'Let's go to the movies': Filmic representations of gay foster carers and adopters

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Abstract

As a growing body of research evidence demonstrates, increasing numbers of gay men across the world are choosing to become foster or adoptive parents. Most importantly, the families that these men form are continually found to be supportive and positive spaces in which to raise children. Yet despite these positive findings, other empirical evidence from examinations of popular media representations of gay parents highlights the negative assumptions that continue to be perpetuated against gay men who are parents. More specifically, these findings suggest that print and popular media promote either a normalising or pathologising account of gay parents. The findings presented in this paper extend this latter body of research by exploring filmic portrayals of gay men variously engaged in fostering and adoptive arrangements. Through an analysis of five recently released films, four dominant themes are elaborated: 1) the capacity of gay men to parent, and in what circumstances, 2) the relationship between gay men's sexual identities and their identity as parents, 3) the agency of children who are cared for by gay men, and 4) constructions of kinship in the films. Implications are explored for what these themes tells us about the representations of gay men deemed acceptable or intelligible at present, and the identities the films offer to gay parent viewers.

Introduction

In the past two decades we have witnessed increasing recognition within the public eye of the experiences of gay men who are parents. Whether this be in documentaries, talk shows, features in popular magazines, or films that have as their central storyline the lives of gay parents, this increasing recognition brings with it an injunction on researchers to examine and understand which representations predominate, and what this potentially tells us about public understandings of gay parents. Of course examining media representations of gay parents tells us more than simply what stories are currently deemed acceptable for viewing by the general public. They also potentially give messages to gay parents themselves, and in so doing shape the identities that are available to gay men who are already, or who are seeking to become, parents.

This paper explores representations of gay men as (non-biological/non-birth) parents within five films that were released between 2000 and 2007: *Cachorro (Bearcub), The Conrad Boys, Holiday Heart, Pack Your Stuff* and *Shelter*. As will be outlined later in the paper, whilst some of these films received limited release or were straight to DVD in the US, others received considerable attention at film festivals and were released internationally. Importantly, these films feature a relatively diverse range of characters from across a range of cultural settings, thus making this an ideal selection from which to ascertain some of the breadth of representations and identities that are made available through them to gay men.

In the following sections attention is first paid to existing research examining media representations of lesbian and gay parents, which has primarily found that negative stereotypes or normalising assumptions predominate. The five films are then outlined in

detail, and an analysis of them is then provided that focuses on the broadly similar themes that appear across the films, these being 1) the capacity of gay men to parent, and in what circumstances, 2) the relationship between gay men's sexual identities and their identity as parents, 3) the agency of children who are cared for by gay men, and 4) the constructions of kinship that are evident in the films. As will be demonstrated, these four themes encompass both negative and positive representations of gay parents, a finding that can be taken at least in part as a positive development in media representations of gay parents which have in the past been primarily negative.

Previous Research on Media Representations of Gay Parents

As none of the previous research on media representations of non-heterosexual parents focuses exclusively on gay men, this section elaborates findings as they pertain to both lesbian and gay parents, with the former occupying a larger proportion of the focus of previous research.

In his ground-breaking research on representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people on US talk shows, Gamson (1998) provides us with some insight as to the conflicting ways in which lesbian mothers are represented. Gamson suggests, in relation to one particular episode of the Ricki Lake show, that whilst 'good' lesbian parents are presented as people of worth who do not deserve discrimination or marginalisation, those lesbian mothers deemed to be 'bad' are constructed as unfit to parent. In the terms of the episode, 'good' mothers are those who put their children's needs first, who seek a lifestyle that replicates the heterosexual nuclear family, and who are not militant in their lesbianism. By contrast, 'bad' mothers are those who privilege

their own needs in some instances over those of their children, and who fail to enact a normative mothering identity.

