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Article

Gay Men as Parents: Analysing Resistant Talk in South African Mainstream Media Accounts of Queer Families

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Abstract

There is increasing visibility of dissident sexualities and genders in media debates about families, including resistant discourses that challenge delegitimising claims about queer families. There remains, however, a lack of research that assesses the ways in which discourses seeking to defend queer parenthood function to challenge or, at times, reinforce hetero-gendered norms. Families formed by gay men have generally received less attention, both in the media as well as academic scholarship. In this paper we explore resistant discourses deployed in mainstream print media, attending particularly to news reports about queer fathers and their children. Through a critical thematic analysis of South African newspapers, informed by feminist discursive psychology, we identify four themes in resistant ways of talking: de-gendering parenthood; normalising queer parents; valorising queer parenting; and challenging the heteronormative gold standard. We conclude with the political implications of such resistant talk, as part of a project of transforming restrictive hetero-gendered norms.

Key Words

Gay fathers, news media, discursive psychology, queer families, heteronormativity

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1. Introduction

The media shape public ideologies in significant ways and have long been one of few sources of information about sexual minorities available to the general public, functioning "hegemonically to reveal and construct dynamic power relationships and their sexual politics" (Landau, 2009, p. 84). The media in general, and news media in particular, have thus been identified as forming an important part of strategies for transforming oppressive constructions of sexuality and gender (Landau, 2009). It has been argued that public acceptance can be promoted through increased *positive* portrayals of queer families (Lubbe, 2008). Bernstein and Reiman (2001) state that "[w]hen queers decide to come out in the context of their relationships, how they represent themselves [and, we would add, how they are represented] has implications for political and cultural change" (p. 8). However, as Gamson (2001) points out, "the desire to be recognised, affirmed, validated, and to lay the cultural groundwork for political change.... has tended to inhibit careful analysis of the dynamics of becoming visible" (p. 70). This observation points to the need to interrogate the ways in which queer families are portrayed in the media, not only in relation to invalidating or oppositional arguments, but also those that appear to work in favour of queer families. Accordingly, our aim in this paper is to explore the relationship between visibility, gender transgression, and the politics of queer families. We do this by investigating how gay men and their families are represented in South African mainstream media.

Queer politics play out within a broader setting in which there is still strong conservative opposition toward queer families—seen as a threat to the hetero-patriarchal order, and to society itself (Bernstein & Reiman, 2001). At the same time, there have been broad cultural shifts toward inclusivity and acceptance of diversity, often expressed in (neo)liberal terms (Brickell, 2001; Michael, 2013). These liberal arguments have been adopted within political movements that attempt to combat discrimination on the basis of homosexuality "as a difference as benign as left-handedness, which would have no meaning in the absence of discrimination" (Bernstein & Reiman, 2001, p. 12).

In the South African context constitutional protection on the grounds of sexual orientation—listed along with signifiers such as race, class and gender—exemplifies a political strategy of assimilation (Hames, 2008). In contrast, other political movements, notably those driven by feminist and queer theories, seek to transform the current hetero-gendered order and espouse a politics of transgression (Bernstein & Reiman, 2001). Scholars who support transgressive politics, do so on the basis that assimilation produces new forms of invisibility and different opportunities for the exclusion of those who threaten the norm (Walters, 2001). As Walters (2001) argues, "[h]istory has shown us—with horrifying detail—the ways in which forms of bigotry sustain themselves and even grow in the face of assimilation" (p. 340). Indeed, "the accomplishments of previous social movements have created a society in which discrimination, sexism, and even homophobia is not as overt as it once was. Covert forms of discrimination are subtle and seemingly innocuous" (Sowards & Renegar, 2006, p. 60).

In this paper we take up a feminist discursive psychology standpoint to explore the transformative potential of counter narratives, or "resistant talk" as we term it, in news media reportage. We analyse media constructions that implicitly or overtly challenge negative constructions of gay fatherhood, thus potentially working to support queer families. Our analysis adds to a small, emerging body of knowledge about the relationship between media discourses and queer politics.

This scholarship is largely located in the global North, often concentrating on United States media products (e.g., television talk shows) and focused either on queer families more generally or on lesbian mothers (e.g., Alwood, 1996; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, 2005; Gamson, 1998, 2001; Landau, 2009; Riggs, 2007). There is therefore a paucity of work in Southern contexts focused on constructions of gay fathers and their children.

The lack of specific focus on gay men as parents corresponds with the broader marginalisation and invisibility of gay fatherhood, as well as parents who identify as bisexual, transgender, or intersex, in both media and scholarship (Mallon, 2004; Morison & Reddy, 2013). This can be understood as part of a general tendency to overlook men in relation to the domestic sphere. The exception is news reporting on fathers who are regarded as problematic (and thus newsworthy), resulting in the predominance of images of violent or "deadbeat" fathers (Prinsloo, 2006). This is changing in relation to heterosexual men, as "new", hands-on fatherhood becomes a more visible and socially desirable identity (Morison & Macleod, 2015). Queer fathers, however, remain on the margins of these discussions.

