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When Neither Parent Is the Mother: Gendered Parenting and the “Gender-Disguised Capital Hierarchy” in a Taiwanese Gay-Father Family

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Abstract

Introduction: Families are children's first pedagogical site, yet research on the division of parenting labor rests on a heteronormative template that positions the mother as the default pedagogical laborer. This study asks how educational and caring labor is assigned when the maternal position is structurally vacant, and through which mechanism a caring/providing hierarchy is re-inscribed in the absence of sex difference.

Methods: Using constructivist narrative inquiry and a pair research design, we conducted separate in-depth interviews with both members of a Taiwanese gay couple—two school counselors with feminist commitments raising an adopted daughter. Interviewing partners individually and then juxtaposing their accounts allowed identification of "zones of discordance." The household was purposively selected as a least-likely case for the persistence of gendered parenting, supporting analytic rather than statistical generalization.

Results: The fathers dismantled the gendered division of household labor, yet educational and caring labor came to follow asymmetries in academic capital. The doctorate-holding partner assumed pedagogical guidance and career priority; daily caregiving and its psychological burden accrued to the partner with fewer credentials. Their gender-education practices with their daughter remained constrained by binary framings even as maternal care was reassigned across fathers.

Conclusions: Parenting can remain gendered without gender difference. Where sex cannot sort parents into teaching and caring roles, credentials may—a mechanism we theorize as the "gender-disguised capital hierarchy."

Policy Implications: Adoption assessment and parenting-education programs should not evaluate same-sex households against heterosexual complementarity, and should attend to capital-based inequality within them. School and counseling systems that presuppose a maternal primary caregiver require revision, and continuing-education support for primary caregivers warrants policy attention.

Introduction

Long before children enter classrooms, they are already being educated. The family constitutes the first and most consequential pedagogical site, where children acquire not only dispositions toward schooling but the foundational curriculum of gender itself—who cares, who provides, whose labor is visible, and whose is taken for granted (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lareau, 2011). Feminist scholarship in the sociology of education has shown that this domestic curriculum is transmitted less through explicit instruction than through the organization of everyday parenting practices: children learn gender by watching who does what at home (Oakley, 1974; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Parenting, in this sense, is not merely the context of education but one of its primary forms—and the division of parenting labor is itself a hidden curriculum.

Yet research on this domestic curriculum has been built almost entirely on a heteronormative template. Studies of parental involvement, concerted cultivation, and home–school relations routinely presuppose a mother–father household, and within it, the mother as the default pedagogical laborer—the parent who manages homework, emotions, schedules, and schools (Reay, 1998; Lareau, 2011). This presupposition has left a basic question untheorized: when the mother position is structurally vacant, how is pedagogical labor assigned? Research on same-sex households has documented that domestic labor remains unequally distributed even without gender difference, typically along lines of earnings and work hours (Carrington, 1999; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007), and that same-sex families may reproduce the gendered divisions of their families of origin (Tseng, 2019). But this literature has addressed housework far more than child-rearing, and it has established the persistence of inequality without theorizing its mechanism of re-inscription—how, and through which forms of capital, the caring/providing hierarchy reconstitutes itself when neither parent can be assigned the maternal position by default. Bourdieu's (1986) account of cultural capital in its institutionalized state—educational credentials—offers a candidate mechanism of particular relevance to education scholars: where gender cannot sort parents into pedagogical roles, credentials may. Following the practice turn in gender scholarship—the recognition that gender is something people do rather than something they are (West & Zimmerman, 1987)—we treat "gendered" as a property of scripts and hierarchies rather than of the bodies that enact them; parenting practices can thus remain gendered even when performed by two men.

A second strand of literature complicates the question from the opposite direction. Research on gay fatherhood proposes that gay fathers "degender" parenting, practicing care outside the father/mother binary (Schacher et al., 2005; Berkowitz, 2011). Yet when studies observe same-sex families reproducing conventional arrangements (Chang, 2008; Chen, 2016), the finding is typically framed as incomplete liberation rather than analyzed through Duggan's (2002) lens of homonormativity: the selective replication of dominant family norms by sexual minorities in pursuit of social recognition. For family-based education this lens matters because it relocates the explanation from deficient consciousness to the structural price of legitimacy—and predicts that norm reproduction will be most pronounced around child-rearing, the terrain on which same-sex families are most intensely scrutinized as families.

Taiwan provides a strategic setting. Since the Enforcement Act of Judicial Yuan Interpretation No. 748 (2019), same-sex partners have been able to marry—2,493 couples by 2022, including 699 male couples (Ministry of the Interior Gender Statistics Database, 2023)—and a 2023 amendment permitted joint adoption of non-biological children. Yet these families pursue parenthood within a Confucian familial order of entrenched role expectations and intergenerational obligations, facing administrative complexity, scrutiny, and stigma in adoption (Chen & Yu, 2021; Wang et al., 2017).