Similar findings in the UK suggest that lesbian and gay parents are represented as either acceptable because of their emulation of a 'normal' (read: heterosexual) lifestyle, or unacceptable because of what is deemed their failure (or inability) to approximate a normative family configuration. In their analysis of such UK and US talk shows, Clarke and Kitzinger (2004) identified six discourses that were deployed by participants and talk show hosts in ways that were intended to be positively disposed toward lesbian and gay parents. These were: 1) an emphasis on lesbian and gay parents being 'just like all (heterosexual) parents': that lesbians and gay men who parent do so as women and men, not as lesbians or gay men, 2) the provision of examples of the mundaneness of the lives of lesbian- and gay-headed families, 3) an emphasis upon love as the only factor worthy of attention in families, and the accompanying statement that lesbian- and gay-headed families are 'all about love', 4) the refutation of anti-gay attitudes towards lesbian and gay parents amongst the religious right via the claim that God created all people, lesbian and gay parents included, 5) the use of children's gender normative behaviours as 'proof' that lesbian and gay parents do not 'damage' their children, and 6) an emphasis on the benefits for children of growing up in lesbian- or gay-headed households.

Clarke (2001) suggests that whilst these accounts afford positive space for lesbian and gay parents, they do so by normalising their experiences. Furthermore, the talk shows examined by Clarke also reinforced negative stereotypes about lesbian and gay parents (such as the presumption that they will 'damage' their children) simply by stating them. As Clarke suggests, when lesbian and gay parents are forced to engage with negative

stereotypes, they are responding to agendas not of their own making: they are asked to represent their families on heterosexist terms that allow little opportunity for alternate representations of what it means to be a lesbian or gay parent. Similar to Gamson, Clarke also suggested that the spaces accorded within the media to representations of lesbian and gay parents rely upon assumptions of whiteness and middle-classness when promoting a particular form of normalisation. Clarke suggests further that families headed by two parents are reified within media representations of lesbian- and gay-headed families.

In Australia, Riggs (in-press) also found that whilst all of the print media articles analysed were positive about lesbian and gay parents, they were positive in a particularly narrow sense: they were reliant upon the normalisation of lesbian and gay parents. This occurred when the articles: 1) emphasised the notion of 'love makes a family' to legitimate lesbian and gay parents, 2) deployed discourses of biology to privilege biologically-related gay parents and their children, or alternatively, to suggest that gay adoptive fathers could be better parents than birth parents, and 3) represented an idealised image of lesbian or gay two-parent families.

On the whole, then, this previous research would suggest that the binary categories of 'good' and 'bad' lesbian and gay parents are deployed in the majority of the media representations examined. Through these categories, lesbian and gay parents are constructed as 'good' only when they conform to a particular idealised or normatively configured image of families, and as 'bad' when they refuse such categorisation. Importantly, however, it must be recognised that whilst the articles examined by Riggs (in-press) were relatively recent (all published in 2007 or 2008), the talk shows examined by Gamson (1998) were first aired in the mid 1990s, and those analysed by

Clarke (2001) aired between 1990 and 2001. It is thus important to understand how media representations may have shifted since the talk shows were aired. Furthermore, whilst the research summarised here focused on data from across three continents, the lesbian and gay parents represented were on the whole white and middle-class. Examining the parenting experiences of parents who are not located within these dominant social identities is thus important, just as it is also important to understand potential similarities in the representations of gay parents across a range of cultural locations. Finally, the majority of lesbian and gay parents represented in the previous research were reported as primarily those who are biologically related to their children. Examining the experiences of non-biological parents (i.e., those gay men who foster or adopt children or otherwise provide care for children they are not biological parents to) would thus appear to be a gap in the current research that requires exploration

The Films

Through a search of online movie databases (e.g., www.imdb.com), websites dedicated to listing gay-themed movies (e.g., http://www.planetout.com/popcornq/), and websites that sell DVDs (e.g., www.amazon.com), ten films were identified that focus exclusively on gay men as parents. Whilst a number of documentaries were identified, these were excluded from the analysis as the focus of this paper is on filmic (i.e., largely fictional) representations, rather than 'real life' representations, as the latter have been most extensively covered by previous research. As suggested in the introduction, examining film representations provides us with insight into the types of gay parent identities deemed intelligible to film audiences, which has much to tell us about how gay parents in general are viewed. Whilst half of the films identified focused on gay men parenting either post-heterosexual marriage (e.g., Wild Reeds) or entering into known donor

arrangements with women (e.g., Next Best Thing; Rick and Steve: The Happiest Gay Couple in the World), the decision was made on the basis of the topic of this special issue to focus solely on representations of gay men engaging in fostering, adoption or other care relationships with children of whom they are not the biological parents. The five films identified in this sub-category were as follows:

Cachorro (Bearcub) [Miguel Albaladejo DIR, 2004]: This Spanish-language film has been aired internationally, including in Australia on paytv, and at film festivals in Europe and the US. The film tells the story of a gay man – Pedro – who identifies as a member of the 'bear' subculture, who works as a dentist, and who enjoys a healthy sex life. When his 'hippy' sister plans to travel overseas with her boyfriend, she leaves her son – Bernado – to stay with his Uncle. When she is imprisoned for possessing drugs, Pedro is faced with the challenge of raising Bernado for the long-term, a task that they both negotiate well. Unfortunately, Bernado's paternal grandmother decides that she would prefer to raise Bernado (despite the fact that she was alienated from him and his mother) and uses extortion against Pedro to ensure his consent. The film closes after we see Bernado eventually return to live with Pedro following a brief hospitalisation for HIV.

The Conrad Boys [Justin Lo DIR, 2006]: This film was given considerable attention at international film festivals not simply for its content, but also for the fact that the then 21 year old writer and director also played the lead role. The film tells the story of Charlie, a Chinese Jewish American who, in his late teens, is faced with raising his younger brother Ben when their mother dies. Charlie takes on the role of care provider but struggles with having to put on hold his dreams for college. Excitement comes into his life when a young drifter – Jordan – befriends him. This excitement is threatened,

however, when Charlie and Ben's estranged father returns demanding to have custody of Ben, and also when it turns out that Jordan is in trouble for some previous choices in his own life. Things go from bad to worse for both Charlie and Jordan, until Charlie's father helps them to sort out the problems and end Jordan's troubles. The movie ends with Charlie being faced with the choice of either leaving his brother to live with their father and going off with Jordan, or staying to care for Ben. He decides to stay and go to college, and care for his brother with his father.

Holiday Heart [Robert Townsend DIR, 2000]: This TV movie (also released on DVD) tells the story of a relatively affluent African-American man – Holiday – who is active in his church choir during the day and who is a drag performer at night. Having lost his long-term partner to illness (as we are told via a flashback), Holiday is searching for meaning and connection in the world. His plans to fulfil this through a trip to Paris (as was the wish of his partner) are put on hold when he intervenes in a domestic violence situation between a man and a woman and offers accommodation to the woman – Wanda – and her daughter Niki in one of his rental properties. What ensues is initially joy for the three of them as Wanda moves beyond her homophobia and addiction to drugs, and recommences employment and provides stability for her daughter. Unfortunately, just when the three of them become comfortable as a family, Wanda starts dating a new man – Silas – who demands that Holiday be excluded. Later Wanda returns to drug use and abandons Niki, who Holiday then raises along with some assistance from a 'reformed' Silas. The story ends with Wanda being killed by a drug dealer, and Niki and Holiday leaving for a holiday in Paris.

Pack Your Stuff [Max Mitchell DIR, 2000]: This direct to DVD film tells the story of Eric and Phil, two affluent white gay men who choose to have children through fostering and

then adoption. After proceeding through the approval process, two 'troublesome' brothers are placed with them, and the bulk of the story tells of the challenges the two men face in raising the boys, including the relationship they develop with the boys' birth mother. Eventually the birth mother comes to live with the two men and the two boys as she attempts to give up alcohol, and whilst this doesn't work out, it allows the five of them to develop a significant relationship with one another and for the boys to remain connected to their birth mother. The movie also focuses on a length of time when the two men separate and the impact this has upon the children and upon the men when one lives with another man. The movie closes with the two men back together raising the children in collaboration with the mother.

