

# **“WE WANT THEM TO BE AS HETEROSEXUAL AS POSSIBLE”**

## ***Fathers Talk about Their Teen Children’s Sexuality***

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*This article examines heterosexual fathers’ descriptions of conversations with their teen children about sexuality and their perceptions of their teen children’s sexual identities. We show that fathers construct their own identities as masculine and heterosexual in the context of these conversations and prefer that their children, especially sons, are heterosexual. Specifically, fathers feel accountable for their sons’ sexuality and model and craft heterosexuality for them, even as many encourage their sons to stay away from heterosexual relationships and sex until they are older. Fathers are more accepting of homosexuality for their daughters yet question the authenticity of teen lesbian identity and do not recognize their daughters’ sexuality as agentic. They instead construct their daughters as sexually passive and vulnerable and position themselves as their daughters’ protectors. The findings illustrate the complexities of heteronormativity in a context of shifting, frequently contested gender and sexual landscapes.*

**Keywords:** *family; men; masculinity; sexuality*

Gender and sexuality are intricately intertwined: Individuals may assess others’ sexual identities based on their gender performances and police gender interactionally through the use of sexual epithets such as *slut* and *fag*. Girls and women in high school and college often report monitoring

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their sexual behavior in an effort to avoid the label *slut* (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Schalet 2010; Tanenbaum 1999), and some teen boys use the term *fag* to police one another for perceived signs of weakness, emotion, or effeminacy—things coded gay and feminine (Pascoe 2007). Along with schools and peers, studies show parents actively strive to shape their young children's gender and sexual identities (Kane 2006; Martin 2009). The links between gender and sexuality may be particularly salient as young people move through the middle and high school years, however. How do parents make sense of and try to direct their older children's gender and sexuality? We address part of this question by examining how fathers think about and talk to their teen sons and daughters about dating, sexuality, and sexual orientation.

Few studies explore how fathers understand their role in their children's sex education and sexual development. Even fewer directly address how fathers think about their teens' sexuality. This lack of research is perhaps understandable given that mothers provide this information more often than fathers (Martin 2009). Yet studies find that parents' lessons to their children about puberty and sex are imbued with gender and sexual meanings (Elliott 2010; Martin 2009; Nolin and Petersen 1992) and that fathers seem particularly invested in and concerned about their preschool-aged children's, especially sons', gender and sexual identities (Kane 2006). Coupled with the importance of heterosexuality for male dominance, this suggests fathers' understandings of their teens' sexuality might be important in reproducing processes of gendered heteronormativity. We explore this through interviews with 23 fathers of teenage sons and daughters. By revealing the heteronormative strategies fathers employ to make sense of their teen children's sexuality and talk with their teens about sexuality, our findings contribute to research on the heterosexual family as a site where gender and sexual meanings, norms, and identities are negotiated and (re)produced.

## FAMILY SEXUAL COMMUNICATION

We take an expansive view of family sexual communication as including not only the more structured conversations fathers may have with their children around puberty, dating, and sexuality but also more casual conversations about sexual images on television or the Internet, for example. Studies suggest that for many reasons (such as a sense of discomfort and/or desire to focus on the moral aspects of sex), parents' lessons to their children about sexuality tend to be vague and general, providing little factual

information (Angera, Brookins-Fisher, and Inungu 2008; Byers, Sears, and Weaver 2008). However, despite a number of factors shaping parent-child communication about sex—including the extent of parents' sexual knowledge and education, comfort levels of the parent and child, and the gender/age of the child (see review in Byers, Sears, and Weaver 2008)—many parents do try to provide some form of sex education to their children. In general, parents are more likely to talk with children who share their biological sex (i.e., mothers-daughters, fathers-sons) because they feel better equipped to answer these children's questions (Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman 2002; McHale, Crouter, and Whiteman 2003; Walker 2001). Nevertheless, regardless of whether the child is a boy or a girl, the responsibility of providing sex education falls on mothers most often (see review in Martin 2009). Mothers report a great deal of discomfort and difficulty around these conversations (Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon 2000; Walker 2001), although some research finds that African American and Latina mothers indicate more discomfort and less communication than white mothers when discussing sex with their children (Meneses 2004; Somers and Vollmar 2006). Yet other studies find that African American adolescents report more communication from their mothers than other adolescents (e.g., Epstein and Ward 2008).

Parents' lessons to their teenagers about sex and sexuality tend to be restrictive, focusing on the dangerous and/or damaging consequences of relationships and sexual activity (Elliott 2010; Moore and Rosenthal 2006; Schalet 2000, 2010). Parents often base these restrictions on assumptions of their own teen children's sexual innocence while at the same time characterizing other teens as sexually deviant and dangerous (Elliott 2010; Moore and Rosenthal 2006). For example, immigrant parents may enforce restraints on their children's, especially daughters', sexual behavior in an attempt to protect them not only from the consequences of sex but also from their Western, "promiscuous" peers (Espiritu 2001; Gonzalez-Lopez 2004). White, middle-class, American parents "dramatize" their children's sexuality and base their lessons, especially to their daughters, on a heterosexual "battle of the sexes" (Schalet 2000). These lessons reinforce a "boys against the girls" attitude (Martin 1996, 126) and stereotypical notions of sexually passive girls and sex-driven boys (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009).

