Negotiating normativities of gender, sexuality and the family in gay parents' small stories. *Journal of Language and Sexuality.*

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Abstract

This article considers how two gay male parents negotiate normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family in an interview context. Employing a three-level framework for exploring narratives-in-interaction, the micro-linguistic analysis identifies and unravels two gay parents' multiple layers of self- and other- positioning through their telling of 'small stories'. The findings support insights from existing sociological and psychological research to some degree, showing how these parents' liminal situation amidst multiple and intersecting normative discourses can lead to conflict as they work to position themselves as partners, parents, and gay men. However, the analysis also reveals new insights about the specific and nuanced forms such conflict can take, depending on individuals' circumstances and experiences. The 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.

Keywords

1. Introduction

This article considers how two gay male parents negotiate normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family through their telling of 'small stories' (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2007) in an interview context. Research in sociological and psychological fields has suggested that gay parents are uniquely situated amidst these converging, but often competing, discourses (Gianino 2008; Goldberg 2012; Golombok 2015). Further, this research suggests that the rigidity of normative discourses can lead to particularly insidious forms of discrimination and stigma, and make it difficult for individuals to access intelligible subject positions as both gay men, and as parents. If this holds true, then the perspectives of gay parents, which are underexplored in queer linguistics, are an important area for investigation, in terms of both furthering our understanding of this group's experiences, and showing how normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family can be negotiated in specific local contexts.

Following Foucault (1972, 1978), and in keeping with my previous discourse analytical work (Mackenzie 2019: 10), discourses are defined here 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'. Some discourses are relatively stable and persistent, such as heteronormativity and gender differentiation, which in many contexts 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 are associated with more enduring global power than other, more marginalised discourses. Others have conceptualised these discourses as '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 such as heteronormativity and gender differentiation, which have been central to the constitution and regulation of time-honoured social constructs such as *family*.

However, many queer linguistic scholars (e.g. Hall 2013; Hall et al. 2019; Koller 2013) have contested oppositional queer politics that position powerful global normativities, especially heteronormativity, against marginal local practices. Further, they have demonstrated that non-heterosexual discourses can produce their own normativities, through investigations of local practices at the level of individuals (e.g. Cashman 2019), small groups (e.g. Jones 2018) and online communities (e.g. Bailey 2019). These local and plural perspectives are 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 can shift, converge and change shape in unpredictable ways depending on time, context and local environment (Foucault 1978; Mackenzie 2019). In keeping with this perspective, my analysis will explore two gay parents' self-positioning in relation to a range of normative discourses, both local and more global. It will also take account of these participants' personal histories, experiences and local situations, when considering how they negotiate these normative structures.

2. Gender, sexuality and family normativities

2.1. Hetero- and queer normativities

Heteronormativity has special relevance for the intersecting spheres of gender, sexuality and the family. It is 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'. Heteronormativity also overlaps with normative gendered discourses, such as gender differentiation, 'which have the effect of describing men and women as opposites that "naturally" attract each other' (Motschenbacher 2018: 9). The pervasive and often insidious influence of heteronormativity in people's daily lives has been

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demonstrated 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 that mundane conversations, which may be experienced as unproblematic and unmarked for heterosexual people, can become sites of conflict or difficulty for non-heterosexual people.

However, whilst heteronormativity certainly has a special kind of power on a relatively global scale, it does not hold universal sway. Queer linguistic research over the past 15 years has shown that heteronormativity can converge and intersect with other discourses of sexual normativity, which in turn produce their own regulatory norms. This work has often taken account of individuals' belonging to a range of macro-level categories including race, religion, age and class, as well as local networks and small communities of practice. For example, Jones' (2012) and Morrish and Sauntson's (2007) sociolinguistic studies in the UK have shown how, for two lesbian friendship groups who are White, middle class and in their mid- to late- middle ages, opposition and distinction from heterosexual identities are important for the in-group construction and affirmation of 'authentic' lesbian identities. In the U.S., Shrikant (2014) analysed conversations between a younger friendship group of mixed ethnicities and sexualities. Shrikant showed how oppositional constructions of heteronormativity and 'authentic' lesbian identity were rejected by one of her African American participants, Tiana, who was angered by liberal White lesbians' idealised constructions of the 'gold star' lesbian (a lesbian who has never slept with a man). Tiana's

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experiences, Shrikant (2014: 813) suggests, 'speak to the difficulty lesbians have "coming out" in black religious communities', showing how sexual normativities can be experienced and negotiated at the intersection of race, sexuality and religion.

