A Minority within a Minority?
Negotiating normativities in lesbian and gay parents’ small stories

This article is currently under review.

Abstract

This article considers how three lesbian and gay parents negotiate normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family. The analysis focuses on the ‘small stories’ (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2007) told by these parents in an interview context, using a three-level positioning framework (Bamberg, 2004; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Deppermann, 2013) to identify and unravel their multiple layers of self-positioning, both in relation to others, and in relation to wider social norms. The findings reveal that these parents are at times positioned in a liminal space between multiple and intersecting normative discourses, which can lead to conflict as they work to position themselves as a partner, parent, gay man or lesbian woman. Findings also suggest that everyday encounters are important sites for the (re)constitution of such normative discourses, and that the small stories parents tell about these encounters can be important resources for making sense of their lives in relation to broader social norms and structures.

Introduction

This article aims to explore some of the ways in which lesbian and gay parents negotiate normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family through their telling of ‘small stories’ (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2007) in an interview context. This aim is driven, in keeping with recent directions in queer linguistics, by a commitment to critically analysing the construction and operation of multiple normative discourses in local contexts (Hall, 2013; Motschenbacher, 2018). The specific context of lesbian and gay parenthood, which is underexplored in the queer linguistic field, is of interest in this respect because both hetero- and queer- normative discourses have the potential to converge in the construction of non-traditional family structures. In the analysis and discussion that follows, I therefore attend to the ways in which different normative structures can constrain or enable lesbian and gay parents’ access to a range of intelligible subject positions, such as partner, parent, gay man and lesbian woman.

Following Foucault (1972, 1978), discourses are defined in this article as practices, norms and structures that regulate ‘our sense of who we are, what we know and the power to define that knowledge and subjectivity’ (Mackenzie, 2019: 10). In keeping with Foucauldian principles, the relations between knowledge, power and subjectivity are conceptualised as multiple and competing. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that some discourses are more stable than others, such as those that have become synonymous with popular concepts of what is ‘everyday’ or ‘normal’. Such discourses are often described as ‘dominant’ (Baxter, 2003; Mackenzie, 2019), because they take precedence over other more marginalised discourses,
or ‘normative’ (Motschenbacher, 2018), since their naturalisation as ‘normal’ and ‘obvious’ is central to their dominant and widely unquestioned status.

The term ‘normative’ is useful here because it accentuates the normalising influence of discourses like heteronormativity and gender differentiation, which are central to the constitution and regulation of time-honoured social constructs such as family. However, many queer linguists (e.g. Hall, 2013; Koller, 2013) have contested oppositional queer politics that position powerful global normativities (especially heteronormativity) against marginal local practices, stressing the point that non-heterosexual discourses can also produce their own normativities. This perspective is aligned with the Foucauldian concept of power as an unstable and multi-faceted force, whereby relatively powerful/powerless or dominant/marginalised practices, norms and structures constantly shift in relation to one another (Foucault, 1978). Accordingly, this article aims to identify and deconstruct the range of normative discourses at play in lesbian and gay parents’ interview talk. I consider how these discourses operate individually, but also how they overlap, intersect and compete in different ways for different lesbian and gay parents, taking account of factors such as their age, gender, family circumstances and social networks.

**Gender, sexuality, family and normativity**

Heteronormativity, defined by Cameron and Kulick (2003: 55) as ‘those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote and produce heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged and necessary’, has special relevance for the normative spheres of gender, sexuality and the family. The pervasive and often insidious influence of heteronormativity in people’s everyday lives and talk has been demonstrated effectively in the interactional and conversation analytical research of Kitzinger (2005a, 2005b) and Ericsson (2008, 2011), who have shown how heterosexuality functions as a taken-for-granted resource in the everyday interactions of heterosexual people in the UK, US and Sweden. Both authors illustrate some of the ways in which speakers casually display their heterosexuality (and presume the heterosexuality of others) through, for example, routine use of pronoun and reference forms (such as ‘she’, ‘husband’, or ‘the missus’), topic talk about heterosexual activities, and heterosexual joking and teasing. The widespread privileging of heterosexuality, they suggest, means mundane conversations that are unproblematic and unmarked for heterosexual people may become sites of conflict or difficulty for non-heterosexual individuals.

Whilst heteronormativity certainly has a special kind of power on a relatively global scale, it does not hold universal sway. Indeed, heteronormativity may compete or intersect with multiple discourses of sexual normativity. Such discourses may be ‘queer’, in that they do not privilege heterosexuality and gender normativity (in keeping with a broad, positive definition of queer; see Motschenbacher and Stegu, 2013), yet still draw on or rework aspects of heteronormativity. In addition, non-heteronormative discourses will still produce their own norms, positioning certain forms of knowledge and subjectivity (e.g. that lesbian women take up stereotypically ‘masculine’ behaviours) as more legitimate, or authentic,
than others. Two well-documented normative discourses of sexuality that have particular relevance here are gay normativity and lesbian normativity. Neither of these discourses are fixed or stable; nevertheless, sociolinguists have shown how some versions of gay and lesbian normativity are constructed in context, for example through narratives-in-interaction (Levon, 2014; Shrikant, 2014), textual or multimodal representations (Cashman, 2019; Koller, 2013) and online advice, dating and hook-up sites (Adams-Thies, 2019; Bailey, 2019).