Shelter [Jonah Markowitz DIR, 2007]: This film has been screened and won awards at film festivals across the US, and has been released to cinemas internationally. The story focuses on Zach, a young working-class white man who is coming to terms with his identity as a gay man, at the same time as living with his sister Jeanne and her son Cody. Cody sees Zach as a father figure, and Jeanne relies heavily upon Zach for assistance in raising Cody. When Zach reconnects with Shaun, the white gay older brother of his childhood best friend who is depicted as much more affluent than Zach, he is forced to deal with his own sexuality (he has only recently broken up with a long-term girlfriend), his sister's homophobia, and the expectations upon him to care for Cody. When Jeanne decides to move away from their home in San Francisco with her new boyfriend, she announces that she cannot take Cody. Both Jeanne and Zach are then presented with choices over Zach raising Cody in the context of a relationship with Shaun, and what this means for Zach's attempts to move 'out of the ghetto' and to become a student at CalArts.

Analysis

The five movies were watched several times each by the author, with notes taken on the first pass as to the general storyline and key issues that related specifically to the men as gay parents. Once the movies had been watched a first time, the observational notes were examined for key themes across the five movies, including similarities and differences between them. Four themes were identified at this stage: 1) the capacity of gay men to parent, and in what circumstances, 2) the relationship between gay men's sexual identities and their identity as parents, 3) the agency of children who are cared for by gay men, , and 4) the constructions of kinship that are evident in the films. The movies were then viewed again to examine specific instances of the four themes identified, to note specific quotes, and to consider additional themes (no other significant themes were noted). With both sets of notations combined, the four themes developed were examined for their predominance across the movies, with subtleties within each theme noted. A close analysis of the four themes was then conducted and is reported below.

Theme 1: Gay Men's Parenting Capacity

The first two themes most closely mirror previous research on gay men's experiences of parenting, particularly in relation to the dominant assumption that gay men are either incapable of parenting *as men*, or that they should expressly be prohibited from parenting *as gay men*. Hicks (2006) has identified this assumption in research on social workers and their views of gay foster parents. Hicks suggests that gay men are often viewed as deviant or pathological, and that as such they should not be trusted to care for children. Similar findings appear in research on lesbian and gay foster carers

undertaken by Riggs (2008a), which suggests that the dominant view of gay men in particular reinforces a pathologising view of gay foster carers.

All of the films in varying ways emphasised the capacity (or otherwise) of gay men to care for children. In some instances this was in explicit questioning by social workers, friends, parents or birth families about the capacity of gay men to provide care. In other instances the issue of capacity was a more implicit theme to the films, where examples where given of gay men's capacity to care, and the specific instances where this was considered acceptable. Examples of this latter account of gay men's capacity appeared in all of the films, where children were depicted as living with the gay men by necessity, rather than by choice. So in *Pack Your Stuff,* the gay men are depicted as the 'last resort' for two young boys who are depicted as 'out of control'. Hicks (1996) found similar accounts of foster carers in his research where lesbian and gay foster carers reported feeling as though they were treated as a last resort, and that they had the 'hardest' children placed with them (i.e., those with either/both physical and/or behavioural challenges). In *Shelter*, Zach is presented as a default babysitter for his sister, and the only possible option when she feels forced to leave town and her son behind. In *Holiday Heart*, the mother's drug addiction leaves her daughter in need of care, which is only provided by Holiday when the mother is unavailable: when she is in recovery for part of the film she is depicted as no longer needing Holiday. In *The Conrad Boys,* whilst Charlie is presented as automatically the carer of his brother when their mother passes away, it is only because of her passing that he is considered in this way. And in *Cachorro,* Pedro only comes to care for his nephew long-term because of his mothers arrest and imprisonment: it was never planned that he would care for him long-term.

Yet it is not only the case that gay men are depicted as in some instances having the capacity to care for children. There are also instances across the movies where the men are depicted as potentially *incapable* of caring for children. So in *The Conrad Boys,* we see a 'concerned friend' of the boys' late mother offer to care for Ben to 'help' Charlie. We then are shown examples of why this woman should be concerned: Charlie falls asleep on a date and doesn't return home until early in the morning; and his choice to welcome Jordan into their home negatively impacts upon Ben who displays anger at school and distress in nightmares. In *Holiday Heart* we are shown an image of Holiday as capable of caring until something typically deemed mother-specific arises: when Niki begins to menstruate, Holiday is initially shown as unable or unwilling to cope with this information, just as he is later shown to be quick to anger when Niki is caught in embrace with a young boy. Thus whilst Holiday is, in general, shown to be capable of providing for Niki, his capacity overall is questioned at several key junctures in the film.

