voice to their personal experiences without the mediating effect of parent opinions or rigid study instruments; it provided adult-male children of planned lesbian families an opportunity to begin to fill the gap in the literature on the gender development experiences of adult-males raised in lesbian families; it offered participants the opportunity to possibly set the stage for, and set into motion, future research that abandons the



deficit model when conceptualizing LGBTQ families, and instead adopts a stance of appreciation of diversity and difference; and it provided adult-male children of planned lesbian families the opportunity to inform clinicians working with lesbian families and/or their children about their specific, and perhaps unique, resource and support needs.

While there were many potential benefits to participating in this study, there was a risk that participants could become emotionally overwhelmed or uncomfortable by the interview questions and elicited content. In an effort to support participants who may have experienced negative thoughts or feelings as a result of their participation in the study, I attached a list of national LGBTQ-affirmative resources to the informed consent form that each participant received and signed before becoming a formal participant in the study (see last page of Informed Consent Form, Appendix D).

### **Data Collection**

The Smith School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee approved this study (see Appendix F). Individuals who expressed interest in participating in the study, and who met all inclusion criteria, were emailed or mailed an informed consent form (Appendix D) outlining the purpose of the study, the expectations of study participants, the voluntariness of their participation, the risks and benefits of their participation, all relevant federal regulations that will be honored to protect their confidentiality, and a list of national LGBTQ-affirmative resources. Once participants signed and returned their consent forms, I contacted them individually by telephone or email to schedule their interview. The format of each interview – in-person or Skype – depended on the physical location and availability of participants.

I used a pre-planned, semi-structured interview guide to conduct each interview (Appendix A). The use of the interview guide allowed me to gather particular demographic and

thematic data from participants that I believed would adequately address my research question(s). Additionally, as Anastas (1999) describes, using an interview guide makes interview data “more amenable to comparison between individuals and between groups of respondents” (p. 354). The use of an interview guide, then, supports the credibility of my data and the study as a whole.

Participants were asked three demographic questions (intending to capture their age, racial identity, and state of residence) and 14 open-ended questions related to their gender development experience and the perceived impact of their family form. The use of open-ended questions was designed to allow participants freedom to voice their unique perspectives, feelings, and opinions to the extent they wanted to without the intrusion of my (the researcher’s) presuppositions and/or socially constructed notions of gender. Standard probe questions were also included to help clarify and/or expand an interviewee’s responses, if necessary. In order to enhance the validity of my study, I worked with an adult-male child of a planned lesbian family to develop my interview guide and ensure that my questions yielded meaningful and relevant responses with respect to my overarching research question(s). My interview guide is designed to elicit information pertaining to the following overarching themes:

- Constructions and expressions of masculinity/male identity;
- Models/role models of masculinity/male identity;
- Experiences of conflict around one’s constructions and expressions of masculinity/male identity, and the impact/nature of such conflict over time;
- Benefits and/or challenges of one’s constructions and expressions of masculinity/male identity; and

- Perceived impact of one's family form on one's constructions and expressions of masculinity/male identity.

To see the complete Interview Guide, please see Appendix A.

### **Data Analysis**

Narrative data collected through in-person or Skype interviews was digitally voice recorded and later transcribed verbatim. In addition, I took written notes during and after each interview documenting my perceptions and impressions of participants' body language, voice inflection, and comfort level throughout the interview.

I conducted a content/theme analysis of the narrative data collected using the "open coding" method. This method is rooted in grounded theory, which assumes that theory emanates from, rather than precedes, the data (Engle & Schutt, 2013). My analysis was tiered and multi-phased. First, I thoroughly reviewed and compared participant answers across the same question areas looking for similarities and differences in the content and language (words and phrases) of their responses. These question areas (outlined in the interview guide; see Appendix A) acted as overarching thematic categories under which additional thematic categories were fashioned out of participant responses. Using inductive reasoning, I progressively segmented and grouped participant answers into sub-themes based on patterns observed. Finally, I organized these sub-themes based on their frequency, importance, and relevance to this study's overarching research question(s). The results of this analysis are presented in the following chapter.

### **Biases**

This type of sample – one recruited through snowball sampling methods – introduces the issue of *volunteer bias* (Anastas, 1999, p. 286). More specifically, those who chose to respond to the flyer advertising this study may have had a particular interest in this issue. This cannot be

avoided, and is “impossible to assess or define,” so no efforts to control for this effect were employed (Anastas, 1999, p. 286). That being said, because this study is exploratory in nature, because it does not attempt to generalize its findings to a larger population, and because it is the first of its kind, the subjects who self-selected to be part of the study nonetheless provide valuable and new information to the body of literature surrounding the experiences of adult-male children of lesbian families.

In addition, when conducting interviews in person or via Skype, there is always a risk of *social desirability bias* – when participants’ responses are influenced by a “wish to appear most favorable in the eyes of the interviewer or researcher” (Engle & Schutt, 2013, p. 95). Usually, *socially desirability bias* leads to the over-reporting of positive information and the under-reporting of negative information. While this cannot be controlled for, I made explicit efforts to appear neutral when interviewing participants so as to not suggest that any of their responses would be unfavorable to me. Further exploration of the possible implications of *volunteer bias* and *social desirability bias* on this study’s findings will be discussed in Chapter V, the Discussion.

Operating from an integrated social constructionist and queer theoretical framework, it is important to address the fact that my approach to data analysis, and how I make meaning out of my research findings, is inextricably influenced by the dominant discourses of my time. In addition, my personal identity as a lesbian-identified woman who one day hopes to raise children in a planned lesbian family certainly bears on my interest in the topic, but also influences the way I interpret and discuss my findings. Most significantly, I have a stake in the gender development experiences of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families. In an attempt

to counter this bias, I make efforts to report the full complexity of participant feelings and thoughts about this topic when I present this study's findings in Chapter IV.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of adult-male children of planned lesbian families with respect to their gender development. Furthermore, this study explored if and/or how adult-male children of planned lesbian families perceive their family form to have impacted their construction and expression of masculinity and male identity. Because no study to date has exclusively, nor deeply, explored the subjective experiences and perceptions of this particular population as relates solely to their gender development, I chose to conduct a flexible methods, qualitative, inductive, exploratory research study using intensive interviewing as my data collection method (Anastas, 1999, p. 353; Engle & Schutt, 2013, p. 272; 288). In line with intensive interviewing methods, I developed and utilized a semi-structured interview guide with pre-planned, open-ended questions, as well as standard probe questions to further clarify and deepen interviewee responses when necessary. Interviews were conducted in-person and via Skype (video conferencing), depending on the participant's physical location and availability. All interviews were digitally voice recorded and later transcribed for thematic coding and analysis. Interviewee responses were compared across question areas and are reported in this chapter according to frequency and relevance to the overall research questions. Implications of interviewee responses will be discussed in Chapter V, the Discussion.

## **Where/How Participants Believe They Learned What it Means to be a Man**

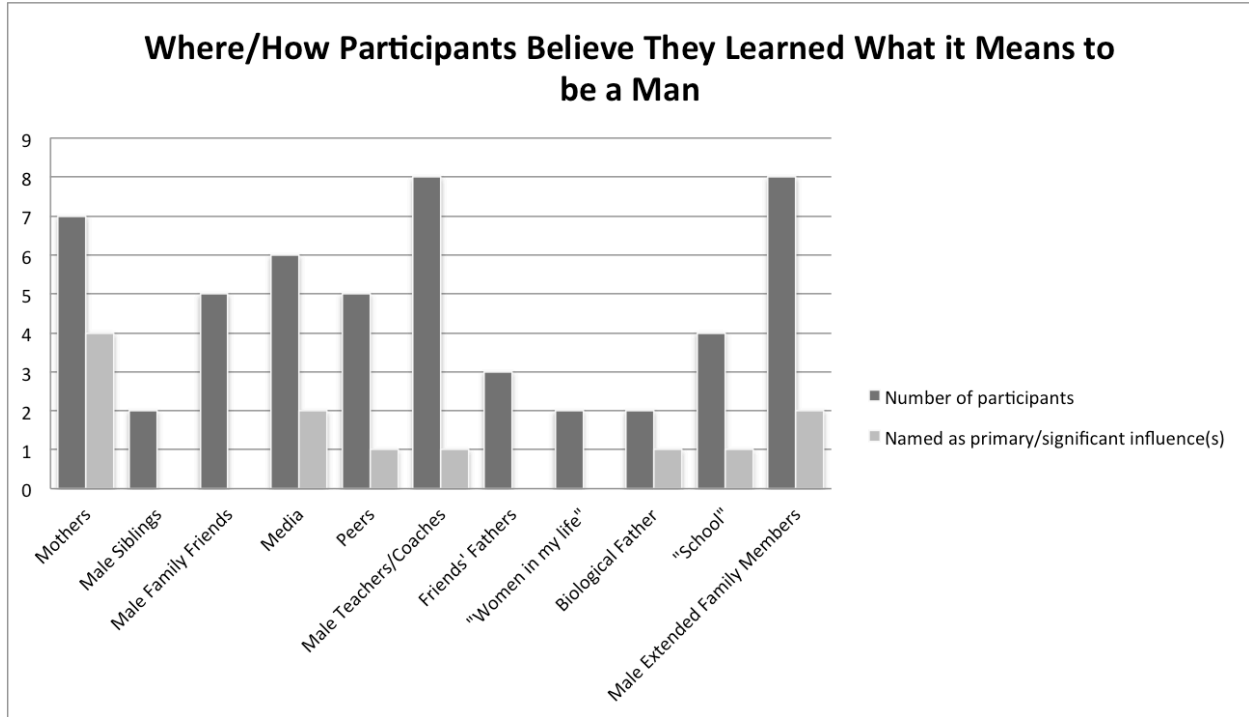
Participants named a range of sources that communicated information to them about masculinity and what it means to be a man. The most frequently named sources were male extended family members (eight participants), male teachers/coaches (eight participants), the media (TV, movies, music, books; six participants), male family friends (five participants), peers (five participants), “school” (four participants), and friends’ fathers (three participants).

Notably, seven participants described their mothers as sources of information about men. Four participants named their mothers as their primary sources of information, or “key people” who taught them about men growing up; three others described their mothers as passively communicating messages to them about men throughout their childhood.

Additionally, two participants named their brothers as sources of information about men, two others named their biological fathers, and two more noted learning about maleness from the “women” in their lives. With respect to the later, one participant described the women in his life as being examples of what he was “calling not-male;” conversely, the other participant described the women in his life as being gender non-conforming and embodying maleness in ways that taught him about what it means to be a man.

Some participants expressed feeling as though it was challenging to try to pinpoint how they learned what it means to be a man. One participant noted that he is “still learning” and is “not sure what it means to be a man”; one stated “it was never a huge part of my growing up to think about what it meant [to be a man]”; and another explained having trouble with the question because “I just don’t associate gender with a lot of things.”

**Table 1**



**What Participants’ Mothers Communicated to Them About Men**

Of the seven participants who described their mothers as sources of information about men, two discussed receiving explicitly negative messages, and five discussed receiving information more implicitly (positive, negative, and/or both). Three of the five participants who believe they received implicit messages from their mothers about men expressly noted that their mothers were not “stereotypically man hating,” but that they did communicate information about male privilege in our society and their preference for certain qualities in men. One participant explained that his mothers communicated to him that: “men have a very powerful position in our society and with power comes great responsibility... whatever I do, I need to be a good man.” Another noted: “I think there may have been a little bit more of an implicit critique of male dominated culture” when he was growing up. A third participant remembered his mothers



“praising different men for being a bit more thoughtful and sensitive” and seeing those men as models to emulate.

Two participants described growing up with a paradigm about “good men” and “bad men.” One participant described learning about this difference in the quality of men implicitly through his mothers’ behavior:

There was a constant effort to introduce me to good men. Like, they wanted me to know good men and have relationships with these good men, which I heard as the rest of the men are bad (laughs). Because most men, normal men, are bad men. And that’s why you need to know these good men...so there was this kind of unspoken assumption that there was a problem with a lot of men out there (laughs).

Another participant explained that his mothers explicitly and constantly verbalized their ideas and feelings about “bad men” to him while growing up: “...my moms had a lot to say about men...bad men were like men who would announce themselves...thought they deserved everything... people who claim too much, took too much, thought too highly of themselves, sort of hulking guys.”

