

FROM CRADLE TO PRIDE: HOW STRAIGHT PARENTS FORGE
REALTIONSHPIS WITH THEIR GAY SONS

by

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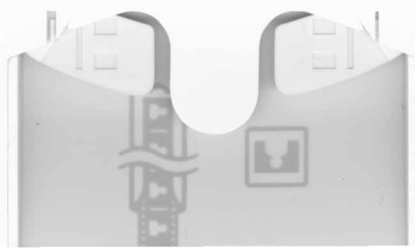
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my brother Phillip Johnson so that some day we might find a way,
and to my aunt, Sheridan McGlothlin, who has always been to us a light for the search.



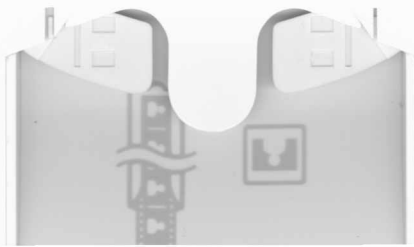
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	vi
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Attending PFLAG Meetings	34
Chapter 3 Pride Parades and Poker Games.....	60
Chapter 4 Renegotiating the Past	77
Chapter 5 The Normal Radical	101
List of References	106



ABSTRACT

FROM CRADLE TO PRIDE: HOW STRAIGHT PARENTS FORGE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR GAY SONS

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George Mason University, 2010

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Sociological research has unveiled conventional parents that become gay rights activists but pays insufficient attention to how this puzzling identity comes about. The argument presented here is that there are stages to what could be called moral careers of straight parents of gay sons. A first stage encompasses the process of a son coming out to his parents, a second involves parents becoming active in a supportive voluntary association, and a third stage is marked by walking in marches that support their children's cultural identities and political rights. Paradoxically, these parents become normal radicals through these stages; that is to say, committed to conventional imperatives of loving and supporting a child, they do parenting by becoming gay rights advocates.



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION- “I’M NOT ACTUALLY THAT COMFORTABLE”

Twenty-third Street in downtown Washington, DC, is packed with vehicles, parade floats, and people. Sporty cars with their tops down prepare to move local politicians through a few blocks of the city while large pick-up trucks are loaded with dancers and entertainers. Multicolored floats representing each hue of the rainbow receive finishing touches as the beginning of the Capitol Pride Parade nears. Up ahead, thousands of people stand ready to watch a walk that celebrates gay pride and the call for equal rights. One advocacy group that participates in the Pride Parade is Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). A large purple banner with PFLAG in large white caps rests statically on the asphalt. I’ve joined about twenty parents, and members of the group mill about our designated space on the street in anticipation. Some wear shirts that boldly declare, “I am a PFLAG Mom,” “Proud of My Gay Son,” or other such identifying statements. Some do not. However, the signs and shirts peppering this cluster of people clearly label them as *parents* fighting for or at least supporting their gay children. They are here in their capacity as mothers and fathers. Kate, a straight mother of a twin boys, one gay son and one straight, and a lesbian daughter, has marched in years past without wearing a political shirt. She nervously holds a shawl over the front of one she has decided to wear this year. Having reservations about wearing it, she says aloud, “I’m not



actually that comfortable, you know? I'm not really out to that many people, publicly." I nod, indicating I understand her discomfort.

Mary, a mother of a gay son, answers, "Well, this is a very safe way to be out publicly." The final minutes before the launch of the parade continue to tick away.

I begin with this ethnographic scene because it highlights some important themes of parenting I noticed during my fieldwork for my master's thesis. Bringing themselves to and marching in the Pride Parade constitutes parenting as a "doing," a term used by sociologist Erving Goffman to capture the activities that constitute social life (1961). More specifically, this march is a public act, something this small group of parents do for their gay children out of love, in an effort to accept them. There are objects that mark this "doing." The rainbow floats and male dancers specify the queer identities being supported by their walk. At the same time, political figures and signs announce the public advocacy work undertaken in support of those identities. More close to home, the purple PFLAG banner announces a morally loaded and slightly subversive identity: parents who support their gay children. The t-shirts that announce this identity are perhaps the most intense objects, since they are worn on the body and can be most clearly identified with the person.

Kate's tough decision to wear her t-shirt reveals a struggle far more broad and abstract. These parents worry about what they do for their children. They especially struggle with how they do it. How will their walking be interpreted? And by whom? Will their children believe in the authenticity of their support? Will other parents judge them negatively for supporting homosexuality? These parents wrestle with the messy



line between private and public parental identities and wrestle with and against the fear that emerges not simply because they chose to support homosexuality but their own *children's* homosexuality. Though they are committed to be supportive of their children, they may not be as comfortable as they would like. This struggle between accepting their children and publicly displaying that acceptance plays out as they deal with their own expectations and identities while engaging in advocacy work, a struggle many would simply prefer to do quietly in private as they have through other struggles their children have endured: not being invited to a birthday party of a grade school classmate, being denied to first choice college, losing gymnastics meets, and countless other small defeats.

The Problem of Parents Becoming Activists

Well before the start of the 21st century, recognition of multiple forms of families had been acknowledged by American sociologists. However, experiences incompatible with narrow definitions of family continue to receive scant treatment in research investigations, certainly families with gay and lesbian members are such examples. Meanwhile, in the broader American context, voters in states with disparate political ideologies like California and Virginia have passed legislation to amend both state constitutions to narrowly define marriage to be between a man and a woman and so legally discriminate against portions of state populations. Organizations like PFLAG and the Human Rights Campaign have emerged to counter these moves. The structural divide between mainstream voters in legislative bodies and counter organizations like PFLAG mirrors the gap between narrowly defined state family policies and social scientific



recognition of diverse family forms. This conjecture reveals the persistently contentious nature of family values debates while refreshing the need for research projects that offer more clarity to family diversity.

A decade prior to the historic Proposition 8 vote in California, which served to rescind the state's Supreme Court's decision to broaden the legal definition of family, scholars had begun clamoring for attention to processes constitutive of family life within families with lesbian or gay members. Sociologists Katherine Allen and David Demo called for family scholars to take up the incredible opportunity to contribute to new theories of families that decenter normative family forms (1995). A few have answered the call, for example, taking up the social problem of heteronormativity, understood as the mundane, routine, constitutive ways that heterosexuality is both taken for granted and privileged in everyday life, sociologists Karin A. Martin (2009) and Jessica Fields (2001) have discovered a small population of parents who are either anti-heteronormative or working to address heteronormativity, a subset of which are parents of gay men who commit to advocate for their families and their sons' lifestyles.

These parents not only commit to accepting their sons but also, by the very definition of advocacy, seek from others acceptance of their commitment. How these parents renegotiate their own expectations of the normal parental trajectory while simultaneously negotiating their new social identities with others whose acceptance they seek revolves around a puzzle: how does a traditional identity like parent become one of activist for social change and acceptance of homosexuality? This conundrum of parents advocating



for their gay sons is about striking the delicate balance between private and public parenting concerns and identities.

Raising a question about parents of gay men at the exclusion of parents of lesbian women is strategic. Both Martin and sociologist Emily Kane (2006) note that daughters are allowed gender flexibility in a way that sons are not. Also, masculinity has become a key site of the reproduction of domination (Bourdieu 1998, Connell 2005). This reproduction is partly what is at stake when it comes to parenting boys to become men. My question sheds light on the unequal treatment of sons vis-à-vis daughters, and focusing on parents of gay men allows us to see and reflect on the conflicts that emerge when latent issues of power and masculinity bubble to the surface.

My answer will involve thinking about being a straight parent of a gay son as a moral career. It will also involve looking at parenting as an action or doing, what ethnomethodologists might call an interactional accomplishment. How parenting is a moral career made meaningful by interaction work will perhaps become clearer after a review of literature pertinent to parenting and gay sons; namely, a review of family, gender, and sexuality literature.

A Review of Family, Gender, and Sexuality

This thesis draws from a wide range of literature, from feminist research on parenting to articles on psychological counseling of parents to sociological work on parents of gay sons, in an effort to make sense of the complicated terrain of parenting as a private/public action. In the first section, specific attention is given to research that suggests parents are



guided by conventional assumptions about gender and sexuality in the raising of their children and that there are differences in parenting behavior between fathers and mothers. This is important because these are the most basic assumptions that make up a parent's toolkit and guide parenting action when children are very young. Fathers are discussed first, and attention is given to the expectations of masculinity they hold for their sons. It is noted that there has been a shift from instrumental fathering to expressive fathering before turning to what that means in terms of intimacy between father and son. Ideologies of mothering are then discussed and considered in terms of what is expected of women to raise children. What is a good mother? How has feminist work on the concept of mothering challenged ideas about good mothering?

Taking the sections on fathering and mothering together, I raise the question, what could changes in idealized versions of motherhood and fatherhood mean for expectations and intimacy? What do challenges to rescript acceptance mean for future models of parental love available to families?

Finally, there is a discussion of the process of men coming out in general and to their families in particular. Why do men come out to their parents? What do they expect to gain or lose in doing so? Is it that they have gauged their parents' levels of acceptance and hope to remain welcomed in their families, or do other explanations account for their disclosure? The literature review concludes with a discussion of how parents react to their son's coming out and what their reactions could mean for a future relationship with their sons and their own identities and roles as parents. It should also be noted that, in the literature review, I borrow heavily from Ann Swidler's work on culture as a toolkit or



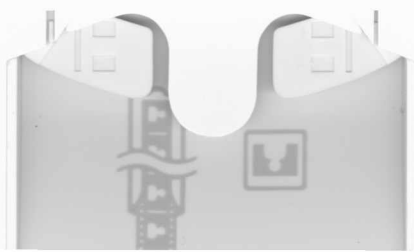
repertoire of meaning without addressing her work explicitly until a later discussion of parenting as a moral career.

Assumptions of Parenting, Gender, and Sexuality

Conventional assumptions about gender and sexuality inform parenting behavior and can be considered to inform parents' toolkits. Toolkits are defined briefly here as the resources, strategies of action, and repertoires of meaning parents draw upon as they parent. We need to be clear about what these assumptions might be and what role they play in parenting behaviors. For those parents whose sons later come out to them, these assumptions and behaviors are challenged by their sons' queer identities. How these parents respond to this challenge may depend on what they say when they reflect back on how they raised their sons. What role would this reflection play in the trajectory they imagine their relationships with their son to be taking, and how would they negotiate that trajectory with past parenting behavior?

Parents begin exercising influence, actively shaping, and even policing the gendered behavior of their children at a very early age, thinking that their actions are within their authority to ensure their children's heterosexual orientations (Kane 2006). This policing affects boys differently than girls, and fathers and mothers police in different ways.

Kane uses interview data to highlight these differences. While parents are often more accepting of their daughters' gender non-conformity, they are more careful to police the gender behavior of their boys. Noting that parents accomplish gender with and for their sons, Kane claims "heterosexual fathers are especially likely to be motivated in



that accomplishment work by their own personal endorsement of hegemonic masculinity (149).” Fathers’ fear that a son could be or could be perceived to be gay motivates their policing of sons’ gender behavior to insure that aggression, limited emotionality, and heterosexuality are ensured (Connell 1987).

Kane’s research is critical for one very important reason. Sociologists have been slow to “study up”; that is, turn their research lens to privileged members of society, though that has changed in the last two decades among feminist research. Kane critically examines the parenting of heterosexual fathers, an examination that is lacking in other research. In a review of sexual orientation and parenting practices, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) admit that little is known about how the sexual orientation of fathers may be related to their relationships with their children. In fact, only two cited references in Stacey and Biblarz’s (2001) review look at fathers’ parenting behaviors as heterosexual fathers (Bigner and Jacobsen 1989, 1992).

The Father-Son Relationship and Expectations of Masculinity

The policing of son’s gendered behavior with concerns about sexuality often uses placement in sports as a device available to fathers. Organized sports become an arena to ensure heterosexuality. Also, ideologies emphasizing hard work which tend to prevail in realm of sports are often drawn from to produce discipline in boys as they pursue heterosexual masculinist projects. This section provides grounding in those notions as expectations of masculinity so the project can later look at how fathers of gay men make sense of them.



In America, fathers often take for granted that their behavior ought to be aimed at getting their sons involved in sport. They see sports as a normal path to manhood and believe that participation in sports provides the structure for intimacy in the father-son relationship. However, Messner shows that boyhood athletes equate athletic success with fatherly approval at the same time that hierarchy and homophobia in sports inhibit boys' abilities to form close relationships (1992). As he argues, "homophobia polices the boundaries of narrow cultural definitions of masculinity (107)".

Kilmartin, another sociologist, supports Messner's thesis, arguing more generally that boys seek approval from their father by working compulsively in the sports realm (Kilmartin 2007). Kilmartin claims that fathering behavior to guide their sons into sports stems from "traditional" gender demands that emphasize the father's role as provider and protector. A traditional narrative stresses that a father display love for his son by going out to work and performing as the family bread winner (McKeown et al 1998). Such a narrative places emphasis on sports as a meaningful arena where masculine selves can be forged, a forging the fathers would assumedly do themselves if they were not busy providing. In other words, boys become accountable to their fathers not only through athletic success but also through hard work as modeled by their fathers. Inversely, this can be read as what fathers expect from their sons towards becoming successful men: hard work and success in an athletic career of some kind.

Of course, through waves of feminism over the last fifty years, there have been many changes in the roles of fathers, their expectations, in the doing of and thinking about masculinity. There has been a shift away from an instrumental role to an expressive one.



These changes set the stage for an emerging concept of intimate fatherhood, which the sociologist Esther Dermott (2008) sets within Anthony Giddens' work on intimacy (1992).

Intimate Fatherhood

This section summarizes the work of Giddens and Dermott to present an emerging concept in sociology, the intimate father. At the intersection of their work, the intimate father emerges as an ideal type. Is this the type of father a gay son could come out to and expect a positive relationship afterwards? If so, which mechanisms of intimacy would explain this possibility?

Intimacy can be a tricky term to use. It is usually equated with sexual relationships, and researchers often study heterosexual couples as a way to study intimacy, which is what Giddens does in his book. This is unfortunate because intimacy need not be just about sexuality. To broaden the use of the term, Giddens' definition is helpful: "Intimacy is above all a matter of emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality (130)." The communication component is particularly useful to reframe projects on intimacy as studies of dialogue and interpersonal equality between any two people, for example, between a father and son.

Giddens' thesis in the *Transformation of Intimacy* is that the possibility of intimacy is the promise of democracy. Sexual liberation and women's equality movements have affected gender relations in a way that has radical implications for democracy. Men have had to negotiate women's sexual histories in an unprecedented way, which requires a



renegotiating of their emotional narratives and an enhancement of their ability to communicate. For example, young men graduating from college are likely to have sexual histories and date young women with sexual histories. So they must be reflective and able to talk about those histories with their partners in healthy ways. This effect is what Giddens calls democrotization of the private sphere; it relates to the pure relationship as a relationship entered as a means in itself assuming free and equal relations between people. Indeed, to Giddens, the structural source of the promise of democracy is the pure relationship. Each person becomes autonomous in negotiating the conditions of his or her personal relations, and autonomy is the key idea linking various aspirations of democracy.

Giddens' claim is that autonomy is the successful realization of the reflexive project of the self. It functions in terms of respect for others, ability to treat others as capable, and recognition that development of others' potential is not a threat. The extent to which these variables are maximized sets the condition for relating to others in egalitarian ways since it makes possible the involvement of individuals in determining the conditions of their association. This condition being met is at the crux of the democratic promise of the transformation of intimacy. As Giddens himself notes, this is a condition worth striving for not just between sexual partners but also between friends, colleagues, and parents and children.

Drawing from Giddens, Dermott takes up the question of intimacy in terms of the father-son relationship, as she asks to what extent do fathers respect their sons? Are they able to treat them as autonomous and capable? Do they recognize that developing their



son's autonomous capabilities in not a threat to their sense of fathering? Taking up these questions reveal problems for fathers developing pure relationships with their sons. This pursuit is inherently problematic in a father-child relationship due to disproportionate economic, political, and social resources, as well as rights and privileges, vis-à-vis parents and children. That makes an intimate relationship between a father and his son fragile in the sense that obligations and rights are more difficult to renegotiate in an inherently unequal relationship. Renegotiation of rights and privileges between a father and son requires critical reflection on the father's part for transformative change to occur. Communication is key here, and at stake is the possibility of fathers' privileged knowledge of their sons through a dialogue about emotional life and authenticity of emotions and a shift in conceiving of rights and entitlements.

Ideologies of Mothering

This section looks at the social practices of mothering since, despite alleged changes in men's relationship to the private sphere and intimacy and roles of fathering, mothers still do a majority of parenting. Given these practices, we might expect moms to be mediators of family life. If this is the case, then how are gender and family politics bargained with the idea of a "good mother" in mind? Does the bargaining between mothers and gay sons differ vis-à-vis fathers and gay sons, and do mothers play a part as mediator between fathers and gay sons? How would feminist research make sense of this bargaining and the expectations of mothers?



The sociologist Terry Arendell published a review of all North American scholarship that conceived of and investigated motherhood (Arendell 2000). One concept of particular interest to this work was summarized: the ideology of intensive mothering. Mothering as the social practices of nurturing and caring for dependent children or people in general is based on the prevailing ideology of the “good mother” (Ribbens 1994; Thurer 1993). Such a mother is devoted to caring for others in self-sacrificing ways, being “not a subject with her own needs and interests” (Bassin et al 1994, p 2). This kind of mothering centers on the child and involves intense emotional work.

Of course, this ideology presumes a narrow definition of family. The nuclear family, idealized as the white, middle-class, and heterosexual couple with heterosexual children, becomes the unit of analysis dependent on the ideology of intensive mothering. Other forms of family are then measured against this unit, allowing for the emergence of “deviancy discourses” (Arendell 2000, p 1195). Discourses about mothers who do not conform to full-time motherhood within nuclear families make sense as deviant only against heteronormative standards of mothering and family. This project seeks to foreground non-conforming mothers (that is, mothers of gay sons, though not by choice since they do want to conform) in an attempt to find out how they make sense of their parenting strategies as repertoires of meaning and normative standards of family life.