In attempting to address these research gaps, we examine the ways that queer fathers and their families are constructed in contemporary South African mainstream print news media discourse through a feminist discursive psychology lens. We draw our data from a research project about gay men and fatherhood that included a media analysis. We begin by contextualising the issue through outlining the media landscape in which resistant talk typically occurs. We then provide some information regarding our research design, explicate out analytical approach, and present our results.

2. Queer families in the media: a polarised debate

Media discourses related to queer parenthood are framed against a profoundly hetero-patriarchal backdrop so that heterosexuality and male dominance are central to definitions of

"normal", "healthy" families (Morison & Reddy, 2013). Using the heterosexual, male-headed nuclear family as the standard, lesbians' and gay men's families are construed as "alternative" at best and, at worst, as "deviant". The durability of these hetero-patriarchal norms means that, despite a broad shift in public rhetoric toward the general expression of liberal tolerance of sexual and gender nonconformity, there remains significant opposition to homosexuality (Burridge, 2004). Queer families, therefore, find themselves in a paradoxical situation as the "age of visibility produces both realities: the hopeful moment of rights and inclusion and the fearful moments of victimisation and reaction" (Walters, 2001, p. 340).

Growing support of queer rights frequently coexists with conservative discourses against same-sex unions (Jowett, 2014) or queer family rights (Clarke, 1999). Similar to such international contexts, civil and reproductive rights are legally protected in South Africa. Though data on the number of queer South African families are not readily available, such civil unions are registered with growing frequency[1] (StatsSA, 2011; 2013). As in other English speaking liberal democracies, such as the USA or UK, the uptake of reproductive family rights, and experiences of queer persons more generally, is deeply raced and classed. In terms of social exclusion, it has been noted that White and middle class queers generally experience "mundane" heterosexism, while those who are Black and working class also face more severe social sanction (Riggs, 2007). In South Africa, such opposition frequently takes more extreme forms such as violence or rape, which may be less common (though not absent) in more affluent, Global North countries. Nevertheless, it could be argued that, as in other countries where liberal tolerance is officially espoused, expressions of heterosexism become less blatant and instead are indirect or veiled within tolerant rhetoric, in order to accommodate political changes. Such veiled heterosexism occurs in response to situations where being seen as homophobic would be undesirable, such as in public debates or the news media (Brickell, 2001; Burridge, 2004).

Accordingly, we argue that some counter arguments, which ostensibly support queer family rights, may still normalise the hetero-patriarchal nuclear family form and "Other" queer families, particularly those underpinned by the discourse of liberal tolerance. We shall show how the political efficacy of ostensibly resistant constructions is undermined by and reinforces particular heteronormative, gendered assumptions. As a result, resonating with the findings of other studies, the hetero-gendered norm itself is rarely questioned in media discourses, and heterosexism (or homophobia) is not usually interrogated in any meaningful way (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004; Morison & Reddy, 2013).

Focusing on media discussions, gay and lesbian people's right or fitness to parent is usually framed as controversial and disputable. The topic is often presented as a polarised issue. Conservative arguments seek to uphold the heterosexual nuclear family as the norm while liberal counter-arguments support family diversity (Clarke, 2001). This framing of the topic as a debate is reinforced by the journalistic style of balancing reportage by presenting "both sides" of the argument, in an apparent attempt at objectivity (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004; Landau, 2009). This "argument then counterargument structure" places advocates of queer families in a defensive position (Landau 2009, p. 88). Moreover, Landau (2009) contends, it lends false credibility to "both sides" of the topic under investigation, inadvertently legitimating the controversial—even threatening—nature of the subject and reaffirming the need for public scrutiny.

Several investigations of various media forms—such as daytime talk television (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, 2005; Gamson, 2001), print news (Landau, 2009; Morison & Reddy, 2013), and radio interviews (Riggs, 2007)—have identified a number of common arguments used by both opponents and proponents of queer parents and families. As can be expected, arguments in favour of queer parenting are often deployed in response to delegitimising or hostile arguments. We discuss these arguments below.

2.1. Arguments against gay and lesbian parenting

Arguments against queer families identified in the media broadly resonate with familiar, well-documented arguments against general divergence from hetero-gendered norms (e.g., Hicks, 2003; Peterson, 2011). They cohere around the idea that the only moral and natural way to create a family is within the confines of a normative heterosexual nuclear model. These arguments frequently draw on religious discourses (Clarke, 2001). In spaces where liberal tolerance is valued, arguments that hold particular weight draw on psychologised notions of children's needs and adequate parenting (Morison & Reddy, 2013). Appeals to (hypothetical or real) children's welfare allow speakers to defend normative family configurations without explicitly condemning non-conforming sexualities and thus to appear neutral and avoid being heard as prejudiced.