The bulk of research on family sexual communication focuses on parents indiscriminately or solely on mothers. Reflecting a growing interest in masculinity and fatherhood—in part because of fathers' increased participation in child rearing (Cabrera et al. 2000)—some studies have begun to examine father-child communication about sexual topics (Lehr et al. 2005;

Robb 2004). Lehr et al. (2005) find that fathers with less education, fathers with more permissive attitudes, and fathers who received communication about sex from their own fathers are more likely to speak to their sons about sex and related issues. Qualitative studies on parent–child sexual communication that include fathers suggest they view the child’s or children’s mother’s presumably better interpersonal skills as proof that she should provide this information (Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman 2002; Walker 2001). However, some fathers do describe talking about the dangerous consequences of sex to their children, especially daughters, out of concern for their safety and well-being (Gonzalez-Lopez 2004; Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman 2001), and fathers seem to care a great deal about their young sons’ attainment of normative gender and sexual identities (Kane 2006; McGuffey 2005). To our knowledge, however, no research examines how fathers think about their teen children’s sexual orientation and how they may attempt to direct their children’s sexual identities through conversations about dating, sex, and sexuality.

### **GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND HETERONORMATIVITY**

Our project draws from the literature on the interrelationships between gender and sexuality (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Pascoe 2007). Feminist and queer theories emphasize that sexuality, like gender, is socially and historically constructed (Katz 1995; Rich 1980; Valocchi 2005). Together, gender and sexuality combine to form a matrix of norms governing “proper” gendered behavior centering on heterosexuality (Ingraham 1994; Martin 2009; Renold 2006; Rich 1980; Tolman 1994). Masculine dominance and privilege hinge on the successful presentation of heterosexuality and heterosexual prowess (Connell 2005; Wolkomir 2009) and the subordination of other ways of being sexual (Pascoe 2007). Rich (1980, 640) defines “compulsory heterosexuality” as the “cluster of forces ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness” that demonize homosexuality in Western society and force women into heterosexual and historically oppressive relationships. A host of social, psychological, and material factors impose heterosexuality on women and men—ultimately reproducing gender and sexual inequalities.

Research examining parents’ gender and sexual lessons to their children emphasizes the prominent role heteronormativity plays in these lessons (Kane 2006; Martin 2009; Nolin and Petersen 1992). For instance, in her study of mothers of three- to six-year-olds, Martin (2009) finds most mothers

assume their children are heterosexual. However, some mothers (particularly those who hold conservative religious beliefs) express concern about their sons' non-normative gender behavior, worrying that it implies a possible future homosexual identity. These mothers actively seek to teach their children that homosexuality is wrong and in this way preemptively steer their children toward heterosexuality. Yet a majority of the mothers Martin (2009) surveyed report never thinking or worrying about their children's sexual identities because of the heteronormative ways both they and their children talk about love and relationships and because "they [find] 'evidence' of heterosexuality in [their] children's cross-gender behavior" (Martin 2009, 197).

Even so, parents do not take their children's gender or sexual identities for granted. Instead, they actively work to try to ensure that their children, especially sons, enact gender normatively and feel accountable when they do not (Martin 2009; McGuffey 2005; White 1994). In her study of heterosexual parents of gay children, Fields (2001) finds that parents often blame themselves for their children's homosexuality. Similarly, some fathers of sexually abused sons encourage their sons to engage in girl watching and roughhousing with them in an effort to guide them toward heterosexuality and "'fix' what had happened" (McGuffey 2005, 637). Kane (2006, 150) finds parents of preschool-aged children feel accountable for "doing gender both for and with their children." Kane's research also demonstrates the importance of heterosexuality to parents of young children and the links between gender and heteronormativity—heterosexual fathers, in particular, express concern that their sons' gender nonconformity might be an indication of homosexuality. Kane speculates that parents may worry about both sons' *and* daughters' gender nonconformity in their teen years, a period characterized by heightened gender differentiation in schools (Pascoe 2007) and increased adult concerns about girls' sexuality (Martin 1996; Schalet 2010; Tolman 1994).

In this article, we consider how heterosexual fathers think about their teen children's sexuality and how gender and heteronormativity shape their understandings. Our analyses reveal that fathers participate very little in their sons' or daughters' sex education. However, they want their children—particularly their sons—to be heterosexual. Fathers care a great deal about their sons being heterosexual and attempt to craft masculine and heterosexual identities for them. In contrast, some fathers of daughters accept and even encourage their daughters to be lesbians but "deny women [their own] sexuality" (Rich 1980, 638) by simultaneously minimizing and infantilizing their sexuality. Thus, although fathers may accept

lesbian daughters more readily than gay sons, fathers of both sons and daughters construct and reinforce male sexual privilege and heterosexuality's status as the "natural" and "right" form of sexuality.