Two other participants also noted that their mothers explicitly communicated their negative feelings about men to them throughout their childhood. One participant remembered one of his mothers sometimes saying “uh, that’s such a man thing to do!” when she was upset with him as a teenager, implying that his undesirable or frustrating behavior was due to him being a man. The other participant emphasized how in his family there was always a “hue of negativity around men in our culture and how manhood sometimes gets out of control for its own sake, in terms of starting wars and the unnecessary and abhorrent violence against women.”

**Participants' feelings about the negative messages they received from their mothers about men.** Four participants expressed receiving negative messages from their mothers about men (either implicitly or explicitly). Three of these four participants disclosed being negatively emotionally impacted by these messages. One participant expressed feeling “guilt” and “self-hate” at times in his development as a result of his mothers’ messages about men; another participant described feeling “devastated” when his mother dismissed his unwanted behavior as being associated with his maleness. Additionally, two of the four participants expressed feeling significant pressure to be different than the men their mothers negatively described. One participant noted that his mothers’ idea of a “bad man” was “definitely the person I really wanted NOT to be, and when I saw those people, and still, I actively push against them.” This same participant also expressed feeling as though he “always had a sense that [he] was in a position of power as a man, and therefore it made it doubly important that [he] be responsive to social problems.” Another participant echoed this sentiment, noting: “there was a lot of responsibility that I felt was placed on my shoulders, like I needed to go help fix the world and all the damage that men had done.” This participant expressed feeling at times heavily burdened by this responsibility.

### **What Participants’ Mothers Communicated to Them About the Kind of Man They Should Be**

Five participants described qualities and characteristics that their mothers communicated to them about the kind of man they should be. The remaining seven participants noted being raised to be a “good person” or “human” rather than a certain kind of man, and then went on to describe the related qualities and characteristics that their mothers expressly valued. Five participants named being “caring” as an important characteristic, three noted their mothers’

emphasis on the importance of respecting women and their bodies, two named being “compassionate,” two discussed being politically aware and standing up for injustice, and two mentioned the importance of being emotionally sensitive and attuned. Two participants also noted that their mothers communicated a desire that they not feel limited or stifled with respect to their gender expression. One stated that his mothers “stressed that nothing is closed off to me,” and another noted that his mothers were adamant about raising a child “that can do it all.”<sup>7</sup>

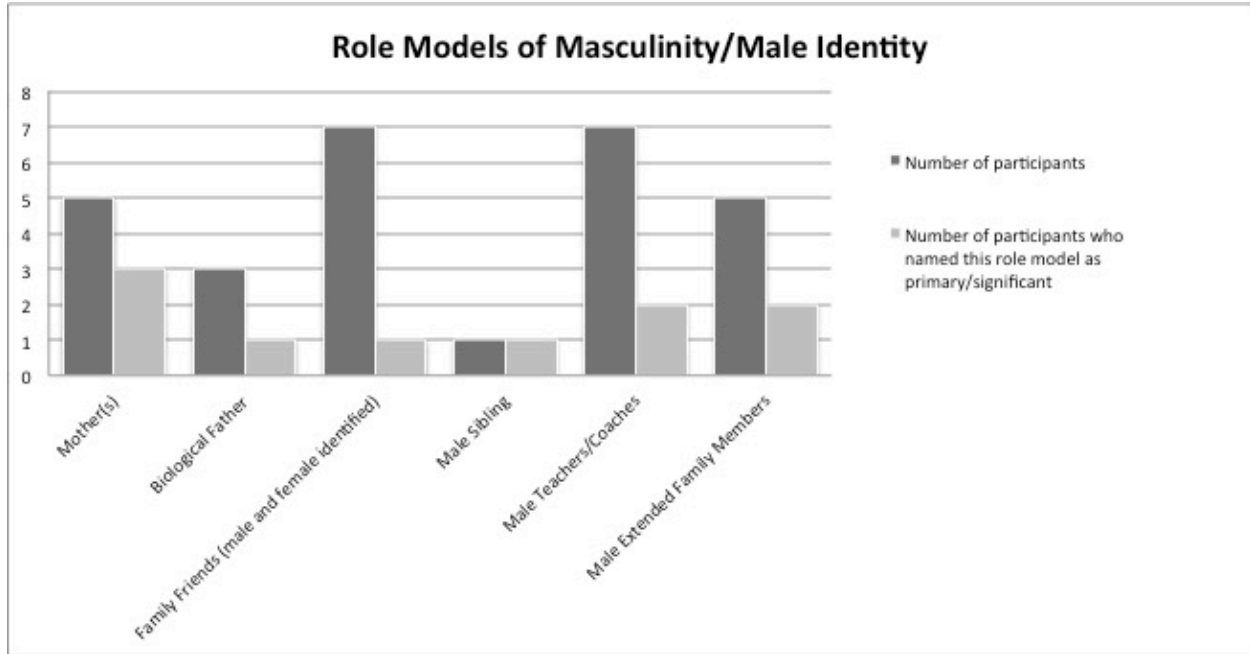
### **Role Models of Masculinity and Male Identity**

The majority of participants (10 of 12) readily named a number of role models of masculinity in their lives, including family friends (male and female identified; seven participants), male teachers/coaches (seven participants), male extended family members (five participants), their biological father (three participants), and their older male sibling (one participant). Notably, five participants named one of their mothers as a model of masculinity, three of which described their mother as the most significant role model of masculinity in their life. One participant expressly noted feeling as though “the women in [his] life” (his mothers and family friends) were role models of masculinity in “equal part” to the men in his life.

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<sup>7</sup> Individual participants named a number of other qualities that their mothers expressly valued and encouraged them to embody as men. Please refer to Table 3 for the complete list.

**Table 2**



**What participants’ role models modeled for them about masculinity/male identity.**

Participants named a wide range of qualities and characteristics that their role models of masculinity/male identity modeled for them. The most frequently named qualities (by at least two participants) are as follows: intelligence/curiosity (four participants); sports skills/enthusiasm (three participants); athleticism/physicality (three participants); emotional expression (three participants); being caring and kind (three participants); being a “fixer” (three participants); gentleness (three participants); taking care of people and things (two participants); strength (two participants); being a “tinkerer” (two participants); being soft-spoken (two participants); outdoor skills/connection with nature (two participants); being supportive (two participants); being respectful (two participants); independence/self-sufficiency (two participants); and that gender is “fluid” (two participants).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Individual participants named a number of other qualities and characteristics that their role models of masculinity modeled for them; for a complete list, refer to Table 3.

**Modeling non-traditional masculinity/gender non-conformity.** A number of participants described having male role models that go against what they consider the male norm or traditional expression of masculinity in our culture. One participant described his male role models as holding “masculinity with a real complexity...[with] spaciousness, spaciousness for gentle, caring masculinity, for an emotional, sensitive, smart masculinity, but also room in that for moving forward with clarity.” Another participant described his community of male family friends in the following way: “their presence in a room would have been gentle and there would have been laughter often and hugs and smiles, and they could cook, and enjoyed cooking, loved cooking, had no qualms about dancing and playing music.” A third participant characterized one of his role models, his godfather, as “an incredibly warm and caring and compassionate and wise person in touch with a lot of his feelings and able to be supportive in a completely disarming, non-threatening, non-overbearing sort of way.”

The five participants who named one of their mothers as a role model of masculinity noted that this mother either held a “butch” identity or embodied more “traditional masculine traits” than their other mother. Participants described their mothers as modeling the following characteristics and associating them with maleness: a love of sports; hard-headedness; strength; confidence/self-assuredness; financial responsibility for the family; stoicism; protectiveness; competitiveness; how to dote on women; how to be content being alone; how to play baseball; how to barbeque; how to backpack, camp, and be in nature; how to fix things around the house or in a car; and how to take things apart and rebuild them.

**The need for male role models?** Six participants talked about how their mothers and extended community made a conscious effort to provide them with male role models, suggesting

a belief that boys need male role models. Speaking of the men in his community, one participant explained:

I think that they knew when I was growing, there was some awareness that as a boy growing up with two moms, that I needed male role models...I think they also knew that they were playing that role for me...I mean, there was never a conversation of like, this is what you need to know as a person with a penis, this is what you need to know about being a man, it was just like life unfolding, and I feel like I picked and choosed, and continue to pick and choose from my experience with them about what I take from their expression of maleness.

Two participants specifically noted their mothers' intentionality around providing them with opportunities to connect with "good" male role models (through participating in organized sports), or exposing them to "good men." Another participant remembered his mothers trying to provide him male role models so he would feel "comfortable as the only male member" of his family. While much less explicit, another participant noted his mothers subtly suggesting that he spend time with a male family friend when they sensed he was having an issue and didn't feel comfortable talking to them about it.

While most participants had clear role models of masculinity in their lives, two participants could not readily name people who played this role for them in their lives. One stated: "I don't think I had any strong male role models, I had kind of a bunch of weak role models...I never felt like I needed a male role model, so I didn't, you know, go searching for one." The other noted his male second grade teacher as his "first male authority figure," but stated, "I just can't think of anyone else who's male that I looked up to" and did not mention anyone else who was not male when prompted by interviewer.

Two other participants discussed often being asked who taught them what it means to be a man given their family form, and expressed doubt that they in fact needed men in their life to teach them how to be a man. One participant who has a relationship with his biological father explained his thoughts about this:

I'm not sure you really need a man to teach somebody how to be a man. I do have a dad in some ways who I've grown up with, but I don't necessarily think that he has necessarily taught me more about how to be a man than my moms taught me or than my teachers taught me or, you know, my grandpa or my grandma. I think that I had a lot of really wonderful supportive adults in my life that all together shaped the man that I am, and definitely my two moms who I spent the most time with shaped me most. My dad took part, but I don't think that just because I had kind of a male father figure, I don't think he was necessarily the most dominant or the most powerful force in teaching me to be a man. I don't think that whole reoccurring question for kids of lesbian parents is really something that should be considered. I don't think that you need a man to learn how to be a man.

Conversely, another participant expressed feeling "furious" with his parents during high school "for not doing a better job providing a father figure [and for] not doing a better job of knowing how to be parents to a boy." The participant, however, followed up by saying: "in terms of what people get for parents and the situations of gifts and challenges of their particular parents, man, I did great!"

## **Characteristics or Qualities Participants Felt Were Central to Their Male Identity or How They Expressed Masculinity**

Most participants struggled to articulate or isolate qualities or characteristics that they felt were central to their male identity. Additionally, participants gave various and disparate answers; no coherent nor dominant themes emerged from their responses. That being said, the most commonly stated characteristics that participants named as being central to their male identity had to do with their male body – it’s physiology and anatomical qualities. Participants named facial hair, testosterone, having a penis, being tall, and having a low voice as all part of how they feel distinctly male. Relatedly, a transgender participant who recently socially transitioned expressed feeling as though being disconnected from his female body is as a central component of his male identity.

Additionally, four participants named athleticism/physicality as being central to their male identity. These qualities were followed up in frequency by the following: being independent/self-sufficient/autonomous (three participants); being a “fixer” (three participants); being confident/self-assured/decisive (two participants); being someone who “takes care of things” (two participants); being respectful of women (two participants); being protective (two participants); being supportive (two participants); being sensitive (two participants); being aware of their male privilege (two participants); and being a non-traditional man (two participants).<sup>9</sup>

Notably, many participants responded to this question by explaining how they rarely think of themselves as men first; rather, they think of themselves as people or human beings. Moreover, participants expressed feeling as though they were arbitrarily drawing boxes around

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<sup>9</sup> Individual participants named a number of other qualities as being central to their male identity, which are represented in Table 3, along with those described above.



qualities in themselves that they usually just associate with their personality in general. Three participants in particular identified this de-centralization of their male identity as actually being central to their male identity. One participant described this eloquently when he said: “I am a man whose manhood is not central to my being.”

### **Participants’ Feelings About How Their Unique Expressions of Masculinity/Male Identity Compare to the Norms, Expectations and/or Stereotypes of Men in our Society**

When asked to compare their unique constructions and expressions of masculinity/male identity to their understanding of the norms and/or stereotypes of men in our society, one participant noted feeling as though “most of them line up” with him, two participants expressed feeling as though they do a good job of “fitting” many of the stereotypes, one participant expressed feeling very “different” from the norm of the “always strong, assertive man,” and the rest expressed feeling both aligned and not-aligned in a number of ways.