Arguments about children's wellbeing typically cite concerns about the children's "normal" psycho-sexual or gender development (Clarke, 2000). The assumption is that "grow[ing] up with a 'mother' (female) and a 'father' (male) is a vital prerequisite for the 'normal' development of personality, enabling boys to develop an identity as heterosexual men and girls to develop an identity as heterosexual women" (Folgerø, 2008, p. 138). Children of queer parents are also frequently depicted as at risk of psychological harm or social exclusion (especially bullying), because of negative societal perceptions of queer families (Clarke, 2001). These arguments construct the heterosexual nuclear family "as a guarantor of 'normal' child development" and often obscure the possible harm associated with a heteronormative sexual and gendered order and the hetero-patriarchal family model in particular (Clarke, 2001).

2.2. Counter arguments in support of gay and lesbian parenting

Scholars have also identified counter arguments in the media that challenge oppressive sexual and gender norms to some extent (Landau, 2006). They have noted an overall shift in tone in recent

years, in line with the changing cultural conditions discussed earlier, toward liberal tolerance of

difference and the positioning of queer families as one of many "diverse" family forms (e.g., Clarke

& Kitzinger, 2004, 2005; Gamson, 1998, 2001), which we also noted in the South African context.

Instead of positing difference as harmful, sympathetic appeals are made to inclusivity and the

acceptance of "alternative" family forms (Gamson, 2001).

Interestingly, such counter arguments often also use children's needs rhetoric, but toward

different ends (Morison & Macleod, 2013). These arguments emphasise the importance of emotional

"needs" that can be provided by a parent of any gender (Gamson, 2001; Landau, 2009; Morison &

Reddy, 2013). For example, Clarke and Kitzinger (2004) identified a love-makes-a-family trope—in

which "love is presented as a positive feature of lesbian and gay families to offset the negative

implications of gayness" (p. 205)—as the most common rhetorical strategy in "pro-lesbian/gay

discourse" on US and UK television talk shows. This trope may serve to render such families as

nonthreatening and familiar, as does another common argument that emphasises the normality of

queer parents.

Normalising arguments minimise difference, frequently shifting parents' gender from the

centre of the debate, in order to counter assumptions that "lesbian and gay parents are significantly

different (because of their 'deviant' sexuality)" (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, p. 203). Instead lesbian

and gay parents' similarity to straight parents is emphasised, for example, by highlighting their

commitment to their children and engagement in familiar parenting tasks (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004).

Existing scholarship has noted the limitations of counter arguments, indicating how, despite

overtly challenging the heteronormative family ideal, these arguments also at times subtly collude

with heteronormativity (Bernstein & Reiman, 2001). For instance, tolerance or acceptance of gay and

lesbian parenthood is contingent on promoting the gender binary and extended on condition that their

"children grow up to be appropriately feminine or masculine and, of course, heterosexual" (Landau,

2009, p. 95). The political strategy that emerges then is one of assimilation, rather than transformation, as heterosexuality is retained as the ideal referent.

Building on these observations, our aim is to examine the arguments deployed in favour of gay parenthood in South African news media and to assess their potential to resist or reinforce hetero-gendered norms. In the following section we explicate our methodology and present four themes, which encompass resistant talk, from our thematic analysis. Two of these themes resonate with findings of earlier research, as we shall show. The other two are novel and shed new light on the political implications of resistant talk. We examine these implications in the concluding discussion, where we consider the political limitations and opportunities of resistant talk in relation to a project of transforming oppressive hetero-gendered norms.

3. Methods

3.1. The data corpus

To locate news articles for analysis, we conducted a systematic search of online South African media archives and databases (*SA Media Archive*; *Google news*; *IOL*; and the *Media24 Archive)*. We selected all relevant print or online articles published in mainstream newspapers and magazines. Relevance was determined according to whether the piece focused substantially on queer parents and families[2]. Articles about queer issues in general or with no substantive focus on childbearing, family formation, or parenting were excluded. Our search was conducted using key words in English and Afrikaans, which are dominant languages of the mainstream South African press.

The overall data set comprises 152 relevant articles spanning almost 30 years (1985 to July 2014), with a steady increase in number over time. We focused our analysis on a subset of 45 articles, as explained below. Most articles were in English (90), but a substantial number were in

Afrikaans (62).[3] The major topics covered, and the number of articles reporting on these topics, are

summarised in the following table.