## METHOD

The data and analyses offered here are based on interviews with 23 fathers of at least one teenage child between the age of 13 and 19. We recruited study participants through their children's schools (5), through on-street solicitation at various local businesses (14), and through referrals (4). The second author conducted pilot interviews in 2006–7. These initial interviews helped us refine our interview protocol and identify research areas to explore further in subsequent interviews (Charmaz 2006). We completed the bulk of the interviews between the fall of 2008 and the summer of 2009 in an urban area in the Southeast. The first author (a white man who is a graduate student) conducted 15 of the interviews (mainly with fathers of sons), while the second author (a white woman assistant professor) completed the other eight (mainly with fathers of daughters). We thought fathers might be more willing to talk openly if interviewed by someone who matched the sex of their child, especially fathers of daughters. However, some fathers had both a son and daughter, and at other times we could not match the interviewer with the sex of the child. Yet when we compared the transcripts we detected no major differences in how the fathers responded to the questions based on the sex of the interviewer.

The interviews, which lasted on average an hour, occurred in the participant's or interviewer's place of employment, the participant's home, or local restaurants. All of the fathers participated voluntarily without promise of incentive, and we assured everyone that their identities and responses would remain confidential. We digitally recorded the interviews with participants' permission and transcribed them, assigning all fathers pseudonyms. Of the fathers, 19 identified as white, while four identified as African American. All identified as heterosexual. The average age of the fathers was 50. Most of the fathers lived with a spouse (20; 17 with their teenage children's biological mothers), and in most instances these were dual-income households (15). Of the fathers, 19 had graduated from college or had a graduate degree, but the fathers' occupations were quite diverse—ranging from a maintenance worker and a school teacher to a veterinarian and a CEO of a nonprofit organization. Table 1 provides more detailed information about the fathers.

We began this project with a general interest in fathers' experiences raising teenagers and a specific focus on issues around puberty, dating, and sexuality.

**TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of Sample**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Self-Reported Race</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Teenage Children</i>
Adam	43	African American	Asst. director of state agency	Daughter (18)
Bernie	39	African American	Customer service rep.	Daughter (13), sons (16, 17)
Bob	47	White	Sales manager	Daughter (15)
Brendon	74	African American	Retired	Son (19)
Brett	48	White	Professor	Daughter (14), son (15)
Charles	50	White	Engineer	Daughter (14)
Chris	56	White	Minister	Sons (14, 17)
Frank	53	White	Consultant	Daughters (16, 19)
Garth	57	White	Engineer	Sons (13, 18)
Greg	43	White	Teacher	Daughters (15, 18)
Harley	45	White	Unemployed	Daughter (18), son (15)
Jimmy	51	White	Veterinarian	Son (14)
Joe	50	White	CEO of a nonprofit org.	Daughter (16)
Kirk	45	White	Auditor	Son (15)
Leonard	58	White	Unemployed	Son (17)
Linus	48	White	Sales engineer	Daughter (19), sons (14, 17)
Patrick	43	White	Consultant	Son (13)
Paul	62	White	Therapist	Son (17)
Ron	50	White	Mechanic	Daughter (17), son (15)
Scott	34	White	Engineer	Son (14)
Tony	47	White	Programmer	Daughters (13, 17)
Vinnie	55	White	Construction superintendent	Son (15)
Will	44	African American	Maintenance worker	Sons (14, 17)

Initially, we told fathers we wanted to hear about their “experiences,” broadly defined, raising teens. We provided more details in follow-up correspondence, informing fathers that the interview would focus specifically on issues pertinent to raising teenagers, such as puberty, dating, and sex. Each semistructured interview started with general questions asking fathers to describe their teenagers and daily family life.<sup>1</sup> From there, topics ranged

from their experiences with their children's pubertal changes, to issues and advice about teen dating, to questions that addressed the extent and content of conversations about sexual issues. We also asked fathers if they had talked with their child or children in general about sexual orientation—about being gay, straight, or bisexual. If, in response to this question, a father was not forthcoming about his feelings about his teen child's or children's sexual identity, we followed up with, "Have you ever wondered about your [son's/daughter's] sexual orientation?" and "How would you feel if your [son/daughter] told you [he/she] was gay?" We made no mention of sexual orientation before this question, although by previously mentioning sex as a topic, some fathers may have anticipated talking about sexual orientation. However, the questions clearly surprised some fathers possibly because they thought they had already established their teens as heterosexual and/or because their heteronormative assumptions precluded thinking about the possibility that their children might be gay.

We relied on inductive coding to identify themes and patterns in our interviews (Charmaz 2006). We manually coded the data—conducting several readings of the transcripts and the field notes we wrote immediately following each interview. For this analysis, the first author used a line-by-line coding method to identify concepts and paid particular attention to instances where a father mentioned his own beliefs about gender and sexuality, perceptions of and feelings about his child's or children's sexual and gender displays, and descriptions of his communication with his teen or teens about sexuality. Both authors then discussed and honed the coding categories and developed the analysis. While we make no claims of generalizability based on our convenience sample, we believe the study does provide insight into the processes of heteronormativity in the context of shifting, frequently contested gender and sexual landscapes.