**Ways in which participants felt aligned.** Participants most frequently named qualities of their physical appearance/presentation (clothing, height, physique) as being aligned with traditional masculinity (four participants). Three participants described their physicality/athleticism as a traditional male quality; three others described themselves as not “expressing” or “sharing” their emotions often and associating this with traditional masculinity. Two different sets of participants named each of the following as being in alignment with male stereotypes: self-confidence, independence, leadership capacities, aggressiveness, competition with other men, and humor. Individual participants also named liking sports, being a provider, being a fixer, their professional interests (leadership/business), being heterosexual, and being

loud/taking up space as traditionally masculine qualities that they embody as their expressions of male identity.<sup>10</sup>

**Ways in which participants did not feel aligned.** Participants named a wide range of personal qualities that they felt were not aligned with traditional masculinity, including: not being assertive/dominant (four participants); being friends with women/interacting with women more interpersonally (five participants); “listening first” (three participants); being nurturing/caring for others/compassionate (three participants); not being aggressive (two participants), being politically aware and socially conscious (two participants); being “receptive” of others’ care and attention (two participants); professional choices (being a teacher/social worker; two participants); being artistic (two participants); being open to non-traditional gender roles in romantic relationships (with respect to sex, child care, financial contribution to the family, and professional aspirations; two participants); being open to cross dressing in certain environments (one participant); being open to a range of sexualities within the self (one participant); not being protective (one participant); and not being decisive/self-assured (one participant).<sup>11</sup> The most frequently named qualities by participants, however, had to do with dimensions of emotionality, having respect for women, and being aware of male privilege.

*Emotionality.* Strikingly, the majority of participants (10 of 12) emphatically named dimensions of emotionality as being ways in which they feel not aligned with traditional masculinity. Words like “emotionally expressive,” “emotionally intelligent,” “attuned to the emotions of others,” “sensitive,” “self-aware,” “willingness to be vulnerable,” and being able to “cry” were used repeatedly among participants to describe themselves and their capacities.

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<sup>10</sup> Also represented in Table 3.

<sup>11</sup> Also represented in Table 3.

*Respect for women.* Seven participants described ways in which they are, or actively try to be, respectful of women, and named this quality as not aligned with traditional masculinity. One participant described mainstream masculinity as involving being “demeaning towards women,” and stated “that has never come easily to me.” Another explained: “I actively don’t call women bitches, even when I’m talking with a bunch of other guys... [and] as much as one can, despite all the social pressures, I think I try and do a very good job to not fetishize a women in conversation.” One participant described his efforts to “talk to women like they are people” as emblematic of his attempts to respect women. Another noted being respectful of women is “something that I care a lot about and hope that I’m successful in doing. I think I am.” Lastly, one participant who is active in the comic scene noted his commitment to not play women as parodies – “If I’m a woman in a scene, I’m not gonna play a woman...I’m gonna play it like a person.”

*Aware of (white) male privilege.* Five participants explicitly discussed ways in which they try to be aware of their male and/or white male privilege and not perpetuate gendered oppression in their daily lives. One participant called himself a “feminist” and explained what this means to him:

...it really acknowledging that and thinking about what that means...at the end of the day for me, it just comes down to recognizing my own privilege and trying to call out places where I see or feel inequality.

Another participant described how he tries to utilize his awareness of white male privilege in his work as a social justice advocate and public school teacher:

I’m a white male from a middle, upper-middle class family, high education, I have a graduate degree. So, on paper, I’m at the top of the pecking order...I think being aware of

that [goes against the stereotype]. Acting upon that in the work that I do, the political work that I do and the work in education, I think [also] goes against the stereotype of what rich, white guys do...I think how I teach is a big part of that...empowering especially the girls in my classroom to be more confident and not let the loud 12 year old boys dominate, and encouraging them to push forward and ask more questions and work hard...it's the same thing I do with all my kids, but like especially with the girls in my class, I think it goes against the stereotype.

Lastly, one participant discussed being aware of how men take up physical space in the world, and his attempts to be mindful of his impact on others in public space:

I'm concerned with being a male who like takes up space and is like being disrespectful or making women feel unsafe. I don't particularly feel like I'm going to do that, I just feel conscious to not do it. I feel conscious of that these days [as] a white dude, I'm just trying to be a guy who doesn't take up a lot of space in the public area.

**Expressions of masculinity that participants believe are more stereotypically “feminine” or associated with female identity.** Of the aforementioned qualities that participants named as being less aligned with their understanding of the norms, expectations, and/or stereotypes of men in our society, the following qualities were explicitly discussed as more stereotypically “feminine” or typically associated with female identity: emotionality (expressiveness, intelligence, attunement to others, sensitivity, willingness to show vulnerability, ability to cry), not asserting dominance, listening first, being friends with women, being able to interact with women interpersonally, being nurturing, caring for others, being artistic, being compassionate, and being receptive to others' care and attention.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Also represented in Table 3.

**How participants feel about their more stereotypically “feminine” qualities.** Notably, 11 out of 12 participants were emphatically positive about these qualities and their impact on their lives (the remaining one participant did not perceive himself as embodying traditionally “feminine” qualities). Words like “cherish,” “pride,” “blessing,” “gift,” “love,” “benefit,” and “asset” were readily used by participants when describing their feelings about these qualities. One participant stated: “I wouldn’t give them up for anything. It feels like that’s some of the stuff I love most about myself, and so you know I think it feels like a real gift.” Another participant echoed this sentiment when he noted the ability to express and feel emotion as “one of the things I most pride myself on and hold dearest to my identity.” Another expressed feeling “special and “unique” because of them, and noted that he believes his capacity to give back to the world emanates from these qualities. One participant not only expressed appreciation for these qualities but also sadness for men who don’t have access to them: “I love it. I think a lot of men seem like they’re suffering in a paradigm that does allow them to see the way that they feel, or express it, or show it. I think that is a terrible cage.” Another expressed feeling pride in his more “feminine” qualities, but also wished that these qualities “weren’t only associated with female identified people in our society ... I wish everyone felt that way.”

In addition to feeling generally positive about these qualities, participants described unique ways in which these qualities have benefitted them in terms of their relationships with others (friends, family, and romantic partners), their professional work, their awareness of themselves, and their mental health.

*Relationships.* Ten participants expressed feeling as though their more “feminine” qualities had a positive impact on their relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners. Two participants described feeling as though their capacity to be emotionally vulnerable and

expressive greatly contributes to them having had intimate, long-lasting, and deep relationships throughout their lives. One participant stated: “I’ve developed really strong relationships with people, and lasting relationships, because of that sort of willingness to be open and real with people.” Similarly, another participant noted: “Interpersonally, I’m blessed to have a lot of really wonderful, long-lasting, fruitful relationships and I think a big part of that is that I really share a big part of myself with other people, and because of that they share a really big part with me and we become very close.” Three participants also noted that these qualities have likely contributed to their lifelong ability to be in close friendship with women.

Five participants also mentioned that their more “feminine” qualities were a benefit to them in romantic relationships. One participant expressed feeling as though his expression of more “feminine” qualities facilitated closeness between him and his partners; another simply noted that his expression of more “feminine” qualities is “one of the things that has been most attractive” to all of his partners. A third participant described how his embodiment of more traditionally “feminine” qualities allows his partner to explore her own gender fluidity and relationship to traditional gender norms: “Me rejecting certain traditional qualities has allowed her to be more experimental in how she wants to express her gender identity.”

*Work.* Five participants noted how their more “feminine” qualities contributed to them being successful in their work. Speaking about his work as a public school teacher, one participant explained that “men are expected to be more aggressive or more overpowering or overbearing, and when men are not I think it’s a disarming thing in a positive way and it’s helpful. I feel like that’s something that has allowed me to be successful.” Another participant noted how his more stereotypically “feminine” qualities support him as a male social worker:

I think it's a big part of what makes me effective as an advocate and ally to kids in the juvenile justice system...it's interesting, men are highly desired in this field because there are so many more women doing it, but I think men need to be able to listen and empathize and do those things to really allow their masculine qualities to be useful.

Two participants mentioned these qualities support their work as a camp or youth counselor.

One in particular said:

I would say it also helps me in my work with young people, like working with young boys especially about providing some alternative to mainstream maleness. What it means to grow up male. That I am a walking, talking alternative to what they usually see, and some boys really need that, they don't have a lot of that in their life and they are comfortable around me because of it.

Another participant noted it benefits him as an employee with female superiors:

It's much easier for me to get along with women, especially in the work place and have women be my professional superiors...I think my ability to get along with other women more so than other men is definitely good, especially as more women have more authoritative roles in our society.

It is important to note that seven participants also expressed experiencing some relational challenges as a result of their incorporation of more stereotypically "feminine" qualities into their expression of masculinity/male identity. Five participants mentioned feeling as though their expression of certain stereotypically "feminine" qualities has acted as an obstacle to connecting with other men. One participant noted that this is painful for him because he loves connecting with people: "I wonder how many people that I miss out on connecting with because of that way that I express myself." Another described as anxiety that he can't be part of the "boys club"

because of his way of expressing masculinity, namely his distaste for hierarchical hazing in the workplace and senseless competition. Three participants described these qualities as contributing to them being bullied and excluded in elementary and middle school. Another noted that in high school he felt like his way of expressing masculinity got in the way of him being part of a group of “cool boys.”

Additionally, one participant explained that while he largely felt positively about how his “feminine” qualities allowed for deeper relationships with friends, family members, and romantic partners, these qualities at times felt in conflict with some of his past romantic partners’ expectations of him. As a result, this participant noted feeling “unable to bring those sides of myself out.” Relatedly, another participant noted that while he is “extremely grateful” for his unique way of expressing masculinity and embodying more traditionally “feminine” traits, he also believes that his way of expressing masculinity may not “work with every woman.” A third participant explained that being male-identified, but not having a male-body, poses challenges in his intimate relationships with women; more specifically, he explained that for a cisgendered man, expressing more feminine qualities may make them seem like a “great guy” and be celebrated by women, but for him (a recently socially transitioned transgendered man) it makes him vulnerable to people questioning his male identity. He noted: “that’s a challenge, figuring out how to like stay the same but also change people’s perception of me.”

*Self-knowledge and self-awareness.* Three participants described feeling as though their incorporation of more stereotypically “feminine” qualities supports them being more aware and in touch with themselves. In particular, one participant noted: “[my] attention to emotion makes me a person much more in tune with themselves. I feel like a lot of things I might have had to repress if I was focused on being masculine in a traditional sense I haven’t had to repress.”



Similarly, another participant described feeling as though these qualities help him understand himself in all his complexity: “It allows me to be more myself, and a complete person; to acknowledge things that are going on for myself on a lot of levels, whether it’s intellectual, emotional, spiritual or physical.” A third participant beautifully echoes this notion that embodying more “feminine” qualities facilitates an inner sense of completeness:

I think a lot of men either never, or not until late in their lives, develop a real relationship with themselves and have the space to listen to themselves, to listen to their own being and develop that relationship. So I feel grateful for that. It’s the shadow of the privilege of masculinity and patriarchy, the sort of disconnection from life and self, and I just see a lot of men who have that. And not only from the self, in particular, from the body...I guess, getting to have something else, getting to embrace something else, there’s a wholeness in it...wholeness is I guess how to describe the internal experience.

*Mental health and a sense of well-being.* Notably, two participants described ways in which their mental health or sense of well-being was enhanced through their expression of more traditionally “feminine” qualities. One participant explained the impact of being in touch with his emotions: “I think [it’s] allowed me to deal with things inside of myself that I don’t think I would have [otherwise].” The other described feeling as though his mental health suffered tremendously until he was able to integrate his more “feminine” qualities into his identity.