Others have shown how some LGBT groups minimise their difference from heteronormative identities and 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, speaks to the relevance of homonormativity in these people's lives. This discourse positions gay and lesbian people as integrated, 'normal' citizens, depoliticising gay culture in a way that leaves heteronormative assumptions and institutions unchallenged (Duggan 2002). For example, Jones (2018: 64) shows that her young gay and lesbian participants frequently positioned themselves as ordinary or 'normal', rejecting 'cultural stereotypes associated with gay identities'. Levon (2014: 139) evidences a version of homonormativity that is intertwined with Israeli national ideals in the coming-out stories of his participants, who work to position their lives in ways that are 'compatible with the standard Israeli models of gender and the nation'. Whilst Levon's participants tend to embrace the acceptance and assimilation of their sexual identities in cosmopolitan parts of Israel, 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. Overall, this body of work reveals a clear need, as Jones (2018) puts it, to think not just *locally,* but *intersectionally,* in queer linguistic research.

2.2. Family normativities

Sociolinguistic research has also illuminated some of the specific ways in which normative ideals of family life 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. Similarly, in below-the-line comments about LGBT adoption in two centre-right, socially conservative UK newspapers, Sokalska-Bennett (2017) shows that constructions of normative nuclear families revolve around the ideal of a mother and father producing children through heterosexual procreation. Further, she shows how 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 actions and interactions.

The persistence of normative, hetero-biological ideals can have damaging implications for families who fall outside of the dominant model. For example, despite the wealth of research showing that children with same-gender parents are thriving (Golombok 2015; Green et al. 2019), this group continue, in popular media and culture, to be depicted as dangerous, incompetent, and damaging for children (Goldberg 2012; Jones et al. 2017). Further, anti-gay organisations such as the U.S. Family Research Council, whose texts are critically examined by Peterson (2011), have attempted to discredit research that draws positive conclusions about LGBT families, claiming that it 'is compromised by methodological flaws and driven by political agendas instead of an objective search for truth' (Peterson 2011: 268).

Gay male parents, in particular, often face the double discrimination of homophobia and sexism, in the form of widely-held assumptions that women are vital, and better suited, to child raising (Goldberg, 2012; Golombok, 2015), that gay men cannot be appropriate role

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models of masculinity, and even that gay male caregivers will sexually abuse their children (Gianino 2008). Local discourses of sexual normativity can further contribute to the delegitimisation of gay parenthood. Gianino (2008: 223), who explored the experiences of gay male adopters in the U.S. reported that some of his participants received negative reactions from the gay community, along the lines that 'parenting was some sort of betrayal to the GLBT community – a caving in to pressures to confirm to a mainstream life that gay activists fought to reject'. Lewin (2009: 6), similarly, points to the 'paradox' of same-gender parenting, whereby 'queer commentators vilify the struggle for family legitimacy as an attempt to assimilate to mainstream, middle-class values, which they view as intrinsically distinctive from what it means to be lesbian or gay'. In terms of gay parents' lived experiences, these multiple and conflicting norms can have a number of effects. For example, a third of the U.S. gay adoptive fathers interviewed by Goldberg (2012: 29) said that they had considered fatherhood an impossible aspiration for many years. When they did become parents, some men experienced increased presumptions of heterosexuality, others began to background their sexual identities, and many felt that, in order to protect themselves and their families from attack, they must 'conform to traditional notions of fatherhood' (Goldberg 2012: 29).

However, research with gay parents has also shown that many individuals work to resist and transform traditional notions of 'family'. Indeed, Goldberg (2012: 13) suggests that the very presence of gay adoptive fathers in society 'has the capacity to revision dominant understandings of family, including who is "seen" and recognized as family'. Further, Wagner (2014) shows how U.S. lesbian and gay parents worked to reconceptualise family by focusing on processes rather than fixed roles. She draws attention to the relevance of actions and emotions in her participants' definitions of family, which contrasts with the reliance on essential biological sex, procreation and heterosexual morality in heteronormative

constructions (e.g. Sokalska-Bennett 2017). These findings lead Wagner (2014) to suggest

that gay and lesbian parents are at the heart of a wider shift in the prototype of *family*.