### **FATHERS' ACCOUNTS OF FAMILY SEXUAL COMMUNICATION**

Although many fathers mentioned talking briefly over the years about issues related to puberty, dating, and sex with their children, when we asked about the details of these conversations, they often could not remember. For instance, Brett stated, "I haven't really sat down and talked to him about 'Here's what to expect. Here's what's going to happen to you.'" Indeed, of the 23 fathers, 16 made it clear that they have had very few explicit discussions about sexual issues with their children, presuming they get this information from other sources. Garth's response was typical: "Apparently

he's got sex education from the schools, friends, wherever. . . . I figured I learned about it, all kids learn about it. . . . [W]e haven't had those conversations." Instead of long, detailed, or regular conversations, most fathers indicated engaging in spot checks—episodic teaching moments with their children around sexual issues. While this lack of involvement echoes previous research (e.g., Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman 2001), it may also reflect our sample of mostly white, educated, and middle-class fathers. Some studies suggest less educated fathers and fathers from other racial/ethnic groups communicate more often with their children (Gonzalez-Lopez 2004; Lehr et al. 2005). Nevertheless, despite their apparent marginal involvement in family sexual communication, the fathers still had quite a bit to say about their children's sexuality, especially in response to questions about dating and sexual orientation.

### **“Chip Off the Old Block”: Fathers and Sons**

Most of the fathers described discussing sexual orientation either explicitly or implicitly with their sons. Until we prompted them with a specific question about sexual identity, however, the fathers did not directly mention their sons' sexual orientation or made comments suggesting their teen sons are heterosexual. Some fathers, for example, said they knew their sons were entering puberty when they began to show an interest in girls. Garth finished up his response to one of the first questions, “How would you describe your 18-year-old son?” by concluding, “He just seems to be a regular kid. He does have an interest in girls. He's had girlfriends.” Garth sees his son's interest in girls (and its implied heterosexuality) as a natural extension of growing up. Similarly, even though his two sons have not shown an interest in dating, Will said, “I'm still on red alert. Because all it takes is a Sally or Jane to come over the right way . . . ,” suggesting Will assumes his sons are on the brink of establishing heterosexual identities.

We eventually asked fathers whether they had spoken with their children about sexual orientation. In response, many explicitly said it is very important that their sons be heterosexual. When asked if he had ever talked with his two sons about sexual orientation, Bernie exclaimed, “Oh yeah. Definitely. Yeah, we want them to be as heterosexual as possible.” Other fathers similarly described how disappointing and/or difficult it would be to have a gay son. Some fathers, however, particularly those who identified as politically liberal, expressed a begrudging acceptance of homosexuality. These comments often resembled “semantic moves” (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000): discursive maneuvers to avoid sounding homophobic. Jimmy said,

Yeah, I'd be OK. I mean I can't honestly say that would be my preference, but I would live with that . . . he's my kid. I'm not going to banish him because of his sexual orientation . . . but you know I can't honestly say that'd be [on] my top list of things that I would prefer but. . . . *Why? Does that prevent him from something?* No. Well, in some portions of society there still is some stigma associated with it.

Ultimately Jimmy diverted attention away from his own personal misgivings about homosexuality and instead established that his concern stems from unease over the prejudice his son might encounter if he was gay. To be sure, gay teens may encounter intolerance and gay bashing, especially if they are gender nonconforming (Kimmel 2004; Pascoe 2007); yet by preferring that his son is heterosexual, Jimmy reproduces the views of the "portions of society" that worry him.

Beyond caring a great deal about their sons' attainment of heterosexuality, the fathers also indicated a sense of accountability for cultivating heterosexual identities for their sons (Kane 2006). Indeed, underlying many fathers' accounts of their sons' sexuality was a notion that heterosexuality is not a given; it has to be taught. Responding to a question about how he would feel if his son or daughter was gay, Brett answered, "I don't think it would make any difference if it was my daughter but with a son . . . I think I would feel like I had failed in coaching in some way . . . that I didn't coach, advise, [or] lead in a way to help clarify some of those thoughts." Here Brett made a distinction between the importance of his son's versus his daughter's heterosexuality (an issue addressed in the next section) and explicitly articulated how important it is for him to be active in coaching his son toward heterosexuality. Thus, while heterosexuality remains normative and taken for granted in U.S. culture (Martin 2009; Wolkomir 2009), it does not seem guaranteed, at least not for boys.

Fathers like Brett see themselves as pivotal in directing their sons' future sexual preferences. This fits with much of the literature on the fragile and contested status of masculinity. Men must perform and prove their masculinity, and men accomplish and "do" masculine identities in large part by establishing themselves as heterosexual (Connell 2005; Kimmel 2004; Pascoe 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). By repudiating femininity and homosexuality and enacting heterosexual desire, men construct themselves as masculine and heterosexual, but this status remains precarious and men must constantly reassert it (Pascoe 2007). Heterosexuality is thus intrinsically woven into the idealized presentation of a masculine identity.