This article examines these questions through a critical case: a Taiwanese household in which two fathers—both school counselors with explicit feminist commitments—jointly raise an adopted daughter. Following Flyvbjerg's (2006) logic of the least-likely case, this is a household in which the gendered organization of pedagogical labor should be hardest to find: sex difference is absent, both partners possess professional vocabularies for reflexive self-scrutiny, and both consciously reject gendered

parenting scripts. We ask: in a household where both parents are male and both possess feminist consciousness, do gendered parenting practices persist—and if so, does academic capital reconstitute the caring/providing division that gender once organized, producing what we term a “gender-disguised capital hierarchy”? And what do the two fathers' practices of raising a daughter reveal about how gender is taught when no parent embodies it by default?

Literature Review

The Family as a Pedagogical Site: Parenting as a Hidden Curriculum of Gender

The sociology of education has long placed the family at the center of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Lareau's (2011) account of concerted cultivation demonstrates that parenting is a class-differentiated educational practice: scheduling enrichment, managing homework, and negotiating with schools are forms of labor through which advantage is transmitted. Reay (1998) shows that this labor is profoundly gendered—mothers overwhelmingly perform the practical, emotional, and cognitive work of supporting children's schooling, so that “parental involvement” has often functioned, empirically, as a euphemism for maternal labor. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) similarly locate the kitchen and living room as sites of regulation and instruction in which daughters, in particular, are socialized into gendered subjecthood.

Drawing these strands together, this study employs the concept of pedagogical labor to denote the educational dimension of parenting: educational decision-making (schools, enrichment, curricula), instructional labor (homework guidance, shared reading, the curation of learning materials), and the everyday emotional labor through which children's learning and identity are sustained. Pedagogical labor overlaps with, but is analytically distinct from, housework: both belong to reproductive labor, yet pedagogical labor carries the additional symbolic weight of shaping the child's trajectory—and, in heteronormative households, has been assigned to the mother position by default. The question this study pursues is what happens to that assignment when the mother position is structurally vacant.

Fatherhood and Motherhood: A Feminist Critique

Parenting encompasses caregiving, childrearing, environmental structuring, and emotional bonding (Chuang et al., 2010), yet it has traditionally been equated with motherhood: mothers are positioned as primary caregivers, and deficits in “maternal functions” are blamed for children's difficulties (Huang, 2006)—a discourse rooted in biological determinism (Abbott et al., 2005). Feminist scholarship counters that motherhood is a culturally constructed role shaped by patriarchal systems rather than an innate instinct (Ku, 1996; Oakley, 1974), and that caregiving should be shared between parents (Chen & Guo, 1998).

Fatherhood, correspondingly, has evolved beyond economic provision. Gerson (1997) identifies three coexisting orientations in contemporary fatherhood: the “primary earner” responsible for economic provision, the “autonomous orientation” pursuing personal freedom with limited family involvement, and the “nurturing father” actively building emotional intimacy with children. Studies of first-time fathers likewise show that fatherhood identity is shaped by societal expectations and family-of-origin experiences, with emotional involvement strengthening as interaction with children increases (Hsiao, 2020). Synthesizing feminist theory and men's studies, Wang (2007) identifies emotional engagement, education, housework, employment, and nurturance as domains of fathering. Following this literature, this study conceptualizes fatherhood beyond economic responsibility, across three dimensions—domestic labor, childrearing practices, and emotional engagement—with childrearing analyzed through the lens of pedagogical labor defined above.

Constraints of Patriarchal Structures on Parenting Practices

Traditional Taiwanese family structures are deeply patriarchal: caregiving and emotional labor are naturalized as women's work while men are assigned paid work (Hudak & Giammattei, 2014), a division legitimized through biological difference and gender norms (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011) and reinforced, rather than dissolved, by interaction with capitalist systems (Lu & Yi, 2005). Relative resource theory holds that housework—low-status, unpaid—falls to the family member with fewer material resources (Ross, 1987); time availability theory ties the division to working hours (Lee et al., 2000); and education and occupational status shape priorities, with doctoral capital in particular increasing the likelihood of prioritizing work over domestic tasks (Walker & Yoon, 2017). Yet recent studies also document highly involved fathers who willingly break traditional expectations to learn caregiving, whereas excessive work produces emotional distance—underscoring emotional engagement as a key component of fathering (Wang, 2000; Lu et al., 2018).

Capital Hierarchy as a Substitute for Gender Hierarchy: A Theoretical Extension

A central theoretical concern of this study is whether the patriarchal logic that organizes household labor operates exclusively through the axis of biological sex, or whether it can be transposed onto other axes of stratification when sex difference is absent. Relative resource and time availability theories were developed to explain heterosexual households, where the resource gap between husband and wife typically aligned with the gender hierarchy of patriarchal society; same-sex households decouple the two.

