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## Nine Months in One Day: A Visual Ethnography with Caroline and Elizabeth Fox-Anvick

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## Nine Months in One Day: A Visual Ethnography with Caroline and Elizabeth Fox-Anvick Kayla Ranta November 25th, 2019

### Paving the Way for Same-Sex

#### Adoption:

Caroline and Elizabeth Fox-Anvick, a same-sex couple residing in Bloomington, Illinois, have been married for sixteen years (*See Figure 1*).



Caroline and Elizabeth were the first same-sex couple to receive a foster care license in McLean County, through the Children's Home and Aid agency.

This agency began offering adoption services in 1883, and continues to help over 300 families each year (Adoption Services). National controversy over same-sex foster and adoptive parenting began in the 1980s (George, 2016, p. 368). Previously, numerous legislators argued that same-sex couples were incapable of serving the best interest of a child, and cast homosexuals as child molesters, pedophiles, and psychopaths (George, 2016, pp. 363-366). To further this unprecedented view, researchers declared that the negative stigma attached to homosexuality would hinder a child's growth and social development (George, 2016, p. 403).

However, with a rapid increase of the number of children in foster care, social workers were forced to consider different parental options (George, 2016, p. 369). Today, there are over 400,000 children in the foster care system, and over 107,000 children

waiting to be adopted (Lavner, Waterman, and Peplau, 2014, p. 46). Mental health professionals assisted by paving an alliance with gay rights advocates in 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association officially declassified homosexuality as an illness (George, 2016, p. 373). Since then, social attitudes towards same-sex couples have continued to change over time (Lavner, Waterman, and Peplau, 2014, p. 50). At first, only children who showed “effeminate tendencies-” wanting to cook, clean, and play with dolls-or teenagers who identified as homosexuals were placed with same-sex couples (George, 2016, p. 376). This led some same-sex couples to license and adopt as single parents in order to avoid unnecessary discrimination (George, 2016, p. 381). Yet, contrary to popular belief, studies have shown no disparities in the gender roles, gender identity, social relationships, or sexual orientation of children raised in homosexual environments (George, 2016, p. 411). Unfortunately, and even though same-sex fostering and adoption has

been legalized, there is still hesitation and scrutiny towards same-sex couples becoming parents in the United States (Lavner, Waterman, and Peplau, 2012, p. 471).

### **Visual Ethnographic Methods:**

Visual ethnography is a collaborative, anthropological method performed by using and manipulating photographs and videography in order to showcase and give voice to a person or community under study. Caroline, Elizabeth, and I worked together in their home over the course of the semester. During our first meeting, we discussed the parameters of the project and simply got to know each other. I explained that creating visual metaphors by utilizing new images, old photographs, and photoshop could help to tell a story in a specified way to highlight important aspects of their story that may not be seen in a standard photograph. I also had the opportunity to meet their two little girls and interact with them during our meetings.

Caroline and Elizabeth were more than willing to share pictures of

their family and experiences in order to help me fully visualize their story, and help me portray it appropriately to others. I gained initial rapport with the Fox-Anvicks through sharing my own experiences with the foster care system. All four of my younger siblings were adopted through the foster care system, and coincidentally through the same agency that the Fox-Anvicks used. This common experience gave us bond that helped facilitate deeper conversations. However, the added element of the Fox-Anvicks being a same-sex couple, combined with my parents previously negative view on the same-sex community allowed me to learn more about an aspect of foster care I had not previously considered. This led to the formation of questions that I used in our second meeting which consisted of a formal interview. Although I had prepared a list of such questions, their stories ended up leading the interview.

The couple explained how on January 24th, 2013, a day old baby girl came into their home, and how roughly two weeks later, her 19 month old sister came. Caroline explained this moment

by stating that, “we went from zero kids to a newborn and a toddler kind of overnight, so that was a little crazy.”

One of the most impactful statements that Caroline made was how the couple is, “still in shock and awe sometimes that we have two healthy, beautiful, bright, happy little people in our lives.”

By both storytelling and showing pictures, Caroline and Elizabeth made it clear that their family and friends were, and still are supportive. Their church was even generous enough to throw them a shower after being placed with the girls. This type of support and generosity is not always available to same-sex couples whose families can be disapproving and can often make the process of creating a family much more difficult. Therefore, the immense support that the Fox-Anvicks had and continue to have has been vital to their success and happiness as a couple and as parents.