There is a fundamental paradox in these fathers' views, however. Although they stressed their desire for, and role in crafting, heterosexual sons, many

said they hope their sons stay away from heterosexual relationships. Similar to the findings of other studies of American parents (e.g., Schalet 2000), fathers often presented their sons' teenage years as fraught with the potential for negative consequences from heterosexual sex and relationships. As Kirk succinctly put it: "That's all we try to explain: Every decision that you make has a consequence." Fathers said they are especially concerned about the consequences of teen sex (like STDs and pregnancies), and some described discouraging dating. Linus put it this way: "[We] encourage them to hang out in groups, you know. There's no sense at this point of pairing off in couples." Other fathers emphasized their sons' sexual vulnerability. Chris said, "We have told him a little bit about 'Be careful of aggressive girls who may want to have sex with you.' . . . We have warned him about that area." In her study of parents of teens, Elliott (2010) finds that parents equate teen sexual activity with deviance and negative consequences and construct their own children as sexually innocent while at the same time describing their children's peers as hypersexual. These fathers' attitudes and recommendations about dating may thus serve to solidify perceptions of their sons as "good" boys who avoid sexual activity.

The few fathers who allow and encourage their sons to date said they view their sons' past and current relationships with girls as evidence of heterosexuality. Paul expressed this:

There were moments when I wondered if he was going to be gay . . . and if I had my choice I wish that he wouldn't be, but if he was I knew that my wife and I would both be fine with it. . . . And then just watching for clues you know? Is he more interested in men than women? And then he started to move very clearly into the female direction so there was a sense of OK! [Paul does a fist pump in the air.] Chip off the old block.

Paul (like Garth) assumes his son's interest in girls means he is heterosexual. Paul's comment also illustrates that his son's presentation of heterosexuality is wrapped up in his own. This is perhaps all the more significant considering Paul identified as politically liberal and was one of only four fathers who said he would be "fine" if his son was gay. However, the qualification "if I had my choice" casts doubt on Paul's acceptance level—suggesting again that liberal fathers may semantically position themselves in a positive light while still affirming heterosexuality as the "better," more desirable option (Valocchi 2005).

Fathers who do not allow their sons to date or whose sons show no interest in dating said they look for evidence elsewhere to establish their sons as heterosexual. After being asked how he would feel if his son was gay,

Vinnie, a father of a 15-year-old son who plays football, said he would be “shocked” because his son “is very much a male’s male.” Like the mothers in Martin’s (2009) study, Vinnie assumes his son is heterosexual because he presumably engages in normatively masculine pursuits and “acts” masculine. He firmly established a link between his son’s masculine gender display and a heterosexual identity by describing his son as a “man’s man,” a phrase that implies the ability to attract, and be attracted to, women. Harley, who lives apart from his son and daughter, also linked his son’s gender display to sexuality. He explained that he used to worry about his son’s sexuality “because being small and somewhat timid . . . when he was younger—and like I said, his stepfather was not very masculine—I worried about the softness and just hoping and praying that he’s straight [laughs].” Harley said he recently laid his fears to rest when his ex-wife demanded that he punish their son for trying to download heterosexual pornography. He described what happened the next time his son came to visit:

And then, you know, I’ve got—not adult magazines—but *FHM* [*For Him Magazine*] and car magazines that have girls in them and I leave them lying around because . . . well you know they’re fully covered. But my son had a little more curiosity. . . . I didn’t discipline him when he came to spend time with me, I left more of them out!

Clearly, Harley views his son’s recent interest in pornography as evidence of an interest in girls (i.e., heterosexuality) and as something he should cultivate further. Harley’s actions seem designed to both craft heterosexuality for his son and model his own hetero-masculinity by bonding with his son through the objectification of women. Several other fathers also indicated catching their sons downloading or viewing pornography and expressed tacit permission for this. Indeed, scholars observe that girl watching is a central way boys and men confirm masculinity within homosocial groups (e.g., Pascoe 2007; Quinn 2002). Harley also stated he did not want to reprimand his son for something he sees as “natural curiosity,” implying an interest in pornography is a normal sign of growing up. Yet some fathers did express concern about the consequences of their sons’ pornography use and said they attempt to curtail their access. According to Jimmy, “[The age of 14 is] too young to be looking at hardcore porn. . . . I think it sets unrealistic expectations.” Despite their reservations, however, these fathers also interpreted their sons’ interest in pornography as a rite of passage and a telltale sign of heterosexuality.

Only one father we interviewed spoke of having a son who is interested in gay pornography. Though Scott explained that when he was young he

learned about sex by watching heterosexual pornography, he expressed discomfort with his own son's interest in pornographic images of men having sex with other men. Scott heterosexualized his son's use of gay pornography, however, by stating that he does not think his son is excited by this kind of pornography but rather watches it because he is worried about the size of his penis and wants to see how he measures up. Illustrating the power of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), Scott simultaneously imposes and manages heterosexuality for his son, defining his consumption of gay pornography as educational—not unlike Scott's own use of pornography as a teenager.