This thesis takes the fact that women continue to do most of the homemaking and child rearing despite the emergence of a “new, nurturing father” seriously (Coltrane 1996; Coltrane and Adams 1998; Dermott 2008). This raises an important question about mothering relationships. Considering the relationships some mothers have with their gay



sons, how are gender and family politics bargained? Does this bargaining differ vis-à-vis relationships of fathers with their gay sons, either within one family or outside? How would particular mothers of gay sons describe their family experiences and their parenting (Arendell 2000)?

Feminist understandings of gender dislodge identity construction from biological frameworks, which are thought to be too essentializing. Better explanations of how one becomes a woman or a man come from social constructivist and phenomenological approaches to identity formation processes (de Beauvoir 1953, p 301; Rubin 1975; Chodorow 1978, p 8-10, 217-19; Ferguson 1989; Rubin 1984; DiQuinzio 1993). However, these understandings have also been critiqued as too exclusionary and essentializing. The critique of exclusion argues that feminist theories of gender obscure the importance of other aspects of women's identities like race, class, and sexual orientation. The problem of essentialism is related to this critique since "essentialism refers to the problem of theorizing gender as both an identity and a mark of difference" (DiQuinzio 1993,1) and reifying gender as something that inheres in bodies (white female bodies). But essentialism is also a problem in terms of the subjectivity presupposed by feminist theories of gender.

The critique of exclusion in feminist theory has mostly come from American Black women, women of color, lesbian women, and Third World critics of American feminism. The thrust of the critique is that feminist theorizing of gender has given insufficient attention to the theorizing of race, class, and sexual orientation and has failed to explain the relationships between these variables/processes and gender. In



consequence, “feminist theory makes universalizing and normalizing claims for and about ‘women’” (DiQuinzio 1993) but really has in mind white, middle-class, heterosexual women from white, middle-class, heterosexual families with heterosexual children.

Thus, the problem of essentialism is related to this imaginary since it inadequately addresses differences among women and closes off attempts at conceptualizing social constructions of other aspects of identity as unrelated to gender. Even more, essentialism is a problem since it relies on identity and subject as pre-social, existing outside of discourse and interaction. With this in mind, the critique of essentialism argues that gender cannot be understood outside of discursive and interactional practices nor separate from other categories of identity, like race, class, and sexual orientation. It is emergent, dynamic, and contingent.

The critique calls for historical and cultural specificity in analyses of identity with gender being just one aspect. This has some importance to this thesis, since the parents in my study draw from resources available at this particular historical moment and within American culture at this point in time. It is within this specificity that new parental identities and understandings of gender and sexuality are either possible or not possible; that is, genders, sexualities, and subjects do not exist outside the social or prior to the discursive practices through which identities are constituted. They depend on whatever historical or cultural resources are available.

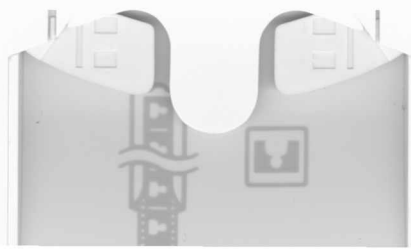


Towards a Broader Model of Families

What implications can be sketched out for models of family life? Since the positioning of subjects is possible by discursive strategies and multiple points of power and resistance, feminist theories question that which enables particular kinds of mothering or fathering. Thinking about the conditions and accounts of mothering and fathering would be enhanced by considering historically specific social contexts of parenting and jettisoning a few assumptions. One assumption to be rid of is that mothering as nurturing and caring work is essentially done in the same way by all women. More radically, it should not be assumed that mothering is exclusive to women nor fathering to men. Perhaps most radically, it should not be assumed that one goal of mothering and fathering is to produce sons and daughters as stable and coherent categories or as having fixed identities.

One question to ask then: would a broader model of family life, defined in terms of flexibility and fluidity for family members' identities, depend on the unfixing of categories and social roles and being comfortable with nonessential identities? For example, how comfortable would people have to be with the non-division of children into two categories, sons and daughters, for such models to be tenable? Or closer to this project's purposes, how comfortable are parents of gay sons with the notion that "son" is not always and essentially a heterosexual male?

This brings my thesis onto a new frontier in family research previously defined in large part by the nuclear family idealized as white, middle-class, and heterosexual. In focus are the familial and social contexts in which gay men live through an inquiry of gay



men's parents. In *Normal Family Processes*, Laird notes that experiences incompatible with narrow definitions of family have failed to be included in research investigations (1993). This project takes up such a process in the third dimension of what Allen and Demo call lesbian and gay families: one or more heterosexual parents with a lesbian or gay child, adolescent, or adult. It is a study from the standpoint of non-normative families that gives voice to their narratives. Additionally, this project seeks to place their narratives in dialogue with a broader understanding of families.

Coming Out to Parents

The reasons for a son coming out to his parents are myriad and complicated. Inversely, the parental conditions allowing for his coming out are unclear. That is, why do children come out, and what are the consequences of coming out for parenting? Specifically for those parents whose sons reveal the information to them, what is expected of them? Is it that their sons have gauged their levels of support and hope to remain welcomed in their families, or do other explanations account for their disclosure?

Research suggests that there are many reasons gay men *do not* disclose their sexuality to their parents. They are afraid they will be rejected; they wish to protect their parents from feelings of guilt or other emotional pain; they fear that they will be forced into sexual reorientation therapy; or they feel they need to keep their family out of crisis (Ben-Ari 1995).

Research also suggests that there are many reasons for disclosure. Inspired by the Gay Liberation Movement, political motivation may cause some young men to come out



to their parents. Inversely, a small number of men will come out for destructive reasons like intense anger or pure rebellion to exact pain. Some may enter into a serious same-sex relationship and disclose to their parents out of necessity (Myers 1982).

One reason cited across a few sources is couched in psychotherapeutic terms. Sons will disclose as part of a process that emphasizes openness and honesty, which is perceived by some parents as motivated by undesired secrecy and a wish to tell them the truth (Ben-Ari 1995, Myers 1982, Saghir & Robins 1973). In telling the truth, these men who come out to their parents do so with hopes their parents will be accepting (Boxer, Cook, and Herdt). For example, Ben-Ari conducted fifty-nine in-depth interviews in the San Francisco Bay area, nineteen of which were with gay men and twenty-seven parents (1995). One of the main findings of the study was that disclosure was predicted by feelings of closeness; “being honest, not to hide, not to live a lie” were reasons for disclosure. The participants citing those reasons, both parents and sons, considered that the parent-child relationship improved following discovery.

Lisa K. Waldner and Brian Magruder examine perceptions of family relations, perceived resources, and identity expression as predictors of identity disclosure offering a different account of what structures coming out or remaining silent (1999). They claim, “Religion, political ideologies, and family structures reinforce heterosexual behaviors by negatively sanctioning behaviors linked to expressing a gay identity (85).” Using a cost/benefit analysis, Waldner and Magruder argue that the disclosure involves “perceiving coming-out as more rewarding than costly (86)”. If young men perceive that they have access to supportive resources, then they will view coming-out as more



rewarding than silence. However, close family relations have a negative impact on those two perceptions. That is, the closer a young man feels to his family, the less likely he is to perceive he can seek out those resources and/or express a non-heterosexual identity. Conversely, a young man who is less close with his family will perceive that he can seek out gay supportive resources or express a gay identity, which will in turn lead to disclosure to his parents.

Waldner and Magruder's work seems to contradict the psychotherapeutic reason for coming out. Unfortunately, there is very little work done on the impact of coming out on the parent-child relationship in general, let alone the parent-son relationship specifically. The scant number of articles addressing the impact of coming out from parental perspectives can explain the obvious contradiction in findings that sons may disclose if they aren't close with their parents and if they are. By sampling parents whose sons have come out to them, this project seeks to bring more clarity to disclosure from parental perspectives and the consequences on parents' sense of parenting self.

The work is not completely without precedent. Andrew M. Boxer, Judith A. Cook, and Gilbert Herdt studied the coming out process and its impact on the quality of the parent-child relationship (1998). The argument of *Double Jeopardy: Identity Transitions and Parent-Child Relations Among Gay and Lesbian Youth* is that disclosure begins a process of reciprocal socialization. The youth "begin to teach their parents about their own desires and feelings, and about the gay and lesbian community (86)". For the parents, something like a family "coming out" process is initiated, "whereby parents are



given the opportunity to restructure expectations and goals for the future life course of their children (86)".

To study the coming out process from a parental perspective, Boxer, Cook, and Herdt drew a sample of fifty parents from a Chicago social support group for parents with gay and lesbian children. Many parents, upon discovering the non-heterosexual orientation of their child, will seek out counseling and often times be directed to a group much like the one sampled from in Boxer, Cook, and Herdt's study (Myers 1982). So far, data from such samples have mostly been gathered through the use of interviews and surveys. It should be broadened through the use of ethnographic methods including participant-observation. A section on methods follows a short review of parental reactions to disclosure and its relation to their participation in social support groups is in order.

Parents React

Parents' reactions to their son's coming out are considered here to sketch out what their reactions could mean for a future relationship with their sons and their own identities.

Parents' finding out that their son is gay can become a question of whether or not the disclosure triggers or propels a family into crisis (Silverstein 1977; Wirth 1978; Myers 1982; Martin & Hetrick 1988; Plummer 1989; Troiden 1989; Ben-Ari 1995). This claim finds some support in research that documents reactions of shock and anger followed by denial or grief (Silverstein 1977; Wirth 1978; Myers 1982; Martin & Hertick 1988; Plummer 1989; Robinson, Walters, & Skeen 1989; Troiden 1989; Ben-Ari 1995).



However, other research highlights the increased closeness and sharing between children and parents or gradual processes of acceptance following coming out (Saghir & Robins 1983; Robinson, Skeen, & Walters 1987).

Parents' reactions can be based in fear. Research suggests that these fears can be separated into two categories: child-oriented concerns and parent-oriented concerns. Concerns surrounding parents have to do with worries about having grandchildren, feeling like they have lost their moral status in broader family or community relations, and intense conflict between love of child and contradicting moral or religious beliefs about sexuality. Concern tied to the child has been identified as the following: the child will grow old and lonely, will not experience parenthood, will suffer from intense prejudice, and will be rejected by family members and others in society. There is a particular concern for the child's physical safety, whether it is perceived to be in danger from violence or sexually transmitted disease (Myers 1982; Boxer, Cook, & Herdt; Ben-Ari 1995).

Parents who perceive themselves to be committed to their own or to their children's health will in some cases seek the counsel of doctors or psychiatrists to navigate this new emotional terrain. As opposed to those parents who reject their children, these parents seek advice to assist them with the process of their kids' coming out. Although research concerning homosexuality has moved away from an emphasis on documenting the causes, treatment, and psychological adjustment of gay men, parents who make appointments with counselors will have concerns about their having caused their child's sexual orientation (Myers 1982; Ben-Ari 1995). Therapists typically attempt



to empathize with parents and make efforts to diminish their feelings of failure as parents. What is of particular interest to sociologists is that some parents, asking what can they do, will be reaffirmed of "basic parental responsibilities, such as to supply their son's need...for their continued caring, love, understand, support, and respect (Myers 1982, 140)" and be recommended to attend community support groups for families of gay people. As Myers argues:

Meeting other parents with a gay daughter or son can be a very enlightening experience, and extremely supportive. This will serve to diminish their sense of isolation, sharpen their perceptions, and perhaps improve a strained relationship with their son (141).

Improvement may occur with some contradiction, as Jessica Fields demonstrates in her work. To show this, the project will draw from Fields' article on parents involved in PFLAG, "Normal Queers: Straight Parents Respond to Their Children's Coming Out".

Fields studied a social support group for families of gay men and lesbian women and found those parents to also be advocates for their children's rights (Fields 2001). Relying on a symbolic interactionist perspective, Fields looked at what their children's gay and lesbian identities meant to parents and how that meaning shaped and directed the parents' social interactions. This perspective led Fields to argue that normative understandings of gender, sexuality, and family provided the basis of stigma while simultaneously being a way out of deviance since straight (read normal) parents of gay men and lesbian women "can be models of how mainstream communities might embrace gay and lesbian people (166)". Fields shows that the parents use notions of the normal family to make the case



that they and their sons and daughters should be accepted for being exceptionally loving and accepting. Stigma is perpetuated through the notion of normal families since the parents rely on conventional conceptions of family, sexuality, and gender as they attempt to affirm their sons' inclusion in broader social processes.

Fields is then able to develop what can be called the normal queers paradox: Parents' acceptance of their children's homosexuality sustains the oppression of people who identify as gay or lesbian since it does not challenge conventional ideas about gender, sexuality, or family. For this thesis's purposes, the paradox reveals how deeply parenting is rooted in middle class scripts of family life.

Research

I gathered my data ethnographically, relying on participant observations and interviews. For one year and a half, I attended and participated in monthly PFLAG meetings. In that time, I walked with some parents in two Pride parades. I also joined one father in play at a handful of poker tournaments at his request. At meetings and marches, I observed and informally spoke with many parents, some of whom only attended one meeting, others only a few. Not all of the parents at meetings were there to talk about sons, as some had daughters. Still others were themselves gay men or lesbian women. Many more mothers than fathers attended the meetings. Focusing on the theme of gay sons has undoubtedly blocked the development of other important subcultural themes, though enabled me to develop some themes relevant to an analysis of masculinity.

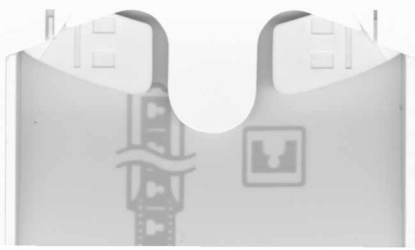


I formally spoke with six parents of gay sons, four mothers and two fathers, through eleven semi-structured interviews and one focus group. Two married couples participated, one interracial with the father being black, the rest white. Of the other two parents, one is a married mother and the other divorced. The interviews were voluntary and took place in parent's homes at their request. I tape-recorded the interviews, which were later transcribed. Though I was committed to reciprocity, my offers to bring food or coffee to interviews were warmly but unanimously rejected. Instead, the parents sometimes fed me, and in this sense extended their parenting to me. All names have been changed to protect respondents' identities.

My focus on mostly white parents means that caution should be exercised in any attempt to generalize from their cases. I do not mean to present an inscription that fixes white parenting as parenting in the abstract. There would certainly be differences in parenting with respect to race, which should be considered all throughout the thesis and on any future research on parenting as a doing.

Moral Careers

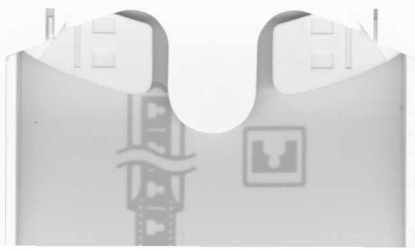
In bringing clear sociological meaning to the concept of careers, Everett Hughes lamented the fading importance of transition rites or rituals marking events in a person's life (1984, 124). The substance of the complaint came from another concept that is now taken for granted in sociology, contingencies. Rightfully, Hughes pointed out the precarious nature of careers since they depend on cycles, like economic cycles and a person's biological cycle throughout the life course. With such indelible career



contingencies, Hughes seemed to ask at the time, why would Americans remove rites and rituals marking career stages?

Perhaps these stages and the transitions that mark them went underground. This would seem the case given that two of Hughes' students gave obsessive attention to marijuana users, "homosexuals", and mental patients. In so doing, Howard Becker and Erving Goffman expanded the concepts of career and contingencies in interesting and useful ways.

Reading his seminal text *The Outsiders*, it is easy to miss one of Becker's major contributions to sociology since it is overshadowed by the introduction of labeling theory to American culture (1963). Becker pointed out the ways that many social types, including those that are commonly assumed to be deviant, have careers that seem normal after entrance to a social world and adherence to that group's set of rules, marking outsiders from that point of view as deviants. In other words, labeling theory was so lucid thanks to Becker's attention to career stages and the contingencies that mark them. Touching on the issue of morality, Becker showed how social types move through phases, each phase including new conceptions of self that raise moral questions about other groups' conceptions of self. For example, marijuana users will only continue to use if they learn from a social other that the effects they feel are recognizable as being high and also controllable. The user may learn that she can be high around others and function as though she is not, the problem turning out to be others' problematic conception of marijuana users. Progressing through stages means to penetrate a social subgroup while distancing oneself from the rest of normal society.



In his essay "The Moral Career of the Mental Patient," Goffman significantly challenged even Becker's assumptions about self and morality (1961). Expanding the concept of career to centrally involve issues of morality, Goffman saw career stages and contingencies but drew far more attention to the social nature of these contingencies on a person's ability to present a moral self. By looking at what happens when a total institution will not allow a person the moral resources for identity, Goffman drew attention to just how much selves are utterly dependent on social others. Whether or not a person enters a mental institution depends much less on actual mental illness than on a friend or family member's convincing words and a lift to the hospital. And watching patients rise and lower to ward levels corresponding to higher or lower levels of privileges and freedoms, Goffman is able to show that there are degrees of self in intimate proportion to the support and license from others. "Each moral career, and each self behind it," Goffman tells us, "occurs within the confines of an institutional system, whether a social establishment like mental hospital or a complex of personal and professional relationships (168)." An institutional arrangement, then, constitutes the self, and a moral career can be seen as a trajectory that grapples with such an arrangement.

Moral Careers of Straight Parents of Gay Sons

It is in the preceding tradition that I will make use of career, emphasizing contingencies and entrance into new social worlds, including learning new group rules and labeling those outside that world as outsiders. Importantly, the moral career of a straight parent of



a gay son is about developing new conceptions of self at different career stages and the dependency of self on a complex of social relationships.

That being said, in sketching out the career of a straight parent, I will rely on an analysis of situations more informal than the stricter analysis favored by Goffman at St. Elizabeths. The parents in my study are not in a total institution yet vaguely sense its confinements of self, though they cannot see them. This certainly raises epistemological issues, but what we gain in insight offsets the cost because, in a post-modern or second modern or globalized world, inequalities are increasingly buried below formal patterns of institutionalized interaction and rearing their heads at interesting moments should we care to look for them.