<TABLE 1 >

This preliminary descriptive analysis indicates that the large majority of articles foregrounded queer

parents' struggles to attain legal recognition of familial rights and custody of children. Indeed, these

are newsworthy topics and the bulk of the reportage appeared in newspapers (121), with far fewer

appearing in magazines (8) or as letters to the editor or opinion pieces (23). This means that the

voices of the actual parents and children living in queer families were represented far less than those

of courts, various experts (like psychologists and social workers), and the general public. This is

especially true of queer men and their families, evident in the much smaller number of articles that

focussed specifically on these persons: While almost half of the articles (45.5%) were about lesbian

mothers and their children, only 32 (21.1%) concerned gay men and their families.[4] A breakdown of

the focus of the articles in the dataset appears below.

<TABLE 2 >

We focussed our analysis on articles about gay men and their families (32) as well as those

reporting on queer families more broadly (13). It is within these 45 articles that we identified

instances of resistant talk. The descriptive analysis of the dataset also included an assessment of the

framing of articles: whether the overall tone was hostile or positive/supportive of queer families; or

generally attempting to be balanced or neutral. A minority of articles (13.2%) were negative, with

most stories either written in an overtly positive (46.1%) or a balanced or neutral style (40.7%).

3.2. Data analysis

The articles were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach to thematic analysis, which comprises six phases, namely: (i) familiarisation with the dataset through repeated readings; (ii) initial code generation; (iii) construction of preliminary themes; (iv) refinement of themes through comparison with coded extracts and the entire dataset; (v) naming and defining themes; and (vi) generating the narrative report of the findings. We approached the analysis from a critical, constructionist standpoint, working within a feminist framework.

After coding and classifying the data according to themes, we interpreted the resulting thematic structures using theoretical and analytical concepts drawn from feminist discursive psychology (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). We were concerned with the overall rhetorical organisation of talk, the discursive purpose of particular rhetorical strategies, and how these reinforce or resist existing power relations—particularly gendered power relations (Bamberg, 2004). The analysis focuses on the broad discursive functions and potential effects of these ways of speaking. Next we discuss the themes identified in pro-queer parenting in news media, focussing specifically on talk about gay men and their families.

4. Resistant talk in South African news media

We constructed four main themes evident in arguments supportive of queer parenting, each reflecting different rhetorical strategies and with different implications for countering hetero-gendered norms, as indicated earlier. Below we explore the major rhetorical strategies evident in each theme, showing how they respond to arguments against queer parenting. The first two themes that we discuss are de-gendering parenthood and normalising gay and lesbian parenting. These were more common and correspond with themes identified in previous research, reviewed earlier (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004). We discuss these in order to show how they manifest within this particular context. The remaining two themes—valorising queer parenting and challenging the normative gold

standard of parenting—were less common in our dataset and only briefly alluded to in the existing

literature. We use data extracts in the analysis for illustrative purposes, with bold font to highlight

aspects of the data that we wish to emphasise. After presenting the themes, we evaluate the political

implications of each of the rhetorical strategies discussed.

4.1. De-gendering parenthood

The first theme encapsulates talk that responds to a gendered construction of parenting in which a

mother is the main caregiver and a father the secondary "helper" parent (Nentwich, 2008). This was

achieved by means of a de-gendering rhetorical strategy (Morison & Macleod, 2015; Schacher,

Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005) that separates parenting from gender and works to place fathering on

equal terms with mothering, as illustrated in the following extracts.

> *Gay dads do not have maternal instinct and basic parenting skills. They are*
>
> *inferior parents*: **Parenting skills** are not determined by gender or sexual
>
> orientation. All children need **love, stability,** and structure and the ability to give
>
> this is not determined by your gender or sexual orientation. Research shows that
>
> gay parents do not differ much from heterosexual parents. It also shows that gay
>
> fathers are at least equal to heterosexual fathers as far as the quality of parenting is
>
> concerned. Parents' sexual orientation has a very small impact on children, says
>
> Maree. 'In fact, the effect is so small that it can be seen as negligible.' If **two gay**
>
> **dads** raise their children in a **stable home** in which the children are **loved and feel**
>
> **secure**, there is no reason why the children will suffer any emotional or social
>
> damage simply because their parents are gay men. ('Myths about gay dads',
>
> Anonymous, 2008, *Beeld*).

> The fair-haired bespectacled man **tenderly** guides the tiny black three-year-old
>
> around obstacles on street pavements. They are **almost never apart**.... The
>
> psychologist who examined the relationship between John and Maria said it was
>
> evident there was a **deep psychological bond** and that John was her **primary**
>
> **caregiver**. It was he who had changed nappies, bottle-fed her, rocked her to sleep.
>
> ('Gay man celebrates hard-won fatherhood', Beaver, 2000, *IOL News*)

These extracts talk against the positioning of men as "inferior parents" (extract 1), opposing the common positioning of mothers as the main parent and fathers as auxiliary parents (Nentwich, 2008). In extract 1 this has to do with both the "gender and sexual orientation" of parents (stated twice). Instead, non-gendered aspects of childcare are emphasised and, in line with the dominant contemporary Western construction of childhood, it is children's emotional "needs" (for stability, love, security) that are foregrounded. This is reinforced by the description of parenting as a "skill", implying that it is learned rather than an innate, gendered attribute. A skill discourse challenges the "myth" of gay men's inability *as men* to care for children due to their lack of a "maternal instinct". It "stands in contradistinction to one of the dominant discourses of motherhood, viz. the 'natural' discourse in which mothering is seen as biological and instinctive" (Macleod, 2001, p. 501).