**Table 3**

**Chart of All Qualities and Characteristics of Masculinity/Male Identity Named by Participants Across Question Areas**

Question Area	Qualities/Characteristics Named by Participants
<b>What role models modeled for participants about masculinity/male identity</b>	Intelligence/curiosity; sports skills/enthusiasm; athleticism/physicality; emotional expression; being caring and kind; being a “fixer”; gentleness; taking care of people and things; strength; being a “tinkerer”; being soft-spoken; outdoor skills/connection with nature; being supportive; being respectful (in general); independence/self-sufficiency; “fluid” gender expression; vulnerability; sensitivity; hard-headedness; stoicism; providing for one’s family; respect for women; protectiveness; charm; boyishness; doting on women; how to be content being alone; decisiveness/clarity; humility; a love of cooking; toughness; solidness; how to be secure in one’s body; friendliness; easy to be around; anger; tallness/bigness; entrepreneurship; competitiveness; stoicism; humor; good fatherhood; and loving/good heterosexual partnerships.
<b>What participants’ mothers modeled for them about masculinity/male identity</b>	A love of sports; hard-headedness; strength; confidence/self-assuredness; financial responsibility for the family; stoicism; protectiveness; competitiveness; how to dote on women; how to be content being alone; how to play baseball; outdoor skills (backpack, camp, and be in/connected to nature); how to barbeque; how to fix things around the house or in a car; and how to take things apart and rebuild them.
<b>What participants named as the qualities/characteristics they possess that are central to their male identity</b>	Having a male body/disconnected from female body (physiological and anatomical qualities); athleticism/physicality; being a "fixer"; being independent/self-sufficient/autonomous; decentralizing maleness as part of identity; being confident/self-assured/decisive; "taking care of things;" being respectful of women; being protective; being supportive; being sensitive; being aware of their male privilege; being a "non-traditional" man; having interest in cars/action movies/computers/sports; sexuality; strength; generosity; being nurturing; being empathic; tinkering; leadership style/capabilities; not expressing emotion often; liking beer; feeling connected to nature; having humility; clothing/appearance; being nice; being emotionally expressive; being smart/intelligent; being a feminist; not being sexist/homophobic; being adventurous; completing the police academy.
<b>Ways in which participants feel aligned with traditional notions/norms/expectations/stereotypes of masculinity/male identity in our society</b>	Physical appearance/presentation (clothing, height, physique); physicality/athleticism; not “expressing” or “sharing” their emotions; self-confidence; independence; leadership capacities; aggressiveness; competition with other men; humor; liking sports; being a provider; being a fixer; being heterosexual; being loud/taking up space; being an initiator; professional interests (leadership/business).
<b>Ways in which participants feel not aligned with traditional notions/norms/expectations/stereotypes of masculinity/male identity in our society</b>	Emotional expressiveness; emotional intelligence; being attuned to the emotions of others; willing to be vulnerable; ability to cry; self-awareness; sensitivity; having respect for women; being aware of male privilege; not being assertive/dominant; being in friendship with women/interacting with women more interpersonally; “listening first”; being nurturing/caring for others/compassionate; not being aggressive; being politically aware and socially conscious; being “receptive” of others’ care and attention; professional choices (being a teacher/social worker); being artistic; being open to non-traditional gender roles in romantic relationships (with respect to sex, child care, financial contribution to the family, and professional aspirations); being open to cross dressing in certain environments; being open to a range of sexualities within the self; not being protective; not being decisive/self-assured.
<b>What participants named as the qualities/characteristics they possess that they feel are more stereotypically/traditionally associated with “femininity” or “female identity” in our society</b>	Emotional expressiveness; emotional intelligence; being attuned to the emotions of others; willing to be vulnerable; ability to cry; self-awareness; sensitivity; not asserting dominance; listening first; being friends with women; being able to interact with women interpersonally; being nurturing; caring for others; being artistic; being compassionate; and being receptive to others’ care and attention.
<b>What participants’ mothers expressly valued in men and/or communicated to them about the kind of man/person they should be</b>	Being caring; respectful of women and their bodies; compassionate; politically aware; standing up for injustice; emotionally sensitive/attuned; not limited in their gender expression; trustworthy; kind; thoughtful; not-entitled; not-imposing; physical; artistic; strong; easy to be around; financially self-sufficient; having conviction; knowing how to cook, dance, and speak another language; being responsible to one’s partners; having personal responsibility; listening to people; seeing people for their complexity; and having appreciation for art and culture.

## **Participants' Experiences of Conflict Around Their Expression of Masculinity/Male Identity and How Such Conflict Has Changed Over Time**

All 12 participants described experiences of internal and/or external conflict around their unique way of expressing masculinity/male identity, though some to greater degrees than others. Most participants described middle school and high school as the time periods in their lives most rife with conflict; one participant experienced conflict through college and five participants noted still experiencing some internal conflict presently.

The most external conflict experienced by participants had to do with being bullied, excluded, or pressured socially because of the way they expressed masculinity. Seven participants in total named this as a conflict. Four participants described being bullied (physically and verbally) and/or excluded socially: one participant disclosed feeling in danger in 9<sup>th</sup> grade because of his non-traditional ways of expressing masculinity; one participant described being teased and bullied for years because he was perceived to be gay due to his way of expressing maleness; and another expressed having few friends for most of his elementary and middle school years due to him not relating to, or sharing the same interests as, other boys his age. Another participant disclosed being verbally pressured by his athletic teammates to show less emotion, and feeling similarly impacted when he witnessed other boys on his team endure verbal threats for expressing non-traditional masculinity. Two additional participants noted experiences in high school when they were challenged to a physical fight as a way of solving a conflict, and their distaste for male aggression resulted in others calling them “a pussy” or questioning their maleness. Both of these participants, however, did not experience this as particularly distressing.

Some participants described times when they repressed or hid their less traditionally masculine qualities to “fit in,” and talked about these times as moments of internal conflict. One

participant remembered times in middle school when he participated in objectifying and disrespecting women despite it being in conflict with his values and how he treated the women in his family: “You know, you really want to fit in...[so] I just mimicked a lot and sort of learned to say things and talk about sex and gender and stuff in a certain way...” This same participant noted that this internal conflict reappears in the present when he hears men talk about women in “antiquated” ways and responds by “nodding along and like not wanting to argue.” Another participant described feeling “angst” in high school about needing to “prove” his maleness, and going about it by engaging in sex with women in an “objectifying way.” This participant noted, however, that it “didn’t really feel good because there wasn’t love and it wasn’t connection.” Another participant described how he changed the way he dressed between middle school and high school to appear more “manly” so he could “hook up with girls” and appear “cool.” This participant disclosed feeling “a hint of pain” about this today.

Two participants expressed feeling anxiety about how to be in relationships with women given their unique way of expressing masculinity. One participant shared feeling quite afraid in high school and in college that he may never be partnered because of his way of initiating relationships, and questioned his fitness as a male in our culture:

My less assertive style of establishing relationships with women was not always accepted, or I guess wasn’t always the most popular approach. I had a lot of internal conflicts, actually I remember thinking ‘am I fit to be...am I...are these qualities that I personally value a lot, are they going to allow me to find a romantic partner that I like?’ And since romantic partnerships are very important in our society, and there’s a lot of weight, a lot of importance that’s generally given to those relationships, it was a very

scary thing for me to feel like, ok I have all of these less traditional qualities for a man and I like those qualities and they feel right to me, but is this not going to be accepted?

Another participant discussed feeling frustrated in high school that he was ineffective at getting a girlfriend, and associated this in part with his way of expressing masculinity:

[I remember] not knowing how to talk to [girls] appropriately or at all and feeling that the people who were doing it the best and were getting girls interested in them were treating them poorly in the amount of attention that they gave them or the amount of shits they gave about them or were strong and heroic and the best at something.

Two participants expressed feeling tremendous shame and guilt about their sexual impulses and urges during and after puberty. One participant expressed feeling not aligned with his “libido” for many years and as a result wishing he could shift his hormonal levels. He elaborated by saying: “this testosterone stuff is kind of intense sometimes and I feel like the way that it expresses itself in my sexuality is sometimes at odds with my sense of self.” Another participant echoed these sentiments and expressed feeling alone in his experience for most of his young life:

...that persistent nagging procreate message is always there despite what I actually consciously think about the other person...and for the first 20 years of my life, first 25, 27, 28 years of my life, it was more about feeling disconnected from it and feeling shameful about it and like I needed to tame it or cage it up or not in any way acknowledge it. I think I’ve made more peace with it recently, but I think that there was that feeling because it wasn’t something that I felt anyone around me really understood or was able to talk to me about, and for a while I thought it was something that was unique to me, which was hard.

One participant discussed an experience of conflict in middle school around how to find community or be fully understood as a gender non-conforming straight male with lesbian moms. This participant started the gay-straight alliance at his school, but remembers feeling as though he did not “fully fit” into that community, nor did he feel the complexity of his identity was fully understood in that space. This participant temporarily identified as “gender-queer” and “fairy” as a way of trying to name his internal experience, but eventually came to the following conclusion: “I don’t want a different identity, I want more space in my identity.”

One participant expressed feeling somewhat anxious about being able to experience success professionally because of his expression of a less traditional masculinity: “I’ll find myself wondering, ‘do I have what it takes? Do I have the hardheadedness?’ And then, upon reflection, it’s like ‘do I even want that?’” Relatedly, this participant and two others disclosed feeling at times doubtful that they are “male-enough,” and wondered whether they would be or feel more male if they had been raised with a father in their homes. Participants described this as the “what if?” question, and said it manifested for them in the form of comparing themselves constantly to other men and/or feeling self-critical about not possessing certain traditionally male qualities. One participant described this experience in the following way:

I would say for sure I’ve had a dialogue in my head, like a conflict with myself, about like am I being male-enough. Like, if I’m having a hard time making a decision, [which is] all the time, I have like some kind of internal conflict of, like, ‘oh, if I was really embodying my masculin[ity] right now I could just make a decision and that would be great.’ Or like ‘what this situation calls for is a strong masculine presence, and I should be able to embody that, but it’s not coming.’ That will maybe come through in maybe like, if I feel threatened, if I’m in a neighborhood in the world where I don’t feel safe,

then I'll really want to activate some kind of male protector, ready-to-aggress energy and I'll just find that I don't really have a deep pool of that. I can put on the mask of it and I can pretend that I have it, but it's not very strong in me, so that has been a source of conflict.

Another participant explained that he often compares himself to other men – especially around their sense of confidence and assertiveness – and noted that his internal monologue wonders if it is related to him not having a father figure: “I think when I [compare myself to other men], I do bring in a little bit of the like, ‘oh, I didn’t have this father figure so maybe I’d be more confident in this situation or something as a man [if I did].”

Lastly, one participant expressed conflict around deciding what expressions of traditional masculinity feels authentic to him and which ones do not. This participant, a transgendered man who recently socially transitioned, is currently negotiating how to embody maleness in a way that allows him to be perceived as male while still maintaining and integrating the more stereotypically “feminine” qualities that are central to his identity and personality. This participant noted that while he has not experienced external conflict around his gender identity, he feels “inward conflict that people may have their own conflicts with [me] not matching what they believe is male or female.”

While some participants still experience some minor internal conflict today, all participants overwhelmingly expressed self-acceptance and pride in their unique way of expressing their male identity. When discussing the change in their experience of conflict, participants named the following as contributing factors: time; experiencing success professionally; engaging in therapy; finding community of like-minded people and men who express gender in similar, gender non-conforming ways; exposure to progressive/liberal arts

education; having successful relationships/partnerships with women; learning about the social construction of gender; finding ways to accept and integrate one's values with one's hormonal impulses; and seeing the media openly discuss and normalize the power of testosterone on male sexuality.

### **Participants' Subjective Perceptions of the Impact of Their Family Form on Their Constructions and Expressions of Masculinity/Male Identity**

When asked how, if at all, they felt their family form impacted their unique way of expressing masculinity/male identity, the majority of participants approached the question from a place of wonder and not-knowing. Participants questioned whether particular qualities or characteristics of their male identity were related to their mothers' sexualities, their mothers' gender identities, and/or their mothers' unique personalities and values and rarely answered definitively. Despite this, 11 out of 12 participants were able to articulate a few key ways they believe their family form might have played a role in influencing their gender development.

#### **Freedom to explore gender identity/expression (parental gender-related attitudes).**

Most notably, seven participants described their upbringing as allowing them "freedom," "looseness," and "permission" to explore how they wanted to express masculinity and male identity. One participant explained: "[there was] permission to cross-dress, permission to cry, to express my feelings, permission to be interested in whatever I was interested in." Another participant similarly described a childhood where his mothers encouraged him to explore interests that were both gender conforming and gender non-conforming:

I learned how to sew and I learned how to cook. I learned how to clean...I did a lot of art also. I remember doing a lot of flower pressing and I totally had like awesome trucks and blocks and then I totally had dolls and like stuffed animals.



Another participant summed up his experience in the following way: “[I had the] freedom to be whoever I wanted to be or who ever I was going to be naturally.”

All seven participants described this quality of their upbringing as a benefit, though two participants also expressed feeling challenged by it. One participant described it as a “double edged sword” – “I’m able to go out and explore it and seek it out on my own, but then the other part is that I *have* to go out and seek it out on my own.” Another participant alluded to a similar tension in the following way:

I’ve been given this opportunity to explore maleness with a lot less, kind of like, blueprint than someone who would have grown up with a dad or like a key father figure, or even a heterosexual relationship to suggest a father. So there’s this opening of like, ‘alright [participant name], you can define maleness as you want.’ And I’ve often thought about the blessing in that, the ability to look at lots of different sources for what maleness is, and the challenge in that, which is sometimes being confused by all the contradicting messages I get about what maleness is, and all the different ways that maleness is expressed.