Ours is a time of such interesting moments. The gay rights movement has made significant progress on recognition issues and fostering a culture of pride in gay identity. More young people come out at earlier ages. By extending the time for a parent of a gay child to grapple with conceptions of self and, in an increasing number of cases, actively seek to make changes in conceptions of self, the movement has made possible a kind of social career that Becker or Goffman probably could not have imagined. The career of a straight parent of a gay child creates interesting possibilities but also a number of problems. By conceptualizing straight parents committed to loving and accepting their gay sons, I focus on one particular problem and response: coming out from parents' perspectives; that is coming out not by gay sons but by their parents. For those parents who commit to accepting their child's identity, parenting involves some redefinition. Parenting activity (past, present, and future) becomes hued with what Goffman calls a



courtesy stigma (30). Indeed, parents who wish to support gay sons must actively seek out a stigmatized self while balancing the normative aspects of being a parent in a complex of social relationships, which may or may not give support and license to this new self. In other words, this special type of concern leads parents of gay sons to moral careers in new and old senses of the concept.

Parenting as a moral career will necessarily involve all the traditional features, especially stages through which learning experiences and changes in conception of self occur. To see the dynamics of parents learning through these stages, however, it is helpful to think about parenting as an action or a doing. Parenting is a dynamic activity almost incessantly in flux; it is all consuming, cognitively, emotionally, and physically. In this way, parenting *role* is an inappropriate characterization. To accomplish dynamic activity, parents routinely draw from symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views available to them, objects in what Ann Swidler has called cultural toolkits. When some of that activity inevitably leads to parenting problems, parenting objects become accentuated, questioned, re-founded, or reworked. We can imagine the *aggregate* of this problematic activity and the collection of reworked objects, whether they are symbols, stories, or rituals, used to solve and make sense of parenting as a vital part of a moral career.

In putting moral careers together with cultural toolkits, we can better see how problems are solved, giving shape and meaning to a parent's career trajectory. In this thesis, I focus on two toolkits: middle-class parenting and PFLAG advocacy.

The warrant of my extensive literature review on family and gender is that conventional parenting consists of a few important themes. For mothers, parenting is



intensive and self-sacrificing. They are expected to do a lot for their children. For fathers, there is a shift from instrumental parenting to caring about and supporting a child's development and autonomy. At this historical moment, middle-class parenting is about valuing absolute love and support; it is especially about parents valuing their children's health and happiness. However, this can come into conflict with a dominant theme of middle-class parenting: raising "normal" children. Towards that end, parents usually take heterosexuality for granted. A parent committed to middle-class values becomes stuck if a son says his happiness is tied to a deviant sexual identity.

To answer this problem, some of these parents' careers lead them to attend PFLAG meetings, a key stage of the moral career as it begins to introduce them to a new social world, that of the gay community and its allies. However, since they are committed to middle-class parenting values, it is not hard for them to attend meetings; it's just like they would attend doctor appointments or parent-teacher meetings to discuss their son's health and happiness. Meeting with doctors and teachers, however, is easily integrated into middle-class values during settled lives, as Swidler might say. Their sons' announcements of gay identities may put parents in states of anxiety and turmoil partly because the lines of action necessary to support that identity are not so readily integrated into middle-class parenting. It is their son's queer identities at an historical moment when many gay men live openly amid a backdrop of moral debate over homosexuality that unsettles these parents' lives. That debate may not be settled within a parent.

Inside this divide, explicitly articulated ideologies "establish new styles or strategies of action (278)," and people are acquiring new ways to organize their activity.



Not only are new lines of action becoming possible, entities become available to take them up.

For its part in the debate, PFLAG has its own repertoire of meaning that is both compatible with and subversive to middle-class parenting. This is encompassed by Fields' normal queers paradox. The parents base their acceptance work in middle-class notions of family life as they grapple with their sons' queer identities. Interestingly, while PFLAG advocacy is about a parent accepting the child's sexual orientation, the broader mission statement encompasses working on one's own comfort with all subversive sexual and gender identities. The discourse is about absolving parents of fault and guilt and instead advocating for societal change by working for expansion of civil rights for all categories of sexual and gender identities.

Though there are important differences and unresolved debates between Swidler and Randal Collins, PFLAG meetings could be analyzed as meaningful interaction rituals (Collins 2004) to these parents precisely because of the divide between family ideologies. Collins brings attention to the former but, unfortunately, neglects the latter. While interaction ritual theory may give "a precise mechanism for showing when new cultural symbols are generated, and when old symbols retain social commitments or fade away as no longer meaningful (40)," the theory suggests cleaner analyses than might actually exist. It is important, therefore, to retain some of Swidler's focus on competing ideologies in order to pay attention to tension within cultural competitions.

It is from either a PFLAG toolkit or middle-class parenting toolkit or some combination of both that parents committed to accepting their gay sons work on their

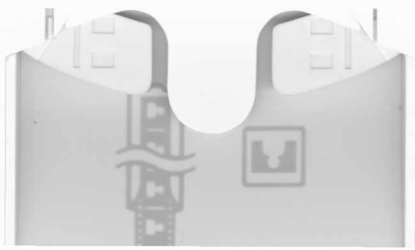


own expectations and their new identity to others. The concept of moral career helps us see the stages of this parenting and the moral implications of each stage, as the parents conceive of a new self. Thus understood, these moral careers also include aggregates of problematic activity and the tools used to solve and reflect on that activity. These aggregates build through stages of learning experiences, like sitting through a PFLAG meeting, as well as through reflections on the past. The success of these phases and reflections at reworking parenting identities is dependent on the repertoires of meaning available to the parents, either PFLAG advocacy or middle-class parenting or a code switching between the two, and on a complex of personal relationships that make newer toolkits available.

Organization of the Argument

The kind of moral career I am looking at in this thesis involves at least three stages. The first stage of a child coming out was covered above in the literature review. In the second and third chapters of this thesis, I look explicitly at the second and third phases of the moral career of a straight parent of a gay son. Attending a PFLAG meeting marks the second stage, while the third stage involves marching in a Pride parade. Post-Pride parade would make up another stage, one marked by reflection, which is covered in the fourth chapter.

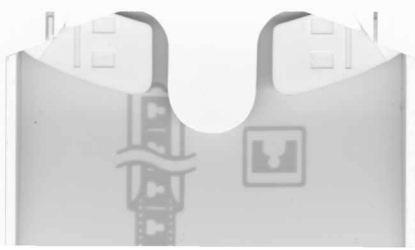
The next chapter focuses on PFLAG meetings to look at the ways that this new kind of parenting is founded by very simple questions: What can I do? How do I act around my son? What do I say around him? They seek out other parents at PFLAG



meetings to learn from them, and the trajectory of their career is dependent on these first meetings with other parents, on some convincing words and an invitation to check one's self into a stigmatized identity. Should new parents return, they begin to enter a new social world, a subculture of gay acceptance. Thinking of a PFLAG meeting as an interaction ritual, the parents begin to negotiate their own expectations, swapping tales and stories with other parents of gay men. They try out new sayings, new phrases, and negotiated discourses, which become symbols of their commitment to accept their sons. Considering their new conceptions of self and their relationships to people outside the meetings, parents learn that the first thing they can do for their sons is come out as parents and quickly discover a key problem of their moral career: situational contingencies, to again borrow from Goffman, of coming out as a parent of a gay son. It is in these informal situations that parents can especially feel the self being confined.

Drawing energy from PFLAG meetings helps these parents face down situational contingencies in a limited way. Since there are few spaces the parents feel they can come out, the space that energy and symbols tend to culminate is the space through which a Gay Pride parade moves.

In the third chapter, I look at a third stage of the moral career of a straight parent accepting a gay son: participating in a Pride parade. I analyze the parade as a culminating interaction ritual, intensifying the parents' new selves and giving the parents a way to communicate a public identity of civil rights activist. Since PFLAG energy and symbols tend to culminate in Pride parades, wider problems continue to face gay rights advocacy. I conclude the chapter by pondering the limits of PFLAG by considering the



spaces untouched by its influence. A surprising finding can be seen that makes us rethink Becker's claims in *The Outsiders*. Despite entering a subculture of tolerance and becoming honorees of the gay community, there is not much evidence of alienation from normal society. This will be clearly seen in one father's participation in poker tournaments.

The concept of cultural toolkits helps us resolve this, and in the fourth chapter I focus on how the parents I interviewed use conventional conceptions of family, sexuality, and gender *alongside* an unconventional PFLAG discourse in reflecting on parenting pasts. This is another aspect of moral careers, realigning and making sense of a past that brought these parents to a present situation. Stories emerge from these reflections, centered on a soft question about heteronormativity, about whether or not their parenting caused their child's homosexuality. Adhering to conventional values of parenting and a PFLAG discourse, these parents begin to negotiate their own expectations by aligning past parenting with present parenting through talk about assumptions and problems of American boyhood. The narratives are about toys and sports, but more centrally they are about the continuity of self of their sons. Telling these narratives, parents attempt to show that they did everything they could to be good parents, providing some absolution they did not cause their sons to be gay.



CHAPTER 2: ATTENDING PFLAG MEETINGS, FACING SITUATIONAL CONTINGENCIES

On a hot summer Tuesday night, I pull my car into a gravel parking lot and arrive at the location of a monthly PFLAG meeting. A local Unitarian church offers space for the parents to meet. The church compound itself is serene. A handful of buildings are arranged in a semicircle, with modest grass between and sidewalk paths linking them. Looking at the semicircle of buildings, eyes are drawn to the tall trees overlooking it, as the compound is embedded within edges of a good set of woods. I follow yellow signs with bold black lettering “PFLAG” that have been placed on wooden posts, the first at the edge of the parking lot, then a few others along the sidewalk. They lead potential parents to the correct building, and then one final sign is posted on the door to the meeting. The meeting is held in what looks like an elementary school classroom, with a large chalkboard against one wall and brown plastic chairs stacked up in the corners, no doubt serving to conjure memories of parenting past. About ten to fifteen chairs have been arranged in a circle atop a large earth toned area rug.

Inside the room, there is a mingling of people; I recognize Mary chatting with Kate, but most I do not recognize. A few stand, talking amiably amongst themselves. Others sit quietly with their eyes staring out into nowhere. A feeling washes over me that there is a range of emotions in the room, from introspective sadness to friendliness intended to welcome others. Uncertainty must grip a number of parents present tonight. Being the



facilitator, Mary takes her seat, signaling to those present to pick out a chair around the circle. I join them in the search. Sitting in circle format, we all face each other.

“So thank you everyone for coming,” Mary starts. As people shuffle into their chairs, they give their attention to Mary, and she continues. “Myself and Kate are co-facilitators of the group, and so there are just a few guidelines I need everyone to be aware of.” With the aid of her facilitator’s guidelines, Mary reads on. “We are sensitive to each person’s stage in the acceptance process. We provide support by listening carefully, sharing our own stories, and relating our own problem solving experiences. So please refrain from having side discussions and avoid dominating the conversation. Our main concern is to create a supportive atmosphere for all group participants; thank you for helping to support the ‘family feeling’ we have at our support meetings.”

Parents who want to accept their gay sons, who want to change their parenting behavior and the very ideas they held about their sons, begin their moral careers with simple questions about their actions. What can I do? How do I act around my son? What do I say around him? How do I manage my role as parent as I interact with others? The reasons they ask such questions are complicated. They are grasping for cultural tools with which they can plan new lines of action. Some do not seek answers to these questions alone. Parents committed to accepting their gay sons also commit to building new parental networks, to securing support and answers to anchor new parental identities as they meld new concerns with enduring ones.

This chapter analyzes the stage of a parent’s moral career marked by attending PFLAG meetings. The first section establishes PFLAG meetings as interaction rituals,



looking at the energy and advice available at meetings. To come out as parents is offered as advice at meetings and a very important aspect of the moral career. At this point, parents find a precarious dependency on others outside their meetings for this new self. The ambiguity of when and how to come out to others makes “situations,” in the classic Goffmanian sense, difficult terrain to navigate, explored in the last section.

PFLAG Meetings as Interaction Rituals: Giving and Receiving Energy and Advice

The mingling of parents, the statement of organizational rules, the circle of small chairs, and the shared mood of listening and sharing stories can be seen in the scene above. The sociologist Randal Collins would likely regard this as the stuff of an interaction ritual: a) there is certainly bodily co-presence, the parents assembling in the recreation room on the first day of each month, acquiring group assembly, b) the closed door and the guidelines of the meetings apply pressure to maintain group solidarity as they c) sit in a circle, facing one another, and bring a mutual focus of attention to each other with d) the shared mood of listening, sharing, and fostering a supportive environment (2004, p 48)

Consider this example. During one monthly meeting, I watch and listen as Roxy, one of the usual moms, uses her time to share pictures of her daughter and partner’s adopted twins, pictures that arouse cooing and smiles from other parents as she answers questions about her daughter and the health of her grandchildren. She concludes by apologizing ahead of time for missing the next meeting, a qualified apology as she then proudly declares with a beaming smile that she is flying to London to visit her daughter



and daughter's partner and see her grandchildren, a declaration that is answered with more smiles and exclamations of "That's wonderful" and "How great!"

As Collins notes, "One chief result of rituals is to charge up symbolic objects with significance or recharge objects with renewed sentiments of respect...Along with this, individual participants get their own reservoir of charge (2004, 38)." The parents are listening to and watching Roxy, but they are also charging up the photograph of Roxy's new grandchildren, a photo that marks a different form of family, as an object that displays her love and acceptance of her lesbian daughter. In this space, Roxy displays a "feeling of confidence, courage to take action, boldness in taking initiative (38)" that she might not comfortably display in other spaces. Collins goes on to explain that energy comes from the feedback of other participants, which can be easily seen in the smiles and exclamations of the others. This he calls entrainment, and it produces "morally suffused energy; it makes the individual feel not only good, but exalted, with the sense of doing what is most important and valuable (38)."

Collins forcefully argues, then, that there are four outcomes of a successful interaction ritual: 1) group solidarity, a feeling of membership, 2) emotional energy in the individual, a feeling of confidence, and initiative in taking action, 3) symbols that represent the group, emblems like visual icons, words, and gestures, and 4) feelings of morality.

As was hinted, emotional energy mostly comes from parents feeling confident that they can talk about their kids because of the supportive mission of the meetings. They are well attuned to the fact there are few spaces they can talk freely about their gay



children outside of PFLAG meetings with the guarantee of support and affirmation. As one father said, "I like coming here because there are so few public spaces left where you can talk about stuff like this and learn how to be accepting." In this sense, parents draw positive energy from talk about their kids' lives and other parents' follow-up questions, conversations that parents of straight kids take for granted. Being able to talk about their children at meetings serves as practice for talking with other people away from meetings. Simultaneously, verbal gestures like "Of course I love my kid", "I may not accept it, but I'm going to be supportive", or "I love my gay son and my straight son the same way, sexuality doesn't matter" become energized objects, symbols that represent what Jessica Fields calls boundless love in spite of or because of their children's gay and lesbian sexualities to assert parents' moral identities as "exemplary parents" (2001, 178-9).

It is the energy available from personal relationships found at a PFLAG meeting that makes it so vital to the idea of parenting a gay son as a moral career. Beginner parents usually say that they do not feel very comfortable with new conceptions of their child's self as well as their own. New parents are in states of anguish over the moral question of their child's identity and their identity as a parent. The discrepancy between regular parents and newcomers offers clear evidence that PFLAG meetings are key in the direction a parent's moral career might take from this tension. In the following, veteran parents like Mary and Kate attempt to assuage a new mom's moral concerns amid a competing theme of denial in-order-to secure her return to future meetings:



With tears rolling, Anita explains on her first night, "I feel like such a hypocrite, such a hypocrite! I, I work as a social worker, and I've managed cases where lesbian teens are kicked out of their homes, and I welcomed them into mine, some have come and stayed with me, and I can't get myself to love my own daughter the way I've loved other kids."

"Well, you've done the right thing," answers Mary, "by coming here. And it's not easy, it's not. I like to say, it takes a while for your heart to catch up with your head."

Kate follows, "It's taken me years to get to this point. Years!"

Anita pushes back, referring to another newcomer's comments from earlier in the meeting, "I don't know, I don't know. I'm with the first person, whoever said that it might just be a choice and it might change. I'm hoping it changes."

Kate answers. "Well, I know that it is not a choice, I know it is not. But I can't speak for everyone, but for me, I have a lesbian daughter and twin boys, one turns out straight, one turns out gay. And I treated them equally, I treated them equally. So I don't think it's a choice." Anita becomes quiet.

"It's a journey," says Roxy.

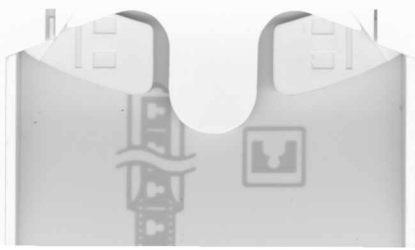
"It really is, it's a process," quickly follows Deb.

"And we have lots of literature for you to read," Mary chimes in.

"I don't want to read any of that stuff, I don't like seeing stuff I don't agree with in my mind, but I do want to change, I'm just not ready to read that stuff."

"Well, then just come back," Mary advises, "We really hope you come back. Because we've all been there."

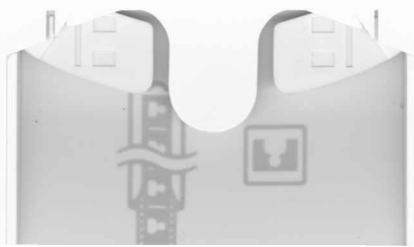
This exchange highlights the regular dynamics of a meeting particularly well. It shows one parent, Anita, seeking support while recognizing that she is not ready to be accepting and loving as a parent, despite already being supportive of other queer identities. Parents at these meetings almost always refer to their commitment to accept their children as a journey and a process, relaying to newer parents the image of themselves in emotional distress at their first meeting. This offers substance to the otherwise imaginary trajectory of their careers. The phrase, "It's a journey," is passed around so a new parent can imagine a future moment of her own career when she might resemble the other accepting parents, and in a way the phrase becomes another energized object of acceptance since it reminds the parents of the work they have done or need to do. And Kate shares a narrative to help Anita to that end, as a parenting story that becomes available to the



group. Mary brackets the exchange with advice for Anita to return. In this moment, Mary models exemplary parenting for others and, importantly, for herself, in hopes that her model and comments are enough to strengthen Anita to take the group's advice to return.