Overall, existing research suggests that for gay and other LGBT parents, competing

and contested normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family can form an uneasy

convergence, giving rise to multiple possible sites of conflict, stigma and discrimination. At

the same time, gay parenthood is a site where these intersecting normative constraints can be

dismantled, and the very concept of 'family' transformed. These findings challenge the

homonormative ideal that gay men who get married and/or have children will be 'rewarded

for being good citizens' (Jones 2018: 59), suggesting that, contrary to Duggan's (2002)

position on homonormative assimilation, the reality is far more complex for many. To

investigate some of those complex realities in more detail, and in line with recent directions

in queer linguistics, this article takes a dynamic approach to analysing local and global

normativities of gender, sexuality and the family in the 'small stories' of two gay parents,

paying close attention to their individual circumstances and experiences, and with particular

emphasis on their social and support networks. Before presenting this analysis, the following

section introduces the wider study from which it is taken, outlining the macro- and micro-

analytical approaches that were employed in this research, and introducing the two

participants, Peter and Tony, in detail.

3. The research context

This article is based on a UK study that explores the experiences of nine parents who used

adoption, donor conception, surrogacy or co-parenting arrangements to bring children into

their lives. Each individual (no partners were directly involved in the research) completed

short questionnaires at the start and end of the study, took part in three interviews over eleven

months, and shared selections of their digital and social media interactions from a range of

platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp. From the outset, all

participants were fully informed of the study's aims and methods, and consented to share their data through interview audio recording and digital data collection. All participants and their family members were given pseudonyms. Further, pseudonyms were used to obscure other identifying information, such as place names, or the names of friends, groups, networks and communities. The study was approved by the University of Nottingham Faculty of Arts ethics committee.

The larger study, which has an emphasis on participants' social and support networks, was shaped and guided by the principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). This popular reframing of traditional grounded theory (cf. Glaser & Strauss 1967) rejects any search for objective representations of 'truth' or '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, macro-level theory that would shed light on the lives, experiences and digital practices of my participants, before examining their complexities in detail through micro-linguistic analysis.

In keeping with grounded theory traditions of flexible and data-driven research, I recruited and began to interview participants early in the project's development, and 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. By taking a 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*. My questions became more specific as we moved through the three interviews, and I began to pursue more specific lines of enquiry. Each interview was transcribed and coded using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, according to the grounded theory practice of assigning descriptive labels ('codes') to each line of text, and grouping these codes together

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 (April – May 2019)

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

in larger 'categories'. The focus, core question and timeframe for each set of interviews is represented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview schedule and key questions

In order to explore the experiences of gay parents specifically, this article focuses on interview data from Peter and Tony, the two participants who identified themselves as gay men in the initial questionnaire and throughout their interviews. Of the other seven participants, who were all women, four identified themselves as heterosexual, one as lesbian, one as bisexual, and one preferred not to specify her sexuality. Given my local, intersectional perspective that takes account of individual experiences and situations, the details of these participants' lives are important for the analysis. Peter and Tony will therefore be introduced in more detail below, focusing on their early experiences of coming out, their socialisation as gay men, their decision to become fathers, and their social and support networks.

3.1. Micro-linguistic analysis: positioning through small stories

After the data construction and macro-level analysis that is briefly outlined above, I moved to the micro-linguistic level of analysis, focusing on how Peter and Tony negotiate a range of normativities in their interview talk. I began by revisiting the interview data through the lens of a single key category, 'redefining the family', and focused on moments at which multiple codes converged, such as 'backgrounding difference', 'being very ordinary' and 'resisting labels'. I subsequently selected two 'significant moments', which represented sites of discursive struggle and contested knowledge, power and subjectivity (see Baxter 2003; Mackenzie 2019), and were true to participants' broader reflections over the course of our three interviews.

These significant moments tended to arise at points where the participants were reflecting on their sense of self in relation to broader social structures, including macro categories such as 'parent', 'gay' and 'LGBT'. At each of these significant moments, participants included 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 as narrative orientations to the world (Bamberg 2004; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008; Deppermann 2013). Stories are therefore likely to be useful tools when people are reflecting on their sense of self in relation to multiple, and potentially competing, social structures.