Bourdieu's (1986) framework of multiple capitals—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—extends these arguments to same-sex households, and its relevance to education scholarship is direct: the capitals were developed to explain educational reproduction, and here they explain the reproduction of the educator position within the family itself. Following Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital in its

institutionalized state, we use “academic capital” to denote the credential-based form of cultural and symbolic capital that educational qualifications confer; within the academic labor market, Walker and Yoon (2017) specify its most concentrated form as doctoral capital. Within a household, the partner who possesses or is acquiring doctoral capital can plausibly invoke a “priority investment” logic—the implicit family agreement that the high-capital partner's career advancement be temporarily protected, even at the cost of the other partner's labor and aspirations.

Synthesizing these resources, we propose: in same-sex households where partners share egalitarian gender ideologies, asymmetries in academic and economic capital may emerge as the primary organizing principle of household and pedagogical labor, producing a functionally patriarchal arrangement without invoking gender as its explicit justification—the gender-disguised capital hierarchy introduced above. This proposition shifts the analytical focus from whether same-sex families escape gender norms to how patriarchal logics are reorganized when gender is removed as an organizing axis, and offers a transferable proposition open to examination in subsequent comparative research.

Parenting Practices in Same-Sex Families

Same-sex families experience parenthood as a deliberate choice involving intensive deliberation, shaped by support networks and by the social prejudice that sexual minorities cannot be good parents (Wall, 2013). International research consistently shows that children raised in same-sex families do not differ from peers in heterosexual families in health, peer relationships, academic achievement, or gender identity (Goldberg, 2007; Potter, 2012; Patterson, 2013), and school-based LGBTQ+ education reduces stigma without influencing students' sexual orientation (Lin et al., 2004).

The notion of “degendering parenting” was first articulated by Schacher, Auerbach, and Silverstein (2005), whose study of openly gay fathers proposed that, by degendering parenting and reworking masculine roles, gay fathers expand role norms in ways that may serve as models for all families. Building on this formulation, Berkowitz (2011) finds that role negotiation within gay father families often transcends traditional notions of fatherhood and motherhood:

We are neither mothers nor fathers; we are simply parents. We assume responsibilities traditionally associated with mothers and practices typically associated with fathers... We have freed ourselves from gendered parental roles and norms... Without rigid models to follow, we parent more freely, often better than our own parents did. (Berkowitz, 2011: 526)

Taiwanese studies echo this fluidity: gay fathers assume both work and caregiving responsibilities after marriage, adjusting roles by context and partner expectation (Lin, 2007), and conceptualizing “fatherhood” as gender-neutral “parenting” reduces the constraints of existing gender frameworks (Hsu, 2016). Neresheimer and Daum (2021) similarly report higher cooperation and less adherence to traditional gender patterns among gay fathers, with support from families of origin, LGBTQ+ networks, and organizational resources helping loosen gender boundaries. Yet traces of fatherhood/motherhood

differentiation may re-emerge even where parenting is not explicitly divided by gender (Hsiao, 2015), and not all same-sex families escape patriarchal structures: some gay-father families reproduce patriarchal roles with little gender reflexivity (Chang, 2008), and reproductive and childrearing practices remain shaped by heteronormative culture (Chen, 2016).

Three limitations of the de-gendered parenting framework (Schacher et al., 2005; Berkowitz, 2011) warrant examination before applying it to non-Western contexts: its empirical base of white, middle-class American fathers whose “de-gendering” rests on specific cultural-economic resources; its focus on identity and discourse at the expense of structural reproduction through non-gendered axes (capital, time); and a celebratory tone risking “queer exceptionalism”—the implicit claim that same-sex families are inherently more egalitarian—that empirical studies have begun to complicate (Carrington, 1999; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007).

The present study therefore draws on homonormativity (Duggan, 2002)—the process by which sexual minorities, in seeking acceptance and legal recognition, selectively reproduce rather than challenge the dominant family form. This lens moves beyond the binary of “liberation versus reproduction”: rather than asking whether participants escape patriarchal norms, we analyze the specific patterns of selective reproduction—which scripts they dismantle, which they unconsciously reproduce, and which they strategically adapt.

Taken together, this study sits at the intersection of the sociology-of-education scholarship on the family as a pedagogical site, capital-based accounts of household inequality, and queer scholarship on gay fatherhood. We treat the Taiwanese dual-counselor gay family not as a test of whether Western models of “de-gendered” parenting hold or fail, but as an analytic site for examining how gender, capital, and cultural context jointly shape the labor of raising and educating a child in an East Asian society where Confucian patriarchal legacies remain influential.