In this first theme gay men are depicted at best as capable parents when there is no other option, and at worst as potentially incapable parents, only operating from possible crisis to crisis, or with the support of others. Whilst there is some recognition that for some of the men parenting was not planned (and thus it is understandable that they may not have developed the skills to parent in all situations), the depiction of 'concern' from an outsider, alongside an example of 'incapacity', serves to reinforce the idea that some (if not all) gay men cannot be trusted to parent children.

Theme 2: Sexual Identities/Parent Identities

Following on from the first theme, the second theme reiterates previous findings that gay foster parents often feel scrutinised for their relationships to children, with the

spectre of paedophilia hanging over the heads of all gay men (Hicks; 2006; Riggs, 2008a; Rofes, 1998). Whilst there is no evidence that would indicate the veracity of this myth about gay men, it continues to predominate in decisions made in the placement of children with gay men and to be used by the Christian right in their arguments against gay parenting.

Characters in the films were variously depicted as concerned about children being in their beds, or seeing them kissing. For example, in *Pack Your Bags* Eric refuses to sleep next to Phil on the first night the two boys are with them, as he "doesn't want them to see them in bed together". A similar statement is made by Charlie to Jordan in *The Conrad Boys* when Jordan asks to stay over, to which Charlie replies; "OK, but you gotta sleep on the couch: I don't wanna confuse Ben". In *Shelter,* Zack too is shown as being concerned about affection expressed by Shaun in front of Cody, his nephew. Returning to *Pack Your Bags,* Eric is also shown in the film as reluctant to kiss Phil in front of the boys, stating; "It's too soon to expose them to it". This is constructed as a valid judgement on Eric's behalf when we are later shown the two boys witnessing the two men kissing in bed, to which the elder child reacts in disgust, stating: "You're not going to make us queer". Examples such as this do not simply attest to gay men's supposed willing complicity with negative stereotypes, but further suggest their willingness to let them shape their lives and to recognise their validity. Referring to 'confusing' children or 'exposing them to *it'* only makes sense if being gay is understood as confusing, where to *not* be confused would be to reinforce the normative presumption of heterosexuality. As such, the gay men in these instances are by default presented as potentially 'good men', even if it is simultaneously depicted that it is 'their' fault that the children are potentially 'confused' or 'exposed'. In other words, being 'good' requires that gay men

recognise negative stereotypes and amend their behaviour accordingly, rather than simply refuse the stereotypes.

In *Pack Your Bags* we are shown what happens when men refuse or fail to let negative stereotypes about gay men shape their behaviour. When Phil finally manages to convince Eric to overcome his anxiety about having sex whilst the children are in the house, the elder child finds their alcohol cupboard and drinks from it, and the other child force feeds the birth mother (who is by then staying with the men) pills whilst she sleeps. After this abortive attempt at having sex when the children and birth mother are home, the two men try again, only to have the mother bring into their house a drug dealer who hurts the older child. Here the men are depicted as bringing negative consequences upon the children because of their decision not to actively incorporate negative stereotypes about gay men as parents. A similar example appears in *Cachorro*, when Pedro 'takes the night off' from caring for Bernado so he can go cruising. Whilst his night goes well and the child is not aware of it *per se,* we later learn that Bernado's paternal grandmother has had Pedro followed and photographed cruising, and she uses this as evidence over Pedro to enforce her desire to remove Bernado from his care (see also Aoki, 2007, for an elaboration of this aspect of *Cachorro*). As such, Pedro's decision to enjoy sexual pleasure is seen as impacting upon his capacity to parent, even when he takes his sexual pleasure outside of the family home. This 'damaged by implication' logic extends the remit of negative stereotypes beyond the injunction upon gay men not to have sex in any proximity to children, and enlarges it to suggest that gay parents should not have sex at all.

In these examples gay sex is seen as largely incompatible with gay parenting, and as the gay men are in all instances bar one (*Holiday Heart)* depicted as sexually active, their

identity or capacity as parents is thrown into question. Whilst the films are positive in the sense that they represent gay men's sexual identities and do not screen them off from their lives as parents, the viewer is nonetheless presented with the 'consequences' of their sexual identities as gay men. As such, the films (either implicitly or explicitly) contribute to the normative understanding that gay men as sexual beings can at some level not be trusted to care for children.