Sociolinguistic analyses of conversations amongst lesbian friends (Jones, 2012; Morrish and Sauntson, 2007; Shrikant, 2014) have offered valuable illustrations of some ways in which lesbian identities can be constructed in opposition with heterosexual identities, and the central role of gender norms in these oppositions. For example, Jones’ (2012) analysis of conversations within a lesbian hiking group shows that the subject position ‘girl’ is tied to heterosexual femininity in this context. The oppositional ‘dyke’ (which is situated as a more authentic lesbian subject position) is constructed as a direct transgression, or rejection, of the stereotypes associated with ‘girls’ and ‘girliness’. Morrish and Sauntson (2007) found similar oppositional constructions in their analysis of lesbian friends’ conversations. In these groups of women, typically in their 50s, the rejection of gender norms functions as a key resource by which they position themselves as ‘authentic’ lesbians. Some specific resources that are taken up in these contexts include the rejection of practices associated with heterosexual femininity such as wearing skirts, make-up and ornate underwear, doing the ironing, having children and liking ‘girly’ toys. Conversely, practices that transgress such ‘girly’ norms include wearing loose clothing, having short hair or a muscular physique, liking ‘boys’ toys, owning cats, being sexually confident, and never having slept with a man. Overall, these studies offer strong support for the claim that discourses of gender differentiation and sexual normativity are closely interrelated, and that constructions of sexual identities often rely on indices of gender as key terms of reference (see Cameron and Kulick, 2003; Motschenbacher, 2018).

Recent work has shown that many younger lesbian and gay people reject the kinds of oppositional norms identified in the talk of these older lesbian friends, constructing their identities in ways that minimise their difference from heteronormative ideals. Jones’ (2018) work with a teenage LGBT youth group in the North of England, and Levon’s (2014) work with Israeli gay male activists in their 20s and 30s, for example, illustrates the operation of a third, homonormative discourse. This ‘new’ homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) positions gay and lesbian people as integrated, ‘normal’ citizens, whose lives are assimilated with heterosexual norms such as being ‘gender conventional’, linking ‘sex to love and a marriage-like relationship’ and defending ‘family values’ (Seidman, 2002: 133). As with all discourses, homonormativity may take different shapes and merge with other discourses, depending on context. For example, a version of homonormativity that is intertwined with Israeli national ideals is evident in the coming-out stories of Levon’s (2014: 139) participants, who work to position their lives in ways that are ‘compatible with the standard Israeli models of gender and the nation’. Similarly, Jones (2018: 64) shows that her young gay and lesbian participants frequently position themselves as ordinary or ‘normal’, rejecting ‘cultural stereotypes associated with gay identities’. Whilst Levon’s participants tend to embrace the acceptance and assimilation of their sexual identities in cosmopolitan parts of Israel,
however, Jones (2018) suggests that her participants’ homonormative constructions are more of a ‘survival strategy’ that reflects desired rather than actual assimilation in their Northern English, conservative, working-class community.

Constructing the ‘normal’ family

The heterosexual, biological, two-parent family continues to be constructed as the most ‘natural’ family form, and the best option for children’s well-being and development (Correia and Broderick, 2009; Golombok, 2015). Linguistic research has illuminated some of the ways in which these limiting norms are (re)produced and sustained through a powerful discursive matrix of gender difference, heteronormativity and biological essentialism. Kitzinger (2005a: 493), for example, shows that ‘family’ is constructed as ‘compris[ing] wife and husband, co-resident with their biologically related, dependent children’ in UK calls to an out-of-hours doctor. In below-the-line comments about LGBT adoption in two centre-right, socially conservative UK newspapers, Sokalska-Bennett (2017) has shown, similarly, that the mother and father unit, who produce children through heterosexual procreation, is central to the construction of the normative, ‘legitimate’ family. Further, the authors of these comments emphasise the importance of feminine and masculine role models in the successful upbringing of children, elevating the status of normative gender roles in ideals of ‘good’ parenting. These studies show that the heterosexual nuclear family is (re)constituted, legitimised and normalised not only through explicit moral judgements in a conservative context, but also through taken-for-granted assumptions in mundane, everyday activities and interactions.