The de-gendering rhetoric evident in the quotes also challenged the feminisation of childcare and concomitant decrease in paternal responsibility and involvement. The disruption of the stereotypical association of femininity with emotionality, which positions women as better suited to cater to the all-important emotional "needs" of children, is facilitated by drawing on the contemporary discourse of "new fatherhood" (Nentwich, 2008). This discourse is characterised by the positioning of "the father's role as a 'mother-like' caregiver" (Eerola & Huttunen, 2011, p. 214). This is especially well illustrated by the second extract, which shows a common trope of describing queer fathers' caregiving in terms that denote good mothering (being "tender" or emotional). In other instances, gay parents were described as highly involved in hands-on care, such as "stay[ing]

awake through the night to care for the two newly born babies" ("British gay couple will fight to keep twins", Anonymous, 1999, Beeld).

De-gendering rhetoric dovetails with the "love makes a family" discourse referred to earlier, in which love and care are portrayed as "the building blocks of family life, as qualities (which are not necessarily related to sex and gender) that all families should (ideally) possess" (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, p. 205). However, it is possible to see that the positioning of men as primary caregivers is not possible without a fair bit of rhetorical work, and it is not entirely taken for granted either. For instance, the explicit statement that "John" is "the primary caregiver" (which would likely go unremarked on if the person in question were female); descriptions of tasks usually associated with mothering (such as nappy changing and feeding); and the appropriation of the essentialist language of natural motherhood ("a deep psychological bond"), work to expand traditional constructions of mothering to include men and fathers.

4.2. Normalising gay and lesbian parenthood

The second theme coheres around talk that emphasises the ordinariness of queer parents and depicts "lesbian and gay families in ways that render them familiar and nonthreatening to the heterosexual majority" (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, p. 205). As discussed earlier, a common discrediting strategy employed by opponents of queer families, is positing non-normative families as "unnatural", "damaged" and inherently deficient based on their divergence from the norm. A normalising strategy resists such discursive positioning, as evident in how queer parents' sameness to heterosexual parents, or their common humanity, is emphasised in the following extracts.

He [adoptive father] is also confident that whatever issues arise in their

relationship, they will cope … His basic philosophy is: 'I'm a gay parent. I'm like

every other parent just a little bit different'. ('Gay man celebrates hard-won

fatherhood', Beaver, 2000, *IOL News*)

According to [one of the fathers] it is amazing how 'normal' it is as gay parents to

raise children. 'All the things that happen to us also happen to heterosexual

parents. The babies' nappies need to be changed. Their winds must be rubbed out.

They say 'goo' and 'dada.' If their fever is 40 in the middle of the night, then gay

parents are just as hysterical as straight parents. And when the children have

nightmares or want a hug, it does not matter to them that their parents are gay or

straight. Not even a little bit.' ('A family like any other', Anonymous, 2008, *Beeld*)

Both extracts reference quotes from fathers in which they downplay or deny their difference

from "every other parent", that is, from heterosexual parents. Notably, the term "parent" constructs a

common gender-neutral category. In the second extract, rhetorical work is done to refute the

supposed importance of a parents' sexual identity as a prerequisite of their fitness to parent as the

speaker constructs a claim to ordinariness or normality. Like the skill discourse in the preceding

theme, constructing parenting in highly practical and instrumentalist terms renders it primarily about

meeting immediate physical and emotional needs; a task undertaken by all parents and, moreover,

achievable by a caregiver of any gender or sexuality. The list format used reinforces the claim to

ordinariness and this construction highlights the "normality" of queer parenting on the basis of its

similarity to straight parenting (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004).

The rhetorical strategy of minimising difference works to "establish that same-gendered

mothers and fathers are capable and acceptable parents" (Morison & Reddy, 2013, p. 7) and suggests

an orientation toward broader arguments about the damaging effects of gay "lifestyles" on children

(Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004). This is well illustrated by the following extract, quoted from an article

about attitudes toward same-sex marriage and parenting within the Christian church and includes the

response from a minister of a progressive church.