**Exposure to gender non-conformity in their mothers and in their community.** Four participants felt that their attitudes around gender non-conformity, and their non-traditional expressions of masculinity, are related to having gender non-conforming mothers and/or gender non-conforming people in their community. One participant noted learning from his gender non-conforming mothers, biological father, family friends and camp community that:

...there are opportunities for people of both sexes to embody different traits that are associated more traditionally with one gender or the other, and that it can be something a little bit more fluid...and it doesn’t have to be fixed as we are often taught it has to be,

and I can be the person that feels most natural to me, regardless of whether my sex is male or female or something else.

Another participant noted that he thinks gender binaries are hard for him to reconcile because his two primary role models were women: “my basic understanding of people was just these two women who raised me, so I guess I didn’t see ‘this is how women are and this is how men are.’”

Another participant discussed his family’s attendance at a family camp for queer families, and how this camp openly valued gender fluidity. This participant linked his access to this camp, and exposure to its values, with his family form. A fourth participant wondered whether it took him longer to know that he was transgender (male-identified rather than female-identified) because of his mothers’ acceptance and expression of gender non-conformity:

I didn’t really understand why that took me so long because I have kind of been a tomboy all my life, and [my therapist] explained that it’s possible that because ...I saw a representation of masculinity and femininity within a lot of different sexualities and genders, I cared less about figuring out an identity.

**Being raised by two women (parental gender identity).** Three participants associated their emotionality as being related to being raised by women, though two of the three expressed some doubt given each had a mother that was not particularly emotionally expressive. One participant stated: “It’s hard to say, but I do think that having mostly female influences makes it easier to dwell in the realm of feelings.” Another participant emphatically explained that growing up with two moms “trained” him to be “emotionally expressive” – “that was the language of the house, and so that has really shaped my maleness.”

Three described the impact of being raised by women on their respect and treatment of women. One participant definitively stated that his upbringing “made [him] a feminist.” Another

participant explained that his mothers “checked” his maleness when it was getting out of hand with respect to his treatment and objectification of women during high school. Lastly, one participant wondered about the association between his comfort with, and respect for, female superiors in the workplace as being related to not having a father figure in his life: “I didn’t have that model of a male authority...maybe I wasn’t taught bad habits?”

**Being raised in a non-traditional family form.** Two participants noted the impact of having a non-traditional family on their internal strength and self-confidence. One participant explained that an “unintentional consequence of strength came from having to practice telling something about yourself that is potentially disruptive to the norm.” Similarly, another participant explained learning from his parents who were politically active and had experienced various forms of oppression that “there are people that don’t like you...and there are people [who] are going to have bad things to say about you, [but don’t let] that stuff keep you down.”

Two other participants also described ways in which their personal experience of being marginalized or oppressed because of their non-traditional family form ultimately resulted in them having more conviction and confidence about their non-traditional gender expression. One participant explained feeling as though experiencing “a sliver of marginalization” as a white man is a “blessing” – “I won’t just follow suit of this like straight white guy power thing, you know. I feel like it’s a unique point [of view].” Another participant echoed these sentiments when describing his experience overcoming experiences of oppression surrounding his family: “I think I learn[ed] to be comfortable and learn[ed] to see difference as a strength, and that allow[ed] me to push back a little bit more than others on how I present as a man.”

Two additional participants explicitly stated that they feel their gender development experiences were “different” because they did not have a direct male role model in the home.

One participant described how his main model of adulthood and adult relationships was a “feminine experience,” and that he has “a sense” that this would have been different if he had had a male parent. Another participant stated with some certainty that his gender development would have been different if he had had a father in the sense that he would have “copied” a his father more, rather than copy the other males in his life.

**Mothers’ experiences of gender/sexuality-related oppression.** Lastly, one participant wondered about the connection between his mothers’ experiences of gender/sexuality-related oppression and their commitment to “not gendering [his] experience.” He explained: “I think just like growing up where they grew up, one in Long Island and one in the Midwest, and like experiencing oppression their whole lives, then coming into raising their kid, they wanted to not do that.”

### **Other Factors Participants Named as Impacting Their Gender Development**

**Geographical location.** Two participants explicitly offered a disclaimer that their overall experience of comfort throughout their gender development, and minimal experience of conflict around their non-traditional expression of masculinity, is likely largely related to the geographical region in which they grew up. One participant explained:

I grew up in what is considered a very progressive city. You know, I went to a public school that the core curriculum was based in the civil rights movement...so a lot of other men that I’ve grown up with and still associate with share my disconnect with how [the] male gender role functions in our society...I do think that maybe having two moms has set me even a little further apart than maybe some of those other people in certain ways, but it’s definitely something that I think is partially a result of my familial structure and slightly different upbringing, but also just being part of a more progressive subculture.

Another participant echoed these thoughts when he said:

...I think my situation may be different than some others because I grew up in this kind of very accepting liberal bastion where, you know, it was never an issue in school or anything, I was never challenged on it by anybody ever. So I think that's pretty unique, and if that had, you know, [been different] I would have maybe had more conflicts or whatever about it, or felt the need to search for more male role models.

**Exposure to progressive/liberal arts education and attending schools with other children of lesbians.** Seven participants noted how their educational experiences impacted their gender development. One participant described his mothers as raising him to “be a kid like everybody else,” and viewed their intentional efforts to send him to public schools with other children who had two moms as directly impacting this feeling of normality. Seven other participants expressed feeling as though their comfort around gender non-conformity was related to attending progressive/liberal arts high schools or colleges where the notion of gender was often deconstructed in the classroom and among peers. One participant described his exposure to progressive education and ideas about the social construction of gender as having a dramatic impact on his sense of self and mental health:

Before I went to [my program], I did think of maleness as more of the pop culture version of maleness and felt that I wasn't really embodying that. And I was definitely very depressed by that during middle school years, but then [my program] talked about how it doesn't really matter what society or what commercialism thinks what a man should be, and that I am whatever I am and to be content with that.

Another participant explained how attending a liberal arts college and taking gender studies courses has helped him feel more comfortable in his expression of masculinity, while

also leading him towards exploring it more deeply: “in college it’s much easier to be the man that I want to be...like it’s easier to express masculinity in all the ways I want to express it, but I’m questioning those too.”

**The loss of a mother.** Lastly, one participant shared feeling as though his gender development was uniquely impacted and influenced by the death of one of his mothers when he was in high school. In particular, this participant felt that his mother’s death ultimately resulted in him holding more dearly to his gender non-conforming qualities and characteristics:

...second half of high school, beginning of college, is often a very formative time for people in creating their own identity, and I think the fact that my non-biological mom died right at the beginning of that phase added a lot of complex nuance to my experience as a son of two moms, because, in a way, I had much more of an ability to pass as a son of heteronormative parents. I had a lot of complex feelings of guilt associated with that, of hiding the fact that I did have two moms and not being proud of that when I loved my mom so much and all of that. And I think perhaps, in a way, in the long run, dealing with all of that and reflecting on all of those emotions, I think maybe made me want to embrace those qualities even more strongly in the end. I think, wanting to honor my mom through that, I think is something I’ve now come to feel, but there was a period in there where I think I sort of lost track of that and was kind of excited to be a normal, you know, young boy, young man growing up that didn’t necessarily have this different family.

## **Summary**

This chapter outlined the findings of a qualitative study exploring the gender development experiences of 12 adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families between the ages of 18 and 30. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to help guide

their discussion of the topic. Key findings presented in this chapter are that adult-male children of planned lesbian families: 1) largely experience themselves as expressing and conceptualizing masculinity in non-traditional ways; 2) feel overwhelmingly positive about the non-traditional ways in which they embody male identity; 3) most frequently name dimensions of emotionality as the qualities and characteristics they possess that constitute non-traditional expressions of masculinity/male identity; 4) experience some form of conflict (internal/external) around their non-traditional expressions of masculinity/male identity, mostly during adolescence; and 5) believe their mothers' gender identities, gender expressions, and gender-related attitudes likely had the greatest impact on their gender development. Implications of the findings outlined in this chapter will be discussed further in the next chapter, the Discussion.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of adult-male children of planned lesbian families with respect to their gender development. Furthermore, this study explored if and/or how adult-male children of planned lesbian families perceive their family form to have impacted their construction and expression of masculinity and male identity. Because no study to date has exclusively, nor deeply, explored the subjective experiences and perceptions of this particular population as relates solely to their gender development, I chose to conduct a flexible methods, qualitative, inductive, exploratory research study using intensive interviewing as my data collection method (Anastas, 1999, p. 353; Engle & Schutt, 2013, p. 272; 288). This chapter will review key findings from this research study and compare them to the current body of literature surrounding the gender development of children raised in lesbian families. This chapter will also explore this study's major strengths and limitations, and make related recommendations for future research on the topic. Finally, this chapter will discuss how findings from this study have implications for social work practice and theory.

#### **Key Findings Considered in Light of the Current Body of Literature**

The two most striking findings of this research study are the following:

- 1) Adult-male children of planned lesbian families do, in large part, feel that they conceptualize and express masculinity/male identity in non-traditional ways; and



- 2) Adult-male children of planned lesbian families feel overwhelmingly positive about how they conceptualize and express masculinity/male identity in non-traditional ways.

While participants varied in their self-defined profile of traditional and non-traditional expressions of masculinity, and the degree to which they expressly identified as more or less gender non-conforming, the vast majority of participants embraced the complexity of their male identity and felt strongly that their non-traditional expressions of masculinity garnered them with unique benefits as men. These findings mirror, in part, Goldberg's (2007) finding that male and female adults raised with lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual parents can and do "highlight their own gender-atypical interests, orientations, and capabilities," as well as serve to re-confirm Stacy and Biblarz's (2001) argument that "children with lesbigay parents appear less traditionally gender-typed" than previously reported in the literature (Goldberg, 2007, p. 559; Stacy & Biblarz, 2001, p. 176). Taken together, these results strongly suggest that adult-male children of lesbian families are in fact "queering" gender (Oswald et al., 2005). Additionally, this study's findings add vital information to the current body of literature about how adult-male children of planned lesbian families feel about their gender non-conforming traits; namely, that they chiefly "cherish" them.

While Stacy and Biblarz (2001) conclude their study by calling on researchers to further explore the meaningful and nuanced ways that children of lesbian, gay and bisexual families express gender in non-traditional ways, this study's key findings serve to further suggest that researchers should continue exploring how children/adult-children of lesbian families personally regard and make meaning of their non-traditional ways of expressing gender. The dearth of scientific knowledge about the real and nuanced gender development experiences of children/adult-children raised in planned lesbian families leaves this population vulnerable to

widespread misconception at best, and prejudice at worst. More research is needed to address this empirical ignorance.

In line with Goldberg's (2007) conclusion that adult-children of lesbian, gay, and bisexual families both "accommodate to the pressures of heteronormativity...[and] also resist heteronormativity," the majority of participants in this study described ways in which they both felt aligned with traditional masculinity and ways that they challenged it through the expression of more stereotypically "feminine" traits (p. 559). These results also relate to those published in MacCallum and Golombok (2004); namely, that adolescent male children raised by lesbians embody more feminine personality traits, but no fewer masculine ones, than children raised in heterosexual families. This study, however, was not a comparison study nor did it quantify levels of masculinity and femininity in participants, which makes direct comparison between the two studies impossible. It is also important to note, however, that three of 12 participants in this study explicitly expressed feeling significantly less masculine than the norm of men in our society and/or identified as gender non-conforming. Given the small sample size, the experiences of these three participants do not undermine the findings in MacCallum and Golombok (2004), but they do suggest that more research is necessary to better understand the prevalence of this experience, how participants come to make this determination about their gender identity, and the long-term impact of such on men's lives in our heteronormative and heterosexist society.

Another significant finding of this study is that qualities related to emotionality (emotional expression, attunement to the emotions of self and others, willingness to be vulnerable, emotional sensitivity, ability to cry) were the most frequently named by participants as their non-traditional expressions of masculinity. Most studies that have attempted to measure gender development outcomes of children raised by lesbians have focused on children's gender

role behavior, attitudes and preferences (Bos & Sandfort, 2010; Brewaeys et al., 1997; Fulcher et al., 2008; Goldberg et al., 2012; Golombok et al., 1983; Golombok & Mooney-Somers, 2000; Green et al., 1986; Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Steckel, 1987; Sutfin et al., 2008); no study to date has systematically explored or measured the emotional capacities of this population and the impact of these capacities on their lives. It is also notable that a number of participants in this study described their level of emotionality (in all its dimensions) as being a “gift” that has facilitated depth, longevity, and intimacy in relationships with others, as well as benefitted them in their work, their capacity to feel whole as a person, and their mental health.