I categorise Peter and Tony's stories as 'small' both because they tend to be short and fragmented, and because they attend to 'micro, fleeting aspects of lived experience' (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008: 379). They are unlike the 'big', self-contained retellings of past events that are found in traditional narrative research, being more intricately enmeshed in the context of their interview talk, and often occurring 'before and after other discourse activities' (Georgakopoulou 2007: 65). The first extract that appears in the analysis below, for example, is a brief illustration of Peter's point 'I find it hard enough finding

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language to just say that (0.8) [I']m gay', where he replays a fragment of conversation between himself and an acquaintance before going on to talk about his struggle with words. Like 'big' narratives, small stories 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 & Georgakopoulou 2008: 381). Peter and Tony's stories, as we will see below, tend to be fragmented (re)tellings of past events, and sometimes generalised (re)tellings of repeated experiences, for example around others' assumptions.

In order to identify and unravel the multiple layers of self- and other- positioning in Peter and Tony's small stories, I employ a three-level framework for the analysis of positioning through narratives-in-interaction, as developed by Bamberg (2004), Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008), and summarised by Deppermann (2013). At the first level, I examine the ways in which Peter and Tony's language choices position characters in their story worlds, including themselves, and any others who play a part in the stories. At the second level, I consider how Peter and Tony use language to position themselves when they step out of their story worlds and into the here-and-now of the interview, for example through commentary on, or evaluation of, the events and characters of their stories. Finally, at level 3, I explore participants' positioning of self and other in relation to normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family. This three-level approach is summarised in Table 2.

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.

Table 2. Three-level approach to positioning in narratives-in-interaction (adapted from Deppermann, 2013: 64-65).

3.2. The participants

Peter and Tony are both White, cisgender gay men, who have each had quite different lives and experiences. Peter is a 29-year-old[1] parent who conceived his daughter with his partner, Malc, through gestational surrogacy and egg donation[2]. Peter and Malc own a large property in an affluent, rural area in the North of England, where upper-middle-class and middle-class people represent the largest demographic[3]. Their significant financial resources facilitated the complex bio-legal surrogacy process, with the support of a consultant in the UK and an agency in North America. When we first met, Peter told me he'd had an 'easy time of being gay', had experienced little discrimination or rejection, and as a result had not felt the need to seek out others in the LGBT community. He also explained that the possibility of having children with Malc had 'always been there… we just would need to explore what the options were'. One exception to Peter's positive experiences, which will become relevant in the analysis below, is that he and Malc, who are both Christians, would like to get married, but are currently unable to do so in the Church of England.

Peter acknowledged at several points throughout our interviews that studying and working (as a classical musician) in liberal, largely middle-class social circles significantly affected his experiences as a gay man. He talked a great deal about his close relationships with three heterosexual friends – Andrea, Al and Dominic, who he'd lived with at University. Peter described these close friendships as an extremely positive force in his life, although they are not without their tensions. For example, in our third interview, Peter explained that not being able to marry in church had really affected him in recent months, because several of

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[1] These and other demographic details were correct at the mid-point of data collection, May 1st 2019.
[2] This process involved creating an embryo using their own sperm (Peter did not disclose whose), together with an egg from anonymous donor, which was then implanted into the womb of a surrogate.
[3] 35.4% were identified as upper-middle or middle-class. All demographics by postcode identified through https://www.postcodearea.co.uk/

his university friends were planning their own (heterosexual) weddings, making him acutely aware that 'we would like to be [married] but can't'. He further explained that one of his close friends, Al, had been 'really blasé' about the church wedding they were having to please his wife's family, and that this insensitivity had upset him. In the analysis and discussion that follows, I explore the relevance of Peter's largely heterosexual friendship groups, as well as his socialisation in relatively liberal, middle-class contexts, in relation to his homonormative self-positioning as 'just a normal family' and his struggle with 'labels'.

Tony, at the age of 54, is 25 years senior to Peter. He co-parents his two children, both of secondary-school age, with a lesbian couple, who the children live with most of the time. Whilst Tony can also be described as middle-class, he is far less affluent than Peter, supports himself and his two children on a single wage (as the director of a small charity) and owns a flat in an urban area where working-class people represent the largest demographic[4]. In our first interview, Tony explained that he came out in the late 1980s, at a time before the rise of wider sexual equality, acceptance and assimilationist homonormativity in the UK, when being gay necessitated the rejection of heteronorms. He also said that he always assumed he would have children when he was growing up, and as a young man, would talk 'jokingly' with his lesbian friends about co-parenting children as part of a commune. However, he later 'shelved' the idea during a long-term relationship with a man who was not interested in having children.