Methodology

This study adopts a constructivist narrative inquiry approach, which holds that social reality is constructed and that narratives express individuals' subjective interpretations of lived experience (Niew, 2014). The core method was the individual in-depth interview: interviewing each father separately captured narratives free from a partner's immediate influence. Participants recounted their parenting across three dimensions: (1) household labor, from family-of-origin context to the division of tasks after family formation; (2) parenting practices, including childcare roles, expectations, and consultation sources—with particular attention to pedagogical labor: educational decision-making, homework guidance, shared reading, and the selection of learning materials; and (3) emotional dimensions, exploring parent–child connection and reflections on fatherhood and motherhood.

Building on these independently captured narratives, the study employed the pair research design (Thompson & Walker, 1982), which examines norms, interactions, power dynamics, and conflicts

between partners rather than individual perspectives alone. The couple's narratives were cross-examined to identify similarities and differences in their accounts of daily parenting and negotiation.

This combination is not merely procedural but constitutes a distinctive analytical contribution of this study. Joint interviews tend to produce a “public couple narrative”—a smoothed-over account jointly negotiated in front of the researcher—while standalone individual interviews capture each partner's perspective without the relational referent. The pair design instead juxtaposes two separately produced narratives to identify zones of discordance—where partners describe identical events in subtly or substantially different ways—treated not as factual errors to reconcile but as analytically privileged sites for examining invisible labor, contested perceptions of fairness, and the micro-politics of intimate negotiation. In same-sex family research the design has additional value: it disrupts the implicit researcher tendency to read same-sex couples through a heteronormative father–mother template, by foregrounding the relational dynamics between two same-gender partners on their own terms. Producing two parallel narratives, rather than a single “family narrative,” resists the unconscious imposition of complementary heteronormative roles at the level of data collection, not merely at the level of analysis.

Participants

Rather than sampling for statistical representativeness, this study deliberately selected a unique, dual-counselor gay father family as a “revelatory case” (Yin, 2018). More precisely, following Flyvbjerg's (2006) logic of case selection, this household constitutes a least-likely case for the reproduction of gendered parenting scripts: sex difference is absent, both partners possess professional vocabularies for reflexive self-scrutiny, and both consciously reject gendered divisions of labor. If gendered scripts of caring and providing nonetheless reappear—reassigned through academic capital rather than sex—the case provides unusually strong grounds for the theoretical proposition, a form of analytic leverage that does not depend on sample size. While the study focuses on a single family unit (N = 2 fathers), it pursues analytic rather than statistical generalization: the fathers' high academic capital and psychological training afford a rare, highly reflexive lens into the micro-politics of non-heteronormative parenting, yielding thick description transferable to similar cultural contexts but invisible in aggregate data. Participant information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Personality Traits
Meng	40s	PhD	School counselor	Introverted, analytical
Jiang	30s	Master's program (incomplete)	School counselor	Extroverted, emotional

Jiang and Meng, five years apart in age, both work as secondary school counselors. Jiang legally adopted their daughter at six months old, after a year-long assessment, before the legalization of same-

sex marriage; once joint adoption became possible, the couple married and completed joint adoption when she was two. At interview she was five and a half. During the interviews, Meng presented as meticulous and organized, narrating events with clear cause-and-effect logic; his upright posture and confident reflections conveyed a calm, composed temperament, suggesting a primarily rational disposition. Jiang, by contrast, sat casually on the sofa, snacking while responding; expressive and candid, his gentle tone would rise with emotion, and he appeared visibly moved when recounting difficult experiences, revealing a rich emotional sensitivity.

The couple met in a university gender studies club and agreed early to adopt. They undertook a lengthy adoption journey—parenting courses, social-worker evaluations, advocacy around the Implementation Act—while facing prejudice toward same-sex families. They practiced “trial fatherhood” by visiting friends with young children, role-playing caregiving through psychodrama, and joining lesbian mothers' groups; after adoption, they sought marital counseling when disagreements arose.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed three stages: holistic reading of complete transcripts to grasp each father's story and its critical turns (e.g., the adoption decision, the dissertation crisis); categorical-content open coding into core categories such as “household labor negotiation,” “gendered parenting beliefs,” and “emotional fluidity,” iterating between data and theory; and dyadic analysis juxtaposing Meng's and Jiang's accounts of identical events to isolate zones of discordance, preserved rather than smoothed over and read as indicators of invisible labor and ongoing negotiation. Investigator triangulation was maintained through regular comparison of coding and reflexive discussion until consensus.

Results and Discussion

The family's parenting experiences are presented across three domains: (1) household labor practices, (2) parenting and childrearing practices, and (3) emotional practices in parenting.

Household Labor Practices

Gendered Division of Labor in Families of Origin: Inheritance and Transformation

Meng grew up performing household chores, observing and assisting his mother in the kitchen, and internalized early the belief that housework is not exclusively women's responsibility.

Since I was young, I was responsible for housework—sweeping, taking out the trash, washing dishes, cooking, everything. Because my dad and brother didn't know how to cook, I prepared dinner when my mom was at work. I used to sit on the stairs and watch her cook, asking questions while observing.