The psychological and social benefits described by participants in this study are echoed in the wider body of literature surrounding male development. As noted and extensively cited in Way, Cressen, Bodian, Preston, Nelson, and Hughes (2014),<sup>13</sup> a growing body of research on male development suggests that “the key to helping boys thrive lies in boys’ resistance to masculine norms that encourage boys not to express their feelings, to engage in aggressive behavior, and deny their desire and need for relationships.” In their own longitudinal study designed to capture the prevalence, developmental impact, and trajectory of male resistance to gender norms across adolescence, Way et al. (2014) found that “resistance to norms of masculinity enhances psychological and social adjustment for boys during adolescence and is

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<sup>13</sup> Blazina, Pisecco, & O’Neil, 2005; Chu, 2014; Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995; Good, Heppner, DeBord, & Fischer, 2004; Gupta, Way, McGill, Hughes, Santos, Jia, & Deng, 2013; Hayes & Mahalik, 2000; Mahalik, Locke, Ludlow, Diemer, Scott, Gottfried, & Freitas, 2003; Santos, 2010; Wester, Kuo, & Vogel, 2006.

deeply influenced by the context in which boys are embedded” (p. 241). The present study suggests that lesbian families may function in a way that facilitates greater resistance among male children to certain masculine norms, and by extension a greater likelihood that their male children might thrive. This possibility could dramatically shift the long-standing paradigm around how differences in family form are conceptualized in our culture. Namely, this study suggests that difference is not something to revile, nor is it something to simply accept and tolerate; rather, difference is something to move towards and embrace as an opportunity for new learning and expansion of the ways we conceptualize gender, healthy gender development, and the role of families in influencing this process. More research is needed to explore how and why male resistance to certain constructed gender norms correlates to greater levels of resilience and well-being, as well as how this resistance manifests itself similarly and/or differently across different family forms and in different ethnic communities. Way et al. (2014) are beginning to measure and capture the prevalence and patterns of male resistance to gender norms among a diverse population of adolescent boys, but they do not control for family form. Future studies designed to capture and compare the prevalence, similarities, and differences in adolescent and or adult-male children’s experiences of gender norm resistance across family forms would greatly enrich our understanding of this phenomenon and the mechanisms underpinning gender role resistance.

In addition to feeling more emotionally expressive, attuned, sensitive, and intelligent than the typical man in our society, a number of participants also named having respect for women and being aware of their male privilege as ways in which they feel not aligned with traditional masculinity. These findings support Goldberg’s (2007) hunch that male children of lesbians “may experience heightened consciousness of their status as males and lack confidence or

permission for ‘male privilege,’” as well as mirror Bos and Sandfort’s (2010) findings that school-aged children raised in lesbian families are less likely to “experience their own gender as superior” (Bos & Sandfort, 2010, p. 114; Goldberg, 2007, p. 551).

With respect to role models of masculinity/male identity, the majority of participants discussed having male role models throughout their childhood, and a few noted that their mothers made explicit efforts to provide them with opportunities to know and be around “good men.” This echoes Gartrell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks, and Bishop’s (1996) findings, as well as those outlined in Goldberg and Allen (2007); namely, that lesbian mothers invoke the presence of men in their children’s lives who they believe will be “good quality role models” (Goldberg & Allen, 2007, p. 361). Strikingly, five participants named their mother(s) and/or female members of their community as role models of masculinity throughout their lives, suggesting their deconstructed notion of gender and their conviction that masculinity (and femininity) is a cluster of traits that can be embodied by anyone, male or female. This unique finding challenges the idea that certain gender-specific traits can only be conveyed from men to boys (or from women to girls), a challenge also raised in Bos et al.’s (2012) study that found no difference in expression of feminine or masculine gender role traits between children raised in lesbian families who did and did not have male role models in their lives. Furthermore, these findings underscore Goldberg and Gartrell’s (2014) assertion that it may be time for researchers to “push beyond the concept of ‘male role models’ and ‘female role models’ to consider other ways of conceptualizing male and female involvement in [lesbian, gay, and bisexual] families” (p. 76).

While participants largely expressed overwhelming positivity about their unique expressions and conceptions of masculinity today, it is important to address the fact that all 12

participants in this study also endorsed experiences of conflict surrounding their less traditional expressions of masculinity (though some more significantly than others). Middle school and high school were named as the most conflict-rife periods in participants' lives with respect to their gender development; some participants also expressed feeling some internal conflict in the present (early adulthood). When considering these findings and what they might mean for male children raised in lesbian families, it is imperative to note the centrality of conflict – and specifically gender role conflict – to normative adolescent development (Erikson, 1963; Waterman, 1982; Watts & Borders, 2005).

Erik Erikson, the developmental psychologist renowned for his theory of the stages of psychosocial development, considers the primary task of adolescence that of fashioning confidence and consistency in one's identity in spite of experiences of external pressure and role confusion. Erikson (1963) writes that adolescents are "...primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others compared with what they feel they are," and need to feel coherence between their internal sense of self and the qualities and characteristics valued in their external world (p. 261). The existential questions 'Who am I?' and 'Who can I be?' underpin this stage of development, and the overall goal "is to find modes of expression that reflect intrinsic inclinations and for which sufficient sources of social support exist within the individual's cultural milieu" (Waterman, 1982, p. 341). Knowing that our society places tremendous pressure on men to subscribe to traditional norms of masculinity, and that pressure to accommodate gendered expectations intensifies during adolescence, it follows that gender role conflict is pervasive among adolescent males of all family forms. Recent empirical studies designed to explore and quantify the experiences of gender role conflict among adolescent males corroborate this assumption (Galligan, Barnett, Brennan, & Israel, 2010; Watts & Borders, 2005; Way et al.,

2014). Therefore, while male-children of planned lesbian families may make meaning of their experiences of gender role conflict in unique and noteworthy ways given their upbringing within a heterosexist society, the experience of gender role conflict, in and of itself, is normative and in no way suggests a problem with lesbian families and their rearing of male children. More research is needed to explore gender role conflict among adolescent boys raised in lesbian families (as well as other family forms), with special attention to its impact on their sense of identity and the ways they make personal meaning out of the conflict given their unique demographic and family characteristics. Furthermore, longitudinal studies would help to illuminate the trajectory of gender role conflict in adult-males raised in planned lesbian families across the lifespan.

While on the whole participants struggled to definitively answer if or how they believed their family form impacted their unique way of expressing and conceptualizing masculinity/male identity, most participants expressed curiosity about the relationship between their non-traditional expressions of masculinity and their mothers' gender identities, gender expression, and/or gender-related attitudes. The majority of participants described their mothers as providing them "freedom" and "permission" to explore the way they wanted to express and define masculinity, something similarly described by Goldberg's (2007) participants and established in Hoeffler (1981), a study of elementary school aged children raised by lesbian mothers in which lesbian mothers were found to be "more willing to encourage, or at least less likely to censor" their children playing with less sex-typed toys than heterosexual mothers (p. 542). A number of participants in this study also posited that having mothers that were gender non-conforming themselves, and/or who surrounded them with a gender non-conforming community, contributed to their personal understanding of gender as constructed and fluid. Furthermore, these

participants suggested that having male and female role models who embodied traditional and non-traditional gender traits taught them that their male identity could incorporate any qualities or characteristics that they felt were true to them as individual people. In this way, the mothers of these participants seem to have created environments for their children where “queering” gender was not only possible, but also nurtured (Oswald et al., 2005)

Participants’ sense that their parents’ attitudes about gender, as well as their parents’ non-conforming gender expression and community of gender non-confirming friends, contributed to them embodying masculinity in less traditional ways is mirrored in Fulcher et al. (2008) and Sutfin et al. (2008). Fulcher (2008) and her colleagues found that “parents’ attitudes and behaviors were more strongly associated with children’s gender development than was parental sexual orientation,” but also noted “lesbian parents are constructing family life that parallels the processes that may lead to more gender flexibility in children” (Fulcher et al., 2008, p. 330; 338). Similarly, Sutfin et al. (2008) found that “children with lesbian mothers had less stereotyped environments and less traditional attitudes about gender,” but that “regardless of sexual orientation, parents who held liberal attitudes about children’s gender-related behavior ... had children whose own attitudes about gender development were less stereotyped as well” (p. 501). Taken together, participants’ hypotheses about the impact of their family form on their gender development further support the argument that differences in gender development among children raised in lesbian families are not direct effects of their mothers’ sexual orientations but rather “indirect effects of parental gender or selection effects associated with heterosexist social conditions under which lesbian-parent families currently live” (Stacy & Biblarz, 2001, p. 176).

It is also notable that a few participants also credited their respect for women and their level of emotionality to having been raised by two women. With regard to having respect for



women, Goldberg's (2007) male participants raised by lesbians similarly credited their "value [of] strength and capability in female partners" and "emphasis on egalitarianism in their relationship[s]" to growing up with "strong, feminist women" (p. 558). This further supports the conclusions of Stacy and Biblarz (2001), Fulcher et al. (2008), and Sutfin et al. (2008) that it is not parental sexual orientation, but rather parental gender identity and attitudes about gender, that ultimately influence a child's gender development. Relatedly, Kweskin and Cook (1982) found that mothers (regardless of sexuality) tend to desire gender traits in their children that mirror traits they possess themselves. While Kweskin and Cook (1982) make no assertions about what this means for male children of lesbians, Stacy and Biblarz (2001) infer that the former's findings "suggest that a mothers' own gender identity may mediate the connection between maternal sexual orientation and maternal gender preferences for her children" (Stacy & Biblarz, 2001, p. 172). Considering this in conjunction with participants' de-emphasis of the impact of their mothers' sexual orientation on their gender development, this suggests that it is time for researchers to redirect their focus away from searching for the effects and impact of parental sexual orientation on children and instead explore the complex ways that parents' gender identities, gender expressions, and gender-related attitudes impact the way their children come to express and conceptualize themselves as gendered beings.

Another small but important finding of this research study has to do with the impact of lesbian mothers' negative attitudes about men on their male children. While it seems as though participants' mothers were accepting, and at times explicitly encouraging, of their male children's expression of less traditionally masculine traits, some mothers also strongly communicated negative feelings about men to their male children and communicated clear expectations that they *not* embody certain traditional masculine qualities. Given a few

participants described their mothers' negative messages about men as causing them to feel "shame," "guilt" and/or "pressure" around their male identity, more research is needed to explore the prevalence, nuance, and long-term impacts of mothers' negative messages about men on their sons' gender development and emotional well-being.

In summary, this study showed that adult-male children of planned lesbian families: 1) largely experience themselves as expressing and conceptualizing masculinity in non-traditional ways; 2) feel overwhelmingly positive about the non-traditional ways in which they embody male identity; 3) most frequently name dimensions of emotionality as the qualities and characteristics they possess that constitute non-traditional expressions of masculinity/male identity; 4) experience some form of conflict (internal/external) around their non-traditional expressions of masculinity/male identity, mostly during adolescence; and 5) believe their mothers' gender identities, gender expressions, and gender-related attitudes likely had the greatest impact on their gender development. While these findings are noteworthy and add valuable information to the body of research on children raised in lesbian families, this study is the first of its kind and therefore raises more questions than it answers about the gender development experiences of this population. While some recommendations for further study are mentioned above, additional thoughts about how researchers should continue to explore the gender development experiences of adult-male children of planned lesbian families will be outlined in a following section entitled Recommendations for Future Research.

### **Strengths and Limitations of This Research Study**

The original purpose of this study was to explore the gender development experiences of adult-male children of planned lesbian families and whether/how they believe their family form impacted their unique way of conceptualizing and expressing masculinity/their male identity. I

believe this study adequately addressed these research questions and sheds important light on how adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families make meaning of their gender development experiences.

Additionally, a significant strength of this study is that it is the first of its kind. Few studies to date have asked adult children of lesbian families about how they make meaning of their experiences, and none have exclusively, nor deeply, explored how adult-male children of planned lesbian families make meaning of their gender development experiences specifically. Relatedly, the use of qualitative, exploratory research methods (semi-structured intensive interviewing) provided participants the rare opportunity to contribute their thoughts and opinions about their gender development experiences to the body of research on children raised by lesbians without the intrusion or mediation of restrictive research tools/measures. Not relying on research tools and/or measures proven to be valid and/or reliable, however, also limits this study in a number of ways, which will be discussed later in this chapter along with other limitations of this study.