Advice available at a PFLAG meeting is pretty simple but very important since it offers an easy answer to a parent's questions about what to do: return to PFLAG meetings. Another common piece of advice from a meeting is also simple, but it leads to more complicated consequences. Parents are advised to come out as parents of gay children. With this advice in mind, newer parents specifically ask about reactions to expect from their friends, families, or colleagues. At one meeting, Kevin had shared with others a story of telling his brother about his gay son. Another father, who was trying to build up confidence to tell some of his coworkers, was listening as Kevin claimed the reaction was mild, not as intense as he had imagined, whether or not it actually was. Kyle returned the following month to report that he had taken some time during lunch to tell a few of his closer colleagues in the break room, confirming Kevin's claim that their reactions were, indeed, not as negative as he had built up in his head, whether or not they actually were.

Certainly, the parents share stories and sayings to support each other, to try and give one another strength to become comfortable with and energize their new selves. They advise one another about talking with others about their sons in ways unimaginable hitherto. Kyle's report confirms this function of the meeting to the other parents. In the account, the energy and advice helped him come out as a parent at work, but the account



minimizes the centrality of parental disclosure to a parent's moral career and what it means in terms of negotiating their identities with others who do not attend PFLAG meetings. This is the issue taken up in the next section.

Coming Out as Parents

It is a crisp and cool autumn night in October and twilight has set in around Mary's back yard. I empty the grapes and a bag of barbeque flavored potato chips into two bowls, taking the bowls through the dining room and out a sliding glass door, then setting them around Mary's table on her back porch. The porch is screened in, so the sounds of neighborhood kids laughing and screeching during a game of kickball waft in and out, varying in degrees of volume as their excitement rises and falls during the game, making it a space of children and parents. The table comfortably accommodates six of us, me, Mary, Kevin, Lacy, Diane, and Kate. A very subtle but consistent hum of crickets chirping surrounds us as we talk on the porch.

I've met these parents at Mary's home for a focus group on coming out as parents, a concept that Denise begins to clarify. "My cousin [a gay male] told me to come out. He, he, and I said to him, I said, that Justin [my son] is gay. And I said, well, what business is it if other people, why do I have to tell people he's gay?" She continues, "And he actually said the word to me, he said you need to come out, he's, you know, fifty-five, fifty-six years old, so he's been involved. And I kept asking, well, why do I have to do it? And he said, well, as a parent, I needed to do it, and the more people I told, the more people would know that there's more people out there." In these comments,



Denise is implying that coming out as a parent is meaningful just because she is a parent. This is so because of the potential that a parent's visibility could have on family understanding. It could lead to wider realizations that the problems surrounding gay identities is not an individualistic problem, since, after all, they would have families, too. Denise hints at the importance of being open and unashamed of her own self as a parent of a gay son, as it might lead to broader feelings of family and dismantle stigma.

Coming out as a parent of a gay son is about moving from static to dynamic parenting, to being honest and forthright about family. The significance of coming out as a parent relates to what Goffman called a dark secret (1959, 141-4). Goffman defined a dark secret as facts about self that are known by some and concealed for others because they would be incompatible with presented images of self. Revelations of dark secrets by unattended audiences would bring interactions to embarrassing halts and possibly cast doubt on the secret holder's character. Inversely, intervening honesty would undo what would otherwise be a false presentation of self and buttress one's character. In the following, the parents in the focus group discuss these dynamics and concerns about secrecy:

Mary: You know, I heard [the phrase coming out as parent], at, many years ago, and I think there's a historical context of gays being in the closet, and when they became, became, they came out of the closet...

Jeff: ...yea, yea...

Mary: ...and I think, maybe that's where the term came from.

Kevin: I think so.

Lacy: It's very similar.

Mary: Yea, and then, I know the first PFLAG meeting I went to, and then Dean was there, and, a gay man that was there, and he said that, speaking of himself, that we don't so much come out of the closet as we pull everyone else in with



us, meaning that you now are privy to their secret. And, then, you have to decide, you know, whom you're going to tell.

.....

Kevin: I think people who are, gay, who hide their orientation, are no different than parents who hide their son or daughter's orientation.

Group: Mm hmm.

Kevin: From their family, from their friends.

Lacy: Good point.

Jeff: Yea?

Kevin: They're in the closet in their own way as well.

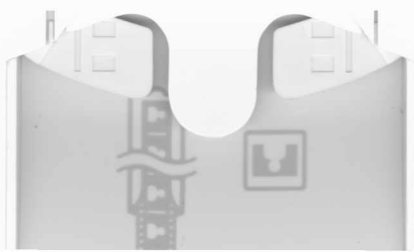
Kate: Yep.

Kevin: And, I think the coming out, is not near what it is for the individual, but it's a lot more than most parents, I think, understand it to be until they go through it.

In these comments, it is very clear that the sons coming out affects these parent's selves, giving them a secret. There is an implication that the secret should not be kept from close friends and family. But then, coming out, while it is almost as meaningful for parents as it is for individuals, is uniquely different than their sons, a difference that might be difficult for parents without gay sons to understand, or even parents of gay sons who wish to keep it a secret.

One difference between sons and their parents coming out has to do with time. These parents take more time to do their identity work than their sons do, likely to the chagrin of their sons. Kate likens commitment and disclosure to slow ripples that emanate from her, cupping her hands into a circle shape. "And then kind of move out, until years later it becomes, oh, don't you know?" Kate continues, "But, but I'm still not quite there yet."

And where is there? The process of coming out as a parent seems to aim toward a challenging though well adjusted phase of parenting a gay son. One section from an



official organization book obtainable at PFLAG meetings especially expresses the mundane though important challenges latent in such a phase:

Just as "coming out" is difficult for gay people, the coming-out process is equally difficult for parents. Many, upon learning their child is gay, go right into the closet. As they struggle with accepting their child's sexual orientation, they often worry about other people finding out. There is the challenge of fielding such questions as, "Has he got a girlfriend?" and "So when is she going to get married?" (PFLAG 1995)

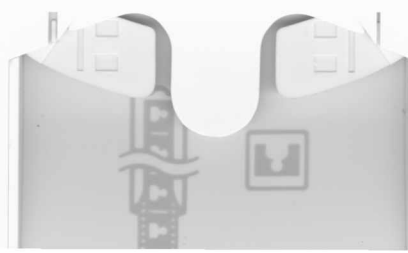
These are not the only questions, as we saw in Kevin and Kyle's case above. Who is safe to tell? When? How can one know when it is safe to tell? What we begin to see in this excerpt is a microsociology of coming out as a parent. We begin to understand that one process inherent within the moral career of a parent wishing to negotiate a new self with others creates everyday problematics. For example, small talk about heterosexual dating and weddings seems to function innocuously and is certainly taken for granted by parents of straight kids. But for parents whose sons come out to them, this everyday rug is pulled right out from under their feet.

It is useful to draw again from Goffman because his microsociological work helps us understand these everyday problematics particularly well, though with a caveat. Goffman claims that sociologists would be little concerned with a stigma that "is nicely invisible and known only to the person who possesses it, who tells no one (1963, 73)" before noting that most, if not all, stigmas fail to fall into this category. However, one of the most nicely invisible stigmas would apply to those parents whose sons come out to them and are rejected by them, who then on keep the information to themselves, passing as normal parents with straight kids in their everyday interactions. While a small degree



of information control existed among parents in the past whispering with other family members or friends about a gay family member, hardly worth scholarly attention, PFLAG parents offer an interesting question. What do we do with a courtesy stigma that would be nicely invisible and only known to the parent possessing it unless, by the definition of advocacy, he accepted the child and sought and aimed to tell others? Goffman was interested in the strategies of information control utilized by stigmatized individuals, like gay men themselves, and it is not particularly clear whether or not straight parents of gay men would necessarily worry about their daily rounds and audience segregation in the same way as their sons might. Instead, "coming out as parents" contains an element of pride in calmly eviscerating stigma. The advice to parents is to voluntarily disclose their family identity. In this sense, they would oblige themselves to a stigmatized self and a continuation of their moral careers as parents accepting their gay children.

Goffman talks about voluntary disclosure being related to a final, well adjusted phase within the moral career of a social type, this type being accepting and loving parents of gay sons (1963, 102). But later in his seminal work on stigma, Goffman reveals the shadowy nature of this well-adjusted phase by taking the point of view of others whose acceptance these parents would be seeking (114-23). The shadow of the normal veils the fact that acceptance of gay men and their parents would be a contingent acceptance. Shows of acceptance might be expected, but there is no certainty of genuine acceptance, however that might be defined. This uncertainty accentuates the work involved in a parent's moral career, especially so because of the dual nature of disclosure. Coming out is a sacrifice parents are willing to make for their gay child to be heroic parents; indeed,



they are advised to come out as an important moment in their own identity work. These parents also know that heroism can bring dangerous consequences if normals are pushed beyond a mere show of acceptance, and so they are unsure of how much they are willing to sacrifice. Somewhere between wisdom and folly, situations become difficult terrain to navigate. This sets up the work of facing situational contingencies.

Facing Situational Contingencies

In the introduction to this thesis, it was claimed that moral careers of parents committed to accepting their gay can be seen in informal situations. Above, the contingent nature of coming out as parents, between a hero's pride of acceptance and fear of reprisal, was pointed out. Putting these pieces together, I would like to make clear exactly how situational contingencies are accentuated for parents committed to accepting their gay sons.

To begin, Kevin offers a clear example of the circumstances that led him to come out about his son for the first time, especially considering the possibility of an unfortunate event:

Kevin: So I kind of sat back for, probably, six months. I told my brother (pauses). I didn't tell anyone else, probably for six months. And I wanted him to know because, he would be, in case something happened to Lacy and I, he would be the one to take care of Jonathon.

Jeff: So you wanted him to...

Kevin: I wanted him to, to know, and he was kind of a logical first person to tell, kind of.



Kevin believed it was a requirement to tell his brother, since his brother was Jonathon's legal guardian in case of his and his wife's death. Kevin goes on to note that telling his brother also served to gauge how people in his family might react, a more complicated concern.

Imagining close family members' reactions motivates the parents' scripting and testing coming out while simultaneously terrifying them. Kevin's brother being Jonathon's guardian might have made him the exception, especially if we consider comments from Lacy, Kevin's wife. In the following, the right conditions for coming out are noted in a very particular kind of situation, one that occurs within the bounded space of a safe zone workshop:

I came out the first time to Charles (a colleague and safe zone workshop organizer), and it was very safe to me, it was in a safe zone workshop that I actually did that. I came out to him because all the gay people around me were very proud of who they were, and you do get pulled into that closet, and you want to be part of it. I came out to him, and then Kevin and I came out to Kevin's brother, a while after that, but it was a long time before we actually came out, because we're protecting that child, and he was a child.

Mary follows up, "I was selective about who I told, maybe that's that protection." She continues, "You fear the Matthew Sheppard thing, but you also fear that people they have loved all their lives are going to reject them." That Mary compares the brutally hateful Mathew Sheppard killing to the rejection of her son by loved ones reveals the terrible fear involved in coming out as parents to close friends and family, the fear that they and their sons will be rejected and maybe even attacked by the people they love in their own family.



That fear helps us understand that, paradoxically, if parents wish to come out for pride and acceptance, they probably do not first come out to those closest to them. While it is easy to assume that mothers, fathers, best friends, and favorite aunts would be the most supportive and accepting individuals, there is no safe guarantee when it comes to accepting a gay identity. The uncertainty drives a worry of rejection, especially since it is impossible to choose not to have disclosed once the disclosure takes place. Instead, after feeling the pride of strangers, Lacy came out in a safe zone workshop. Denise sought out a cousin, not very close to her, to tell him first. Mary's first disclosure was to a gay co-worker. These outs constitute ultra-safe tellings, what might be called practice disclosures.

Wondering what they might be practicing, I recall Kevin's comments in one of our first interviews together:

After experience, telling a lot of people, of course, you start to read, you become a mind reader quickly, its almost fun to watch people go through the couple of quick phases, like (tenses shoulders, reaches head back slightly and breathes-in quickly), oh, I shouldn't appear shocked (relaxes shoulder muscles), its normal, oh that's cool, so what's up (chuckles)? An overly normal response to it, which isn't like, no kidding (laughing)?! You don't get that. Oh dude (said with mocking concern)! Nothing like that. It's all like, and so what? Or just, yea? That's cool, any problems? No? Ok.

Disclosures to safe recipients serve as opportunities for parents to practice reading a situation. To borrow again from Goffman, Kevin reports reading backchannel cues to his disclosures (1981, 20). He takes pleasure in putting his finger on the show of acceptance by others. Glances, looks, and shifts in posture during the smallest moments of an interaction convey information. Kevin reports reading these sign vehicles closely, noting



that quick breath and body movements communicate some level of discomfort, though quick changes to relaxed postures show social consideration. The swift change in bodily expression segues into exaggerated normal responses like, "Oh, that's cool." The question does not seem to be about whether these parents of gay sons are truly accepted. The question seems to be about whether or not their coming out would be taken normally within a given set of interactions, small concerns about reactions against bigger worries about rejection and violence by those that might matter most, friends and family. Practice disclosures are about reading these small interactions, about gauging the conditions of the situation for safe identity work.

Sociologists, perhaps Goffman most famously, have paid attention to the fact that the smallest aspects of our social lives are structured. Guided by turn taking and topics of conversation, small talk has its own organizational form. Guided by considerate bodily movement like eye contact or inconsiderate bodily movement like eye rolling, face-to-face interaction becomes shaped. These microstructures are the stuff of situations, if we take another cue from Goffman and understand a situation to be a full spatial environment anywhere within which an entering person becomes a member of a gathering (1963a, 18-9). Uncertainties about microstructures supporting an act like coming out as a parent in any given situation make up the most difficult situational contingencies of coming out as a parent. For example, what sort of small talk is in place for a parent to talk about his gay son and his gay son's partner? In fact, during the focus group, the parents admit that they seldom challenge situations. Instead, they often act out deference rituals with respect to many of the gatherings they find themselves in. For



example, Kevin would say that he seldom tells people about his son when he's playing cards at local bar poker tournaments.

Goffman specifies that asymmetrical rules of conduct guide acts of deference; these acts can be thought of as rituals. Avoidance rituals and presentation rituals are particularly important forms of deference. Taboo is an avoidance ritual of particular importance to these parents, since it is the one they wish to dismantle. It is not uncommon to hear it said, to use Goffman's phrase, in Anglo-American society that one should avoid politics and religion when bringing up topics of conversation (1963a). Perhaps more taboo than religion and politics, although undoubtedly interwoven through both, is sexuality. To the chagrin of parents of gay sons who have decided to be forthright, deference in situations often takes the form of avoiding the one issue central to their identity work.

Inversely, supportive parents also find they are negatively affected in terms of presentation rituals, which encompass "acts through which the individual makes specific attestations to recipients concerning how he regards them and how he will treat them in the on-coming interaction (1956, 71)." This is most explicitly about the theme at hand, since coming out as a parent would be a presentation ritual, and parents are unsure of how they might be treated in the on-coming interactions after they do so. To Goffman, presentation rituals are prescriptions of action, and one telling example cited is of a female nurse passing out pictures of her fiancé and his family. The example is significant because of its heteronormative underpinnings. If presentation rituals are commonly sexualized as straight, then what becomes available, not just to recently engaged gay men



or women, but to accepting parents of gay men? At the very least, these kinds of presentation rituals become situational problematics to supportive parents, which partly explains their participation in PFLAG meetings since they become safe spaces to pass around pictures of their children and children's partners, especially when those couples adopt or surrogate children, as we saw with Roxy above.

Tension between deference rituals and desire to be forthright can produce negative emotions in all sorts of ways. The desire to be out has to do with a parent succeeding at his identity work, and being out could make for a loving and accepting parent. In this way, small talk moments are moral career opportunities. In our focus group, Mary recounts the times a hairdresser inquired about her son's relationship status, each time reflected on as a missed opportunity for Mary to disclose, before the hair dresser quit asking. The consequence for Mary and her moral career is a lost chance to be forthright about her son, to display love and acceptance to others and herself. The parents quickly add that sometimes, without their having come out, people around them discover the secret. Without taking initiative to be forthright and sensing that friends and acquaintances discover their son's identity, a parent may find herself on defense. Kate describes particularly well the feeling involved in discovery moments drained of straightforward honesty:

Mary: They stop asking because they know...

Kate: ...they'll stop asking, some people will say, they don't even, and one of the things you may, you may know these people have figured it out or they know or maybe even talk about, but then they don't ask about that child.

Mary: Mm hmm.

Kate: You know?



Jeff: You think it's intentional?

Kate: Yea.

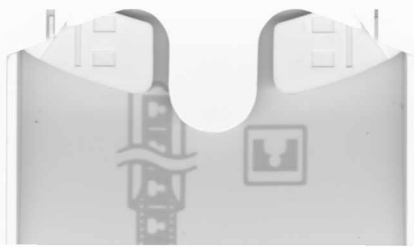
Jeff: Yea?

Kate: I do, I have no proof, but I, I do, I think, cause you'll be in a group, and all the people are asking about the other kids, and you're thinking, what do you think my kids are, chopped liver? You know.

Kate reports feeling alienated within group interactions, understandably defensive about the feeling that her children are being treated like they do not exist. The gloss feels inhuman to her. This very clearly shows us the degree to which situational contingencies are accentuated to parents committed to accepting their gay sons. Small talk about children's lives means something to so many parents, and parents who are working on accepting a gay son, or a lesbian daughter for that matter, would like to receive questions and participate in small talk. At the same time, concerns about rejection and violence lurk ("What, are my kids chopped liver?"). The situational contingencies described in Kate's comments are very much about the uncertainty of her own children's existence in small talk situations, as absurd but terrifying as that is to these PFLAG parents.

All the above tells us much about the importance of everyday structures and dependency on others for human selves. Sociologist Charles Lemert discusses this well in *Sociology After the Crisis* (2004), at one point utilizing the classic work by Julia Ann Cooper. Cooper was a black woman who spent her life working as a public intellectual during the Jim Crow Era. Because of her genius, gender, and race, she was someone who was able to make visible the concept of invisibility through her work. She writes:

And when farther on in the same section our train stops at a dilapidated station, rendered yet more unsightly by dozens of loafers with their hands in their pockets while a productive soil and inviting climate beckon in vain to industry; and when,



looking a little more closely, I see two dingy little rooms with 'FOR LADIES' swinging over one and 'FOR COLORED PEOPLE' over the other; while wondering under which head I come (184).