Fathers whose sons had not yet dated seemed especially intent on modeling heterosexuality. Will, whose sons show no interest in dating, said he points out “pretty girls” to his sons: “I just point them out. Like a flower. ‘Say wow, son, come on now. Let’s tell the truth. You don’t think Janet Jackson or Halle Berry is. . . .’ So I let them understand, to not think it’s strange if this appetite tries to get into you.” Through encouraging his sons to participate in girl watching with him, Will normalizes and promotes heterosexuality—providing examples of women his sons should naturally desire and modeling his own heterosexual desire. Other fathers want their sons to wait to date until they are older and said they use their own life examples to reinforce this message. Bernie, who said he wants his teenage sons to be as heterosexual as possible, tells them,

“I wouldn’t even look at dating seriously right now. I wouldn’t even get involved right now.” I tell [them] about my experiences when I went to college . . . playing basketball, you start getting the attention of women and then you start going out and hanging out and the next thing you know, you’re failing out.

Kirk, who described his 15-year-old son as “shy” and “a late bloomer,” said, “I basically tell him the truth that, you know, I had sex with people prior to marriage . . . [but] that’s something that probably he should not do.” Yet, like Will’s encouragement, these stories also establish the fathers’ relational and sexual competence and presumably model these things for their sons.

An interesting tension emerges in the fathers’ accounts: Even while hoping for and encouraging heterosexuality in their sons, fathers base their lessons on a battle of the sexes paradigm that puts heterosexual relationships in an unfavorable light and suggests fathers do not view their sons as fully agentic, desiring sexual actors. Similar to the findings of previous research (Elliott 2010; Moore and Rosenthal 2006), these fathers presented their sons as innocent while casting their peers as sexually predatory.

However, fathers still look for “evidence” of heterosexuality. For fathers whose sons date girls, this seems obvious. Fathers who discourage dating, or whose sons show no interest in dating girls, see their role in crafting heterosexuality for their sons as *especially* important or rely on other evidence that establishes their sons as heterosexual.

### **“Protect Yourself, Guard Yourself, Guard Your Heart”: Fathers and Daughters**

Although many of the fathers indicated being only marginally involved in conveying sexual information to their children, fathers of daughters overwhelmingly informed us that mothers handle these conversations. Bob said, “I think it would have been embarrassing for me to say something. . . . I don’t know it that well what all you go through. So the mother had the conversations with her. I felt that she . . . has the experience and she seemed to be comfortable with it. . . .” Other fathers conveyed similar levels of discomfort with their teen daughter’s pubertal changes and sexuality. Greg explained that his 15-year-old stepdaughter’s appreciation for her breasts bothers him:

She’s . . . very vain. She’s aware that she has breasts. She’s very happy with her breasts. She annoys us with them. She likes to talk about them. . . . [And] you’ll come in the room and you’ll go, “Honey, let go of your boobs!” . . . I mean she’s not fondling herself, she’s just holding them. . . . She’s very proud of her breasts.

In line with social discourse and sex education curricula that elide and evade girls’ sexual desire (Fields 2008; Fine 1988; Garcia 2009; Tolman 1994), by defining his stepdaughter as vain Greg seemingly ignored any pleasure she might derive from touching herself intimately and in fact made a point to convey to the interviewer that she was not “fondling herself.” Instead, he externalized her self-touching in terms of pride in her breast size (and presumably attractiveness)—an explanation that may reconcile his daughter’s actions with normative conceptions of femininity and stands in contrast to fathers’ attempts to cultivate heterosexual desire in their sons.

Instead of talking about female sexuality during the infrequent conversations they have with their daughters, fathers said they focus on providing a male perspective on sex. Greg described his conversations with his daughters this way:

With my girls, what I’ve said was, “What are the guys thinking? You know how I know that? ’Cause I’m a guy. That’s what we think, you know. And

[other guys] weren't any different. So I'm just asking you to protect yourself, guard yourself, guard your heart."

Adam—a father of four daughters—echoed Greg:

I tried to give them a boy's perspective on how they look at young girls at that age. . . . [I told them,] "Here's what I did when I was 14 and 15 and I'm certain that little boys haven't changed. Here's what guys think and here's what they do and if you let them do this then they'll take advantage of you."

Overall, fathers stressed their daughters' sexual vulnerability and the need to protect their virtue. Charles said he tells his daughter, "Okay, honey, right now you have something that's valuable. Right? You have your sex. And the guys, they want it."

These descriptions appear to serve three purposes: First, they establish the fathers' own identities as normatively masculine and heterosexual. Second, they cast their daughters as heterosexual insofar as they assume their daughters need protection from heterosexual encounters with boys and define their daughters' sexuality as passive, vulnerable, and in need of saving—things stereotypically associated with female heterosexuality. Third, they reinforce the gender binary—demarcating "proper" performances of masculinity and femininity in hetero-relationships. To be sure, the myriad potentially negative consequences of sexual activity for girls in a sexist society (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009) shape these fathers' responses; but fathers did not link girls' sexual vulnerability to sexism, and their descriptions may reify girls' victim status. Indeed, Frank seemed ambivalent about his use of the discourse of sexually driven boys: "We've talked generally about sex and what boys want. Boys have an interest in, you know, sex and sexual conquests perhaps. I don't know, it wasn't quite that barbaric."