Through the course of our interviews, Tony made it clear that his belonging to a queer community called the 'Fae Revolutionaries' (a pseudonym) was an important part of his life and identity. Tony began to connect with the Fae Revolutionaries around ten years ago when a long-term relationship, which he describes as 'emotionally abusive' and 'toxic', broke

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[4] 36.3% of people in this area are identified as working class (semi and unskilled manual workers). All demographics by postcode identified through https://www.postcodearea.co.uk/

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down. He explained that he felt able to share a more vulnerable side of himself within this community, to embrace a 'queer' as well as 'gay' identity, and to explore polyamorous relationships. The Fae Revolutionaries are a worldwide network that originated in the U.S. in the 1970s, during a time when the gay rights movement was gaining momentum in the U.S., as part of a broader civil rights movement concerned with racial, gender, and sexual equality. To elaborate in Tony's own words:

> [The Fae Revolutionaries] is sort of counter-cultural, alternative, quite hippy but not exclusively, might be described as queer rather than LGBT. It started in America, was mostly men to start with but it's actually getting a lot more diverse these days. It's kind've a rejection of heteronormativity basically… Revolutionaries are more likely to say 'actually we don't wanna get married, we want to have polyamorous relationships and we want to make our own rules and not fit into the rules that society kind've might allow us to go along with'. It's more a kind've celebration of that, [of] our otherness.

Tony describes the Revolutionaries as his people, sometimes his kin, and as a diverse, open and accepting community to which he feels a firm sense of belonging. He connects with other Revolutionaries both through social media, and face-to-face, at 'gatherings', or in smaller groups of friends and partners he has met through the network. The analysis and discussion below will explore how, in a significant moment from the interview data, local normativities within this community have influenced Tony's assured self-positioning as a gay man, but have also precipitated some conflict in terms of his positioning as a parent.

4. Analysis

4.1. Language troubles: Peter

As noted above, Peter told me he'd had an 'easy time of being gay' and experienced very little discrimination. Further, when I asked about his identity as a gay parent, he said he 'wouldn't think to use that label', explaining that his sexuality didn't have a particular impact on his sense of self as a parent. The excerpts below are taken from a twelve-minute section near the beginning of our third interview, where we returned to the theme of Peter's sexuality. 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 '[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 for Peter. 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 ri<u>di</u>culous< 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 <u>not</u> 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 <u>his</u> 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*

When telling this small story, Peter's talk is peppered with fillers, hedges, hesitation, repetition and exclamations (*gosh,* line 4; *oh god,* line 5), framing the account as an uncomfortable one for him to recall. When positioning himself as a character in the story world (level 1 positioning), Peter's reference to *language* (line 6), together with evaluative lexical choices that position him as clumsy with and embarrassed about this language (*fumbled*, line 5; *ridiculous*, line 7), identify words themselves as the source of his discomfort – specifically, not having easy access to words that would explain his relationship and family. Peter further positions himself as clumsy and inarticulate 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 the words to correct his acquaintance, Jack, and specify his relationship with his partner. By contrast, he positions Jack as relaxed and accepting when he says 'Jack… wasn't even gonna (.) blink at it' (line 7-8). As he steps out of the story world to evaluate his actions (line 7), Peter consolidates an antagonistic position in relation to his past self through the repetition of *just*, further berating himself by implying the situation was simple, and he had found it unnecessarily difficult.

At this moment, *language* functions as an important mechanism for Peter's self-positioning, not only in the worlds of the story and the interview (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, Peter's struggle between the heteronorms that position him as *other* and his desire not to be marked out as different. Peter's positioning of himself at the heart of this struggle sheds some light on his assertion

that he has not faced discrimination, despite the many examples of discrimination that he offers throughout our interviews. By minimising the role of others, and of wider social norms and structures, Peter is able to downplay any malicious or exclusionary intent, and thus protect himself from harm.

Shortly after this initial story of linguistic struggle, Peter tells two small stories where the words to describe his family come more easily. In both cases, he suggests 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.