The persistence of normative, hetero-biological ideals has damaging implications for families who fall outside of the dominant model. Same-sex parents, for example, are often depicted as dangerous, incompetent, and damaging for children (Goldberg, 2012; Jones et al., 2017). Gay male parents, in particular, may be faced with the double discrimination of homophobia and sexism because of the widely-held assumption that women are vital, and better suited, to child raising (Goldberg, 2012; Golombok, 2015). Queer normative discourses can also contribute to the delegitimisation of queer parenthood (Gianino, 2008; Mamo, 2007). The normative concept that ‘real lesbians don’t have kids’, for example, left many of Mamo’s (2007: 60) lesbian participants struggling ‘to reconcile the idea of motherhood with a deeply held self-concept’. This is not surprising in light of the above discussion about ‘authentic’ lesbian subjectivity, which can be constructed in opposition with (hetero)normative femininity. Heteronormative femininity, in turn, is tied to motherhood through its conflation with caregiving ideals such as nurture, sensitivity, warmth and self-sacrifice (Bem, 1993; Rich, 1986; Mackenzie, 2017, 2019). In terms of gay and lesbian parents’ day-to-day lives, these conflicting norms can have a number of effects. For example, they may experience increased presumptions of heterosexuality, as well as more situations where they feel the need to ‘come out’ to new people (Goldberg, 2012). Many gay and lesbian parents have also reported a backgrounding of their sexual identities when they become parents (Brown et al., 2009; Gianino, 2008).
Overall, existing research suggests that for lesbian and gay parents, competing and contested normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family can form an uneasy convergence, giving rise to multiple sites of conflict, stigma and discrimination. However, gay and lesbian parenthood can also engender the reconceptualization of family itself, as seen in Gabb (2005) and Wagner’s (2014) research. The children in Gabb’s UK (2005) study of lesbian parent families, for example, constructed families in terms of processes rather than fixed roles, and the lesbian and gay parents who took part in Wagner’s (2014) U.S. research emphasised the relevance of actions and emotions in their definitions of family. This emphasis on process contrasts with the reliance on traditional and fixed notions of essential biological sex, procreation and heterosexual morality in heteronormative constructions of family (e.g. Sokalska-Bennett, 2017). Such findings lead Wagner (2014) to suggest that gay and lesbian parents’ negotiations of what constitutes ‘normal’ family are part of a larger shift in the prototype of family (also see Goldberg, 2012; Mamo, 2007). In sum, whilst the convergence of oppositional discourses can lead to discrimination and conflict, lesbian and gay parenthood has the potential to emerge as a site where intersecting normative constraints around gender, sexuality and biology are dismantled, and the very concept of ‘family’ transformed.

The participants and their stories

This article is based on a UK study that explores the role digital media can play in the lives of nine single and/or LGB (lesbian, gay or bisexual) parents who used adoption, donor conception, surrogacy or co-parenting arrangements to bring children in to their lives. This study was shaped and guided by the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz’s popular reframing of traditional grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) rejects the search for objective representations of reality and resists mechanical applications of narrowly defined methods, but retains grounded theory’s original focus on building robust, data-driven theory through concurrent data collection, theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis. Accordingly, data collection and analysis began early in the project, and the direction of further research and data collection was guided by the ongoing development of analysis and theory. Through this iterative approach, I worked to build explanatory theory that would shed light on the lives, experiences and digital practices of these single and LGB parents. The theoretical strand explored in this article forms an important part of my broader theorising around the ways in which participants work to redefine the family.

I recruited and began to interview participants early in the project’s development, conducting three interviews with each parent over a period of 11 months. In keeping with the grounded theory tradition of flexible and data-driven research, I adopted an open-ended, participant-focused interview style. I invited each parent to choose the interview location, based on comfort and convenience, and as a result, 25 of the 27 interviews (including all those explored in this article) took place in participants’ homes. I took one central, open question to each interview, as well as some more specific questions in reserve. In some cases (especially the first interview), the reserve questions were not needed, only
follow-up and elaboration questions based on the direction of participants’ talk. By taking this flexible approach, I made space for participants to control the agenda to some degree, and reveal what aspects of their lives and practices were most important to them. Each interview was transcribed, then coded according to the grounded theory practice of assigning descriptive labels to each line of text. My questions became more specific as we moved through the interviews, and I pursued particular lines of enquiry that had become salient through the coding process. The focus, core question and timeframe for each set of interviews were as follows:

Interview 1: ‘tell me about your family’ – participants’ family lives, experiences and support channels (December 2018 – January 2019)

Interview 2: ‘show me your digital life’ – participants’ use of digital technology to connect with others, including demonstrations (April – May 2019)

Interview 3: ‘how do you describe your family and support networks?’ including diagrammatic visualisation of these networks (September – October 2019)

This article focuses on interview data from the three lesbian and gay parents who took part in this study: Peter, a 29-year-old gay man who has a daughter of pre-school age with his partner; Anna, a 41-year-old single lesbian woman with two children of primary school age, and Tony, a 54-year-old single gay man with two secondary-school age sons. All three participants are White, European and cisgender, and live in the Midlands or North of England. Each of these parents brought children in to their lives in quite different ways: in Peter’s case, with the assistance of an egg donor and gestational surrogate, whilst Anna adopted her children with her now ex-partner, and Tony formed a co-parenting agreement with a lesbian couple.

The following section presents micro-linguistic analyses of Peter and Anna’s third, and Tony’s first interview, focusing on moments where they reflect on their sense of self in relation to broader social structures, especially categories such as ‘parent’, ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’. At each of these moments, participants include non-elicited stories in their talk. The frequency of stories in these interviews is not surprising - after all, it has been well documented that narratives perform an important social and interactional function, and are ‘powerful resources for positioning’ (Deppermann, 2013: 67; also see Bamberg, 2004; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008). As Deppermann explains, stories allow tellers to position themselves at multiple levels, for example in the story world itself, as well as in the way they tell it. Stories are therefore likely to be useful tools when participants reflect on their sense of self in relation to multiple, and potentially competing, social structures.

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1 These details were correct at the mid-point of data collection, May 1st 2019. The sexual identity categories employed here are based on those used by participants in the initial questionnaire, though Anna also referred to herself as gay, and Tony also referred to himself as queer, in the interviews.
In an attempt to identify and unravel the multiple layers of positioning that are possible through storytelling, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (Bamberg, 2004; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008) have developed a model that distinguishes three levels of positioning in narratives-in-interaction. Depperman’s (2013) summary of this model is adapted in Figure 1 for the current analytical context. My primary alteration concerns a change (at ‘level 3’) from conceptualising ‘larger social structures’ as ‘master narratives or dominant discourses’, to the more general ‘normative discourses’. This shift acknowledges the relevance of local, as well as more global, structures and norms in participants’ talk and lives.