Caroline and Elizabeth are always honest with their daughters about their adoption and birth family, but use a rated PG version. The girls utilize their adoption status as a little token of

honor that makes them unique. Another impactful story that Caroline and Elizabeth shared is how they mentored a young, gay student of Caroline's, who moved from Chicago to Bloomington as a freshman. This young man had a bad home life, living in extreme poverty, and was unable to identify as a gay man in Chicago. Therefore, he had trouble adjusting in Bloomington-Normal. Caroline and Elizabeth served as a same-sex couple who 'have it together' that he looked up to. Caroline and Elizabeth feel both blessed and lucky, but do not take that for granted. Elizabeth explained that even though their situation is beautiful now, "there were lots of tears to get here,"

considering the intense emotions of wondering if the right placement will come, or if the placement will become adoptable, and the uncertainty of what road bumps may stand in the way. Instances such as experiencing failure with in vitro, battling negative stereotypes of their sexual orientation, and dealing with the ups and downs of the foster care system all caused challenges and tears along the way for the Fox-Anvicks, but it was nothing they could not overcome. Having the opportunity to work with this couple has allowed me to delve into the family that is foster care and adoption, and the numerous opportunities that come with it (See Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Elizabeth, Caroline, their two daughters, and I, posing for a 'family' style portrait. Considering the intimate nature of the work we did together for this project, and the fact that I have siblings who were adopted through this agency, integrating the Children's Home and Aid sign into a group portrait seemed most appropriate. Photograph by Caroline, Elizabeth, and author.

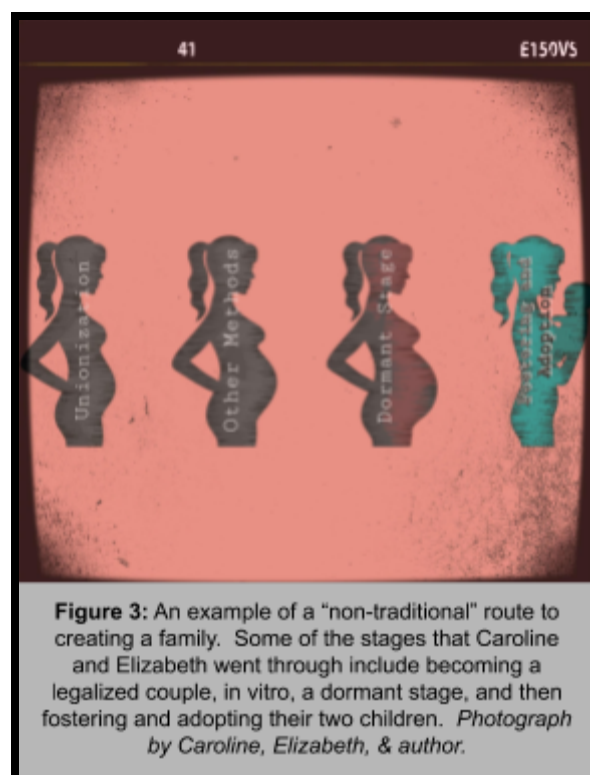
### Creating a Family:

Adoption policies in the 1980s obtained explicit rules that excluded unmarried couples, making it almost impossible for for same-sex couples to create a family (George, 2016, p. 365). Even without legal impediments, new generational declines in relationship quality and heightened levels of divorce have hindered the stability of families (Riskind, Patterson, and Nosek, 2013, p. 222). Although alternate reproductive technology exists, such as donor insemination and sperm banks, such processes can be costly and unattainable for most individuals (George, 2016, p. 371). Like other couples, Caroline and Elizabeth tried in vitro for a year and a half, but stopped after being unsuccessful. Often, individuals are unfamiliar with donor insemination, unsure of how to obtain a sperm donor, and may not have access to information or services (Riskind, Patterson, and Nosek, 2013, pp. 223-224).

Due to the complications, Caroline and Elizabeth decided that they were not going to have children for

about four to five years (*See Figure 3*).

Surveys show that there are roughly two



million gays, lesbians, and bisexuals interested in adopting in the United States, but they did not acquire the right to until recently. Private agencies provide infants and 'lower risk' adoptable children, but generally these organizations have skyrocketed fees, making these infants unattainable for most people (Lavner, Waterman, and Peplau, 2014, pp. 46-47). On the other hand, children in the foster care system usually have biological and environmental risk factors, including



being subjected to substance abuse, neglect, multiple placements, special needs, and transracial adoption, making them 'less desirable' (Lavner, Waterman, and Peplau, 2012, p. 466). With factors such as cost, unattainability, and personal variations, creating a family may not be possible for all same-sex couples, which could lead to depression due to unfulfilled parenting desires (Riskind, Patterson, and Nosek, 2013, p. 233).