Theme 3: Children's Agency

In contrast to the first two themes, which provide largely negative images of gay men, the following two themes present somewhat more positive accounts. In the third theme, children are in most instances shown as capable of making decisions for themselves, and these decisions are depicted as being supported by the gay men who care for them. This mirrors findings from other research on gay men and families, which suggests that gay men may be more likely than heterosexual parents to understand children's best interests as necessarily determined by children (as age appropriate), and that children should play an active role in determining their movements in the world in relation to their parents (Benson, Silverstein & Auerbach, 2005; Riggs, 2008b). Findings such as these are important for the counter they provide to heteronormative understandings of families in which children are seen as passive recipients of adults decisions (Riggs, 2006).

The film *Cachorro* provides us with one clear example of this. In the early part of the movie Bernado is depicted as 'known' by his mother as gay: she states to Pedro that she knows he will grow up to be gay. Pedro is clear to her that this type of assumption is inappropriate, not primarily because talking about sexual identities in relation to a

young child is typically deemed inappropriate, but more so because he respects Bernado's own capacity to determine his identity. Later in the movie we witness a discussion where Bernado states his heterosexuality, and Pedro engages within him in a mature discussion about this. The film *Pack Your Stuff* also depicts the children as capable of making choices: to work with the two men to rehabilitate their mother, to engage in mutual caring relations, and to assert their own opinions about the choices made for them. One example of this appears when the men make sushi for the children for dinner. The eldest child responds to learning what it is made of ('seaweed') by stating that "these fucking faggots are trying to kill us". Whilst the language used here is obviously pejorative, the two men are nonetheless shown as respectful of the boy's decision not to eat the food.

Of course it is not always the case that the children in the films are shown as agentic. In *The Conrad Boys* Ben is often shown as being a victim of the situation he is in, or as wilfully manipulating his brother Charlie. Yet such infantalising depictions of Ben are placed alongside examples of him developing coping strategies and displaying resilience to change. In these instances, Charlie is shown to be respectful of Ben's actions, and supportive of his methods of seeking security and assurance. The same is true for *Holiday Heart,* in which Holiday is shown as reacting in a paternalistic way to Niki's close embrace with a boy her age. However, in a subsequent scene Holiday is shown as recognising the reasons and choices that may have underpinned Niki's actions, and he approaches her respectfully to talk about these.

Whilst often subtly enacted, this theme of recognising children's agency, and gay men's child-focused approach, was a largely positive representation of gay men caring for children. As mentioned earlier, research has found that gay men may well be more

likely than heterosexual men to recognise the rights of children to determine their own best interests (though this may not always be the case; see Riggs, 2008c). Regardless of the degree to which this may be true in practice in all gay-headed families, it is nonetheless positive that gay men caring for children are presented with images of care provision that model a child-focused approach that recognises children as equal partners in determining family forms (Riggs, 2009).

Theme 4: Constructions of Kinship

In this final theme, and related to the previous one, gay men and the children in their care were often represented as engaging in alternate or non-normative forms of kinship structure. Partly this was due to the very fact that they were non-biological parents or non-birth parents caring for children, which often necessitates developing kinship styles that diverge from the heterosexual nuclear family model. But partly also these alternate constructions of kinship appeared in some instances to arise from the opinions or choices of the children. As such, the films provide concrete examples of research on lesbian and gay families which has suggested the radically different ways in which lesbians and gay men may do family (Stacey, 2006; Riggs, 2007). Whilst this is not necessarily the case for all lesbian- or gay-headed families, and whilst it may be problematic to promote lesbian or gay parents as always already non-normative or radical (Hicks, 2005), it is nonetheless the case that the films highlight the strengths of gay men as parents by emphasising their openness to a range of family forms.