Eventually, I could cook on my own and became the family's 'little sous-chef,' and this habit continued into adulthood. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

Jiang, by contrast, grew up under the traditional “men work outside, women work inside” model, rarely performing domestic tasks:

I didn't need to do housework at home; my mom did everything. I only kept my personal things organized, and my parents never asked us children to do chores. It wasn't until I joined a gender club in college that I started washing dishes and helping during family gatherings. But even then, I was often stopped by family members when I tried to wash dishes. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Only through gender-related student groups at university did Jiang begin intentionally engaging in housework to challenge his family's gendered norms. Shaped by feminist perspectives, both men now assist their mothers at family gatherings rather than enjoying the privileges traditionally afforded to men—an ethic of everyday equality carried into their married life.

Whose Chores? Degendering the Fatherhood/Motherhood Boundary

After forming their family, the couple did not reproduce gendered divisions; the boundary between “fathering” and “mothering” blurred in daily life.

After Jiang moved in, I started teaching him how to sweep, mop, and clean the bathroom. Then I realized he's even more of a neat freak than I am. He went from not knowing how to do housework to becoming a domestic expert. I felt so blessed—suddenly I didn't need to do so much. I hate washing dishes the most, and now he almost always does it. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

Meng emphasized having taught Jiang domestic tasks—cooking, laundry, cleaning—to ensure equal competence and forestall unequal distribution: housework, he insisted, is not gendered. Jiang became self-sufficient and eventually more exacting than his teacher:

He went from someone who couldn't clean to being extremely particular about cleanliness—it's a huge shift. For example, he didn't know how to wash or hang clothes before. Once I taught him, he became almost obsessive about it—he has rules about how clothes should hang, which side should face out, whether they're drying or being put away. He wants me to follow his method, but honestly, I don't think I've ever hung the clothes in the 'right' direction according to him. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

Tellingly, the researcher initially and unconsciously tried to map the two fathers onto the father/mother binary, reading Meng's domestic competence as “maternal”; observation suggested the opposite—Jiang, who had done no chores growing up, became the more exacting housekeeper, unsettling gendered assumptions about caregiving.

Couples Counseling: When Household Labor Becomes a Barrier to Academic Advancement

After adoption, both fathers pursued graduate degrees while working full time. The combined pressures led Jiang to suspend his master's studies—a period of acknowledged psychological distress—and only after Meng completed his doctorate did Jiang resume graduate school.

Yes, at the beginning things were definitely unbalanced. After adoption (when our daughter was six months old), I was working and studying for my master's at the same time, and I eventually had to withdraw. Now that she's five, I took the entrance exam again and re-enrolled. At the time, I prioritized our child and had to pause my studies to focus on work and childcare. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

During the final stage of Meng's dissertation, Jiang assumed nearly all caregiving and domestic work despite working full time. Although the couple shared egalitarian values, the imbalance produced tension and strain.

The hardest time was the last two months of my dissertation, right during the pandemic. My advisor told me that during those two months I needed Jiang to fully support me so I could finish. That meant he had to take on almost everything... it was really overwhelming. Later, I sought couples counseling. He was also taking medication for depression at the time. Through counseling, we were able to reset and adjust our relationship. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

Even with counseling backgrounds, both fathers experienced stress from imbalanced labor. Jiang's paused studies echoed the familiar gendered narrative of one partner “stepping aside” for another's career—though once his doctorate was complete, Meng acknowledged Jiang's distress, sought help, and renegotiated responsibilities.

Read through the lens of capital, this episode exemplifies the “priority investment” logic theorized above: the household's implicit agreement that the doctorate-holding partner's advancement be temporarily protected, at the cost of the other partner's studies and well-being. Jiang's suspended degree was never justified in gendered terms—no one invoked a wife's duty—yet the structure of the sacrifice was familiar: the lower-capital partner absorbed the reproductive labor that made the higher-capital partner's credential possible, and his own credential was deferred. This is the gender-disguised capital hierarchy in operation, and what was traded was itself educational: one partner's degree was purchased, in part, with the suspension of the other's.

Children as a Source of Imbalance: The Psychological Burden on the Primary Caregiver

Working in different counties, the couple saw daily caregiving and school transport fall to Jiang, whose workplace was nearby; he became the primary caregiver and bore greater strain, while Meng's high cleanliness standards added burdens on his return—prompting the couple to hire a domestic helper.

If fatherhood means earning money and motherhood means housework, then both of us earn and both of us take care of our child. I do more housework, but he contributes in his way—he pays someone to do it. So, we are both taking responsibility, just in different ways: I do it, he hires help. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Weekly outsourcing eased the strain and preserved a sense of fairness; without it, the imbalance would likely have intensified—mirroring dual-income heterosexual families in which the primary caregiver bears the heavier emotional load. In sum, the two fathers enacted a de-gendered mode of household labor severing the link between biological sex and domestic work; yet educational-status differentials produced uneven distribution and strain for the primary caregiver, and their recourse to counseling and outsourcing underscores that domestic labor is a negotiated commitment rather than implicitly female work.