**Figure 1. Three-level approach to positioning in narratives-in-interaction (adapted from Depperman, 2013: 64-65).**

Level 1: positioning of characters (including the speaker) in the story world,

Level 2: interactive positioning in the here and now of the interview,

Level 3: locating the self in relation to larger social structures, especially normative discourses.

The stories participants tell in our interviews are categorised as ‘small’ both because they tend to be short and fragmented, and because they attend to ‘micro, fleeting aspects of lived experience’ (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 379). They are unlike the ‘big’, self-contained retellings of past events that are found in traditional narrative research (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Instead, small stories form a part and function of everyday interaction, and as such are ‘enmeshed in [their] local surroundings’, and may occur ‘before and after other discourse activities’ (Georgakopoulou, 2007: 65). Like ‘big’ narratives, they include reference to some kind of event, situation or experience, but these are not limited to retellings of past events; rather, they can include ‘tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events’, as well as ‘allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell’ (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 381). ‘Characters’ also play an important role in small stories (bearing in mind the teller themselves may be a character in the story), and attention to this role will be an important part of the analysis that follows.

**Analysis**

**Language troubles: Peter**

When we first met, Peter, a 29-year old gay father, told me he’d had an ‘easy time of being gay’ and experienced very little discrimination. He explained that he rarely thought about his sexuality and hadn’t felt the need to seek out LGBT+ friends, partly because he already had a close, trusted network of (largely heterosexual) friends and family. When I asked about his sense of self as a gay parent, he replied that he wouldn’t ‘think to use that label’. The excerpts below are taken from a twelve-minute section near the beginning of the third interview, where we returned to the theme of being a gay parent. This talk was prompted
by my question ‘what kind of language do you use to describe your family?’ Peter’s audible groan, the pause before he says the words ‘[I’]m gay’, his dropping of the ‘[I’] pronoun, and the laughter that follows (lines 1-2), all consolidate the impression that finding the words to explain his sexuality and family is a source of frustration and conflict, both for Peter and his partner Malc. As he works to explain this struggle, Peter recalls an encounter in which an acquaintance, Jack, presumed he was both heterosexual and married (Extract 1).

**Extract 1. ‘struggling to find language’**

1 P (groans) e::rm (.) I don't have anything particularly succinct and to be honest
2 I find it hard enough finding language to just say that (0.8) m gay @[@@@@ ]
3 J [yeah really]
4 P  erm yea:h I erm I mean gosh I was (0.5) singing with someone (0.5) I think a while
5 ago and (.) he said oh what's your wife do: (.) and oh god I just sort've fumbled
6 around for language to sort've say (.) oh well this is (.) that's (.) y'know >and it was
7 was just so ridiculous< because (.) y'know (.) *Jack's just gonna have absolutely n
8 y'know wasn't even gonna* (.) blink at it
9 J [mmhmm]
10 P [like ] it just was so not like an issue but (.) the language is a- and I guess that's
11 because. (.) e:rm: (1.5) I think (2) Malc *has struggled with finding (.) language*
12 for his sexu[ality ]
13 J [mmm]
14 P and so that's sort've filtered through (.)
15 J oh [ok ]
16 P [e:rm] to h. (.) er me having language around our (.) relationship

In this small story, Peter focuses on his struggle to adequately express himself. He positions himself as incompetent and clumsy, both at level 1 (within the story world) and level 2 (within the here-and-now of the interview). His talk is peppered with fillers, hedges, hesitation, repetition and exclamations (‘gosh’; ‘oh god’), framing the account as an uncomfortable one for Peter to recall. When explaining his unease, Peter’s references to language (lines 6 and 10), together with evaluative lexical choices that position him as clumsy with, and embarrassed about, this language (‘fumbled’, line 5; ‘ridiculous’, line 7), show that his discomfort centres on not having easy access to words that would explain his relationship and family. His repetition of ‘just’ (line 7) emphasises his frustration, apparently with himself, for finding the situation difficult. Peter’s struggle to correct his acquaintance is made further apparent through his use of the deictic markers ‘this is’ and ‘that’s’, followed both times by a micropause (line 6). Both clauses are left incomplete, with no disambiguation of the referent, making it clear that even in revisiting the moment for my benefit, Peter is still unable to find words that specify his relationship with his partner. These references to and negotiations of language function as an important mechanism for Peter’s self-positioning, not only in the story and interview contexts (level 1 and 2), but also in relation to wider social structures (level 3). Indeed, ‘language’ might be interpreted here as a symbolic resource, which both represents, and is a vehicle for, his struggle between the heteronorms that position him as other and his desire not to be seen as different. Peter’s rejection of identity labels echoes the words used by some of Jones’ (2018: 61) young LGBT
participants, one of whom reveals that she hates ‘labels’ such as lesbian or dyke, preferring to describe herself as ‘normal, like everybody else’. As the youngest of my participants, who has had positive experiences of acceptance, Peter may be in a particularly strong position to embrace the homonormative position of an integrated, ‘normal’ citizen.