> Some gay relationships and gay marriages do not work out, says Muller. Just as
> some heterosexual marriages and relationships do not work out. It's a **human**
> **thing**. Most [same-sex] marriages in his congregation, however, are **stable**
> relationships with the Christian faith as a foundation. And families? 'Wow, yes. It's
> happy families. Stable homes with love and peace and good role models.' ('A
> candle that must burn down', Anonymous, 2012, *Beeld*)

The minister refutes "stereotypical constructions of gay men as being sexually promiscuous, anti-family, and having few financial obligations" (Berkowitz, 2007, p. 159), which act as a barrier to gay men who wish to become parents (Hicks, 2006; Berkowitz, 2007), and frequently emerged in the data. Such constructions render gay relationships as potentially volatile and unstable and thus in opposition to ideals of parenthood as occurring within the conjugalised, two-biological-parent, nuclear family (Morison & Macleod, 2013). In countering these claims, emphasis was placed on the sameness—and the normality—of gay and straight relationships and families as seen in the appeal to common humanity ("it's a human thing").

Finally, as part of such a normalising strategy, articles frequently featured "good gays", who were implicitly positioned as acceptable fathers. This argument was reinforced by descriptions of gay couples that emphasise aspects that are usually considered essential to childrearing (Morison & Macleod, 2015). The data contained frequent references to parents' marital status and the duration of the relationship. For example, parents were described as follows: "A married gay couple … who married in January after being involved for 14 years" (Bamford, 2010, IOL News). There were also often descriptions of parents' professional status or financial wellbeing, for instance: "The couple, who live in an upmarket Johannesburg northern suburb … made an undertaking in court papers to pay all medical expenses" (Mooki, 2010, The Star). Such descriptions target anti-gay parenting arguments focused on children's best interests, summed up by the following quote in opposition to gay parenthood: "the family provided the best conditions for rearing children - the family being the

stable, loving relationship between a married father and mother, he said" (Anonymous, 2006, Business Day). This theme encapsulates rhetorical work that emphasises the ability of gay parents to live up to this ideal.

As discussed earlier, normalising arguments tend to rely on liberal discourse, but avoid pointing to difference from the heteronorm, let alone the potential benefits of difference. We did however identify some resistant talk that constructed queer families as being different in positive, socially-desirable ways, as shown in the following two themes.

4.3. Valorising queer parenting

The third theme points to the benefits of queer families. It responds to conservative concerns about potential psychological damage caused to children raised in queer families, and the universally positive outcomes associated with parenting in the heterosexual nuclear family, as discussed earlier. In the following extract, for instance, an expert opinion lends credibility to resistant talk suggesting that there are possible positive social and psychological impacts of an adopted child being raised by a gay parent.

> Gilbert [a sociologist] feels that Maria [a child adopted by a gay father] could even
> turn out to have an advantage over other children, in terms of being a more
> **tolerant person**. 'If she is exposed to as many people as possible, she could turn
> out to be an **accommodating and well-adjusted person**. Besides, how many so-
> called normal families have raised racists?' she said. Nhlapho [an activist and
> lesbian parent] agrees: 'We grew up not knowing about other sexual orientations.
> My child understands my orientation and this is to her advantage.' ('Trans-racial
> adoption raises questions', Mpye, 1999, *Sowetan*)

Here, the idea that the heterosexual "normal" family is responsible for producing psychologically healthy children is inverted. Instead, the queer family is depicted as potentially sensitising children to discrimination and exposing them to diversity, a strategy also noted by Clarke and Kitzinger (2004) in their research. Such a counter-argument is not limited to normalising or legitimating queer parenting as being "as good as" the heterosexual nuclear family; instead, it argues that queer parenting differs in positive ways that may even exceed the outcomes associated with childrearing by heterosexual parents. In the excerpt below a similar argument is advanced, in this instance bolstered through an appeal to research evidence.

> Almost invariably it is found that the children are equally as emotionally and socially adjusted as children in control groups with heterosexual parents. The only difference is that sometimes it is found that **children from gay households tended to be more tolerant** ('Gay couples can be good parents', Du Plessis, 2002, *Die Burger*)

This strategy is compelling in that it is difficult to oppose the view that children should be raised to be tolerant and accommodating to difference. It challenges dominant media constructions that uncritically present heterosexual parenting as the only context in which capable parenting can take place. As researcher Judith Stacey notes, the tendency to downplay or deny difference from the heteronorm is related to the "fear that such evidence will be used to discriminate against gay families", but instead of denying differences, these should be welcomed by democratic societies (Silsby, 2001).

4.4. Challenging the heteronormative "gold standard"

Finally, in a similar vein, some resistant talk challenged the hetero-patriarchal nuclear family and its assumed benefits for childrearing more directly. This involved highlighting the potential negative

effects of raising children within this family configuration by pointing out its negative interpersonal and structural effects. Such claims were sometimes reinforced by comparisons of loving, capable queer parents with neglectful, abusive, and dysfunctional heterosexual family arrangements. The following extract illustrates how some commentators highlighted the harm that occurs at the hands of heterosexual parents.