Parenting and Childrearing Practices

Complementary Rational and Emotional Parenting: The Concentration of Pedagogical Labor

Whereas heterosexual families often expect fathers to provide rational guidance and mothers emotional support, this household enacted a complementary but de-gendered version: Meng—more analytical, with a doctorate—guided academic learning and shared reading, while the more expressive Jiang provided companionship and everyday support.

Usually, I'm the one who buys learning materials and educational toys. A friend gave me their home curriculum plan, so I arranged music, reading, singing, games—lots of activities. As a result, I later became the one who bought most of the picture books and did shared reading. Jiang also plays with her, but his side is more focused on fun. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

She gets homework every two weeks. We originally said whoever is free would teach her, but thinking back, it's mostly Meng. I help too, just not as often. Same with picture books—he reads with her more. In comparison, I watch cartoons with her, hunt Pokémon, go to 7-Eleven or the stationery store to buy random things. So mine is more on the fun-and-play side. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Some role differentiation thus persists—Meng anchors structured academic guidance, Jiang everyday emotional care—but it follows temperament and availability rather than biological sex, and the fathers continually renegotiate it.

What the fathers narrate as temperament—Meng “more rational,” Jiang “more fun”—is, viewed analytically, also a capital-based division of pedagogical labor. Structured educational guidance (curating learning materials, arranging a home curriculum, shared reading, homework) concentrated with the doctorate-holding father, while everyday experiential and emotional care accrued to the partner with lower credentials. The pattern mirrors Reay's (1998) finding that pedagogical labor attaches to the parent

positioned as the household's educational authority—except that here, in the absence of a mother, that position was assigned by credentials rather than by gender. That the assignment felt natural to both partners, requiring no negotiation, is precisely what a hidden curriculum would predict: the household teaches its members, as well as its child, who the educator is.

Gender Education: The Limits of Challenging Gender Differentiation in a Gay Father Household

The fathers maintain an open attitude toward their daughter's emotions and future sexual orientation:

We've told her it's okay to like boys or girls; we will accept her either way. But right now, she clearly prefers handsome boys. She admires pretty girls, but when she sees a good-looking guy, her eyes turn into hearts. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

In daily caregiving, Jiang deliberately resisted gender stereotypes—yet social expectations gradually seeped into his choices.

At first, I didn't want her to be limited by gender stereotypes, so I chose blue, yellow, and green—more neutral colors. But store staff always asked, 'Boy or girl? Boys wear blue, girls wear pink.' I still bought both. Eventually, I noticed I was also influenced by society—I'd think pink looked better on her, and her birth mother said the same. So now I buy fewer dark colors and lean more toward warm tones. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Jiang, who spends more time with her, also had frequent opportunities to counter gender misconceptions from school:

She used to be more 'boyish' but later became more neutral—related, I think, to her friends. She loved Spider-Man and Pokémon, and I never restricted that. But some classmates said, 'You're a girl, you can't like Spider-Man.' We explained that boys and girls can both like Spider-Man. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

The fathers thus provided affirming gender education from early childhood, hoping their daughter would feel free to explore gender expression autonomously. That she currently displays conventionally feminine traits and heterosexual preference underscores that queer-affirming parenting dictates neither identity nor orientation; it widens the space in which she can choose.

These practices speak directly to how gender is taught when no parent embodies its binary by default: through deliberate counter-instruction at home, the fathers widened their daughter's room for gendered self-making, even as store clerks, classmates, and an all-female teaching staff continually re-imported the binary curriculum from outside. The home does not teach gender alone; it negotiates with the market's and the school's gender pedagogies—and the fathers' partial concessions (warmer tones, the felt need for a “female role model”) index the strength of those external curricula rather than a failure of conviction.

Diverse Parenting Information Sources Yet Persistent Gender Binarism

The fathers drew parenting knowledge from diverse sources, judging and integrating for themselves:

I usually ask classmates or my sister-in-law; my parents' generation is too far removed. Sometimes I ask friends on Facebook, and there are websites, academic papers, and YouTube—so much information now, but messy, so you have to judge for yourself. Parenting styles split into 'attachment' or 'scheduled' camps; we just discuss and decide ourselves. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

By drawing on others' experience, both fathers offset the limits of their own single-generation, same-sex household. Jiang also actively sought female figures for their daughter; yet his phrasing reveals a residual binary assumption.

Gender role models don't have to come from the primary caregivers. Even though I'm biologically male and theoretically can't provide a female role model, she still has godmothers, grandmothers, many female friends, and her schoolteachers are all women—so she's not lacking female examples at all. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Despite openness and active learning, the felt need for a “female role model” shows that gender-differentiated assumptions can survive precisely where they are most reflectively resisted.