Shortly after this initial story of linguistic struggle, Peter tells two small stories about encounters with others where the words to describe his family come more easily. In both cases, he suggests that the ideal expression of his relationship and family would utilise simple or traditional language. In the second story (Extract 2), Peter recalls an encounter with an unknown man, shortly after his daughter was born. The third story (Extract 3), a generalised telling of how he names his partner, seems to be prompted by Peter’s reflections on his desire to get married because, as he told me, ‘then some traditional words would fit’. The theme of marriage is complex and fraught in Peter’s case because he and his partner are Christians, but as a same-sex couple are currently unable to marry in Church.

**Extract 2. ‘it’s just us’**

1 P I suppose how I'm descri- I mean (0.5) my instincts (0.3) to describe it when we
2 were first asked h. is when Lu was a f- couple of weeks old (.) and we were still in the
3 states (.) a:nd hh. some bloke x >we were walking down the street we were living
4 on< and *some bloke shouted across oh where's the mother*
5 J mmhhm
6 P (0.5) I think I've told you this
7 J yeah [you did]
8 P [erm and] I said erm oh it's j- it's just us (.) and that's xp. I think basically how I
9 >see it so it's like< o:h we're just (0.3) two ^dads^ that's it yeah

**Extract 3. ‘I've just said we're married’**

1 P e:rm (.) so yeah I think because we talk about that I can't say my husband although
2 actually in s I have sometimes h. for people that (.) I don't know very well and I know
3 I'm not g going to @get to know@ I've just said we're married. because it's just
4 [so much]
5 J [yeah ]
6 P easier b sometimes d sometimes people >just assume you are< anyway
7 J mmm
8 P so (.) that (.) i it just says oh (.) my husband (.) that just ties everything up?

In Extract 2, Peter tells the second story in which a character makes a heteronormative presumption. This stranger, in asking ‘where’s the mother’ (line 4), draws on a normative discourse of gendered parenthood that has particular relevance for Peter, the only one of my participants whose child does not have a mother. Peter seems to have been particularly affected by this incident (he mentions it twice over the course of our interviews). Whilst he doesn’t explicitly say that he felt delegitimised by the question, his reported response works to justify his existence as one of two same-sex fathers. In this response, Peter both explains the absence of a mother and names his family using the relational identifying clause ‘it’s just us’ (line 8). In this self-referential construction, Peter names his family unit without using a lexical noun or category (what he might call a ‘label’). In this way, he positions his family as
both unique, because he implies they cannot be adequately named using a generic term, yet also unremarkable, since any family could use the non-specific pronoun ‘us’ to name themselves. He then adds ‘we’re just two dads that’s it’ (line 9), specifying the referent for the pronoun ‘us’, but continuing to emphasise the unremarkability of his family unit through the repetition of ‘just’, modification of his position with the qualifier ‘basically’ (line 8), and by closing with the simple, bald statement ‘that’s it’.

In the third small story (Extract 3), Peter uses the category ‘husband’ (lines 1 and 8), as well as referring to marriage (line 3), even though he and his partner are not legally married. In contrast with his self-positioning as incompetent and clumsy in the first story, here he positions himself (at levels 1 and 2) as more comfortable and confident. For example, the statements ‘I’ve just said we’re married’ (line 3), and ‘oh my husband that just ties everything up’ (line 8), are comparatively direct and unmitigated, with a lack of hedging and hesitation. The ease with which he takes up the language of marriage suggests that Peter is far more comfortable positioning himself and his family (at level 3) within a discourse of homonormativity. His use of a knot metaphor (things being ‘tied up’), like the naming of his family as ‘just us’ in the second story, further suggests that Peter prefers to take up unremarkable and unmarked positions for himself and his family. Peter’s inability to access marriage (in a church) on equal terms with opposite-sex couples, however, complicates his ability to straightforwardly take up an assimilated position in relation to a wider heteronormative society.

Visibility: Anna

Like Peter, Anna, a 41-year old adoptive mother, suggested from our first meeting that she did not think about her sexuality very much, adding that it generally only became relevant when she felt the need to ‘come out’ to new people. In the third interview, I asked Anna about the language she used to describe her family, which led us to revisit this theme. This section explores the discussion that followed, focusing on a six-minute segment near the beginning of the interview. I start by analysing a small story from this segment, which Anna tells as part of her reflections on the concept of ‘ordinariness’ (Extract 4). This story involves a generalised telling about what ‘people’ tend to assume about her family when they meet.

Extract 4. ‘an ordinary family’

1 A  the assumption n is that you're an ordinary family and you're [the ]
2 J [yeah]
3 A  tr kinda just the assumption of () kinda meeting people is: there's the assumption
4 that () you've been pregnant you've given birth=
5 J =mmm=
6 A  =you've got husband at home
7 you've got this and the other h. (0.3) and then there is the h. but I don't think I have
8 the kinda (0.8) a way of () e describing it or or kinda easy (0.8) a I don't think I have
9 a a label how I explain=
10 J =mmm=
11 A  =our family (0.3) and it is even with the kinda (1.5) like
12 I'm a s xxx. I'm a single parent but I'm (.) a co-parent and=
In this story, Anna brings converging discourses of heteronormativity, gendered parenthood and biological essentialism into play through other characters, who make the leap from what they see (Anna caring for her child) to the assumption that she is heterosexual, married (‘you’ve got husband at home’, line 6), and also that ‘you’ve been pregnant you’ve given birth’ (line 4). This echoes Peter’s recollection of others’ presumptions in Extracts 1 and 2 (‘what’s your wife do’/‘where’s the mother’). A third discourse of biological essentialism may be particularly relevant to Anna as a woman, who is expected not just to have a genetic link to her children, but to have experienced heightened and highly visible biological connection through the processes of pregnancy and birth. In Anna’s story, as in Peter’s, level 3 positioning via level 1 positioning works to distance her from the normative discourses that produce the ‘ordinary’ nuclear family, and suggests that these discourses operate primarily through others’ impositions and assumptions. Such assumptions have the effect of forcing Anna, like Peter, to choose whether or not to offer a correction.