Although fathers described their lessons to their daughters using a heterosexual framework, they did not explicitly mention their daughters' sexual identity until prompted. Once asked, many fathers of daughters said they would accept, and two implied they encourage, homosexuality for their daughters. Charles responded to a question about sexual orientation by saying, "Well, no we've talked about that. In fact, I've told her, 'If you want to bring girls home, it's okay with me.'" Similarly, Joe described joking with his daughter about her best friend:

We also kid my daughter all the time about her close relationship with her friend that she plays hockey with. They are very close, very friendly, and very affectionate to one another, and so we joke with them about which

one's wearing the dress and which one's wearing the suit at the wedding. . . . And if it did turn out that she was gay, I don't think it would surprise me and it wouldn't really matter.

Of course, we do not know how Charles's and Joe's daughters respond to their comments. For instance, Joe's jokes could be seen as supportive or policing of his daughter's (already) gender-transgressive involvement in hockey.<sup>2</sup> Yet we note these comments largely because none of the fathers treated their sons' sexuality as a laughing matter.

Fathers less open than Charles and Joe to the idea that their daughters might be gay nevertheless did not express overwhelming disappointment about this possibility. However, these fathers often qualified their support with statements that called the legitimacy of teen lesbianism into question. Frank said he does not care whether or not his 16-year-old daughter is gay. Throughout the interview, however, he often returned to the following:

My daughter claims that a couple of her friends are lesbians. Maybe they are, maybe they aren't. I don't know. . . . Perhaps they are. . . . I'm indifferent about that but what I am concerned about is that it's kind of stylized, a little bit fake, probably not real, and that the kids do it to get attention.

Frank questioned the validity of his daughter's friends' lesbianism and heterosexualized it by echoing the notion that "women's sexuality is a direct consequence of men's desire," which helps render lesbian identities invisible (Hamilton 2007, 168). Indeed, he undermined his earlier supportive statements about his daughter's potential homosexuality later in his interview by stating he hopes his daughter would have some "substantive thought" before claiming to be gay. Like some of the more liberal fathers of sons, Frank used semantic moves to avoid sounding overtly homophobic. He projected an air of ambivalent acceptance of his daughter's friends' lesbianism but then rejected the legitimacy of homosexuality. Other fathers of daughters referred to homosexuality as a "lifestyle" that teenagers are too young to understand and participate in; yet no father suggested that a teen's heterosexual identity might be just a phase or something that requires serious consideration. Instead, like fathers of sons, these men positioned heterosexuality as the "natural or right" form of sexuality and "homosexuality as its binary opposite" (Valocchi 2005, 756).

Some fathers also suggested that their apparent acceptance of a lesbian identity for their daughters stems from their concerns about teen heterosexual relationships. These fathers (like the fathers of sons) did not paint a positive picture of heterosexual relationships. Joe, the father who teases his daughter about marrying her best friend, ended his discussion of whether

his daughter might be lesbian by saying, "It really doesn't matter if she is from the standpoint of my [advice]—'boys are mean, throw rocks at them'—she'll buy right into that. I'd feel a little safer to say that sort of jokingly." Similar to other fathers who provided their daughters with the "male perspective," Joe presented an essentialized view of boys centered on a fully realized version of masculinity steeped in heterosexual conquest. This version stands in stark contrast to fathers' depictions of their sons' sexual identities as vulnerable and in need of crafting. By viewing their daughters' sexuality through a heterosexual lens, these fathers do not seem to connect girls' same-sex activity to a fully realized homosexual identity (Hamilton 2007; Rupp and Taylor 2010). Their professed acceptance of lesbianism may thus stem from their belief that it is a phase or a fad some girls go through before permanently establishing heterosexual identities. Given that parents talk more often with children who share their biological sex (Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman 2002; McHale, Crouter, and Whiteman 2003; Walker 2001), fathers may also base their seeming acceptance on a sense that their daughters' sexual orientation does not reflect their own.

## DISCUSSION

The fathers in this study represent a select group: All volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences raising teenagers, thereby expressing an interest in and concern about the task of parenting. Yet consistently, many of the fathers described their role in family sexual communication as virtually nonexistent. This is not to say fathers think their children do not need this information—all of the fathers said their children should learn about puberty, relationships, and sex. Rather, most fathers we interviewed do not see it as their job to provide this information. Despite their reported noninvolvement, these heterosexual fathers' accounts shed light on fathers' feelings about their teen children's gender and sexual identities. They also elucidate the operations of heteronormativity. Our analyses reveal that while most of these fathers posit heterosexuality as either the preferable or more authentic sexual identity for their children, they do not simply assume their children are straight: Many actively promote heterosexuality for their sons and sexual passivity (associated with normative female heterosexuality) for their daughters. Thus, while fathers may treat sons and daughters differently, their expectations for "proper" behavior reinforce gender binaries and marginalize alternative sexual identities, potentially adding to the challenges and conflicts LGBT and

heterosexual youth face when navigating sexuality at school and at home (Fields 2008; Garcia 2009; Pascoe 2007; Schalet 2010).

Examining fathers' descriptions of their conversations about sexuality with their teen children contributes to the literature that frames gender and sexuality as a set of social practices rather than immutable traits (Connell 2005; Pascoe 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). The fathers see their sons' sexuality as something that must be coached and modeled (Kane 2006; McGuffey 2005) and engage in various strategies to craft masculine and heterosexual identities. Fathers' desire for heterosexuality seems to come from a sense that their sons' sexuality reflects their own, but they may also recognize that male dominance rests on heterosexuality and homophobia. A careful reading of the fathers' accounts suggests they have gained certain privileges and status through their enactments of heterosexuality—privileges they may both consciously and unconsciously wish for their sons.