Emotional Practices in Parenting

Love in Queer Parenting: “Life Story Book” and Inclusive Picture Books

From early on, the fathers told their daughter about her origins through a “life story book” explaining her birth mother's circumstances. As she entered preschool and noticed differences from peers, they used picture books, cartoons, and gatherings with other diverse families to cultivate understanding and pride.

The first picture book she read was And Tango Makes Three, the story of two penguin dads raising an egg. The second was King & King & Family. Actually, during her first week at our home, we read these books to her. So she has always known she has two dads and is adopted. We also meet other queer families regularly, so by seeing different families, she naturally understands that we're the same as others, just a little different. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

They instilled the principle that “love is not limited by gender,” normalizing diverse family forms through curated books, inclusive cartoons, and the lived example of other queer families:

Foreign cartoons are very progressive—Netflix Kids has shows with diverse races and family types, including two-dad families. We also intentionally connect with other queer families and join adoption

support activities, so she understands that families come in many forms—two dads, two moms, one mom and one dad—both similar to and different from hers. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Sexuality education—often uncomfortable for heterosexual parents—was addressed without embarrassment:

We use picture books like The Secrets of the Body and daily life examples so she understands biological sex differences. She already knows she will menstruate someday and that blood will come from her vulva—she was a little scared at first. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Jiang's account shows how a male parent can confidently address female bodily topics, undercutting the assumption that only mothers can guide daughters through such matters. Notably, the tools of this domestic pedagogy—the life story book, queer-affirming picture books, curated cartoons—constitute a deliberately assembled home curriculum of family diversity, one that most schools in Taiwan do not yet provide.

A Father's Love: Being Both the “Strict Parent” and the “Nurturing Parent”

Rather than fixed strict-father/nurturing-mother roles, both fathers alternated between strictness and warmth:

We both play the strict and gentle roles. It's not fixed who's stern and who's soft; both of us can be affectionate and both of us can be firm when needed. We are more child-centered and treat her as an individual. We discuss many things with her, but not everything is negotiable—for example, if she's sick, she must take her medicine even if it tastes bitter. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Meng agreed that both perform both roles, though he tended to be more structured in enforcing routines while Jiang allowed more latitude—a difference negotiated case by case (e.g., over cram school) rather than along gendered lines. While Meng perceived Jiang as more indulgent, Jiang explained that his aim was a close, trusting relationship in which sensitive topics could be discussed openly:

I've been building a close relationship with her, so she feels comfortable talking about sex and gender with me. We can buy pads together, browse lingerie stores—that's part of the atmosphere. She chats with me a lot before bed: who likes whom, who upset her, what happened at school. (Jiang, Interview, 2024/04/26)

Meng valued planning and negotiated routines; Jiang cultivated an emotionally warm environment, breaking the assumption that only mothers can engage daughters in intimate “women's talk.” Here, a father not only enters that space but thrives in it.

Alternative Maternal Love: Fathers Can Also Be Mothers

Pushing a stroller, the fathers were repeatedly asked “Where is the mother?”—everyday microaggressions revealing persistent distrust of men's caregiving. Meng countered that they embody both roles:

We always thought of ourselves as both father and mother. Every family is different—single fathers, single mothers, grandparent care—what matters is secure attachment and stable caregivers, not whether there's a 'mother' or 'father.' Asking whether a child 'needs a mom' is a false question. Good parenting isn't determined by gender, but by the quality of care. (Meng, Interview, 2024/05/17)

Jiang echoed this: he raises, cares for, teaches, and accompanies his daughter without emphasizing the father identity—“dad” is just one name for “parent,” and she occasionally calls him “mom” when expressing emotional needs. This flexible naming reflects his resistance to gender-role boundaries and his capacity to meet her desire for “maternal” affection—a distinctly queer form of nurturance, consistent with Morman and Floyd's (2006) finding that the traits of “good fathering” (love, emotional expression, listening, closeness, involvement) overlap strongly with traditionally maternal characteristics. In sum, the family's emotional practices disrupt gendered expectations: each father becomes “strict” or “gentle,” “dad” or “mom” as the relationship requires, foregrounding the caregiver relationship over gender category and collapsing the father/mother binary into a hybrid, responsive model of queer parenting.

Conclusion

This study examined the parenting practices of two gay fathers—both school counselors—who adopted a daughter, focusing on household labor, childrearing, and emotional caregiving. As a least-likely case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), it pursues analytic rather than statistical generalization. Three theoretical contributions emerge.