Anna explains the temptation not to correct normative presumptions in the interlude after this story (lines 7 to 29), where she suggests that the explanation would not be straightforward. Anna’s communicative difficulty when considering how to correct people is evident in the hesitation, false starts, repetition and hedging between lines 7 and 9. As with Peter, Anna’s struggle to escape the matrix of normative discourses that produce the ‘ordinary’ family is manifested here in a lack of access to the words that would constitute such a correction. As she works to identify the language she might use, she finds that even the ‘label[s]’, or ‘terminology’, that are available to her, such as ‘single parent’ and ‘co-parent’ (line 12), are inadequate to express the complexity of her intersecting positions as a single, gay, adoptive co-parent.

After telling an illustrative story about a trip to the optician, Anna begins to negotiate the possibility of positioning herself within an ‘LGBT family’ (Extract 5, lines 1-2). Her ambivalent alignment with this subject position is evident from her use of the affective verb phrase ‘feel
like’ rather than the simple copula ‘am/are’, the hedging pre-modifiers ‘I suppose’ and ‘it’s kinda’, and the multiple pauses and false starts before she arrives at the words ‘LGBT family’. When she says that her family’s claim to an ‘LGBT’ identity doesn’t ‘come out anywhere’, Anna suggests that any more confident self-positioning would be predicated on greater visibility. She then elaborates on the relevance of appearing to be gay through the introduction of, and comparison with, ‘a friend who’s a… gay single mum’. There is no specific story tied to this friend, but she has an important function as a symbolic character that allows Anna to situate herself beyond the immediate context, both in relation to others (level 1 positioning) and in relation to wider social structures (level 3 positioning).

**Extract 5. ‘more visibly gay’**

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1 A >I suppose< it's kinda I'm (2.5) if (0.5) I feel like (0.8) an LGBT family but I don't
2 think it's (0.5) it kinda comes out anywhere=
3 J =mmm=
4 A =which is interesting cos I've got
5 a a friend who's a (.) a gay single mum (.) a solo mum and (1) she's always been (0.5)
6 and and that's kinda always that she's er hey (.) Sylvie (to cat) erm (.) that she (.) she
7 and her daughter are a (.) LGBT family

(24 seconds of omitted talk about Anna’s cats)
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When introducing her friend, Anna’s bald, unmitigated statement ‘she and her daughter are a (.) LGBT family’ (lines 6-7) suggests that she sees them, unlike herself, as having a clear, legitimate claim to the subject position ‘LGBT family’. The oppositional positioning of herself in line with gender norms (‘traditionally… feminine looking’, line 15), but her friend as transgressing gender norms (‘more (.) masculine or more (.) gender neutral looking’, lines 17-19), adds to Anna’s suggestion that she doesn’t feel able to position her own family as straightforwardly LGBT, at least in part, because she doesn’t look gay. It therefore becomes clear, at this point, that queer norms around being ‘visibly’ LGBT restrict Anna’s access to an authentic lesbian subject position, whilst dominant hetero-biological norms restrict her access to a ‘normative’ family sphere.

**A minority within a minority: Tony**
About halfway through my first interview with Tony, a 54-year old gay father, I asked about his sense of self as a gay parent. Tony had already mentioned that as a young gay man, he’d assumed he would never have children. This is not surprising, given that it has only become more common for gay men to have children outside of heterosexual relationships in recent years, and given that Tony realised his sexuality at a time when being gay necessitated the rejection of heteronorms.

As he explores his experiences, Tony introduces the fae revolutionaries, a queer counter-cultural movement that he describes as diverse, open and accepting. Tony explained over the course of our interviews that he felt very comfortable in this community, and connected with its members regularly. As Tony talks about his place within this community, however, he tells a small story about his first experience of a revolutionary ‘gathering’ that suggests he didn’t always feel so at home there (Extract 6).

Extract 6. ‘a kind of coming out’

1 T the very first time I went to a gathering (0.8) I didn't talk about being a parent at all I
2  kind've
3 J mmm
4 T it felt like h. I was very much (1) that I was a minority (0.8) [there]
5 J [yeah]
6 T within that mi[nority]
7 J [mmm]
8 T and so (.) and (2) and it's not that I y'know (.) I don't care (.) if people think I'm: (.)
9 divorced people think I've had a a wife or a female partner and (.) then discovered I
10 was gay I actually don't (0.5) it doesn't bother me that people might think that even
11 though
12 J yeah
13 T you know I was gay (0.8) *came out when I was 22* never really had a girlfriend and
14 (1) and all that in terms of gay @credentials@ [@[@@]
15 J [@@[@@]
16 T ↑oh no no↑ I'm a proper @homo[sexual@ @@]@@
17 J [@@@@ ]
18 T erm (2.5) but for some reason I just it just felt really strange and awkward to talk
19 about hh. erm (0.5) I mean I have done (0.5) subsequently
20 J [mmm]
21 T [but ] it it felt again I suppose it felt like a kind of coming out