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 <u>first</u> asked h. is when Lu was a f- <u>couple</u> 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 <u>oh</u> where's the mother**

5 J *mmhmm*

6 P *(0.5) I think I've told you this*

7 J *<u>yeah</u> [you did]*

8 P   *[erm and] I said erm oh it's j- it's just us (.) and that's xp. I think <u>ba</u>sically how*

9   *I >see it so it's like< o:h we're just (0.3) two ↑dads↑ that's it yeah*

Here, Peter tells a story in which an unknown character, 'some bloke', makes a hearably threatening, sexist and homophobic comment after seeing Peter and Malc with their newborn baby, while they were still in the U.S. Peter also told this story in our first interview, where he framed it as a humorous example of people 'over-prying into our specifics' and 'taking interest in a rarity' (extract 3). In this telling he positioned the stranger (level 1 positioning)

as harmless, framing his comment with the mitigating statement '[he was] just a:sking' (line 2), and rounding off the telling with the nonchalant 'off we went', followed by laughter (line 4).

Extract 3. 'it's just the three of us'

1 P   *some (.) old bloke shouted across the street where's @the mother@ (1) a:nd just*

2   **inquis-* just a:sking not like (.) er i he was just a:sking (0.5) and (.) and (.) I s*

3   *shouted back s like *oh it's just the three of us* (.) and he replied @how modern@ (.)*

4   *and then off we went @@@*

In both of these tellings, Peter positions his family (level 1 positioning) as unremarkable and unmarked. Through the relational identifying clauses 'it's just us' (extract 2 line 8), and 'it's just the three of us' (extract 3 line 3), he names his family unit without using a lexical noun or category, thus positioning them as both unique, because he implies they cannot be adequately named with a generic term, yet also unremarkable, since any family could use the non-specific pronoun 'us' to name themselves. In extract 2, he 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*.

The fact that Peter tells the story twice over the course of our interviews suggests that the incident had a lasting effect on him, especially his sense of how his family might be perceived by others. However, through these tellings, Peter downplays its significance, taking control of the way he is positioned in the story world (level 1), and the way he presents himself to me in the interview (level 2), by glossing over any implication of threat, othering or victimisation. By doing so, he works to preserve and protect both his own sense, and my sense as an outsider, of his family's dignity and legitimacy. The fact that this incident took

place at all, and at such a vulnerable point in Peter and Malc's transition to parenthood, provides some indication as to why this kind of self-preservation may be so important for Peter. However, it also shows that full acceptance and unmarked homonormative assimilation, in the eyes of others at least, remains an ideal that is not yet fully realised for Peter and his family.

The third story (extract 4) is a generalised telling of how Peter names his partner, Malc, to others. This is prompted by Peter's reflections on his desire, as a Christian, to marry Malc in church, which they are currently unable to do.

Extract 4. '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 <u>hus</u>band although*

2   *actually in s I <u>have</u> 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   *e<u>a</u>sier 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 this story, Peter reflects on his use of the category *husband* (lines 1 and 8), as well as referring to *marriage* (line 3), even though he and Malc 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. His use of a *knot* metaphor (*ties… up*) implies, like the naming of his family as *just us* in the second story, that these expressions distil his identity and relationships in a simple and concise way – a remedy to his concern that he doesn't 'have anything particularly succinct' to describe his family (extract 1, line 1). The ease with which Peter names Malc as his husband here suggests, again, that he is far more comfortable positioning himself and his family in a way that is unremarkable and unmarked in relation to wider (hetero)normative constructs (level 3 positioning). Nevertheless, the fact that Peter and Malc cannot access marriage on equal terms with opposite-gender couples again complicates his ability to straightforwardly take up an assimilated and unmarked position in a persistently heteronormative and discriminatory context.

4.2. A minority within a minority: Tony

About halfway through our first interview, I asked Tony about his sense of self as a gay parent. As he navigated his response, Tony introduced the Fae Revolutionaries, a queer counter-cultural movement which, as noted above, he connects with very strongly on a number of different levels. However, in this interview he also told a small story about his first experience of a Revolutionary 'gathering' that reveals he did not always feel a secure sense of belonging within this community, because being a father initially felt like a transgression of its local (queer) norms (extract 4).