When drawing a comparison between mostly white, middle-class PFLAG parents and Jim Crow Era black women, one must proceed cautiously. What is comparable is the vitality of everyday structure to social selves, and the morality of those responsible for discrimination, of those who deny everyday structures for others, is both inferior and privileged. There was no place, not even a category above a bathroom door, for Cooper. That felt invisibility in everyday life is paralleled by gay men and lesbian women today, and still another parallel is found in the invisibility felt by Kate, especially so since she has committed to accepting her children. Discriminatory signs above bathroom doors reveal structural discrimination more easily than when structural discrimination lies within an informal situation, as Kate hinted when she admitted that she could not prove other people's intentions to ignore her children. Deep invisibility is partly why contingencies vex these parents, applying pressure to their interactions.

Interaction uneasiness and the frustration concomitant to it are sometimes recalled as catalysts for coming out as a parent. "There was this one guy at work, who was a national sales manager, and I was in a national conference away from home, and he made a derogatory comment when speaking to me about gay people," Kevin describes during the focus group. "And, instead of giving him a bible beating about gay people, which I really wanted to, um, I just went after him." From there, Kevin describes coming out as a parent, as well as using the phrases and discourses about choice and religion, objects passed around at PFLAG meetings, to counter the interaction. "If you really believe it's a



choice, and science one day proves it's hard-wired, how will you feel about your negative judgments you've made on so many people, yet you stand there and act like a Christian?"

Kate tells a similar story a bit more dramatically. "I think it's part of our job to educate other people," Kate says, "I do, yea, and I'm not always great at it. My incident with the book club, as hard as it was, I was very happy that I was able to stand up and say what I did and let them think about it." Kate is referring to her favorite "coming out as a parent" story. It is about the unique job these parents feel they have to do, to not just tell other people about their identities as parents of gay children but that they are accepting. The following serves as the best example of these parents solving situational contingencies:

Long story short, I'm at, at my own house, I have a book club, there were seven people there, myself included. Um, an international group of women, Asian, primarily Asian, but American citizens, they're American. And this one woman made this announcement, that she had switched churches, she left her church because they like gays. And so, I'm sitting there, and I'm just about to have a hissy fit. And, uh, she kind of went on and on, and two of the other women, who are newer members, they started saying back, what are you talking about, that's ridiculous, na-na-na-na, going back, and I'm just sitting there, just dying. And two women had been told [that I'm the mother of a gay son], I found out later. These two women are being quiet; they don't say anything. So finally, long story, I, the woman, her name was Annie, I said, well what would you do if you had a gay child, do you think it's a choice? And she said, oh, it's a sin. And she's going, and I, I'm just about to die, so I stood up, in my own home, and I said well I don't think it's a choice, and I have two gay children.

At the book club meeting, Kate experiences what Goffman called alienative misinvolvement, becoming very conscious of the interaction (1981, 119). When a friend announces the rejection of a church, there are many reasons she might be doing so. In early twenty-first century America, during which gay civil rights debates are being



voraciously debated, one possible reason is disagreement with the church's stance on homosexuality, which can go in many directions. Yet, the woman's response is unexpected, and a frame dispute, to borrow again from Goffman, begins to brew unbeknownst to her (1974, 32-4). Unaware of all the backgrounds of all the participants in the situation, it is difficult to tell who would be in agreement and who would not, though Kate's framing of the moral question around homosexuality is in stark contrast to the one being articulated. As the interaction builds, Kate realizes her friend has left her church for all the wrong reasons, so to speak, and the direction the interaction begins to take causes her concern. Her first attempt to diffuse the situation and integrate the woman's comments, invoking empathetic advocacy, does not stabilize the interaction. And so, in dramatic fashion, Kate comes out, resorts to a personal narrative, revealing her identity as a parent of two gay children and her opposing philosophical stance on the issue, neatly converging the personal with the public in one small moment in her private home.

Moral opposition to these parents' acceptance of their gay sons, evident in Kate and Kevin's stories, constitutes the toughest situational contingency that parents face. Conquering contingent morality, defined as the uncertain resolution of whether or not gay identities and the parents who accept them are wrong, is at the core of these parents' moral careers, involving them in telling others of their identities as accepting parents of gay men and attempts at reframing the terms of the issue, sensing the precariousness of license and support for their new selves. Until the parents arrive at some imagined stage of their careers where they are able to succeed at negotiating their new self, they are



unlikely to be easily open with those closest to them. It is telling that Kevin and Kate's hero stories involve characters like coworkers and book club members and not sisters or fathers, in that the former may not be as intimate as the latter. Parents are probably not as attached to a transient book club member as they would be to their favorite sister. It is probably more telling that the setting of Kate's story is her own home. It offers a big clue about these parents' goals to open some space for their children, some home where they can be loved and accepted.

Thinking about the hominess between grandfather and grandson, Mary ambivalently reflects on her father's death before Tyler came out, pondering how she could of told him. "And my dad, I mean, I, this is only recently that occurred to me, my dad died when Tyler was six, and he just doted on him, he loved him dearly, but he was unhappy with me because I let him play dress-up," she says. "I know, that were my dad still alive, that would come back to bite me, 'Well, you know, if you hadn't let him play dress-up,' and that's one that would be really, really painful, cause I know how much Tyler meant to him and how much he meant to Tyler." The juxtaposition of a close father to coworkers and acquaintances shows us how these parents' moral careers are about winning over loved ones and ensuring acceptance from them. Such a high goal guarantees that they may not risk rejection until they have reworked their parenting toolkits and faced down a few situational contingencies.



Conclusion

The sort of sticky interactional work described above makes situations especially accentuated to parents committed to accepting their gay sons. Their experiences of coming out as parents could be understood as a key transitional rite in their careers. In acquiring energy and advice from PFLAG meetings, parents feel a sense of moral solidarity to reframe the terms of the debate over homosexuality when they go out into the world beyond the safe space of these meetings. In safely telling gay coworkers and cousins, they practice the simple act of disclosure. Parental disclosure becomes a good act to take pride in, as parents simultaneously draw strength from the meetings to not simply disclose their identity but add moral elements to it. However, it is in more informal situations that parents feel the confinement of the new self they are attempting to forge. With enough practice and energy, some parents are able to successfully challenge situations. And, with respect to their moral careers, they refold hero stories back into their discussions at meetings.

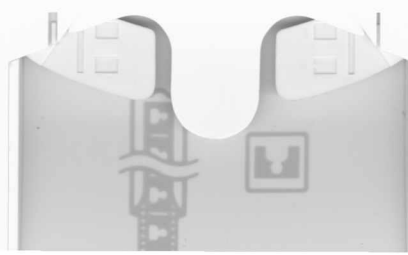
Thinking of PFLAG meetings as interaction rituals helps us think about parenting as a doing. The two pieces of advice highlighted in this chapter were about what to do for a gay son: try to come out as parents and return to PFLAG meetings. Veteran PFLAG parents like Kevin, Mary, and Kate know the difficulties of situational contingencies and the importance of a meeting to find out what to do in those tough situations. If Goffman said, "Not men and their moments, but moments and their men," and Collins rephrased, attempting gender neutrality, "Not persons and their situations, but situations and their



persons,” these parents would ask, “Not us and our situations, but what can we do in these situations to be good parents to our gay sons?”

In light of situational contingencies, the advice to return to PFLAG meetings, like we saw Mary give an emotional Anita above, is crucial at this stage of a parent who wants to accept a gay son. Understood as an interaction ritual, PFLAG meetings provide energy to manage situational contingencies but also present problems. Frustration concomitant to outside interactions can be vexing to a parent who wishes to be forthright, and too easily leads some to quit their careers. Getting parents to loop back into PFLAG meetings is to get them to continue committing to the identity of a parent committed to accepting a gay son, since a restocking of emotional energy is available there. This is what Collins has in mind when he says, “In a strong sense, the individual is the interaction ritual chain (5).”

Still more problems arise though. Collins says, “Short-term situational emotions carry across situations, in the form of emotional energy, with its hidden resonance of group membership, setting up chains of interaction rituals over time (xii).” To some extent, we see this above in Kate’s favorite coming out story. It is not hard to imagine Kate imagining her PFLAG group behind her as she stands up to her book-club friend, drawing out a symbol energized at meetings she has attended. But in an important way, the main circumstance of the story is that her friend initiated the frame contest in Kate’s home. One of Collins’ major claims in *Interaction Ritual Chains* is that humans seek to maximize emotional energy; interactions that are too defensive or draining of energy are avoided. However, Kate’s coming out narrative, her hero story, is both defensive and directed.

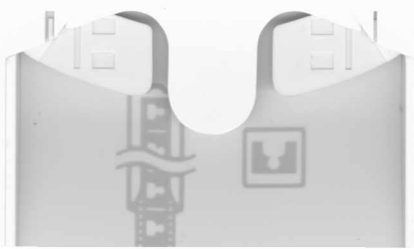


If unfavorable situations, by the contingencies highlighted above, were the only space available for spillover energy from PFLAG meetings, than interaction ritual theory says that no interaction ritual chain could appear; that is, no identity of a parent committed to accepting a gay son would be sustained. The next chapter describes Pride Parades as culminating interaction rituals at a further stage of the moral career of a straight parent of a gay son.



CHAPTER 3: PRIDE PARADES AND POKER GAMES- SPACES FOR AND AGAINST ADVOCACY

On a mid-summer Saturday afternoon, I jump out of my car and make my way towards a subway station to head downtown for an annual Pride Parade, one of many celebratory and political marches that occur in major cities around the United States to support gay men and women each year. The sound of speeding cars below an overpass leading to the station mixes with the voices of people coming and going, chatting with each other and on cell phones, producing a cacophony of sound. It is hot and humid, the sun beating down through a very few trees, making greens and yellows on the sidewalk. The station is surprisingly busy, with people buying tickets amid the buzz of two subway trains leaving and arriving at the station. A voice comes over the intercom and welcomes riders, making perfunctory announcements about elevator outages and the availability of shuttle buses. The parents I've been working with tell me the Parade is something I cannot miss, and I've agreed to meet them at this station to walk alongside them, one of whom I see now. Diane is walking into the station with her son and his partner. Contrary to assumptions, the two gay men are not dressed flagrantly or colorfully at all, no camp or queens, the men wearing a white tee and khaki shorts and a green tee and dark cargo shorts, respectively. Shortly thereafter, the other three parents who have agreed to meet at the station arrive, Kevin, Lacy, and Mary. Kevin and Lacy are with their son Jonathon, and Mary is with her boy, Tyler. Kevin and Lacy are wearing yellow political wristbands



printed with the word "Pride." Mary and Tyler more prominently advertise their identities or political goals most relevant for this occasion. Mary wears a white tee printed with the phrase "I'm a PFLAG Mom," and Tyler's black t-shirt reads, "Stop the Hate." We board the metro for a ride into the city.

Arriving and ascending to the streets atop escalator steps, we are swarmed by a rainbow coalition marked with multiple colors and the booming sounds emanating from street performers playing drums. The sidewalks are packed. I notice a lot of people wearing activist t-shirts, some people dressed up in purple and green wigs. Many are wearing rainbow colored necklaces or have colorful make-up on their faces. We wind our way past them and take our place in the allotted position for the PFLAG constituency. Justin and Lacy walk away into the crowd, but the other sons join their parents. In position, we begin to eagerly anticipate any movement that would signify the beginning of the Pride parade.

Energy from PFLAG meetings, though frustrated by some situational contingencies, can most easily carry over into the space of a Pride parade, carrying the symbols that are generated in the interactions that occur at those meetings. In this chapter, we will see that walking in a parade marks an advanced stage in the moral career of a parent committed to accepting a gay son. At this stage, the parents find a way to communicate a safe, public identity as civil rights activist while displaying love and acceptance to their sons. Since PFLAG energy and symbols tend to culminate in Pride parades, wider societal problems continue to face gay rights advocacy. I conclude this chapter by pondering the limits of PFLAG by considering some spaces untouched by its discourse. To help make this more



concrete, I discuss one father's participation in poker tournaments. Despite immersing oneself in a subculture of gay acceptance, there is little to no alienation from normal society. Here we see that moral careers can be splintered into paths, one for a strangely valorized self, valued for taking up a courtesy stigma, and another path for a fully participating member of a heteronormative society.

Walking in Pride Parades: Spaces Where Parenting and Advocacy Intertwine

Just before the beginning of the Pride parade, milling about in the spot set aside for PFLAG members, all of the ingredients for an interaction ritual can be found. Considering the above excerpt as well as the one that opens this thesis, it is clear that these parents bring themselves to the streets of the city and their position in the parade, a) meeting the ingredient of group assembly. The parade line, before it begins to move, is sequestered from the thousands of viewers to come, b) serving as a temporary barrier to outsiders, though it is an interesting barrier since the nature of public streets make it an amorphous one. Chatting amongst themselves about their children and taking in the sights of the floats, dancers, and political signage, the marchers align their c) focus of attention and d) share in the mood of celebration, support, and advocacy.

The public streets through which the parade moves offer space for the energy generated at PFLAG meetings, charged up in the symbols and ties forged at those meetings. The symbols come in the form of sayings written on signs or shirts that indicate the parents' negotiations of their own expectations. For example, Mary is wearing her "I'm a PFLAG mom" shirt, displaying her new identity, presenting a new

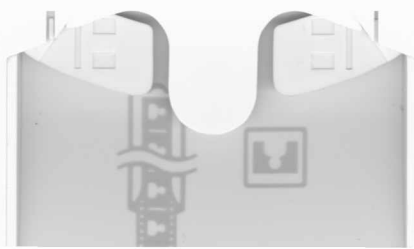


type of mom. Many parents have prepared signs, writing on them the things often said during a meeting. "The Face of Love" was written on one sign. Another read, "Of Course We Love Our Sons and Daughters!" Still another said, "We Love Our Children, Gay or Straight." This sign in particular related to the parents at meetings who have both gay and straight sons, like Kate. The shirts on their bodies and the signs in their hands enable the parents to be recognized as loving and supporting parents of gay men and women.

One more sign is necessary to distinguish this group from others as supportive friends and parents. This barrier is satisfied by a large purple banner, with giant white letters reading, "PFLAG of Metro DC: Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays." The banner is held by two walkers and raised as the first steps of the parade are taken. The parents adjust the pace of their walk to ensure they are demonstrably behind the purple banner. A gap appears between their group and the one in front of them, featuring a large float carrying male dancers from a local gay nightclub.

All of this is significant because, assembled just so with these barriers and symbols, audience members instantly recognize the moral implications of the group as it parades through the streets. When these parents reach the first mass of viewers alongside the parade, the reaction is emotionally overwhelming. I attempted to capture the experience in a fieldnote:

The clapping and yelling is unlike anything I've ever heard, louder than a roar at any football game I've been to. People cheering their support, "Yea PFLAG!" Others cheering, "We love you, too!" A few people distinctly yell, "Thank Youuuuu!" The words echo, drawn out, through my ears. The people closest to



the streets are the easiest to hear. Some of them say, "I wish you were my parent." Some are in tears. I can't be certain, but it seems that they are imagining their difficulties with their own parents. For the moment, they are in the presence of parents who love them in spite of or because of their gayness—perhaps a bit of both. I glance around at these parents walking. They are cheering back at the audience, clapping or waving with beaming smiles. The intensity is difficult to describe. June 16, 2009

After beginning the walk, the parents have adjusted their attention to an intense mutual focus: the audience members watching the parade. Thousands of people attend the Pride parade in DC, some of whom are gay men and women, and some of those assumedly with parents who have not accepted them. The clapping, cheering, and yelling "entrain" the parents through the route of the parade, to borrow more from Collins. This helps us further understand the parade as an interaction ritual, since the emotional outbursts intensify the parents' focus of attention and shared mood, energizing even more the symbols of their acceptance, strengthening their feeling of group solidarity, and providing them good amounts of emotional energy.

The standards of morality that emerge during this intense experience are especially important to understand, particularly because they make walking in a Pride parade a key moment for a parent's moral career. Upon viewing the purple banner, seeing the parents with their signs waving above their heads, and reading the sayings written on shirts, many audience members burst into tears. Some spectators run out into the parade to hug other people's parents. These young people's action is perhaps reaction to the tense experience they may have in their own families. In a response to one of my questions, Mary explains this notion very well:



I hugged a young woman who burst into tears when she saw the PFLAG contingent. I couldn't hear her, but I could tell by her gestures that a friend next to her had asked her why she was crying. She gestured toward our group. Another man from PFLAG went over to hug her. I pointed her out to Tyler, and he said go hug her, so I did. I told her it would be ok, not knowing of course what "it" was for her or if "it" actually would be ok. Most people were saying thank you, holding out their hands for high-fives. One young woman saw "I'm a PFLAG Mom" shirt and said, "I wish you were my mother!" So I hugged her. I felt a connection with people I didn't know; I felt happy about that. But I felt sad for them and angry at parents who reject their children. I don't understand that and I never will.

Mary reports experiencing a moment of parent/child connection, and in this moment she is able to take the moral high ground. Remembering his hugging and handshaking, Kevin reflects:

Marching through the streets with people reaching out to you emotionally and at times physically, I wanted to 'touch them' back. Although there was very little verbal exchange and didn't need to be, I told them that we loved them and they were great. Their eyes said everything to me. What I felt is very hard to put into words. Perhaps a combination of love and sadness, happiness and outrage, purpose and change.

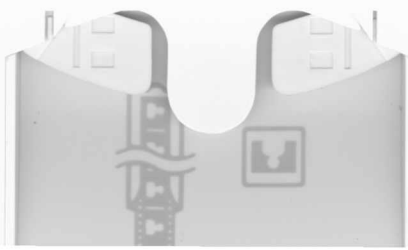
The intensely emotional experience and outpouring of love reinforces these parents' focus of attention on the spectators, imagined as rejected children from other families. The march reenergizes them as well, not just in this space in particular but in terms of their overall commitment to their sons. The experience helps them draw a line between themselves as good parents for loving and accepting their children and those parents who reject their children. It begins to intertwine parenting and advocacy, giving these parents the feeling of doing what's right, feelings of "purpose and change."



The word “change” offers clues as to how a Pride parade functions in a parent’s moral career, how parenting and advocacy intertwine. The activity itself becomes a symbol of the parents’ support for their children at the same time they share the experience between them. Walking in the parade becomes a story to be shared with other parents once they are back in a meeting in efforts to change their minds from skepticism about the morality of accepting their sons to certainty that it is the right thing to do.