In the film *Pack Your Stuff,* the men engage in a family form rarely seen in relation to foster care, namely one where the birth mother is welcomed into their family. Whilst of course in many instances this may be an unwise or unsafe option, the non-proprietal

form of family that it engenders may be considered positive for the children who are free to explore a range of connections not bound by biology or duty (Riggs, 2008d; 2009). Another example of gay men claiming non-normative relationships to children appears in *Cachorro,* where Pedro and Bernado develop family practices that signify their parent-child connection to one another, albeit one that steps out of the normative model of seeing children as passive recipients of adults actions. In one scene we see Pedro shaving his hair, and Bernado then states that he wishes to do the same, with the intention of them looking alike. Here Bernado and Pedro engage in a form of bonding that honours their kinship regardless of their actual biological relationship (i.e., as uncle and nephew, rather than parent and child).

Of course it is not always adults who engage in instigating non-normative family forms. In *Holiday Heart,* it is Niki who affirms her relationship with her mother and Holiday as one of family, where she states to her mother: "We finally have a family: You, me and Holiday". Whilst her mother later rejects Holiday, the film ends with Holiday, Niki, and the mother's (previously homophobic) boyfriend standing together at her grave, where Niki states that her mother would be happy, as what she always wanted was for Niki to have two parents. This image of a child recognising two men not in a relationship with one another as her parents, and as fulfilling a desire of her mother, is not only touching, but depicts a relatively radical reworking of the nuclear family ideal, where one man is a drug dealer, one is a drag queen, where they are not in love with one another, and where they are not all living together. Yet regardless of this, they are united by their care for one another and commitment to family. In *Shelter* we see another example of a child claiming family in direct opposition to social norms related to biology determining parental status. Cody, the youngest child depicted in any of the films (aged 4), tells Zach that just like his grandfather is Zach's Dad, so too is Zach his father. Zach attempts to

correct him, and says; "No, your mum's my sister, so I'm your uncle. Joe's your daddy".

But Cody doesn't accept this, and corrects him in return with; "No, you're my daddy".

Here Cody is not depicted as failing to comprehend the situation or 'fact' of biology, but

rather than he recognises the significant relationship between himself and Zack.

Both the gay men and the children they care for in these films engage in a range of

family forms that in some places emulate normative family forms, and in other places

radically rework them. As Hicks (2005) suggests, we must be wary of presupposing that

non-heterosexual families are inherently radical, but we must also be mindful of the

instances when non-heterosexual families do provide us with new or reworked models of

family.

Conclusions

By examining representations of foster, adoptive and other gay non-birth parents of

children, this paper has elaborated some of the positive and negative ways in which gay

men are depicted as parents within films. As such, this paper extends upon previous

research that has focused on talk shows or print media, and also explores a wider range

of identities amongst gay men beyond the 'usual suspects' of white middle-class gay

men. Perhaps strikingly, however, the findings suggest relative homogeneity in

representations across differing cultural groups, even if the particular circumstances of

the individual gay men depicted differed. This of course does not tell us anything about

the actual lives of diverse groups of gay men *per se*. It does, nonetheless, provide us with

insight into how gay men are understood by film makers, and what are deemed to be

acceptable or intelligible representations of gay parents. Furthermore, the findings

highlight the identities or stereotypes that are made available to gay parents who view

these films, regardless of whether they choose to take up or act upon these identities or stereotypes.

It is of course appropriate to acknowledge that the content of these films were likely shaped by those involved in their production, and that they are a sub-genre of a sub-genre of a sub-genre (i.e., the genre of films on gay fostering or adoption as a sub-genre of films on non-heterosexual parenting as a sub-genre of films on families and parenting in general). As such, there are limits as to how far we can generalise these findings or what precisely they tell us about the social milieu in which they were produced. Nonetheless, the very fact that these films exist, and that the stories they tell represent gay men overall in a positive light, is an important fact not to lose sight of. Whilst this analysis necessarily only tells part of the story of these films, it nonetheless highlights their strengths, and well as the negative stereotypes they both render visible, whilst potentially unwittingly reproduce.

In conclusion, these films represent to us something of the diversity of the lives of gay parents, and they certainly match up in many ways with research findings of the actual experiences of gay parents. As such, their availability to mainstream audiences are at least in part an important counter to other, more negative representations of gay parents. And perhaps most importantly, they provide gay parents with a mirror in which to at least some extent they are reflected. In this sense, they are important cultural artefacts that are deserving of ongoing attention and promotion.

Acknowledgments

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