Extract 4. '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
```

Through his emphatic, unmitigated statement 'I didn't talk about being a parent at all' (line 1), Tony suggests that, at least initially, he tightly controlled his self-presentation at Fae Revolutionary gatherings, withholding any reference to his children or parental status. Thus, Tony positions his past self, as a character in the story world (level 1 positioning), as somewhat constrained in his early involvement with this community. Stepping out of the story world to reflect on this position, Tony explains in line 18 that sharing such information would have 'felt really stra:nge and awkward', positioning his past self as uncomfortable through the intensifier *really*, repetition of *just*, and elongation of the word *strange*. Tony further reflects on his position as a parent within this queer community through comparison with the process of 'coming out' (line 21). Through this analogy, Tony further positions his past self as an outsider, confirming that he initially experienced his parental status as a marked transgression of local norms in this context.

Tony alludes to his reasons for this (level 1) self-positioning as an uncomfortable outsider between lines 8 and 10, when he says 'I don't care (.) if people think I'm: (.) divorced

people think I've had a a wife or a female partner'. Here he acknowledges, and positions himself (level 3 positioning) in opposition with the heteronormative assumption that children are always the product of a romantic, sexual relationship between a man and a woman. This position is clarified in other interviews, where Tony 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 conscious of the discursive entanglement between parenthood and heteronormativity, and that this initially affected his sense of belonging and legitimacy within the Fae Revolutionary community. His phrase 'I was a minority… within that minority' (line 6) succinctly expresses his sense of liminality, whereby his position as a gay father sits in the space between two sets of regulatory norms, one heteronormative and one anti-heteronormative.

In the section transcribed between lines 8 and 16, Tony counters his problematic position in the story world (level 1) as a 'minority within a minority' with a decisive claim to an authentically gay subject position in the here-and-now of the interview (level 2). This self-positioning at level 2 is intertwined with level 3 positioning, whereby Tony draws on norms of authentic gay subjectivity to take up a confident position as a gay man. 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, saying 'I was gay (0.8) *came out when I was 22* never really had a girlfriend and (1) and all that in terms of gay @credentials@@@@ ↑oh no no↑ I'm a proper @homosexual@ @@@@' (lines 13-16). As he makes this claim to an authentic gay identity, Tony adopts a stylised 'gay voice', using prosodic features that are associated with normative perceptions of gay male sexuality, including high pitch intonation on *oh no no,* and careful articulation of the phrases *gay credentials* and *proper homosexual*. Tony's marked use of the pathologising term

homosexual[5], and laughter around both this and *credentials*, further contribute to this parodic style, as if he is engaging in light-hearted mockery of his own very conventionally gay past. This style is markedly different from the rest of his interview talk. Tony's confident and relaxed (level 2) self-positioning as a gay man also affirms his belonging within the Fae Revolutionary community, in contrast with his past stance in the story world. Further, he positions himself in alignment with the local norms of this community (level 3 positioning) where heteronormativity and assimilationist homonormativity are rejected, and 'otherness' is celebrated.

5. Discussion

The above analysis shows that Peter and Tony have experienced different sets of normative discourses in their encounters with others, and have negotiated these discourses in different ways, through their telling of 'small stories' in an interview context. In order to understand the complexity of these discursive relations and negotiations, it has been important to consider Peter and Tony's individual lives and situations, including not just their gender and sexuality, but also factors such as their age, class and race, and especially their social and support networks.

Through Peter's small stories, he works to minimise his difference from heterosexual couples and families, taking up positions such as 'husband' and 'dad' with ease, and downplaying incidents of heteronormative assumption and homophobic threat which are at odds with his desired self-positioning. Further, when he struggles to access language that would adequately capture his sense of self in relation to wider social structures, Peter places *himself* at the heart of this struggle, as someone who is clumsy with language, rather than

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[5] As noted by Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013), the word 'homosexual' never completely lost its pathologising implications.

contesting the heteronormative structures that limit his access to adequate words and categories.

Peter's self-positioning echoes that of Jones' (2018: 61) young LGBT participants, one of whom revealed that she hated 'labels' such as lesbian or dyke, preferring to describe herself as 'normal, like everybody else'. However, in contrast with Jones' working-class participants, an assimilated, homonormative position is well within Peter's reach. He and Malc have access to the significant financial resources needed for international surrogacy, and he has the privilege of being a White, cis, middle-class British man. Further, Peter is supported by a strong network of family and friends who, by and large, show him a great deal of support, care, love and understanding, and he socialises in liberal work and educational contexts, at a time when LGBT rights have progressed significantly in the UK. These are all important factors that have likely influenced Peter's access to, and preference for, the homonormative position of an integrated, 'normal' citizen. Nevertheless, and in common with Jones' (2018) participants, the analysis shows that an assimilated position as a gay parent and partner is *not* fully realised for Peter, as evidenced by the attitudes and presumptions that he and Malc encounter from specific individuals, as well as their institutional exclusion from Christian marriage.