In this small story, Tony takes up an ambivalent (level 3) position in relation to queer norms, through the suggestion that being a father initially felt like a transgression of norms in the fae revolutionary community. Tony’s emphatic, unmitigated statement ‘I didn’t talk about being a parent at all’ (line 1) makes it clear that, at least initially, he tightly controlled his self-presentation in this context, withholding any reference to his children or parental status. He later says that sharing such information would have ‘felt really strange and awkward’ (line 18), emphasising this discomfort through the intensifier ‘really’, repetition of ‘just’, and elongation of the word ‘strange’. Tony further reflects on his position as a parent within a queer community through comparison with the process of ‘coming out’ (line 21), which adds to the point that Tony initially experienced his parental status as a marked transgression of queer norms. The reasons for his discomfort and sense of otherness are
alluded to between lines 8 and 10, and clarified in other interviews, where he explains that identifying himself as a father has often led people to presume he’s had a heterosexual relationship in the past. It would therefore seem that Tony is very aware of parenthood’s entanglement with heteronormative discourses, and that this initially affected his sense of legitimacy within a queer community.

In the section transcribed between lines 8 and 16, Tony returns to the here-and-now of the interview, countering his problematic position as both queer and a parent with a decisive claim to an authentic subject position within a discourse of gay normativity – as a ‘proper homosexual’ (line 16). He specifies the normative requirements for authentic gayness as, firstly, coming out at a young age, and secondly, having never been in a heterosexual relationship (line 13). His prosody and lexical choices at this point are markedly different from his style across the interviews, using high pitch intonation and the low-frequency words ‘gay @credentials@’ and ‘proper @homosexual@’. Both of these phrases are carefully articulated, with emphasis on the first syllable in ‘proper’ and ‘sexual’. Since these prosodic features have been associated with perceptions of gay male sexuality, they work to affirm Tony’s emphatic claim to an authentic gay identity at this point. His marked use of the pathologising term ‘homosexual’, and laughter around both this and ‘credentials’, contribute to a parodic style, as if he is engaging in light-hearted mockery of his own very conventionally gay past.

For Tony, a man in his fifties, much like Jones’ (2012) and Morrish and Sauntson’s (2007) lesbian participants of a similar age, rejecting heteronormativity seems to be particularly important to his sense of place in a queer community. This is very different from Peter’s more homonormative stance, which overlaps and merges with heteronormative ideals. Both positions prove to be problematic at times, and in Tony’s case, his phrase ‘I was a minority... within that minority’ (line 6) succinctly expresses his own predicament when his identity as a gay father positions him in the middle of two sets of regulatory norms, one heteronormative and one anti-heteronormative. His liminal position in relation to these discursive spheres consolidates the impression that lesbian and gay parents may be vulnerable in multiple senses. They are at double risk of marginalisation because their sexuality positions them as different within discourses of heteronormativity, gendered parenthood and the nuclear family, yet their status as parents (because it is intertwined with these dominant normative discourses) positions them as different within queer normative discourses.

Discussion

When Tony, a single gay father, says that he has felt like a ‘minority within a minority’, he neatly expresses his problematic position in relation to social spheres that often draw on competing normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family. However, the idea of being a minority within a minority does not quite capture the full complexity of Tony’s position, because it implies that he is effectively contained, in a static way, within two

2 As noted by Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013), the word ‘homosexual’ never completely lost its pathologising implications.
distinct spheres of discursive influence: the queer norms of the fae revolutionary community and the heteronorms of wider society. The above analysis suggests that the way Tony positions himself through small stories about his life is often much more complex. Similarly complex positioning is found in Peter and Anna’s stories.

What Peter, Anna and Tony have in common is having at times been positioned as ‘other’ in relation to the discursive matrix that produces the (hetero)normative ‘nuclear family’: heteronormativity, gendered parenthood and biological essentialism. However, their individual situations, including their age, gender, the means by which they had children and their social networks, mean that they have experienced different sets of normative constraints in different ways. For example, as a gay man in his late twenties who has experienced little overt discrimination, Peter is able to draw on a discourse of homonormativity to minimise his difference from, and emphasise his similarity with, heterosexual couples and families. However, his small stories show that he can still be excluded by dominant discourses such as gendered parenthood, within which mothers and fathers are deemed essential and complementary components of the traditional nuclear family, with the mother playing the most dominant role in children’s successful upbringing. As a woman, on the other hand, Anna is able to fulfil the culturally lauded maternal role, but her legitimacy in this role as an adoptive (and therefore non-biological) parent is brought in to question by a dominant discourse of biological essentialism, which positions biological relatedness (and pregnancy/childbirth as visible and experiential signs of this) as a more essential part of parenthood than social relatedness. Tony, an older, biological father who co-parents with a lesbian couple, seems to be most affected by the heteronormative presumption that he married, and later divorced, a woman. Whilst all three parents experience similar assumptions, Tony is the only one who responds, in the interview, by assertively claiming an ‘authentic’ gay identity. Tony’s age and commitment to an anti-normative community may be important factors in his emphatic rejection of a position that draws on heteronormative ideals.

