

# ALL IN THE FAMILY: FATHERHOOD AND FAMILY DIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The growing body of South African research on fatherhood has considered its social and cultural significance, especially in relation to gender, class, race and heterosexuality. Far less attention has been given to fathers who identify as other than heterosexual. *Tracy Morison, Ingrid Lynch and Vasu Reddy* discuss some findings from their Ford Foundation-funded research on fatherhood, which turns the spotlight on gay and bisexual men, and explain why encouraging family diversity is important for us all.



Less than a decade ago there was virtually no South African research on fatherhood. The HSRC's *Fatherhood Project* was a significant development in research focused on fatherhood, and produced the landmark book *Baba: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*. Another catalyst for research was South African scholars' growing awareness of how the sociocultural role of fathers shaped gender relations between women and men – for example the pioneering book *Changing Men in Southern Africa* by Robert Morrell. Men's general failure to contribute significantly to childcare remains a barrier to women's full participation in society and the labour market. Not only is this a hurdle to gender equity, it also impacts on the types of fathering relationships that men are able to enjoy.

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Research has shown that in order to encourage male involvement in childcare, the concept of 'care' must be stripped of its gender bias. We therefore need to expand current understandings of what it means to be a man and a father, so as to include nurturing and caring. Same-gendered parenting helps to expand norms in fresh ways. It challenges us to rethink our understandings of traditional masculine gender roles, family and parenting, and provides models for all families that move us away from the gendered division of parenting. This may allow heterosexual women and men more space to negotiate traditional roles. It is necessary to increase the visibility of gay and bisexual men in relation to families, as these men remain marginal both socially and in research, especially in South Africa.

<sup>i</sup> This term refers broadly to people who do not identify as heterosexual or who are gender non-conforming.

## Our research on queer<sup>i</sup> fatherhood

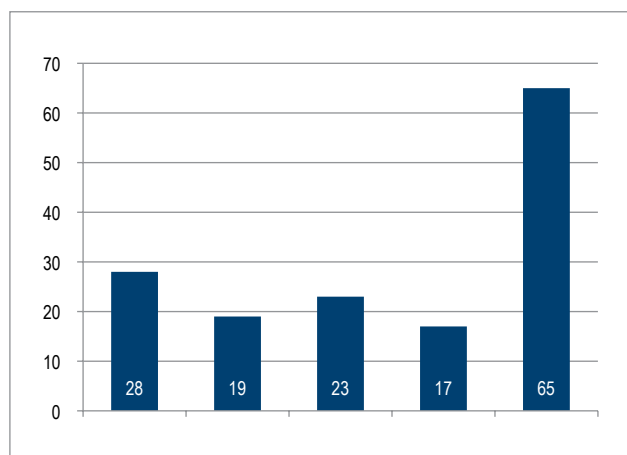
Responding to this research gap, our research explored queer men's views on, and experiences of, fatherhood, in relation to (1) their motivations to become a parent; (2) related decision making; and (3) the barriers and opportunities to fatherhood. We began the study with an exploration of public discourses and representations of same-gendered families<sup>ii</sup> in South African mainstream media. The media, and especially news media, forms part of the backdrop for queer men's experiences, and plays a significant role in constructing and challenging contemporary politics.

## Representations of queer families and fathers in the media

Media studies scholar, Jean Prinsloo, argues that there has been very little representation of fathers in South African media, and the images that do exist are often negative (e.g. of uninvolved or violent fathers). However, says Prinsloo, the media 'could enable creative engagement with a broader repertoire of images. They (sic) could expand how we imagine the world and how we envisage relating and caring'. We were therefore interested in the 'repertoire of images' in our media, especially those of same-gendered families, and gay fathers in particular. We conducted a content analysis of 152 articles published in South African newspapers and magazines from 1985 to 2014<sup>iii</sup> and considered, inter alia, the main topic and subject of the article as well as its tone.