To foreground space, a parent bringing himself into the space and walking allows him to construct this object, which is a sign of his self as both a parent of a gay son and a gay rights activist. The space and activity become a situation, and the situation is self-referential. For example, while walking I ask Kevin why he participates in the parade. He says, “I walk for Jonathon, to support his civil rights. And also it’s my way to come out.”

As a tool in the parents’ repertoires as an accepting parent of a gay son, walking in the parade negotiates their new social identities with others. The parade itself moves through public spaces, so anyone present can see them. Since there are also journalists and photographers present at the parade, the potential to appear in public documents, like newspapers for example, further anchors their public support for their children and gay rights. A few of Kevin’s co-workers noticed him at his first parade. He used the recognition as a way to reveal his identity. Knowing that they had attended the parade in support of the gay rights movement, he naturally felt safe to tell them. In other words, walking in a Pride parade offers the parents a safe, public identity as civil rights activist while displaying love and acceptance to their sons.



A more accurate claim would be that thinking about and actually walking in the parade is a way for parents to measure their readiness to negotiate their new social identities with others. Reflecting on her first parade, Kate was slightly embarrassed to say that she wasn't quite ready to do so. She offers more evidence of the dependency of a new self on support from others:

It was such a funny thing, I mean, I was on, I was sitting on my bed thinking, I can't go, I can't go, I can't do this, and I needed a partner. I need somebody to go with. But I decided, ok. I'll go. But I remember Mary had given me a PFLAG shirt, I couldn't put it on. Cause it was just so, everyone would know that I am the moth-, everyone would know. Not just whom I wanted to know, not just who I was comfortable with. I was going to go, but I was going to be incognito.

Walking in the parade reenergizes the parents' commitments to each other and their sons, yet the experience itself has a humbling effect on these parents. These parents admit that, while feeling energized, they do not feel like emotional energy stars. They also feel some sense of unworthiness, like they fall short of being truly good parents. Minimizing their participation, they admit that all they did was walk, and that that was not very much. After imaging the parade as a final destination, these parents seem to become disappointed afterwards and start to place their participation at some point of an unfixed process. Kate highlights this notion the best:

Kate: And the other thing that, this is going to sound very contradictory, cause it is to me, but people would cheer. And I felt, so unworthy of applause, or cheering, or tears, or hugging. I mean, there were people crying, there were people hugging, people running out to shake our hands. It just totally freaked me out.

Jeff: Yea, well why?



Kate: Cause I'm thinking, of course we are supporting our children. Yet. I had never been to a parade.

Jeff: I see.

Kate: I couldn't wear the, I couldn't wear the shirt, but.

Jeff: Or hold a sign?

Kate: Or hold a sign, I could only do, like I was taking a baby step, you know? I think had I been able to go this year, I think mentally, I would have worn the shirt, but I think I would have covered it up on the train. And when I take a bigger step, I will wear the shirt on the train without it being covered up, you know?

The language of taking steps vis-à-vis the cocktail of emotions seen above (happiness, sadness, outrage, disappointment, embarrassment) describes and fuels the parents' future actions, which seems to contradict Collins' claim that actors seek interactions that maximize positive energy. It seems that a mix of both positive and negative energy keeps these parents talking about their advocacy and returning to PFLAG meetings and Pride parades.

At the very first meeting after the parade, Mary and Dianne spoke excitedly and began making plans for next year's parade. Dianne relayed to the group that people holding up signs received the most cheers, so she was going to make one next year. Imaging future action, Mary agreed and spoke both glowingly and disappointedly about the signs, reassuring the group that Tyler confirmed a return trip to walk again, next time with signs. Merely days after the parade, Kevin said to me, "Oh, it was great. You know, I got home, and I was all pumped up. Then today, with this huge victory (a presidential memo giving same-sex benefits to federal employees). It's such a victory and why we have to get one thousand marching behind that banner." Kevin spoke these words to me at the beginning of one of the poker tournaments we participated in together,



comments that would become ironic by, as we will see, the very structure of interactions at those poker tournaments.

Playing Poker Games: Spaces Against Gay Rights Advocacy

There are some spaces where energy generated at PFLAG meetings is not activated, both cause and effect of the channeling of energy towards Pride Parades. This claim can be partially explained by what could be called competing interaction rituals. In this section, an analysis is offered that shows how one of the stronger advocate's participation in poker tournaments competes with his participation in PFLAG. If we take seriously the microsociological call to foreground situations, then a natural problem to take up is that of space. In which spaces do what situations need to occur to solidify identities, like that of a gay rights advocate? More concretely, what happens when the father of a gay son who considers himself a gay rights advocate enters a masculine space where heterosexist and homophobic things are said? Does he engage in advocacy work? Is he against gay rights, or is the space, defined by its situational dynamics, against gay rights?

The following will show Kevin's participation in poker tournaments. It analyzes the games as competing interaction rituals, impervious to and dampening the energy generated at PFLAG meetings. The expectations and norms governing this space favor heterosexual men, and while opportunities arise for Kevin to advocate on his son's behalf, he instead follows heterosexist and homophobic beliefs, even actively reconstituting them. He does this to succeed at poker, a game he has played all his life.



His participation in these games helps us understand the importance of context and space to situational selves.

Texas Hold-em is the featured game at the poker tournaments Kevin plays in. A Texas Hold-em hand consists of four rounds, betting occurring after each round. Players are first dealt two private cards, colloquially called pocket cards, followed by a dealing of three community cards, one more community card, and then a final community card, totaling five community cards available to all players in addition to each players' pocket cards. Texas Hold-em games, like PFLAG meetings, are also interaction rituals. There is bodily co-presence and barriers to outsiders, as players take their seats around a table with their backs to the rest of the room. A mutual focus of attention exists. Players turn their attention to the center of the table to make bets and watch the community cards, as well as to each other as they attempt to make reads. There is a shared mood of competitive card playing and gambling.

Tournaments are held most days of the week, free of charge, in sports bars in Kevin's area. Although at any given tournament there are women players or patrons, a tournament bar services a male clientele. Televisions feature professional men's baseball, basketball, and football games. The spaces are sexualized, assuming patrons are heterosexual, and so the bars also service a patriarchal gaze. The uniforms that women employees are required to wear offer evidence for this claim. One bar featured women employees wearing tight and revealing black tee shirts; another had their waitresses wearing spandex shorts and low-cut football jerseys.



The favoring of heterosexual men perhaps results in the number of men and women playing in the tournaments; which is about three-to-one. Not surprisingly, the rules and norms governing the way interactions are structured at these games could be described as masculine. One has to develop a good poker face, suppressing emotion and displaying a cool demeanor, lack of emotionality being conventionally coded masculine. This is expected to happen even in the face of great risk, and those unable to maintain their composure are feminized in a negative way:

At the table beside us, there is a particularly intense exchange between two white guys about whether or not one of the players has played his hand "blind," that is, not looking at his pocket cards: "You said you didn't look, bitch," says the one. "I didn't, ho," retorts the other.

Here, being cool while simultaneously being risky is associated with masculinity, and there is a policing of those failing to follow this norm through the use of derogatory terms for women applied to men. The fine details of such an interaction are very important to reading situations. Much like Kevin's readings above of others' reactions to his disclosures of being an accepting father of a gay son, here we see small signs that can be read as clues to how people react to one another in this space and the sexist nature of those reactions.

Some signs in this space suggest that reactions are also homophobic:

At the table to our left, there is an eruption of yelling after the river card gives a trailing player a winning hand. "That's gay-fed!" the losing player shouts, a white guy. Laughing, another player inquires, "Did you just say K-Fed or Gay-Fed?" To which he responds, "Gay." This seems to be about the winner betting



on a poor hand and defeating the shouter, who was leading before the improbable card.

This is very much like the fag discourse discovered by sociologist CJ Pascoe (2007). The homophobic lob, coupled with a popular culture reference to Kevin Federline, a man ridiculed in popular media for his failed relationship with Brittany Spears, is taken lightly by the players but has a serious aim both to keep players in line in terms of playing poker correctly and reconstituting the norm of heterosexual masculinity. Fag discourse is utilized at these poker tournaments to ensure players place what are perceived to be the right bets, the overall effect being the shoring up of heterosexual masculine identities. In fact, these interactions energize homophobic symbols, since the goal is to succeed at poker by not acting “gay-fed,” coded here as making bad bets on improbable hands. To not act “gay-fed” would be to keep a cool demeanor, make accurate probability calculations, and bet aggressively. There are outpourings of emotion both when hands are won in this fashion and when “well-played” hands lose to “lucky” hands played by people who ignore the odds. Those playing too recklessly are oftentimes jokingly belittled in sexist and homophobic outbursts like the one above.

Of course, these are opportunities for Kevin to advocate, something like potential teaching moments. But, arguably, the structure of these interactions block any of the symbols generated at PFLAG meetings, especially the norm of a poker face. In the following, Kevin says absolutely nothing as he suppresses his emotion while reading his hand, letting a homophobic slur pass by unchecked:



As cards are being dealt at our table, one player, a black guy, introduces himself as an employee at a used car dealership. Someone asks him about leasing a car. "It's not something you want to do." Laughing, he continues, "You get it up the ass (he balls up one of his hands into a fist and motions it through the other hand, curled up to symbolize a hole)." I glance sideways at Kevin to see if he will say something disagreeable to the gesture, but he does not. He looks like he is nodding in agreement, though his eyes are downward to his pocket cards.

At one tournament, I was able to make it to the final table with Kevin, who oftentimes advances to this last stage of tournaments. At this final table, there was an incredible moment with salient gender and sexuality themes that can be defined as heterosexist since the men talk about sex with women. Here, Kevin participates:

As a handful of us make our way to join a few players already at the final table, Zach, a skinny guy with jet black hair, asks aloud, "Who's got the biggest penis?!" He looks around at each of our stacks of chips. He eyes up Kris, one of the two women to advance to the final table. Looking at her stack of chips, she visibly having the most numerous, Zach exclaims, "You do?!" He pauses and then follows up, "She's got the biggest penis, all of you guys with short stacks have small penises." Some guys hold up their stacks between their thumbs and index fingers, squinting at the plastic chips. Zach continues, "You all need Viagra or Enzyte or something."

Someone asks, "Wait, which is the one that makes you bigger?"

One player says, "Viagra."

A second player begins to correct him, "No, that just..."

He is interrupted by a third player, "Yea, Viagra just gives you an erection that lasts longer."

Another player chimes in, "What do the commercials say?"

The third player answers, "If you experience an erection for more than four hours, see your doctor. Shit, if I have one for that long, my girlfriend's going to need medical attention."

I am then very surprised to hear Kevin join the discussion, "Yea, you'll be calling your friends."

Instead of engaging his advocacy work, Kevin follows heteronormative norms, even actively reconstituting them. Being one of the better players, it comes across merely as an attempt to successfully participate in poker games by conforming to informal rules of

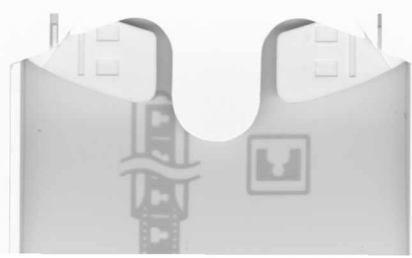


masculinity. However, his participation has the effect of reconstituting the very norms he advocates against in other spaces. Though it is tempting to blame the individual here, a question emerges about the very structure of these interactions and whether or not his advocacy work would even be successful considering the conditions of these situations.

Easy answers to the discrepancy between Kevin as advocate and Kevin as poker player come in the form of role deactivations. After all, do we have to be one role all the time? Does Kevin have to be a parent all the time? The space of poker tournaments probably lets him feel like a normal guy in the moment; it is not necessary that he always advocate. The point, however, is critical. Normals bestowed with a courtesy stigma have the luxury of turning off their advocacy. Inversely, the narrow channel of gay identity made privy to parents as activists is oftentimes the only channel of authentic being available to gay men like their sons. While Kevin turns off his parenting in a heteronormative, masculine space, simultaneously switching off his advocacy, gay men would deactivate their sexual identities in attempts to assure their safety.

Conclusion

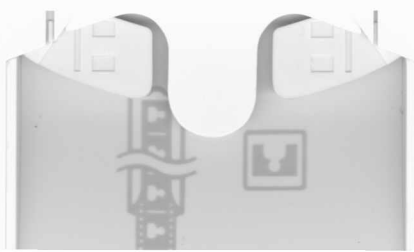
I hope I have not performed a hit job on Kevin. Pointing out the participation of a gay rights advocate in rituals that tend to charge up sexist and homophobic symbols does not necessarily diminish his identity work at parades. Instead, the juxtaposition of Pride parades and poker games shows us the clear connection between moral careers and situational contingencies, especially against the concept of space. We saw before that situations can be difficult terrain for parents to navigate in terms of being forthright about



themselves and their sons. Knowing which spaces are safe to be forthright, like the space of a classroom where PFLAG meetings are held, makes it easier for them to decide where to come out as parents. Reading and dealing with uncertainties of situations outside of meetings helps them determine where else they can safely come out, but it also becomes frustrating. Tension helps explain the emotional intensity of walking in a Pride parade. Situations in many spaces lack a structure for them to come out and some others are downright dangerous, pressure-cooking and channeling these parents towards the parade.

Walking in a Pride parade is a way for these parents to show commitment to accept their sons, highlighting even more that parenting is a doing contingent on situations. It also shows us how moral careers become shaped as they move through interactions and learning phases. Marching intertwines parenting and advocacy, an action that meshes good parenting with fighting for gay rights. In this way, walking in a Pride parade is a key moment for these parents' moral careers. It is a public display of their commitment to accept their sons and fight for their civil rights, as well as the rights of other men and women who share their plight. In public streets, these parents see the tears of other people's kids, feel their private pain, and draw a moral line between PFLAG parents and those who reject their children.

Some spaces remain unsafe for parents of gay sons, let alone gay men. Focusing on the role of space in the constitution of masculine heteronormativity, we see how Kevin's participation in some rituals constitutes that which he fights against in others. This might seem contradictory unless we consider that a PFLAG discourse has very limited purchase in heteronormative spaces, despite its goal to turn those spaces safe. One individual



probably cannot succeed here. Instead, focusing on unsafe spaces reveals the importance of wider structural change to the possibilities of selves. If anything, Kevin's poker playing reminds him of the work left to do for his son's and his own self.

The next chapter looks more closely at parents' reflections on their past and their sons, showing how conventional discourses about family work alongside unconventional discourses about gender and sexuality. This seems to follow easily from the path dependent nature of moral careers seen above.



CHAPTER 4: RENEGOTIATING THE PAST

Kevin Thompson is both an imposing and welcoming figure. He stands about six-feet-four and is a bit heavy-set. His broad shoulders hunch forward slightly and open up to long, lanky arms, and stocky legs support the whole arrangement. Below his salt and pepper hair are friendly eyes. When he smiles, it is a warm sign that he is simultaneously eager to listen and prepared to speak for hours. Kevin's voice sends words into the room, each one like a warm and full note from a bass guitar.

"I think it's important to look at not only one aspect of somebody," Kevin told me during our first evening spent in his living room, "but what other pieces to their personality are important. There are catalysts that go way beyond. Jonathon's was, he was born with a heart defect. And his first surgery was within twenty-four hours of birth, four-hundred and fifty miles away from where he was born."

Kevin's moral career as a father had begun dramatically. His son, Jonathon, was born with a reversed aortic pulmonary, a potentially fatal heart condition that required medical evacuation, major surgery, and placement in intensive care. Kevin's first day on the job was full of panicked doctors and swamped by red and blue emergency lights. Jonathon, before his father could hold him for the very first time, was whisked away to a crisis center. It was not until a few days after his son's birth that Kevin could know the outcome of the crisis, for better or for worse, and pick up his son. Fortunately, doctors



were able to stabilize Jonathon's heart and return him safely to Kevin and his wife, Lacy. But the heart condition would require constant monitoring, care, and endless appointments with doctors.

Kevin continued, "So when I describe my son, being gay is just his orientation. What influences his relationships, character development, and all of that, is the human being, much more so than just an orientation."

Appealing to the language of humanism, Kevin's dramatic story about his son's birth is one of the main tools he uses to make sense of his parenting trajectory, to see his job as a father as developing a good, all-around human being. To him, that wholeness is not an abstract idea but one that exists in the concrete, clarified by early crisis, when mortality was severely tested.

In this chapter, I focus on Kevin and two mothers, Mary and Kate, to explore the idea of parenting a gay son as a moral career. All three are active in PFLAG, each serving as group leaders at different times. They reveal a key aspect of parenting as a moral career: negotiating their own expectations through a reworking of parenting toolkits, especially in the form of stories, by reflection on previous parenting and examining the assumptions that shaped it. Reflection follows the thought, "I expected my son to turn out to be a straight man, someone who married and settled down with a wife, having kids who would of course be my grandchildren. Is it because of me that it is not turning out that way?"

The perception that gender is understood dichotomously, that is, there are only two genders, man and woman, with two sets of expectations exclusive to each, leads parents



to raise boys with expectations of masculinity in mind. Also, parents assume heterosexuality through these gendered expectations based on sex assignment (West and Zimmerman 1987). It is from this imagined point that they reflect on their parenting when their sons challenge the linear path from sex assignment to heterosexuality by coming out. Rather than challenge the linear model, parents ask, "Was it the people my boy was around? Was it the toys he played with? Should I have done more to get him involved in sports?" Mining the past in search of signs, "Why didn't I realize earlier?"

Crises and Social Relationships

Kevin's story revealed important components of a parenting career: problems that had to be solved and tools that helped solve them. Much like Kevin, Mary reflects on a crisis occurring around the time of her son's birth in the following. Mary recalls problematic activity that also had to be solved:

Mary: So [Tyler] was, um, my child, my only child, and I left his dad when he was about seven months old, so he never really knew his real father.

Jeff: Oh, ok.

Mary: I started dating Leon when he was, well, I met Leon when he was about fifteen months old, and we started dating a year later, so Tyler was about two.

Jeff: So why did you leave your husband, so soon after...