The comment 'where's the mother?' is a particularly potent symbol of the homophobic treatment that gay parents like Peter and Malc continue to encounter, painfully illustrating that homonormativity, as imagined by Duggan (2002), is no guarantee of inclusive sexual citizenship. This accusation also marks a point of overlap with sexist discourses that exclude fathers from the role of primary caregiver, and may equally be damaging to single or stay-at-home fathers of any sexual orientation. In light of this dual sexist and homophobic discrimination, Peter's homonormative stance may be read both as a position of privilege, but also what Jones (2018) calls a survival strategy, and Goldberg

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(2012) describes as protection from attack, allowing him to preserve and protect his sense of autonomy and pride in the face of potential threats to his family's legitimacy and safety.

Both Peter and Tony describe and negotiate others' heteronormative presumptions through their telling of small stories. However, the way Tony positions himself in response, assertively claiming an 'authentic' gay subject position, bears a striking contrast to Peter's more homonormative self-positioning. The differences between the two men may be symptomatic of wider shifts in gay, queer and heterosexual culture in the UK, in the 25 years between their socialisation as young gay men. As Tony explained, he came out in the late 1980s, a time before the rise of sexual equality, acceptance and assimilationist homonormativity in the UK. He also explains that, as a young gay man, he had a lot of lesbian and gay friends, and used to talk with them about the possibilities of queer, communal, family formations. Queer communities such as the Fae Revolutionaries have continued to play an important role in Tony's life as protected and safe spaces, and he has continued to challenge convention, as evident in his identification with queer, as well as gay, subjectivity, and his polyamory.

For Tony, the rejection of heteronormative structures and traditions such as marriage, monogamy and the nuclear family has been important for his sense of belonging in the queer Fae Revolutionary community. His long-standing connection with both this, and other queer networks, is likely to have a bearing on Tony's self-positioning as an 'authentic' gay man. Conversely, Tony has experienced some conflict around his position as a *parent,* where a perceived clash between the heteronormative associations that come with being a father, and the anti-normative stance of the Fae Revolutionary community, affected his ability to confidently position himself within this sphere. However, despite the ambivalence and conflict that is related in his small story, Tony has been able to overcome initial hurdles of feeling like 'a minority within a minority' as a parent in a queer space, ultimately finding

solace with the Fae Revolutionaries, where the multiple facets of his life are accepted and embraced.

As well as revealing insights about Peter and Tony's local negotiations of normative structures, this article has also shown how small stories can be important resources as they make sense of their experiences, and position themselves in a wider social context. The explanatory power of storying resources may be particularly relevant for gay and other LGBT parents, whose positions can be complex and difficult to express given their 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 Peter and Tony, these three levels rarely operate in isolation, with level 3 positioning nearly always intersecting with 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.

6. Conclusion

This article makes three key contributions to queer linguistic research. First, its focus on gay male parents opens up space for further discussion around the experiences of this underexplored group, as well as other forms of queer family and parenthood. To a degree, it confirms the findings of existing sociological and psychological research, which suggests that gay parents are often positioned in a liminal space between multiple and intersecting normative discourses of gender, sexuality and the family, leading to potential conflict as they work to position themselves as authentic partners, parents, and/or gay men. However, the article's close linguistic analysis of two participants' small stories also reveals important insights about the specific and nuanced forms such conflict can take, depending on

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individuals' circumstances and experiences. In Peter and Tony's case, I find that their age, early experiences as young gay men, and the nature (especially the local norms) of their social and support networks have a significant influence on their negotiation of, and orientation towards, different normative discourses. Thus, the article also contributes to ongoing conversations in queer linguistic research (e.g. Cashman 2019; Jones 2018; Levon 2014) around how normative discourses are constructed and negotiated in local contexts, and how attention to individuals' multiple and intersectional positions can help to unravel these complexities. Finally, the analysis suggests 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 valuable resources for making sense of their positions in the world, in relation to the full complexity of their social and familial lives.

Appendix: transcription key

(.)   micro pause (less than 0.3 seconds)

(1.5)   timed pause

[   ]   overlapping speech

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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
:	extended sound (number of units indicates duration)
( )	transcriber comment
=	latching (no pause between speaker turns)
.	end of intonation unit (falling intonation)
↑words↑	high pitch

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