Another notable strength of this study is that it serves to further de-stigmatize the gender development experiences of children – but specifically male children – raised in lesbian families by adding to the growing body of research that reframes their experience of difference as a normal and positive part of the human experience. In illuminating the overwhelming positivity participants expressed about their non-traditional ways of expressing masculinity, this study not only supports the idea that difference exists, but also that difference is largely experienced as a positive and helpful thing by those who embody it.

Additionally, allowing for the inclusion of both cisgender and transgender participants in this study allowed participants to entirely self-define what male-ness meant to them from the

outset of participation in the study, as well as shed light on the ways in which cisgender and transgender men raised by lesbians share common experiences. That being said, the small sample size limits this study's ability to make any generalizations or observations about the similarities and differences among cisgender and transgender men raised by lesbians with respect to their gender development.

While this study has unique strengths, it also has its limitations. Due to the small size of the study's sample, the homogeneous racial make-up of participants (all white identified), the concentrated geographic locations of participants during childhood, and the sampling methods employed (convenience/snowball sampling), this study is limited in its ability to be generalized to the wider population of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families. The small size of the study sample additionally makes it difficult to draw any systematic conclusions about demographic subgroup variations and trends (i.e. the experiences of white, adult-male children raised in lesbian families in the Bay Area, CA and Cambridge/Boston, MA). Lastly and again due to the small sample size, this study was unable to explore any differences among men's feelings about their gender development based on their current age group/developmental stage or cisgender/transgender identity.

The fact that all interviewed participants self-selected to be part of this study must also be considered when reviewing the results. This introduces the possibility of *volunteer bias*. While participants did not know the questions they were asked ahead of time, they were informed of the study's overall focus and objectives, and therefore felt some degree of comfort discussing their gender development experiences. It is possible that the participants in this study demonstrated bias with respect to the level of positivity they held about their gender development experiences and non-traditional ways of expressing masculinity/male identity. It is also possible that the

participants in the study demonstrated bias with respect to the degree of resolve they feel around their non-traditional ways of expressing masculinity/male identity. These outcomes could also be the effect of *social desirability bias*. It cannot be known how many individuals opted out of being interviewed for the study due to feeling discomfort or conflict around the topic, and/or fear that their discomfort or experience of conflict could be misconstrued in a way that would have a negative impact on how their family form is regarded by me, the researcher, or the general public.

While the semi-structured format of this study's interviews was designed to allow participants freedom to voice their unique perspectives, feelings, and opinions to the extent they desired without the intrusion of my (the researcher's) presuppositions, my open-ended questions were still inherently designed to guide participants' expressions based on what I believed were key overarching topics to discuss surrounding their gender development (ex: role models, experiences of conflict, impact of family form, etc.). It cannot be known how much this semi-structured interview format subtly influenced participants in their expressions, nor what information they would have volunteered if they were simply asked to describe what they felt was most salient to them about their gender development experience from the outset of the interview.

Relatedly, the semi-structured format of this study's interviews with participants limits the generalizability, replicability, and reliability of this study's findings. While from a social constructionist theoretical framework the use of open-ended interview questions is highly valued as a way of allowing participants freedom to define their own experiences and researchers to learn from these unmediated expressions, not utilizing research measures and/or tools that have repeatedly been proven to be valid and reliable precludes this study from being recreated, as well

as limits to what extent the findings of this study can be compared with the findings of other studies with different methodologies to draw sound conclusions about this population's gender development experiences.

Lastly, due to the qualitative nature of the study, interpretations, findings, and conclusions extrapolated from the data are inherently products of this researcher's subjectivity. This cannot be avoided in qualitative research, though it can be safeguarded against through the employment of secondary coders to review the consistency and validity of interpretations of the data. Unfortunately, due to limited time and resources, this researcher was unable to secure the help of secondary coders.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

A major strength of qualitative research is its capacity to generate knowledge about social and developmental processes from the first-hand accounts of those who are affected by them. Qualitative research is especially valuable when seeking to explore phenomena or topic areas that are under-researched and/or primarily only researched through a narrow lens or single methodology. Given the fact that this study is the first to ever ask a sample of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families to share their thoughts about their gender development experiences, my first and most virulent recommendation is that more researchers conduct qualitative, exploratory studies with this population to continue exploring their gender development experiences, how they subjectively express and construct masculinity/male identity, and how they make sense of the impact of their family form on such expressions and constructions. Moreover, qualitative studies with larger and more socio-culturally diverse samples of adult-male children of lesbian families would serve to build a more robust knowledge

base from which to draw conclusions about the normative gender development experiences of this population.

In addition to calling for similarly intentioned and structured qualitative studies with adult-male children of planned lesbian families, the present study also illuminates a number of specific themes related to the topic of male gender development and family form that would benefit from deeper qualitative exploration. Firstly, more research is needed to explore how men from various family forms feel about and make meaning of their non-traditional ways of expressing gender. The current body of literature shows that male children of lesbian families are not the only male children incorporating non-traditional traits into their way of expressing masculinity/male identity (Way et al., 2014); however, there may be interesting and important ways in which children of different family forms create different meanings about their gender identity development based on their upbringings. Exploratory studies designed to compare the response of adult-male children raised in lesbian families, gay-male families, single parent families (heterosexual and/or homosexual), and heterosexual families could begin to address this question. Additionally, more work is needed to explore the gender development experiences of the specific population of transgender men raised in lesbian families, paying particular attention to the ways in which these men perceive themselves as having similar and/or different experiences than cisgender men raised in similar family forms. Lastly, given the dearth of literature on the gender development experiences of children raised in gay-male families in general, it is imperative that researchers begin to close that gap and approach adult-male children of gay-male families with curiosity about how they make meaning of their gender development experiences, its relationship to their family form, and how they believe it may be similar and/or different from children raised in other family forms.

While important for their own sake, more robust and diverse qualitative studies are also necessary to inform the direction and focus of future quantitative research on children raised in lesbian families. For many years, quantitative research on children of lesbian families emanated from places of fear or defensiveness around the aptitude and fitness of non-heterosexual parents to raise children. To avoid further movement driven by prejudice, bias, agenda, or voyeurism, it is imperative that researchers listen to the voices of children of lesbian families for cues and suggestions of where their experience warrants further attention by the wider research community. Only then will quantitative studies be in service of this population and yield meaningful information about the frequencies and generalizability of themes raised in this qualitative analysis, as well as those to come.

The present qualitative study raises a few important questions that could benefit from further quantitative exploration. Given the fact that all 12 participants in this study named experiences of conflict surrounding their gender development, and coupled with the fact that gender role conflict seems to be a normal developmental struggle for males in general, more research is needed to capture the prevalence, timing, and nuance of gender role conflict among male children of lesbian families as compared to the growing literature on gender role conflict among the wider population of men. Additionally, given the significant number of participants who described dimensions of emotionality as their most non-traditional masculine quality, and the quality that grants them the greatest benefits in their lives, more research is needed to quantify and measure the emotional capacities of male children raised by lesbians and compare them to male children raised in other family forms. Knowing that the current body literature views emotionality as a protective factor in a man's psychological and social development, these studies may serve to illuminate unique strengths and benefits of being raised in a lesbian family,



and therefore further de-stigmatize the experiences of children growing up in non-traditional households. Furthermore, quantitative studies should be designed to try and identify and isolate the familial factors that lead to the integration of emotionality in men, as well as further explore the impact on men's relationships, experiences of wellbeing, and their mental health over time.

Lastly, but importantly, more work is needed to tease apart the various socio-cultural influences that bear on the gender development of male children raised in lesbian families (race, class, gender, family form, parental marital status, ethnicity, geographic location, ability, etc.), as well as track and compare gender development experiences of male-children raised in lesbian families over the course of their lifetimes.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice & Theory**

This study comes at a unique time in history when researchers and children of lesbian/gay families alike are boldly engaging in research that seeks to explore potential differences between their experiences and those of children raised in other family forms. As Stacy and Biblarz (2001) explain, for many years researchers felt tremendous pressure to empirically prove that there were “no differences” between children raised with lesbian/gay parents and those raised with heterosexual parents in order to contend with widespread homophobia and the commonplace denial of legal rights/custody to lesbian/gay parents. Today, not only are researchers exploring difference, but they are also finding that difference does not equate to deficit. To the contrary, researchers are finding that there may be unique strengths associated with growing up in different family forms. In line with this, the present study serves to show that there are a number of ways in which adult-male children of planned lesbian families feel different than the traditional/stereotypical man in our society, and that they believe their non-traditional ways of expressing masculinity grant them unique benefits as men. Most importantly, however, this study

concludes that male children of lesbian families are not only all right, but they also *feel* (more than) all right about their gender development experiences and unique ways of conceptualizing and expressing masculinity/male identity. It is my hope that this specific finding will help to finally put to bed the outdated and prejudiced assumption that differences in gender expression and conceptualization among children raised by lesbian mothers is something to fear, and instead encourage the widespread embrace of difference as a meaningful and natural part of the human experience.

Relatedly, social workers, therapists, and other practitioners working closely with lesbian families and their male-children should simultaneously avoid making assumptions about the impact of family form on a child's gender development and demonstrate curiosity and understanding that there may be meaningful ways in which male-children do in fact experience themselves and their family's influence differently than children from other family forms. In other words, practitioners should not search for difference nor avoid it; they should simply be attuned to the unique and individual ways that male-children of lesbian families are shaped by their mothers' gender identities, gender expressions, and gender-related attitudes in light of the social pressures and social discourses around gender in our culture. This is especially necessary among therapists and practitioners working with adolescent male-children of lesbian families around their experiences of gender role conflict.

Lastly, given the majority of participants named middle school and high school as times rife with conflict about their gender expression, social workers and school counselors should actively try to design and implement gender-related trainings for school communities that deconstruct gender and the mainstream essentialism of masculinity and femininity. These

trainings would hopefully support all children in feeling safer in school, as well as reduce the emotional and social impact of gender role conflict during adolescence.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of adult-male children of planned lesbian families with respect to their gender development, as well as to explore if and/or how adult-male children of planned lesbian families perceive their family form to have impacted their construction and expression of masculinity/male identity. The most significant findings of this study were that adult-male children of planned lesbian families largely experience themselves as expressing and conceptualizing masculinity in non-traditional ways, and that they feel overwhelmingly positive about this. Importantly, all participants described experiencing some form of conflict (internal and/or external) around their gender expression, and most participants located their experiences of conflict within adolescence – a developmental stage defined by identity-related conflicts, and specifically gender role conflict. That being said, the majority of participants expressed feeling as though their non-traditional expressions of masculinity afford them unique and invaluable benefits as men: interpersonally, professionally, and psychologically. The qualities most frequently named by participants as their non-traditional expressions of masculinity had to do with emotionality (emotional expression, attunement to the emotions of self and others, willingness to be vulnerable, emotional sensitivity, ability to cry). When discussing the impact of their family form on their gender development, participants notably de-emphasized the role of their mothers' sexual orientation and instead expressed curiosity about ways in which their mothers' gender identity, gender expression, and gender related attitudes influenced their way of thinking about and expressing masculinity.

No study to date has asked adult-male children of planned lesbian families to self-define and self-describe their gender development experiences without the mediation and intrusion of research tools, researchers' constructions of gender, and/or outside observers; therefore, this study is the first of its kind and adds vital new information to the long-standing body of literature on children raised in lesbian families. This study offers much-needed insight into how adult-male children of planned lesbian families make meaning of their gender development and the impact of their family form. Most importantly, this study pushes the body of literature surrounding children of lesbian families beyond just proving that this population is functioning and/or developing similarly to children raised in heterosexual families – or conversely, searching for differences between these two populations – to showing that adult-male children of planned lesbian families themselves *feel* different and/or disconnected from traditional notions of masculinity/male identity in our society *and* that they *feel overwhelmingly positive* about this.

Additionally, this study further supports the conclusions of recent empirical research suggesting that parental sexual orientation is secondary to other socio-cultural factors in its influence on children's gender development. It follows, then, that it may be time for the research community to re-evaluate its half century obsession with searching for similarities and/or differences in children raised in lesbian families, and instead approach this population with curiosity about how experiencing themselves as being similar to and/or different from other children impacts their lives in multiple and nuanced ways. Similarly, this study serves to urge future researchers to move beyond focusing on the impact of parental sexual orientation on the gender development of children and instead attend to the complex ways that parental gender identity, gender expression, and gender-related attitudes impact how their children come to know and express themselves as gendered beings.