> The many cases of the torture and abuse of children by heterosexual fathers and mothers should, by now, have cured us of the myth that these are 'normal' or 'natural' parents. Where is the justice in applying such prohibitive standards to gay parents?   ('Should gays be allowed to adopt?', Alibaih-Brown, 1999, *The Star*)

In this extract, the potential for abuse in the heterosexual nuclear family is used to question the assumption of the inherent superiority of this family form. This questions the normative status ascribed to the two-parent, married, heterosexual family—a model to which most families are compared, despite the fact that the majority of families, both globally and in South Africa, do not in fact conform to this ideal (Morison & Reddy, 2013). This extract draws attention to the way that this family form is idealised and used as a benchmark to evaluate other family configurations (Clowes, Ratele, & Shefer, 2013).

Similarly, other commentators pointed to possible undesirable effects at the broader societal level, identifying the heterosexual nuclear family as a potential site of inequality, social exclusion and harm that extends beyond its negative impact on queer persons and their families. In the excerpt below, for example, an academic and activist comments on a South African family policy[5].

> The skewed premise [in the proposed legislation] is that 'the family' is imbued with qualities that make it inherently 'nurturing and supportive'. In reality, many families 'nurture' unequal social relations between men and women, rich and poor, black and white, queer and straight. … Women's subordination is reproduced in

families where boys are raised to assume masculine dominance and girls are told

(most recently by the president) that marriage and child rearing is their primary

social role … The green paper's hallowed 'family' is often a pretty unsafe place.

('Are we really family?', Judge, 2012, *City Press*)

As shown above, there were instances in the dataset where commentators—usually in opinion editorials or letters to the editor—problematised the taken-for-granted belief of the heterosexual nuclear family as "inherently nurturing and supportive" and the common sense assumption that this is the ideal form. Instead, the commentator highlights how the hetero-patriarchal nuclear family maintains various forms of privilege and may even perpetuate violence, making it an "unsafe space". This renders heterosexual families, rather than queer families, threatening to children's wellbeing. Such an argument draws on socially desirable ideals of a progressive society and is particularly persuasive in a liberal democracy such as South Africa where democratic values of non-racism and non-sexism hold traction—even if only rhetorically. This strategy points to the possibility that large socio-political shifts that occur in transitional societies potentially open up the discursive space to question taken-for-granted hetero-gendered norms.

5. Concluding discussion

We now consider the political implications of the rhetorical strategies present in the themes discussed and assess their potential to challenge restrictive hetero-gendered norms. Previous research proposes that queer families need to be constructed and represented on "their own terms" and that politically effective strategies should not be based on "straight values" (Gamson, 2001; Morison & Reddy, 2013; Riggs, 2007). In our research we were thus attuned to the possibility of rhetorical strategies that appear to operate on their "own terms", rather than reinforcing the heteronorm.

The first two themes (de-gendering parenthood; normalising gay and lesbian parents) are clearly limited in this regard. This is not to say that they do not challenge gender norms and heteronormativity at all; de-gendering talk "challenges seemingly consistent categories, such as 'father', 'mother', 'man', 'woman', 'heterosexual', and 'homosexual'" (Folgerø, 2008, p. 146). Such talk potentially subverts the gendered logic of "doing family", allowing both men and women to perform non-traditional roles. This subversion paves the way for more equitable parenting practices within heterosexual relationships (Schacher et al., 2005). It may also allow gay men to challenge beliefs about men as inferior parents. Likewise, normalising rhetoric contains some subversive potential in that it challenges assumptions about deviant-difference and homosexuality as a master identity in which sexuality overrides one's parental status (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004).

Nevertheless, neither rhetorical strategy supports transgressive politics, because each remains structured around "the oppressor's discourse" (Smith, 1994, p. 235) and so does not greatly challenge heteronormativity. Instead, each to some extent supports established understandings of "The Family". This is evident in arguments which retain assumptions regarding the superiority of the two-parent norm in ways that largely map queer families onto the heterosexual template and in so doing maintain the heterosexual nuclear family as the ideal. Such arguments draw on a familiar "conjugalisation of reproduction" discourse, that contains procreation within heterosexual marriage, in which the male-female romantic dyad becomes the parenting dyad (Morison & Macleod, 2015), with families created outside of such a union being considered illegitimate, unnatural, and tenuous (Folgerø, 2008; Macleod, 2001). In our data this configuration is extended to accommodate two same-sex parents as forming a parenting dyad. However, while challenging the gendered character of parental roles, in which mothers are seen as natural parents, the ideal of a conjugalised, two-parent structure of parenting often remained unquestioned. Likewise, arguing that queer families compare favourably to the heterosexual ideal, means that this ideal remains the standard against which all families are measured (Hicks, 2005). This suggests that the preferred context in which children

should be raised remains the nuclear family. Not only does this obscure classed and raced values that often underpin the nuclear family ideal, but it also circumvents challenges to the heteronorm.