First, the study extends relative resource theory and scholarship on the gendered organization of pedagogical labor by showing that, when biological sex no longer sorts parents into caring and providing positions, asymmetries in academic capital may take over that sorting function. Both fathers dismantled the gendered divisions of their upbringing, organizing chores by strength and preference. Yet de-gendering did not guarantee equality: when Meng entered the final stage of his doctorate, caregiving shifted disproportionately to Jiang, who suspended his own studies, and structured pedagogical guidance concentrated with the doctorate-holding father. This illustrates the **gender-disguised capital hierarchy**—a functionally patriarchal arrangement in which the lower-capital partner bears the costs of the higher-capital partner's advancement, without gender as its explicit justification. Gendered scripts of parenting, in short, do not disappear with the absence of gender difference between parents; the hierarchical valuation of providing over caring can be transposed onto other axes of stratification, with credentials doing the sorting that sex once did. Notably, because both partners held egalitarian values, they negotiated, outsourced, and sought counseling rather than defaulting to gendered sacrifice.

Second, the study specifies the conditions under which the de-gendered parenting framework (Schacher et al., 2005; Berkowitz, 2011) travels to an East Asian context. The fathers practiced complementary, de-

gendered caregiving—Meng guiding structured and academic tasks, Jiang providing everyday emotional presence—and cultivated competence through “trial fatherhood,” diverse networks, and reflective adaptation, echoing Gerson's (1997) nurturing-father trajectory and refuting the assumption that men are weakly connected to childcare. As adoptive parents, they further confirmed that effective parenting is not biologically predetermined. Yet de-gendering was incomplete and selective: binary thinking persisted (the “female role model”), and structural pressures reproduced inequality through non-gendered means. The framework travels only conditionally; East Asian contexts, where Confucian familial expectations mediate recognition, warrant their own theoretical specification.

Third, the study contributes to the literature on homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) by illustrating how same-sex families dialectically dismantle and reproduce patriarchal scripts. “Fatherhood” and “motherhood” functioned as fluid relational roles: the daughter alternately called them “dad” and “mom,” and both fathers embodied “strict” and “gentle” registers, engaging in conversations traditionally coded as maternal. Through the life story book, affirming picture books, and lived examples of diverse families, they fostered secure attachment and a positive family identity. For the study of family-based education, the lens carries a specific implication: the pressure to be recognized as a legitimate family concentrates precisely around raising the child “well,” so that norm reproduction in parenting is best understood not as deficient consciousness but as the structural price of educational legitimacy—negotiated, here, within a Confucian grammar of intergenerational recognition. Rather than a verdict on whether the participants “escape” patriarchy, this dialectical reading identifies specific patterns of selective reproduction—deep dismantling of gendered labor, partial dismantling of binary parenting roles, and unconscious reproduction of capital-driven inequality.

Implications for Gender Education and Counseling Practice

For schools, the findings underscore the need for family-diversity and gender-equity education reflecting the actual plurality of Taiwanese families. Children of same-sex families encounter the binary curriculum daily—from classmates' policing of “girls' toys” to the routine question of where the mother is—and teachers and school counselors should be equipped to interrupt these micro-exclusions, represent diverse families in curricular materials, and monitor these children's school adjustment. The fathers assembled, at home, a curriculum of family diversity that most schools do not yet provide; gender education should ensure such labor is not left to queer families alone.

For counselor education, the case cautions against reading same-sex families through a heteronormative father–mother template. Practitioners should attend not only to gender dynamics but to capital dynamics—how educational and career asymmetries organize domestic and pedagogical labor and strain the primary caregiver—and explore clients' family-of-origin and gender-consciousness trajectories. For same-sex couples planning parenthood, the case illustrates the value of anticipatory preparation—caregiving experience, LGBTQ+ parenting networks (Hsu, 2016)—and of outsourcing and renegotiation when imbalance emerges, rather than letting the lower-capital partner absorb the cost silently.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As a single least-likely case, this study aims at analytic rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The dual-counselor profile is an extreme case selected for reflexivity and theoretical yield; the gender-disguised capital hierarchy may operate differently in households without comparable academic capital. Future research could examine the proposition through comparative cases varying in academic, economic, and social capital, and extend to families without counseling backgrounds and to transgender-parent families. Family ethnography incorporating all members—including the child's own account of who teaches and who cares—would better capture relational dynamics, while attention to families' social networks could illuminate how social capital sustains queer identity and parenting resources. Finally, longitudinal and cross-societal studies—particularly in other East Asian contexts such as Korea, Japan, and urban China, where Confucian patriarchal legacies and rapid social transformation interact in distinctive ways—would illuminate how capital asymmetries evolve across career transitions and child developmental stages, and how far the dynamics observed here are durable or reversible.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Syun-Yi Chang: Investigation (lead); Data curation (lead); Formal analysis (lead); Conceptualization (supporting); Writing – original draft (lead); Writing – review & editing (supporting); Project administration (lead).Ya-Hsuan Wang: Conceptualization (lead); Formal analysis (supporting); Writing – review & editing (lead); Writing – original draft (supporting); Supervision (lead).Both authors contributed equally to this work (50% each). Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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