While this study offers unique and important information to the body of literature surrounding children/adult-children raised in planned lesbian families, this study is limited in its ability to be generalized to wider populations of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families due to its sample size and methodology. More qualitative research designed to explore the nuances of the gender development experiences of adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families is needed, both to capture the reality and complexity of this population's experiences, but also to inform future qualitative studies that serve to support the needs of this population rather than objectify it. In particular, this qualitative study suggests that additional quantitative research is necessary to capture and identify the frequency of gender role conflict among adult-male children raised in planned lesbian families as compares to adult-male children raised in other family forms, as well as to explore the differences and similarities between the meaning participants make of their experiences of gender role conflict in light of their family form. Additionally, given the significant number of participants in this study who described dimensions of emotionality as their most non-traditional expressions of masculinity, and the quality that grants them the greatest benefits in their lives, future qualitative studies should attempt to measure the emotional capacities of male children raised by lesbians as compares to male children raised in other family forms, as well as try to isolate the familial factors that lead to the integration of greater emotionality in men.

With respect to social work practice and theory, this study suggests that it is time for researchers, social workers, therapists and other practitioners working closely with lesbian families and their male-children to release themselves from the historical preoccupation with searching for similarity and/or difference, and instead approach their work with sensitivity about the complex ways that a child's gender development can be impacted by their unique family

members and family form. On the whole, practitioners should make concerted efforts to avoid making assumptions about the impact of family form on a child's gender development; simultaneously, practitioners should demonstrate knowledge and curiosity about the meaningful ways that children may experience themselves, their gender development, and their family's influence on their gender development differently than children from other family forms in the context of our heterosexist and heteronormative society. It is my great hope that this study – and studies to come – will continue to emanate from places of not-knowing, an appreciation of diversity, and a fierce commitment to representing the actual experiences, interests and needs of this growing population of children/adult-children raised in planned lesbian families.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

How old are you?

How do you identify racially?

What state do you live in?

\*

\*

\*

1. What qualities or characteristics do you possess that are central to your male identity?
  - *Alternative phrasing*: what makes you a man?
2. Where/how did you learn what it means to be a man?
  - *Standard probe*: How did you feel about what you learned?
  - *Standard probe*: How did that information influence you?
3. Who were your role models of masculinity/male identity growing up?
4. What did they teach/model for you?
5. How does the way you define masculinity, and the way you express your male identity, compare to the expectations, norms and/or stereotypes of being a man in our society?
  - *Standard probe*: Can you tell me more about that?
6. Are there qualities of your male identity that you feel are more stereotypically “feminine”?
  - *Standard probe*: How do you feel about those qualities?
  - *Standard probe*: How do you believe those qualities have played a role in your life and/or relationships?
7. Have you ever experienced conflict around the way that you think about and express masculinity/your male identity, either with yourself or with others?
  - *Standard probe*: Can you tell me more about that?
8. How has your experience of conflict around the way you think about and express masculinity/your male identity changed over time?
9. What, if any, benefits do you believe your way of thinking about and expressing masculinity/your male identity affords you?
10. What, if any, challenges have you faced because of the way you conceptualize and express masculinity/your male identity?

11. In what ways, if at all, do you believe your idea of what it means to be a man, and how you express your masculinity, has been impacted or influenced by your family form?  
- *Standard probe*: Can you tell me more about that?
12. What did your mothers communicate to you about men?
13. What did your mothers communicate to you about the kind of man you should be?
14. Is there anything else you would like me to know before we conclude the interview?



## **Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer**

### **Seeking Participants for a Research Study!**

Are you 18+? Are you a male-identified child born to or adopted by a lesbian couple? If so, are you interested in sharing your thoughts about the way you think about and express masculinity/your male identity? I am an MSW student at Smith College School for Social Work conducting a research study that seeks to explore and give voice to the subjective experiences of male children raised in planned lesbian families with respect to their gender development. This study offers participants a unique opportunity to add a human quality to the body of research conducted on children of lesbian families, as well as support a more comprehensive understanding of how growing up in a non-traditional family may impact one's sense of self in our society. This study would be the first of its kind.

If you are interested in sharing your story, I would love to hear from you! Interviews will be between 45 minutes to 1 hour in length, and can be conducted in-person or via Skype (depending on one's physical location and availability). Your participation in the study will be confidential. Please send me an email at [REDACTED] if you are interested and I will gladly provide you with more information. Also, if you know of anyone else who fits the criteria and might like to participate, please feel free to forward on this message and my contact information.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST AND YOUR SUPPORT!

-Naomi Drexler

## Appendix C: Template Email (for recruitment)

Dear \_\_\_\_ (insert individual or group name),

I hope this email finds you well!

As \_\_\_\_ (you/some of you) may already know, I am a MSW student at Smith College School for Social Work currently working on my Masters thesis. I have chosen to conduct a qualitative study exploring the experiences of adult-male children raised by lesbian parents as relates to their gender development. I hope to learn about how adult-male children of lesbian families think about and express masculinity and their male identity, as well as explore whether/how they believe their family form has had an impact on how they think about and express masculinity/their male identity.

I am very excited about the possibilities of this study, as it is the first of its kind and will provide participants the unique opportunity to fill a hole in the body of literature surrounding the gender development experiences of children raised in lesbian families. Not only are the voices and perspectives of adults raised by lesbians largely absent from the current body of literature, but they are also sorely needed in order for our society to have a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of how growing up in a non-traditional family may impact one's sense of self in our society.

In order to conduct this study, however, I need your help finding participants! Below are the criteria for participation:

- 1) Be at least 18 years old;
- 2) Be male-identified; and
- 3) Be the child of a planned lesbian family (defined as being born to or adopted by a lesbian couple who intended to raise their child together; the original lesbian couple, however, does not need to still be a couple for participation in the study).

I ask that you please pass along this email and/or distribute the attached flyer to any and all people who fit the inclusion criteria and may be interested in participating. Please also forward this message on to those who you believe might know others who fit the inclusion criteria and might be interested in participating. I can be reached at [REDACTED] and am happy to answer any questions you or prospective participants might have.

Thank you so much for your interest and support!

All my best,  
Naomi Drexler

[attach recruitment flyer]

**Appendix D: Informed Consent Form**



**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

.....

**Title of Study:** A Study Exploring the Subjective Experiences and Perceptions of Adult-Male Children Reared in Planned Lesbian Families as Relates to Their Gender Development

**Investigator(s):** Naomi Drexler  
Smith School for Social Work



.....

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to participate in a research study that seeks to explore the **experiences** of adult-male children reared in planned lesbian families about their gender development and the extent to which they believe their family form impacted their way of thinking about and expressing masculinity/their male identity.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you meet the following criteria:
  - 1) 18 years of age or older;
  - 2) male-identified;
  - 3) child of a planned lesbian family\*; and
  - 4) born, reared, and currently residing in the United States.

\*For the purposes of this study, a “planned lesbian family” is defined as follows: a lesbian couple who either adopted or conceived (through third-party reproductive methods) a child with the intention of raising it together as co-parents. In order to participate in this study, the original lesbian couple who either adopted or conceived a child with the intention of raising it together does not still need to remain a couple.

- I ask that you read this form and ask me any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is to gather important information about the experiences of growing up as a male in a lesbian household. Not only are the voices and perspectives of adult male children raised by lesbians largely absent from the literature, but they are also sorely needed in order for our society to have a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of how growing up in a non-traditional family may impact one’s sense of self and experience of self in relation to others in our society. I hope this study adds a human quality to the research on children/adults raised in planned lesbian families and further de-stigmatizes the experiences of this rapidly growing social group.

- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

### **Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:
  - 1) Participate in either an in-person or video (via Skype) interview with this researcher for no more than one consecutive hour.
  - 2) Agree to have the interview digitally audio recorded. These recordings will be later transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

### **Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

This study poses little foreseeable risk to participants; that being said, you may become emotional or uncomfortable after discussing your gender development experience and its relation to growing up in a planned lesbian family. Feel free to decline to answer any question, or even end the interview early if the discussion causes you discomfort. In addition, attached to the end of this Informed Consent Form is a list of national LGBTQ-affirmative resources for you to use in case you feel the need to access support after our interview.

### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

- Participants may benefit from this study in the following ways: it provides a rare and unique space for adult-male children of planned lesbian families to give voice to their personal experiences and stories without the mediating effect of parent opinions or rigid study instruments; it provides adult-male children of planned lesbian families an opportunity to begin to fill the gap in the literature on the gender development experiences and perceptions of adult-males raised in planned lesbian families; it offers participants the opportunity to possibly set the stage for, and set into motion, future research that abandons the deficit model when conceptualizing LGBTQ families and instead adopts a stance of appreciation of diversity and difference; and it provides adult-male children of planned lesbian families the opportunity to inform clinicians working with lesbian families and/or their children about the specific, and perhaps unique, resource and support needs of such families and children.
- This study benefits the field of social work and society at large by shedding light on the subjective experiences of adult-male children of planned lesbian families, which can inform clinical practice and social policy. In addition, this study will attempt to humanize the current body of literature on children of lesbian families, as well as identify areas for future research.

### **Confidentiality**

- Your information and participation in the study will be kept confidential. I will be the only person who will know about your participation. In-person interviews will take place in a neutral, private or semi-private location of your choosing. With respect to video interviews (via Skype), I will conduct them without any other individuals present; you are advised to reside somewhere private as well to ensure confidentiality of shared information. In addition, all digital and written records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. I will be the only one who will have access to the audio recording, with the exception of a potential transcriber who will sign a confidentiality agreement. Recordings will be destroyed after the mandated three years. They will be permanently deleted from the recording device.

- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations, after which point they will be destroyed. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. I will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

**Payments/gift**

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* up until April 1, 2015 without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 1, 2015. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis and final report.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Naomi Drexler at [redacted] or by telephone at [redacted]. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. You will also be given a list of national LGBTQ-affirmative resources to use if you experience emotional distress related to your participation in this study.

.....

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

**1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Form updated 9/25/13

## **LGBTQ-Affirmative Resources for Children of LGBTQ Families**

### **COLAGE – Coalition of Lesbian and Gays Everywhere**

[www.collage.org](http://www.collage.org)

COLAGE unites people with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer parents into a network of peers and supports them as they nurture and empower each other to be skilled, self-confident, and just leaders in our collective communities.

### **Family Equality Council**

[www.familyequality.org](http://www.familyequality.org)

Family Equality Council works to change attitudes and policies to ensure all families are respected, loved, and celebrated - especially families with parents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Website includes resources for children of LGBTQ families.

### **Families Like Mine**

[www.familieslikemine.org](http://www.familieslikemine.org)

The official website for Abigail Garner's book, *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is*. The site launched in 1999 with the mission to decrease isolation for people who have parents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), and bring voice to their experiences; the site now serves as a partial archive of Garner's work as a spokesperson and educator. Garner herself can be contacted through this site.

### **PFLAG – Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay**

[www.community.pflag.org](http://www.community.pflag.org)

Founded in 1972 with the simple act of a mother publicly supporting her gay son, PFLAG is the nation's largest family and ally organization. Uniting people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) with families, friends, and allies, PFLAG is committed to advancing equality and full societal affirmation of LGBTQ people through its threefold mission of support, education, and advocacy. PFLAG exists in every state. You can visit the national website to locate your local PFLAG chapter.

### **Human Rights Campaign**

[www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)

As the largest civil rights organization working to achieve equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans, the Human Rights Campaign represents a force of more than 1.5 million members and supporters nationwide — all committed to making HRC's vision a reality. HRC envisions a world where lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are embraced as full members of society at home, at work and in every community.

### **Possible books to read:**

*Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is*

Written by Abigail Garner; Published in 2004

*Let's Get This Straight: The Ultimate Handbook for Youth with LGBTQ Parents*

Written by Tina Fakhrid-Deen; Published in 2010

## Appendix E: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

### Volunteer or Professional Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality Form

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, *Naomi Drexler*, shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

#### PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, *Naomi Drexler*, for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

---

Transcriber's Signature

---

Date

---

Researcher's Signature

---

Date



## Appendix F: Human Subjects Review Letter of Approval



---

**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 6, 2015

Naomi Drexler

Dear Naomi,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Diana Fuery, Research Advisor