The talk in both of these themes (de-gendering and normalising) thus fits queer parents into existing understandings of the family and parenthood and only partially challenges the heteronormative discourses in which ideas about biological kinship, gender complementary, and family life centred around a co-resident couple are interwoven and support the heterosexual ideal (Folgerø, 2008). Furthermore, rhetorical strategies that make claims to "sameness" or "normality", obscure the radical differences that shape queer parents' lives; deny possible benefits of lesbian and gay parenting; and divert attention from the ways in which institutionalised discrimination oppresses lesbian and gay parents (Riggs, 2007). These arguments are articulated in the voice of liberal tolerance, which encourages the acceptance of "Others" into mainstream culture (Morison & Reddy, 2013). Since change is allowed to occur only within the status quo, there is limited scope for long-term social change that includes those who do not measure up so well to the heteronormative gold standard. Transformation is thus limited to the (conditional) tolerance of "alternative" families in hetero-patriarchal society.

In contrast, the final two themes (valorising queer parenting; challenging the heteronormative gold standard) seem to hold greater promise for transformational politics. These encompass ways of speaking that emphasise the benefits of queer parenting for children in terms *other* than how well they match up to this gold standard and interrogate the heterosexual nuclear family as ideal. These instances of talk were, however, infrequent and it is worth noting that in the mainstream media analysed, these resistant voices are largely those of gender activists, using an academic framing as expert voices, and presented in what can be described as more "liberal" press. While this is admittedly a somewhat marginal position, in relation to the mainstream press, it holds the potential to challenge the status quo and offer the promise of long-term social transformation.

A closer look at the central concerns of each of these counter arguments provides some indication of how these ways of speaking can be moved from the peripheries of the debate. What is useful about all four of these arguments is that each to some extent steers the discussion away from a preoccupation with family form and toward family functioning. The first two (degendering and marginalising) are hamstrung by their articulation within and oppressive discourse, as we have noted. However, the second two (valourising and challenging) refuse the subordinate positioning of queer families as a starting point for dissent. Eschewing the more defensive positioning of the first two rhetorical strategies, these more radical counter arguments create a new benchmark, based on a different set of "family values" centred upon ideals of tolerance and equality; these values, as intimated in the theme, already hold sway within liberal democracies. By placing the argument in these terms, it is possible to highlight the extent to which family functioning may help achieve these ideals. Though child welfare is upheld as a concern—which is guaranteed primarily by what families do rather than what they look like—this is balanced with a broader view of other family members' needs and rights, and these are aligned with children's needs or best interests.

This alternative set of values admittedly may not appeal to those committed to conservative family values. Yet, when they are linked to broader social issues that go beyond family politics, the argument may become more persuasive. In particular, the final theme of challenging heteronormativity as ideal offers a strategy for allowing wider engagement with oppositional talk: by connecting the interests of queer families to more commonly shared concerns of inequality and violence in traditional family structures, such resistant talk might find greater traction in public discussions.

In light of our broader aim of addressing the relationship between the ways that queer families are rendered visible, gender transgression, and queer politics, we have shown how particular South African media constructions feed into assimilationist and/or transgressive political strategies. We have shown how long-term socio-cultural transformation is not undermined only by obviously

invalidating or oppositional arguments, but also how this may occur more insidiously within arguments that at face value appear to support queer families. This supports previous findings, related to general queer politics, of the limitations and drawback of liberal discourses. We have also identified alternative ways of speaking that appear to offer more possibilities for long-term socio-cultural transformation. These strategies propose a fundamental shift in the current hetero-gendered order and hold potential benefits not only for sexual minorities, but also for broader gender power relations. Nevertheless, as we have indicated, such arguments remain at the periphery of public discussions of queer families and, in their present form, draw on academic discourses that may be alienating in the broader social milieu. We have provided some initial thoughts regarding how such strategies could be taken up in advocacy work and filtered into mainstream discussions, but further research would assist with this aim.

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[1] Same-sex marriage has been legal in South Africa since 2006 with the enactment of the Civil Union Act (No. 17 of 2006) and between 2007 and end of 2013 5307 civil unions were registered under the Act.

[2] Articles about queer issues in general or with no substantive focus on childbearing, family formation, or parenting were excluded.

[3] Afrikaans texts were analysed in the original, since the first author speaks Afrikaans as a home language and the second author as a second language. The material from Afrikaans articles quoted in this paper was translated into English and back-translated to ensure that they are accurate reflections of the original.

[4] Bisexual, transgender and intersex persons were only mentioned in two articles, but not in any meaningful way.

[5] The Green Paper on the Family, which has subsequently become a White Paper (Department of Social Development, 2012)

Gay men as parents: Analysing resistant talk in South African mainstream media accounts of queer families

Lynch I

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