The fathers of daughters did not articulate a sense of accountability for their daughters' sexual orientation, but they strongly expressed accountability for protecting their daughters from boys and sexual harm. Although fathers of sons also emphasized the risks of sex and said they warn their sons about "aggressive girls," fathers of daughters overwhelmingly said their conversations with their daughters focus on how girls must guard themselves from the hazards of relationships with boys and sexual intercourse. Yet fathers of daughters appeared somewhat more accepting of the possibility that their daughters are lesbian. Most fathers nevertheless qualified their acceptance with comments that called teen lesbianism into question. In doing so, they drew on the increasingly widespread notion that girls perform lesbian desire to attract boys (Hamilton 2007; Rupp and Taylor 2010). The belief that girls "might be the losers in both [heterosexual sex] and relationships" (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009, 591) also shapes fathers' tepid acceptance of homosexuality for their daughters. Fathers overwhelmingly constructed their daughters' sexuality as passive and imperiled, and no father described his daughter as a sexually desiring subject. Perhaps this narrative is impossible given that fathers see their role in relation to their daughters' sexuality as defender and protector.

Taken together, fathers' constructions of their teen children's sexualities reflect the current state of gender and sexual hierarchies: Masculinity remains dominant and privileged, but that dominance relies on heterosexuality. With femininity subordinate and devalued, girls and women have more leeway for varied gender and sexual expression, as long as they do not challenge heterosexual male privilege. Yet despite tending to prefer heterosexuality for their children, overall fathers characterized teen heterosexual

relationships quite negatively. There was no “idealization of heterosexual romance” (Rich 1980, 638-39) in these fathers’ narratives. Instead, fathers described their teen children as vulnerable and potential victims in heterosexual relationships and said they encourage them to wait until they are older to date or get serious.

This negative characterization of teen heterosexuality sets up an interesting tension for fathers who nonetheless want their sons to be heterosexual. Fathers whose sons do not date girls see their own role in crafting heterosexuality for their sons as particularly important. They also described using various indicators, such as a normatively masculine gender display or an interest in pornography, as evidence that their sons are heterosexual. Much pornography is highly degrading to women, misogynistic, and racist, however, potentially giving those who consume it distorted perceptions of heterosexual sex and relationships (Dines 2010). Thus, fathers’ tacit permission of their sons’ consumption of pornography may bolster the gender (and racial) order. Future research should examine other ways parents find “evidence” of heterosexuality in their children as well as their consequences.

While recognizing our contributions to the literature, we also note some limitations. First, our small and relatively homogeneous sample does not allow for generalizations, but it does provide insight into the links between gender and sexuality. Future research should attempt to solicit a more diverse sample, including fathers of varying races/ethnicities, ages, economic backgrounds, and geographic locations as well as those who identify as gay, bisexual, or queer. In addition, our sample mainly consists of married or cohabitating fathers; the few divorced and non-cohabitating fathers we interviewed indicated that living away from their sons increases their concerns about their sons’ sexual identities. Future research should examine how non-cohabitating fathers of sons conceive of their role in crafting their sons’ sexuality. Researchers should also examine how teenagers themselves make sense of their father’s role in family sexual communication. At present, our research sheds light on only part of the story; teenagers may have very different interpretations of their father’s sexual lessons.

Despite these limitations, our analyses add complexity to the processes of heteronormativity and how gender and sexuality intertwine. Our findings support scholars’ contention that heterosexuality is an important component of masculinity and male dominance. Fathers compulsively (Pascoe 2007) establish their own heterosexuality and heterosexual prowess during the course of their conversations with their children and presume and prefer that their children—particularly their sons—be heterosexual. We have mixed evidence for the links between heterosexuality and femininity in

these fathers' accounts, however. Fathers of daughters appeared more accepting of lesbian daughters—potentially allowing for the increased legitimacy of lesbianism. Nevertheless, the fathers did not recognize their daughters' potential or imagined lesbianism in a thick sense—as something real, desired, and pleasurable. Rich (1980, 647) argues that one way women may be forced into heterosexual relationships is through “the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility.” Our analysis suggests that lesbian identity may be more visible to fathers and certainly appears more acceptable than having gay sons, but this does not necessarily translate into fathers' wholehearted embrace of lesbianism as a legitimate sexual identity for their daughters. Thus, while fathers may have different (gendered) understandings of their children's sexuality, their sexual lessons to both sons and daughters ultimately privilege heterosexuality and reinforce gender binaries. However, the fact that many of these fathers have at least considered the possibility of homosexuality for their children is perhaps grounds for optimism. Fathers' understandings reflect important progressive social changes in recent decades around both gender and sexuality—even as they also reveal the processes that reproduce persistent gender and sexual inequalities.

## NOTES

1. Interview guides were semistructured to help ensure both researchers covered similar material during the interviews.
2. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this helpful observation.

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