There are moments at which Peter, Anna and Tony’s positions in relation to other discourses of sexual normativity, including lesbian, gay and homonormativity, can be equally precarious. In Peter’s small stories, he works to position himself and his partner as legitimate, ordinary and unremarkable fathers – ‘just two dads’. However, Peter and Malc’s exclusion from Christian marriage, and Peter’s subsequent reluctance to straightforwardly position Malc as his husband, shows that true assimilation remains a desired, but not fully realised, ideal. Whilst homonormativity is Peter’s preferred route to validation as a gay parent, Anna explores lesbian normativity as a way of legitimising her position within an LGBT family. Her self-perception as a feminine-presenting woman, however, restricts her access to this discourse, because she does not feel that she meets gender-transgressive lesbian norms. Tony experiences a comparable struggle for legitimacy within a queer community, though in his case it is the discursive entanglement of parenthood and heteronormativity that leads to direct conflict between normative discourses of family life and normative discourses of gay/queer sexuality.
Despite their differences, Peter, Anna and Tony share experiences of exclusion and delegitimisation in relation to a range of normative discourses. They have all appeared at times, though in different ways, to occupy a liminal space between two sets of oppositional normative hierarchies, one of which works to constitute the traditional nuclear family, and one of which maintains norms around sexual identity. These liminal spaces are not adequately accounted for, or easily accessible through, the discourses that are available to these parents, leaving them in something of a ‘double bind’. There are moments in all three participants’ lives at which they are silenced by this double bind; left unable to fully and adequately express their sense of personal and familial identity.

As well as revealing some important insights about the everyday effects of normative discourses for lesbian and gay parents, this article supports the claim that ordinary, mundane interactions and events are important sites for the (re)construction of normative structures. It has also shown that drawing on such encounters, in the form of small stories, can be an important resource for individuals’ sense-making about their position in relation to such structures. The explanatory power of storytelling resources may be particularly relevant for lesbian, gay, and other queer parents, whose positions can be complex and difficult to express given their liminal situation amidst competing normative discourses. A three-level positioning framework, which encourages the analyst to account for an individual’s self-positioning in relation to the story world (level 1), the here-and-now (level 2) and wider social structures (level 3), has proved useful for identifying and elaborating the nature of such complex positions and positioning through stories. However, it is worth noting that for my participants, these three levels rarely operate in isolation. For example, in Peter, Anna and Tony’s small stories, level 3 positioning is nearly always achieved through level 1 or 2 positioning. A nuanced analysis of positioning in small stories might therefore conceptualise these levels as overlapping, rather than distinct and separate, resources.

**Conclusion**

This article has shown how three lesbian and gay parents draw on six intersecting normative discourses in small stories about themselves and their families: 1) heteronormativity, 2) gendered parenthood, 3) biological essentialism, 4) homonormativity, 5) lesbian normativity and 6) gay normativity. The first three discourses represent a discursive matrix that constitutes the ‘traditional’ (hetero)normative nuclear family in their talk, whilst the second three tend to be taken up as participants negotiate the (ir)relevance of their sexual identities. These parents’ stories often represent moments of conflict or ambivalence, at which they seem to occupy liminal spaces between these discourses, and as a result may struggle to confidently position themselves a parent, partner, lesbian woman, or gay man. Encounters and relationships with other people - or ‘characters’ - tend to be at the heart of these stories. These characters often voice or represent the different normative presumptions and practices that participants negotiate as they work to position themselves as intelligible subjects, giving their stories a dialogical quality. This article therefore shows that everyday encounters can be important sites for the (re)constitution of normative
discourses, and that the small stories parents tell about such encounters can be important resources for making sense of their complex positions as lesbian and gay parents.

Much has been written about how damaging heteronormative discourses can be, but this article contributes to a growing body of queer linguistic research that shows how a wide range of normative hierarchies can be problematic and exclusionary for different groups. My focus on lesbian and gay parents, who are under-researched in queer linguistics, illuminates some of the particular challenges for parents whose families do not fit the traditional (hetero)normative mould. I have shown that lesbian and gay parents’ position at a problematic intersection between normative discursive spheres can be a vulnerable one, which may affect their ability to access intelligible subject positions in their everyday lives and talk. These findings suggest that lesbian and gay parents may be at particular risk of marginalisation in relation to multiple normative spheres, whose sometimes overlapping, often competing normative constraints can leave them in something of a double bind. It is likely, by extension, that other queer parents who do not meet the regulatory norms of the (hetero)normative nuclear family will experience similar struggle and conflict. The breaking down of all normative discourses is therefore important for anyone who does not meet their often restrictive and oppositional constraints.

Appendix: transcription key

(. ) micro pause (less than 0.3 seconds)

(1.5) timed pause

[ ] overlapping speech

underlined emphasis

wo- false start or self-interruption

@ laughter (one unit per pulse)

@word@ spoken with laughter or smiling quality

h. audible in-breath (number of units indicates duration)

x. audible out-breath (number of units indicates duration)

xp. air blown between the lips, making them vibrate, producing a ‘phhh’ sound

*asterisked* quiet

>bracketed< fast speech

<bracketed> slow speech

: extended sound (number of units indicates duration)

( ) transcriber comment
latching (no pause between speaker turns)
.
end of intonation unit (falling intonation)
?
end of intonation unit (rising intonation)
↑words↑
high pitch

References


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