Mary: We had lots of problems. Financial, just basic, um, philosophical, political, just everything differences, um, he was, he really was, he had a lot of racist, and um, sexist, and homophobic attitudes, that initially I was in denial about and refused to believe, I sort of ended being, you know, mentally, how did I do this (laughs)? How did I end up married to him? Cause he really was the antithesis of everything I valued.

Mary's language of explanation was probably not part of her previous toolkit. Rather, Mary's story about her divorce from Tyler's father helps her resolve the past while



clarifying herself as a PFLAG parent. After all, Mary frames the causes of the divorce in terms of being inconceivably wed to a homophobic husband. While the marriage may have been contradictory in terms of the beliefs she had imagined herself holding, it is more important that the story allows Mary to construct early commitment to support gay people and work against homophobia, even if that means divorce. The timing of the divorce places Mary's parenting narrative in the context of being a parent who would have taken action to create a situation in which she could live consistently with her parenting principles, aligning her past with her present commitment to support her son.

Mary recollects this past relationship as bad for her growing identity ("he was the antithesis of everything I valued"). In other interviews, she contrasts this kind of negative relationship against those perceived to be more positive, remembered as those that offered learning experiences. For example, Mary speaks fondly of her career at the American Psychological Association (APA). There, she remembers meeting and becoming acquainted with gay men who also worked for the association, relationships remembered as being opportunities to both reinforce and broaden her worldview.

Mary's ability to reconstruct perception of previous experience with the toolkits of her present moment is repeated by Kevin. Mary and Kevin are able to see themselves as aware of parenting dynamics between the past and present. For example, in an interview, Kevin tells me about fathers he knew in the South before he moved to the Northeast:

You, you're talking about a regional difference, the ideas of masculinity in [the South] are, how soon are your kids hunting and fishing? I mean, they get camo



for baby clothes, and you think I'm [kidding]? It. Is. The. Truth. It is so push-ingrained, in the southern part of the US, the shock fact-, or the parent influence on masculinity, they role model their kids, and they do it real early. And I think partly it's to make sure their kids don't turn out gay. I'm serious, its why women get in dresses, boys go out hunting. You raise them that way and they don't turn out gay.

Later in the interview, Kevin clarifies the relationship between his past social network and the decision to relocate to the Northeast. "It's not why we left down there, not because we thought Jonathon was gay," Kevin says, "but we didn't want that kind of cultural influence on a kid growing up, in the school systems in the south, the prejudices that they, yea, definitely, we didn't want him in public school systems in the South." Like Mary's above, Kevin's story reveals parenting action, relocating with his family, leaving a space and its possible social network, to create a different situation in a different space, out of concern for forming a son's worldview. Also similar to Mary's narrative about her ex-husband and her APA colleagues, the fathers Kevin knew in the South contrast against a friend who had come out to him in college, enabling the growth of a more expansive worldview. Kevin recalls continuing the friendship, and that the two remained friendly enough that they relocated in proximity of each other. Reflecting on his friend coming out and the conversations they had about sexuality and its causes, Kevin adds to his story, "That's when I knew it was hardwired, and I said to him, 'I agree not to call you homosexual, you agree not to call me heterosexual.' We've been great friends since."

It is clear in these stories that PFLAG offers a new repertoire to use during reflection on crises and social relationships. Mary and Kevin had made decisions, solved problematic activity, and negotiated relationships, sometimes in drastic ways. Just



imagine all the packing and moving involved in Kevin relocating with his family. In other words, components of parenting as a moral career appear in these narratives, the action involved in moving, divorcing a bad husband, or monitoring a heart condition, symbolizing committed parenting. This all fits within middle-class parenting values and shows how committed parents drive action. Drawing from PFLAG advocacy, they are able to make sense of their action in new ways. They add what phenomenologist Alfred Schutz called “because” motives to previous action (1970, 127-8). Mary divorced her husband “because” she was supportive of social justice and anti-homophobia. Kevin moved away from the South “because” he was concerned about homophobic influences on his son. Using a PFLAG repertoire alongside middle-class parenting toolkits, components of parenting as a moral career begin to take a more dynamic shape as the parents reflect on their sons getting older.

Playing with toys: “I don’t think anyone knew more than I did”

During our first interview in her home, Kate reflects on the toys Cody played with and a realization that her son was playing with his sister’s dolls. “I remember thinking, ‘Oh, oh! What?’ I was stunned by this,” Kate tells me. She goes on to describe consulting her pediatrician, who recommended a psychological evaluation. A psychologist put him through “play therapy” and recommended that Kate encourage her son’s masculine play without discouraging his playing with dolls. Kate’s reflection reveals more parenting action, echoing the endless doctor appointments reported by Kevin above. With middle class values in mind, making appointments and going to see doctors evinces good



parenting. Doctor appointments are easily recognized tools in a parent's repertoire, signaling a parent's attention to the health and well-being of the child.

In the following, Kate remembers that the therapist's advice seemed vague against her son's specific request for a feminine toy. She recalls more parenting action, calling in to a radio show for expert advice:

Kate: I was living in Denver, and he wanted uh, My Pretty Little Pony? Or something? Which is obviously a girl thing. And I called, there was a local radio station that had a psychiatrist, psychologist, some woman, and people would call in.

Jeff: Yeah, yeah.

Kate: And I called in one day and I said, "What the hell am I...?" Well I didn't say it that way, I said, "What am I supposed to do about this?" And she gave me the same advice, she said, if that's what he really wants, get, I think she kind of advised me, get it, and get some other things, you know, and it was funny because after I hung up, the next couple of days, a couple friends called me and they recognized my voice.

Jeff: Yeah?

Kate: And they said "Hey! That was you." And I just remember two people calling, and everyone was really supportive, and they, you know, where I lived...

Jeff: Do you remember what their advice was?

Kate: I think it was get the child what he wants, but get other things too, and like, my gut feeling was get, instead of, don't get this huge, don't get the big pony ranch,

Jeff: Yeah.

Kate: Just get the pony, and, and maybe some other more masculine things. I think that, you know, I don't think that anyone knew more than I did.

Cody's choice of toy and Kate's parenting anguish became a public matter, telegraphed on the radio. Seeking expert advice through a radio show brought her concerns to the attention of listeners, including some of her friends, and so Kate felt a small amount of public support. She recalls eventually resolving the crisis with this support and meeting her son's request for a feminine toy while continuing to buy masculine toys as well.



Something about her parenting trouble, though, remained private as she concedes that, while she sought expert advice, her parenting competencies were more than sufficient.

Kate saying, “I don’t think anyone knew more than I did” in the context of her reflection on her son’s gendered play, expert advice, and a public audience tells us much about the blurred line between public and private parenting. Parenting is not exclusively private. Parents often seek out advice to solve problems and social support for solutions. It is not exclusively public, though. Advice is weighed and support is gauged, but ultimately a parent decides what to do. The overlap between private and public parenting is considerable. Private concerns about gendered play stem from notions of public expectations of boyhood, but public expectations of boyhood cannot match each and every American boy. This interplay between private and public, especially when mixed with expert advice, produces some confusion as a by-product, since much advice differs from one person to the next. In the end, Kate resolves that her decision is competent, her capabilities just as good as anyone else’s, even if the result is messy gendered play, and this affirms her identity as a good mother. The narrative moment marks a key aspect of Kate’s moral career: being at odds with and skeptical of other people’s advice and understanding.

In an interview, Mary echoes similar concerns about the toys her son played with, saying, “I knew from the time Tyler was in pre-school that he was different from other boys. He didn’t, um, he liked dolls, he liked to play dress-up.” Unlike Kate’s telling above, Mary implies that she believed the non-normative play indicated something about her son’s disposition, an implication related to one different source of advice:



My, my, you look back on it, and you think, ah, I probably, from the time he was three or four, I had a feeling that he might be gay. And, from my background at APA, and what my gay friends at APA said, that it was hardwired, that I hadn't caused it, so my attitude was, if he is, he is, there's nothing I can do about it.

This does not mean that Mary did not seek professional advice. Mary visited psychologists based on a suggested diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) by some of Tyler's teachers. Mary recalls that in the course of her meeting with one male psychologist in particular, Tyler's non-normative play was revealed, and the psychologist added Gender Identification Disorder (GID) to the diagnosis. Mary was advised to ensure masculine play to treat GID as one way to help Tyler focus. Mary reflects, "I mean, I think they thought that, um, I should steer him [towards masculine play]." But she goes on to remember the advice seeming absurd in practice. "My mother had a bunch of old dress-up clothes, that were mostly women's clothes, and Tyler would put them on. And I just thought it was funny. He looked like a little bag lady!" Mary's sense of humor comes easily as she has worked a PFLAG discourse into her moral career, a fact that is seen above most clearly as her reflection absolves her of parenting responsibility ("there's nothing I can do about it"). Her parenting is at odds with professional advice, but Mary takes some delight in the opposition. Like Kate above, Mary's reflection begins to reveal confidence in her own capabilities to know her son as she remained committed to support him and help him achieve better focus.

A bit later in the interview, Mary's reflection begins to add deeper texture and reveal a questioning of other people's understandings of her son's gendered play:



There were some baby dolls at the house, and Tyler got them out and started playing with them. But he was always the dad, you know? And he would even tell my father, you know, Tyler would say, if my dad was there to put him to bed, Tyler would tell him to say, tell my babies that I'm here and I'll be here in the morning. Which I think had more to do with his own absent father than anything else, um, but, or could've, I don't know. I oughta give up motive (laughs), or try to figure it out, it could have been a lot of things. But, it is, I also remember, this is something that I still don't know, what to do with, because I, I mentioned it in PFLAG, and I think some of the moms understand, but, I didn't know how to steer him away from feminine things without sounding like I was putting down women.

Part of parenting as a moral career is squaring gender. Parents fret endlessly about gender, which in and of itself can be a bewildering worry since it is an abstract concept. Toys are physical objects associated with gender, and parents can more easily deal with them. This is seen in both Mary and Kate's narratives about the toys their sons play with. Across these narratives, a tension arises between child as different from the beginning and child as more than just an orientation. Whatever Tyler's non-normative play conveyed about his sexuality or gender identity, Tyler missed his father and imagined being a good father to his own children. Parenting is about nurturing the character of a child and raising sons to become good fathers. But Mary retrospectively admits the possibility that she could be wrong about Tyler's motives. The role of parent and the moral career of parent involve both distinct and typical parenting worries: the choices parents make could be based on misinterpretation amid simple concerns to raise good sons, even as every parent will have distinct concerns about their own child. In Mary and Kate's cases they remember being concerned about their sons' non-normative play, but in the end articulate being comfortable with their solutions though might be less



comfortable in actuality. As part of their moral careers, the past is remembered as full of learning phases that led to satisfactory understandings of their sons and some absolution of their responsibility for their sons' present sexual orientations. Part of Mary's satisfaction emerges from an organic feminist understanding of gender and parenting. She was uncomfortable with discouraging feminine toys since it would also denigrate women, though she remains unsure about how parenting can solve this paradox.

For the moms, there is an element of responsibility for toys played with, leading Mary and Kate through narrative mazes obstructed by doctors' offices and counselors' couches. In the following, Kevin reflects on what his son's toys said about his son's gender and sexuality differently than Mary and Kate:

Kevin: I guess he was about six or seven, and there were ads on TV about a playschool kitchen, and it wasn't a Barbie doll, but you're around the same topic of a boy asking for a playschool kitchen, um (laughs). I like to cook and it didn't bother me that he got, I found it interesting in terms of he wanted to do that, cause he never showed any affinity towards play in the kitchen, you know, cook-wise. And so I really just attributed it to, it must have been a really good advertisement, cause he wanted it and it looked like fun and the kids in the ad looked like fun, so that was the one thing that he probably came out and said he wanted and people would have labeled him as being gay.

Jeff: Not typical for a boy?

Kevin's comments do not suggest that he sought out a doctor or expert advice about his son's gendered play. Deference to parenting experts is gendered; fathers have more liberty to watch their sons play and reflect on it with less feeling of responsibility for sexual or gender development. In other words, moral careers are gendered, most clearly seen in Kevin's concern with how his son may be labeled by other people, although play is not actually an indication of gayness. For boys who grow up to be heterosexual, their



play with Barbie, kitchens, and such is dismissed. Nonetheless, Kevin goes on to focus on toys more typically associated with masculinity, like an American football:

Kevin: But I guess when he was about five, I had this little football, and we were out in the front yard and I was taking pictures, and, the point was to take pictures, and...

Jeff: Yea, yea...

Kevin: ...and, he had this outfit on and stuff, and I gave him the football, I said, pretend like you're throwing it, and when I got the pictures developed, I remember I was with Lacy, and I look at her and I go he's gay (laughs). And she goes, oh what are you talking about?! And I said, look at how he's trying to throw the football (imitates poor throwing motion emphasizing limpness of the wrist), you know like this. And we laughed, and it was nothing like...

Jeff (laughing): Yea, yea, but were you playing around, or did you think that...?

Kevin: ...I didn't think that was an indicator of his orientation.

Jeff: Oh, ok, yea.

Kevin: But kids, most five years old who've never been around footballs?

Jeff: Yea, its tough.

Kevin: They don't look like they got good form.

Kevin's recounting of his son's toy football is messy. Not only is choice of toy important, proper use of a toy can cause some concern, even if a small concern. Playing incorrectly with a masculine toy could be perceived as absurd evidence of a young boy's homosexuality. Common assumptions about the links between gender and sexuality should be teased out here. Rightfully, Kevin implies that the sexual meanings of gendered play are nuanced. Young children lack the motor skills to properly hold and throw a football, whatever that might mean about their sexuality and irregardless of the fact that gendered play is never a necessary sign of sexuality. Nonetheless, fathers and mothers use early success in sports as evidence of "normal" masculine identity development, with an implicit assumption of heterosexuality. Reflections on boyhood



play offers clues as to if and how fathers are renegotiating these assumptions and expectations. Here, we see Kevin offering a messier understanding of boys and sports.

Reflecting on and renegotiating the possible gendered and sexualized meanings of childhood play motivate the stories that parents tell about their son's toys. Nuance, skepticism, and, for Mary at least, organic feminist questioning confront parenting expectations in these stories, binding their moral paradox up in competing explanations. The themes that emerge in parenting narratives are aspects of the parent's moral careers. Problems are remembered as learning phases, and parenting is remembered as a doing. Going to experts for advice, raising questions, and trying to do the right thing reveal committed parenting aligned with middle-class values. They were paying attention to subtle clues kids offer that something is going on. This sort of close scrutiny of child action is increasingly expected in age of intensive parenting. These doings serve as evidence that these parents did everything to be good parents, evidence that their sons' gay identities are continuous from childhood to present, that their sons have always been this way. And likewise for the parents: the narratives serve to reveal continuity between past and present support for their sons while revealing the work these parents do to become skeptical of normative parenting.

Tempering Sports Expectations, Troubling Gender and Sexuality

Examining the role of sports in these parents' narratives shows us much of how parents renegotiate expectations of their child's trajectory from childhood to adult, from boys to men. Focusing on their sons' participation in boyhood sports reveals tempering of the



most explicit gendered and sexualized expectations of raising a son: involving him in sports as a path to proper masculine identity.

Unlike Mary and Kevin, who only have one child, Kate has multiple children, an older daughter and twin sons. In her stories, she uses her other children as yardsticks against which to measure and evaluate gendered and sexualized expectations regarding sports. For example, she notes that her gay son was not interested in sports, not even enough to participate for fun. But neither was her straight son. "Not in the least," she says. The interesting story to Kate is that her lesbian daughter was interested in and excelled at sports, despite her specific attempts at getting her daughter involved in typically feminine activity:

Kate: Well, this is very bizarre, because what would happen is that Cody would play, well not exclusively, but he would play with Emily's toys, and she would play with the boys' toys. So, you know, here was I between a rock and a hard place, and you know, I would try, I remember *trying* to get my husband to, their father, to take the boys out and throw a ball. But my daughter was a tremendous athlete. I tried her in ballet. One year of it. Gymnastics? Didn't like it. Put her on a soccer team (snaps fingers). Just like that. Champ, VIP, MVP, not MVP, anyway.

Jeff: Yeah?

Kate: Yeah, you know, right away, star. Mini star. You know, first year, right away. And, so um, anyway that's how you know. And it's hard.

Kate saying, "...that's how you know," reveals parenting as an endless effort to read signs and make attempts to impose clarity and continuity on a child. Kate's reflection on parenting begins very personally with feelings of wonder and guilt but then takes the shape of a confrontation of stereotypes of gays as fem non-athletes and lesbians as butch



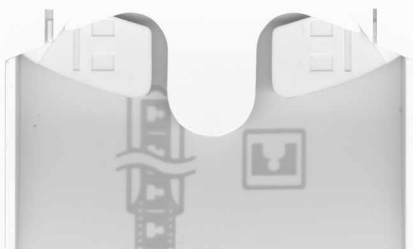
athletic stars. In Kate's story, those stereotypes are affirmed and debunked in her family; after all, her gay son's twin brother turns out straight and uninterested in sports.

Whether or not Jonathon would be interested in sports, Kevin's first priority was his son's health. The story of Jonathon's dramatic birth, surgery and life-long heart condition is used by Kevin to explain how he held tempered expectations for his son regarding athletics:

But really, for the most part, he's never going to be in the military, he's never going to be a pro athlete, so just don't do anything that is pushed to the max, in other words, sprint running, jogging, fine, but don't do sprints, he's never going to be on the swim team, he's not going to be varsity basketball, baseball.

Taking seriously his role as father required that Kevin monitor his son's activity and intervene whenever others put his sons' health in jeopardy. So he tells stories about fighting with gym teachers who asked too much of Jonathon. Nonetheless, Kevin still reports enacting masculine norms in raising his son. Though his expectations of his son's participation in the American big three (baseball, basketball, football) were tempered, he endeavored to involve his son early and often in outdoor activities like hiking and camping, which led to an enrollment in Boy Scouts, another legitimate avenue for masculine identity formation for young boys.

When Jonathon came out to his parents, he was close to earning his Eagle Scout badge. The situation is recalled by Kevin as one of the first meaningful tests of his commitment to support his son, especially in light of the Boy Scouts' organizational stance against homosexuality. On the one hand, he was proud of his son's



accomplishments in terms of masculinity, his mastery of outdoor activities, while on the other he had committed himself to unconditionally support his son. Recall that he had long ago committed to advocating for his son against the status quo- in one case the healthy boy body- in the other non-normative gender. In this case, it meant aligning with his son's decision to come out, speaking with the Scout Master to ensure that Jonathon would not be prohibited from completing his badges on account of his orientation. The story evinces parenting commitment in a way that interestingly troubles gender and sexuality. Kevin proudly describes how his gay son was able to become an Eagle Scout in spite of institutional stances that prohibit homosexuality, in some part because of his advocacy work.