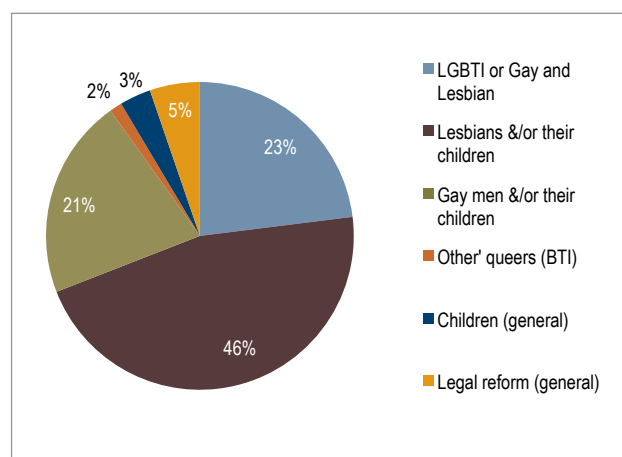
We identified several common topics that were covered by the press (Figure 1 on page 22). The most common by far was of the struggles of lesbians and gay men to form families and/or to attain civil rights. In keeping with this trend, the most common topics that followed were general discussions of marriage and parenthood among homosexual persons, and the possible effects on children growing up with gay or lesbian parents. In comparison, however, the voices of the actual parents and children were represented far less than those of courts, various experts (like psychologists and social workers) and the general public.

Figure 1: Main topic



We investigated who these stories tended to be about (Figure 2). It was possible to see that the majority of articles focused on families with lesbian mothers. In contrast, articles that concentrated exclusively on gay men and their children formed only 21% of the sample. Furthermore, the subjects of the articles, regardless of sexuality, were most often urban, affluent, white, gay men and lesbians.

Figure 2: Main focus



We also explored the framing of the article, assessing whether overall it conveyed a tone that was negative and oppositional toward same-gendered parenting; positive and/or generally supportive of same-gendered parenting; or generally attempting to be balanced or neutral. The general trend was that most of the stories were either written in an overtly positive way or in a way that was intended to be balanced (Table 1).

Table 1: Framing

Tone (n = 152)	#	%
Negative/oppositional	20	13.2
Positive/supportive	70	46.1
Balanced (neutral)	62	40.7
Total	152	100

## What the findings showed

Our findings confirmed those of other studies on fatherhood and same-gendered families, pointing to the low visibility of gay fathers in mainstream media and the near invisibility of bisexual fathers. They also shed light on the type and quality of representations. Not only did the reportage we analysed fail to capture the voices of persons living in same-gendered families, especially those of men, but it did not contain much diversity. The focus on the struggles of gay men and lesbians, while newsworthy, did not reflect the range of experiences of queer families, and failed to show the positive aspects of their lives. Further, the socially privileged families that tended to be featured in articles did not necessarily represent experiences of other families; of those who were from different cultures and classes, and those who had 'non-traditional' forms.

<sup>ii</sup> Families in which the parent/s identify as other than heterosexual.

<sup>iii</sup> This time-frame was chosen because it encompassed a period of significant legal reform in South Africa, including the right for homosexuals to adopt (in 2002) and to enter into civil unions (in 2006).

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Another noteworthy finding related to the predominantly positive and/or balanced reporting. This potentially allowed for traditional, gendered ideas of 'the family' to be expanded and for greater family diversity. Yet, on closer inspection, we found that while articles were framed by a tone of liberal tolerance, they simultaneously subtly promoted heterosexism. Heterosexual families were held as the so-called gold standard, with same-gendered families being described as being as good as heterosexual families, usually because the children turned out to be 'normal' heterosexuals.

Similarly, as Bruce Bawer writes in *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society*, supposedly balanced articles actually privileged heterosexuality by treating same-gendered families 'as something to argue about and worry about, as opposed to something to think about and learn about: it [therefore] becomes a hot political issue, something with two inflexible opposing sides'. The heterosexual nuclear family and its traditional gender roles thus remained idealised without challenging the status quo.

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### **Moving beyond the 'gold standard'**

To help change perceptions and shift norms, society requires more varied representations of families and experiences. We need to hear the voices of those living in same-gendered families, not just their struggle stories and not only from those who correspond to the ideal heterosexual family, namely two-parent, white and middle-class families.

Above all, we need reporting that does not use the heterosexual nuclear family as a 'gold standard' for all. We must, in fact, acknowledge that in reality this standard is actually fairly recent, that most South African families do not conform to it, and that it often fosters inequity and violence, as shown by domestic violence statistics. Instead, we must embrace different concept families, like those modelled by gay and bisexual fathers. ■

*Authors: Dr Tracy Morison, senior research specialist, Human and Social Development (HSD) programme, HSRC; Dr Ingrid Lynch, post-doctoral fellow, HSD, HSRC; and Professor Vasu Reddy, executive director, HSD, HSRC.*