### **Legalizing Same-Sex Marriage:**

The push for legalization of same-sex adoption also surfaced other rights claims such as the right to marriage equality (George, 2016, p. 367). State representatives needed to separate the creation of laws from their personal morals during these debates (George, 2016, p. 415). In such instances, the separation of church and state needed to be enforced, especially in cases of lesbian mothers seeking custody of children that resulted from previous heterosexual encounters (George, 2016, pp. 367-371). The public sphere battled the importance of

religion versus the importance of fundamental rights for decades (Patterson, 2009, p. 727). Legislators believed that legal marriages signified a deep commitment to permanency, which trickles down to a commitment to children (George, 2016, p. 408). Legalizing same-sex marriage would also allow for the continuity of care of the child if one parent were to pass away (Patterson, 2009, p. 729). Legalization was being pushed for beyond civil unions and domestic partnerships (Patterson, 2009, p. 727), since it was required that you be legally married, or legally together in order to



**Figure 4:** Photographs from Caroline and Elizabeth's wedding day, surrounded by their supportive friends and family, and sealing their union with a hug. *Photograph by Caroline, Elizabeth, & author.*

have a joint foster care license in Illinois  
(See Figure 4).

### **The Foster Care and Adoption**

#### **Process:**

In the beginning, social workers defied rules and regulations to promote the welfare of children who had become wards of the state. Criticism of same-sex placements undermined social workers' abilities as trained professionals (George, 2016, pp. 364-366). In the 1970s, social workers started matching same-sex couples with teenagers who were sexually active and identified as homosexual (George, 2016, p. 368). Yet, social workers did not always inquire about sexual orientation. Social workers during this time tended to dump unwanted or 'hard to place' children, such as older children, children with disabilities, and with behavioral problems onto same-sex couples who were eager to receive any child (George, 2016, pp. 381-382).

With an increased awareness of child abuse, agencies and states began offering financial incentives for foster placements (George, 2016, pp.

372-373). However, each state structures foster care differently (George, 2016, p. 379). In almost every state there is an existing shortage of foster homes (George, 2016, p. 392), and thousands of foster children lack stable, adoptive and foster care placements (Lavner, Waterman, and Peplau, 2012, p. 470). At this point, social workers had to decide which factors to prioritize (George, 2016, p. 415). Originally, Caroline and Elizabeth thought that the foster care system seemed too complicated and emotional. Getting a foster care license often focuses on literacy, income, a background check, and training requirements (George, 2016, p. 401). Yet, Caroline and Elizabeth did not feel that this 'hoop jumping' was too excessive.

The couple agreed that waiting on the right placement was difficult. Caroline explained how, "one phone call was going to change your life." Once the right placement came and the process was over, Caroline and Elizabeth agreed it was worth it. Elizabeth stated how, "adoption day was



pretty cool,” and that the judge would, “bang his gavel and make us all Fox-Anvicks.” Their oldest daughter, who was five years old at the time, thought they were going to grow tails,



and that she would become a little fox (See Figure 5). This was another story that they highlighted, which exemplified the joy and light heartedness that comes with the beauty of finalizing adoption after the lengthy process of fostering.

### Going Forward:

It is important to try and overcome the barriers that stand between same-sex couples and creating a family (Riskind et al., 2013, p. 222). Yet, it may not be necessary to overcome every barrier, but rather a few large barriers such as existing negative stigmas and financial constraints (Riskind et al., 2013, p. 231). Although a broad cultural change occurred over the past few years in the United States, improvement can still be made (Riskind et al., 2013, p. 233). Legal activists should fight to allow new foster and adoptive parents to receive maternity leave. Most people do not understand the complications involved in the foster care process. There is extensive paperwork to be completed, home visits by a social worker, and the waiting process, all equating the exhaustion of having a baby naturally.

Caroline and Elizabeth instilled a strong sense of social justice into their daughters, who are always looking out for somebody who is not being treated right. The couple kept their foster care license open until the agency permanently closed. However, they

wish they still obtained one to be a safe space for LGBTQ youth and teenagers

in the Bloomington-Normal area (*See Figure 6*).





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