These parents' stories reveal a balancing act between tempered expectations of and pride in masculine attributes. Kevin had lowered his expectations of Jonathon's athletic success out of genuine concern for his son's health, though he also proudly participated in camping and canoeing with his son. Mary shares a story about her son's difficult experiences in a youth soccer league. Even though Tyler was much bigger and stronger than all of his peers, his heart wasn't in it, he wasn't very interested in sports, and so he was not a good athlete, she'll say. He was more interested in chatting with his teammates or even the opponents during games. Mary recalls that her son's distracting character led to many frustrated calls from other parents and coaches, and she finally had to threaten her son with removal from the league if he would not focus. So the next game, the story goes, Tyler plays very well. He's running all over the field, making stops, and then he gets the ball and goes zipping down the sideline and comes right up to a defender. At this



point, Mary will remind listeners of Tyler's impressive size before finishing, "Now rather than make an aggressive move through a much smaller player, Tyler stops, the ball goes dribbling away, and he picks up the other kid and physically moves him aside!" Mary's expectations of her son's athletic success are tempered in her narrative, emphasizing that her son cared about other people and would not intentionally hurt another player despite being able to as a large man. His size impresses Mary, but also his control of it.

Leon, Mary's husband, adds another take to the soccer story. "Shortly thereafter, that's when he, he kind of made a transition," he tells in an interview:

And I saw, kind of saw the, the effeminate side of him while he was playing soccer, or standing around the line. But then he moved right into karate, and I thought, this is going to show me one way or the other, if he's going to be on the effeminate side or if he's going to have masculine tendencies, and he just shocked me! He was just as rough and tough as the other little children were, you know?

Mary follows up and speaks proudly of Tyler's accomplishments in karate, noting that he had completed a black belt. Having guided Tyler out of soccer and into another boyhood activity, one that Tyler succeed at "just as" aggressively as other boys, Leon and Mary beam about their parenting success at making typical parenting choices even as they simultaneously recall Tyler's youth experiences as different from other boys.

Leon and Mary have reworked their story about Tyler's sports career in a way that resolves the seeming contradiction between raising a typical and different boy. From his success at karate and trouble with soccer, Tyler emerges as a large, strong, caring, passive, and effeminate man with a black belt in karate. Indeed, the story goes a very



long way to resolve concerns about appropriate gender identification amid safety concerns they have about their son's queer identity:

Mary: I know there was an incident, I think it was at, when he was working at USC, um, maintenance, there was a maintenance crew that um, was in the parking lot when he got to work one day, and they knew he was gay or they, um, well I don't know how they knew that, maybe by where he worked, I don't know, but they were harassing him, and they called him faggot, you know.

Jeff: Really?

Mary: And walking across the parking lot...

Jeff: Towards him?

Mary: ...well, following him.

Jeff: Oh.

Mary: And he said, he finally just, he turned around he said, I may be gay but I'm still a man and I can beat your ass. And they backed off. Um, so, you know, he can be, I wouldn't mess with him. I don't know why anybody could think they could do that, because he is so, imposing. He has a very gentle soul, but he's still big.

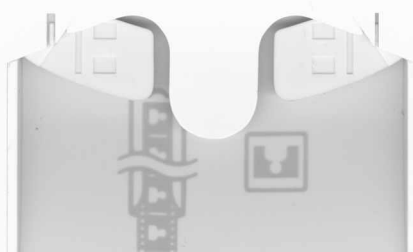
Mary's soccer stories about Tyler reveal her reframing of gender in seemingly contradictory ways: a strong former black belt who can beat someone's ass, but also caring and passive. These stories perform a more important function for her, helping her accept and assuage her concerns about his queer identity. For her, her son being feminine, masculine, and gay at the same time is fine, especially since his large stature as a man may protect him from violence. This is an important part of her moral career as a parent. Stories of a child's triumph are part of parent's narratives because a child's resolve reflects good parenting. Mary remembers being able to cultivate Tyler's kindness while forcing his focus at soccer, a focus that Leon recalls being utilized as they moved him into karate. They take some pride in raising a gay man who can beat some ass, testifying to the fact that he is "still a man."



These parenting narratives about their sons' participation in the stuff of American boyhoods reveal renegotiations of the most explicit gendered and sexualized expectations of raising a son: involving him in and ensuring success at athletics as the normal pathway to becoming a man. In Kate's story, neither of her boys, despite parenting attempts and despite their future sexual orientations, responded to sports while her daughter did positively. Mary tells of getting her son involved in soccer and karate, which, contrary to normal expectations, makes possible a very messy manifestation of gender and sexuality: a large, passive queer man with a black belt in karate. And Kevin's son was physically unable to pursue the American dream because of the risk of death. Instead, Jonathon was able to do what no queer man is supposed to, become an Eagle Scout. Importantly, the stories are about allowing that to happen, making sense of how that happened, and being comfortable with those outcomes. In terms of their moral careers, these are hero stories marking the parents' ability to do what was necessary to guide their sons carefully through boyhood. The lessons about the messiness of masculinity allow the parents some absolution that their sons became who they were meant to be.

Reworking Stories as Dynamic Parenting

So far, I have brought these parents' memories of activity to the foreground in order to pay attention to parenting as a doing. This helps us see how moral careers are shaped by parents' reflections of what they did for their kids. Now I would like to inch closer towards a reflexive understanding of telling narratives. This will hopefully show us that



telling these narratives helps these parents describe their pasts while the very telling functions as parenting in the present, as another way of doing parenting. The stories are part of their moral careers.

Consider a long excerpt from an interview with Kate:

Kate: Well as a mother of a gay child you feel so, guilty, because you think it's something that you did.

Jeff: Do you, well, so do you think back on his childhood?

Kate: Yeah.

Jeff: Do you think that there was something you did?

Kate: No.

Jeff: Or do you reflect on it?

Kate: I used to.

Jeff: Yeah.

Kate: I still think, wonder. But I remember when I was pregnant, this man, this guy, a peer of mine would come in, and he was a twin and he would come in and tell me this wild story about what they did to their mother and he advised me and gave me the best [advice] and said not everyone will treat them equally but you have to. And so um, when I think about it, I tried equally to treat them the same, and all three of them. And they turned out the way they turned out, so different. All three of them, a lesbian, a gay man, and a straight kid. You know, and I, no mother, would...

Jeff: So when you think back on the advice you got from the psychologist or the pediatrician and when you say sometimes you feel guilt for how they turned out, do you think sometimes well, there really wasn't anything I could do?

Kate: I don't think there was.

Jeff: Or, you know what I mean, was it like...?

Kate: Well, when I get so upset, I get so upset because how, I mean, Cody was this little boy. What does he know?

Jeff: Yeah.

Kate: He was drawn to those stuffed animals. He was drawn. I can remember coming down one day, and he was dressed in his sister's nightgown, and so was his brother, though, but it wasn't as often. Not always but often. You know, he was fascinated with the Wizard of Oz, and I've never even read Narnia, so I don't know if the main character is a girl, well if there's two...

Jeff: Well, there's two boys and two girls and a lot of creatures.

Kate: Yeah a lot of creatures so, but I, the more I think about it, I honestly don't think that [there was anything I could do].



Psychologists might see Kate's narrative in terms of what is normally called radical acceptance, but sociologists would be more attuned to social relationships and processes as clues to how Kate is reworking a parenting narrative to describe acceptance work. After all, Kate, like many parents, remembers doings: seeing doctors, asking for advice, purchasing toys, involving her children in sports. A good friend, also a twin, offers parenting advice from the point of view of a child. Leveling out all advice, Kate remembers providing equal treatment to all three of her children. While guilt plays a role in her narrative, the wonder about causing her son's queer identity, it is mediated by this equal treatment and her living relationships to her kids. She works a hard-wire explanation of Cody's behavior into her narrative while noting that his brother would also play dress-up, though infrequently. Frustration emerges about the absurdity of reading sexuality into boyhood innocence.

While the narrative describes all the above, it functions to show that Kate is committed to being the best parent she can be. Providing equal treatment, she raises three completely different children. She might remark that she allows her children to become the children they were meant to be, a selfless act since she suspends her own personal longings. Selflessness is another aspect that makes parenting a moral career.

The frames of Kate's narrative simultaneously reveal how parents use tools like normative medical advice to solve crises, rework those very tools to make sense of crises by practicing the advice and noting concrete reality, and refold those tools back into their narratives to make sense of parenting as a contingent and confusing dynamic set of actions. Also, the work of framing a narrative acts as the negotiation of parenting



expectations, since it showcases how much is being done to be a good parent and how, often, parenting is about selflessly allowing children to become who they want to be.

Since these framed narratives are stories, they are objects in the parents' toolkits. This helps us better understand the narratives as reflexive objects. While the stories describe parenting pasts, they are available to display continuity up to the present, continuity of their sons' sexual orientations as well as their committed parenting. Telling narratives *is parenting*, at least in the ways that a moral career would make sense of parenting as an action or a doing that confronts a courtesy stigma. To return to the opening of the chapter, Kevin's telling of parenting works backwards and then forward through situations that had to be resolved and into present situations. It functions to show the tension between raising a typical yet different child while emphasizing selfless parenting:

Kevin: I don't have any problem telling Jonathon how I feel, I want his opinion, I like good exchanges going back and forth, the normal amount of (pauses), father-son disagreement and what-not, of course they come about. But I don't think it was about any activities as a kid I didn't think he should do, or limits I wanted to put on him, and I kind of altered my activities and interests a lot to be more parallel with his. Uh, cause like I said, I enjoy just about anything, so if he wanted to camp more or go canoeing or swimming, I was like, great lets go.

Jeff: Yea?

Kevin: So it was never really an issue, and the honesty is a, I think birth on up, when you have to be candid and honest about medical conditions, you get, what do you feel like lying about, if you are that honest about the big things, it makes no sense to...

Jeff: Lie about the little ones?

Kevin: Yea. It's easy. Uh, partly coming out was partly the same thing. It may have prepared us in a way, and I think it has, because, dealing with a lot of other parents who, we see, come to us for the first time, just trying to, one person who is not coping well or a guy who thinks a friend made [his son] gay, all the crazy stuff out there, with, people who are dealing with it, what I find is this is the first big thing they had to deal with.



The early situation of Jonathon's heart condition was sobering, but it prepared Kevin for a particular type of parenting, one that emphasized support and advocacy. Kevin unconditionally supported his son's health and happiness, necessarily communicating that support to him along the way and remaining open to Jonathon's feedback. The support, advocacy, and reciprocal communication uniquely prepared Kevin for his son's coming out. Having already made concrete the abstract nature of absolute love and unconditional support, Kevin easily integrates the seeming crisis into his career as a father. So Kevin's story is not just about loving and supporting his son and communicating that support to him. It is about communicating that communication of support to himself as a parent, simultaneously committing himself to accepting his gay son and showing that he is committed.

Conclusion

Parents committed to accepting their gay sons reframe stories they tell about the past so the stories can match and reinforce the parents' present commitment to frame love as absolute and support as uncompromising. These narratives reveal how parents confront the past through reflection on crises, social relationships, and their children's play, bringing forth the tools used to make decisions and solve problematic activity. Understood dynamically, reflecting on parental expectations clarifies toolkits of middle-class parenting and PFLAG advocacy by emphasizing parental sacrifices and good decision-making. The stories aim to demonstrate what kind of parents they see themselves as: thoughtful, competent, and committed. Focusing on their sons'



participation in boyhood sports reveals negotiations of the most explicit gendered and sexualized expectations of raising a son: involving him in and ensuring success at athletics as the normal pathway to becoming a man. The normative pathway is then redrawn with a messier understanding of those expectations.

Since these framed narratives are stories, they are objects in the parents' toolkits. Even further, telling a narrative *is parenting*, especially considering the extent to which it communicates love and support. But even further, PFLAG parents' narratives negotiate the expectation that parenting ought to have produced properly masculine and heterosexual men by questioning other people's understandings of sexuality and masculinity displays and reframing parenting as absolute love and unconditional support. They do this by relying on middle-class values of intensive, reflective, and concerned parenting. The narratives are about the continuity of their sons' selves; that is, centrally about their sons always already having sexual identities irrespective of parenting work. Telling these narratives, parents attempt to show that they did everything they could to be good parents, providing some absolution they did not *cause* their sons to be gay but instead supported healthy and happy lives. They instead, selflessly, allow their sons to be who they were meant to become. This could be understood as an advanced understanding of parenting self, coming after the stages of their moral careers as detailed in the first two chapters.



CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION- THE NORMAL RADICAL

My aim in this thesis has been to focus on becoming a parent of a gay son as a moral career. The concept of moral career highlights how parenting is a doing, in these cases to take up an answer a simple question, "What can I do for my gay son?" Aspects of their moral careers accentuate modest answers to that question, revealing bigger clues to how they negotiate their own expectations and how they negotiate their social identities to others whose acceptance they seek.

Attending PFLAG meetings anchors these parents' new identities in a social network, from which they get parenting advice on how to address former expectations, as well as how to begin the process of coming out. A key question for these parents' moral careers is whether or not they return to meetings, whether or not they continue to moor their identity work to this network. It is important to veteran parents that newer parents return; the meetings offer a safe space for parents to work through their turmoil and inner debates, as well as energy to help parents strengthen their new identities.

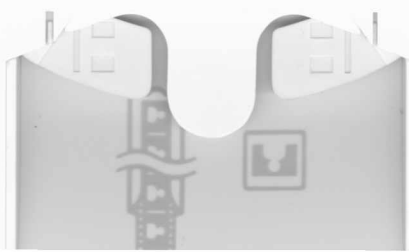
Walking in a Pride parade marks a key moment in these parent's moral careers. Publicly displaying their parental acceptance, they witness the tears and pain of children who have been rejected, some who literally request their parenting. At this moment, these parents crystallize a boundary between their group and parents who do not accept their gay children. Parenting and advocacy entwine as these parents present a safe self of



civil rights activist, explaining that they advocate in-order-to change people's attitudes in hopes for broader change for gay men and women to be able to live open, healthy, and happy lives. Reflecting on their actions, they say they do it because they love their sons.

Reflecting on their careers, PFLAG parents negotiate their own expectations by meshing middle class values and PFLAG advocacy in order to align past parenting with present. This is seen in the narratives parents tell about their gay sons, which are centrally about the continuity of their children. The narratives show that they did everything they could to be good parents, they did exactly as was expected by middle class values. The narratives provide absolution that they did not cause their sons to be gay; rather, they see their parenting as supportive of healthy and happy lives for their sons, allowing their sons to become who they were meant to be.

All of this perhaps does not advance us much further than Jessica Fields' findings that parents who support and advocate for their gay children sustain the oppression of gay people because of reliance on conventional notions of gender and family. However, zooming in on these parents' actions helps us see the dynamics of their identity work. It forces us to pay attention to situational inequalities and the continuing existence of unsafe spaces. To these parents who commit to accepting gay sons and wish to change the minds of others, PFLAG meetings and Pride parades are sacred because of the group solidarity and moral symbols to be found there. The trick? Group solidarity and moral symbols are partly energized by conventional conventions of family life and middle class values. The energy based in a middle class parenting repertoire of meaning provides these parents some public leverage as they advocate for their sons while a PFLAG



discourse allows them to begin negotiating their own comfort with non-normative gender and sexuality. The public issue of gay marriage perfectly fuses these two repertoires of meaning, and this is how a traditional identity like parent becomes one of gay rights activists. As the legal case of same-sex marriage inches its inevitable way to the United States Supreme Court, we should not be surprised about the dual nature of these parents' identity work, part radical and part normative.

Watching these radical normals march down city streets in protest, we learn more than the theoretical fact that parenting is a doing. PFLAG mothers, and a few fathers, enter a public sphere, both a physical and dialogical place, to make purposeful decisions. Their dialogic communication is aimed at making public issues out of private concerns in hopes for structural changes to help them solve their problems. From them, we also learn about democratic engagement and organic sociological imaginations. The sociologist Nancy Fraser, drawing from the work of Jurgen Habermas, built a feminist conception of public spheres and revealed its important relationship to families in terms of bringing private issues to the attention of broader audiences (1991). Another sociologist, C. Wright Mills, sensed the importance of public spheres when he argued for the development of sociological imaginations for individuals to link their own personal biographies to larger social and historical institutions and processes (1959). This point cannot be overstated. In these parents' participation in a public sphere, we find more evidence of emotional and private motivation to participate in democracy.

While that point about a small group of parents cannot be overstated, there is undoubtedly a wide variation of acceptance within a group of PFLAG parents. This



thesis has focused on seasoned careerists, those further along in their acceptance work and broaching activism as a way to participate in democratic processes. As the ethnographic scene that introduces this thesis suggests, there are tougher questions to ask about these parents' acceptance of homosexuality. Why would a parent who is not as comfortable with homosexuality as she would like choose to march in a Pride parade celebrating and advocating for gay rights? Perhaps more conversations between psychology and sociology are necessary here, and future researches on this topic would have to consider psychoanalytic understandings of these parents' acceptance work.

Finally, the emphasis on PFLAG parents veils a wide variation of parental responses to gay sons. How many gay men come out to their parents, and what proportion of those disclosures serves as catalysts to civic engagement of gender and sexuality issues? Do counter-groups like Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays (PFOX), a group that has been organized as the antithesis of PFLAG in that the group rejects gay lifestyles and proffers reorientation therapy as a viable solution to a child's homosexuality, offer another route into a public sphere? Future researches would have to consider the moral careers of parents who participate in PFOX meetings, as well as the possibility that there might be parents whose careers move them between the ideologies offered by both groups.

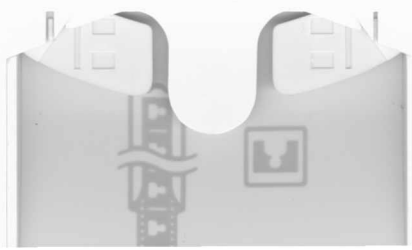


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