

# Lesbian Parenting: Insiders' Voices

Amaryll Perlesz and Ruth McNair

Lesbian parenting has entered the public arena over recent years via debates regarding access to fertility services and adoption, legal recognition of same-sex parents and children's rights (McNair, 2002). Research in the area has been published for over 20 years, with an increasing shift towards delineating diversity rather than proving the legitimacy of these families. The *ANZJFT* – the major mouthpiece for Australian family therapists – has made curiously little contribution to the literature on lesbian parenting. The lack of discussion leaves trainees and family therapists largely ignorant about the lived experience of lesbian family life. This paper goes some way to filling this gap. We present data gathered from 151 Australian lesbian parents who answered questions about their own and their families' perceived strengths. Despite the constraints and challenges of living within a heteronormative and homophobic society and dealing with discrimination and legal, political and social non-legitimation, this group of lesbian parents expressed great pride in raising well-adjusted and happy children. They also described their families as thoughtfully planned, proud, accepting and celebratory of diversity and difference, flexible in gender roles, and as having interesting, supportive, extended kinship networks that included a wide range of positive role models for their children.

## The Invisible Lesbian-led Family

In 1997, Clark and Serovich surveyed 17 major marital and family therapy journals: fewer than .007% of articles published had any explicit gay and lesbian content. In the 23-year history of the *ANZJFT* the *only* article about gay and lesbian relationships has been a piece about the legal recognition (or absence thereof) of such relationships written, incidentally, by a non-therapist (Katzen, 1997).

In addition to not writing about them, family therapy teachers and supervisors have failed to train students to work adequately with gay and lesbian families or to deal effectively with gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) issues (Long, 1996). Malley and Tasker (1999) report unpublished

findings where fewer than 25% of family therapists (in a sample of 50) had had more than two hours' input on working with gay and lesbian families in at least four years' clinical training.<sup>2</sup>

This silence in our local literature is curious in that lesbian and gay therapists are well represented among leading Australian family therapists, with others being 'gay and lesbian sensitive' in their clinical and training work. Moreover, around 10% of the families with whom we work are likely to have member/s who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual — whether or not issues of sexual identity, homosexuality, or homophobia are relevant to presenting problems. Lesbian-led families exist in increasing numbers in Australian society, and intentional childbearing outside heterosexual unions is perhaps the fastest growing and most controversial genre of family formation to have emerged in the West. During the 1980s, a lesbian baby boom began in industrialised countries such as Australia and the United States (Laird, 1993; Stacey, 1996). There are now a significant number of lesbian-parented families in North America, Western Europe, including Britain, and Australia. It is very difficult to estimate of the number of lesbian parented families in Australia, as an individual's sexuality is not included in ABS data. Lesbian community surveys indicate that one in five lesbians currently have children and more than 40% surveyed planned to have children (Lesbians on the Loose, 2000; Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2001). A recent front-page article in *The Age* newspaper (October 30, 2002) reported that 8.8% of Inner Melbourne households comprised same-sex couples (based on 2001 census data, which does now collect information on same-sex cohabiting couples).



**Amaryll Perlesz** (left), Senior Lecturer, The Bouverie Centre, Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University, Bundoora, VIC, 3083.

**Ruth McNair** (right), Senior Lecturer, Department of General Practice, University of Melbourne, Carlton, VIC, 3053.

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So, if we accept that lesbian-led families exist, and that we, and our clients, are among them, how is it that family therapists do not write about them? The simplest answer to this question is to assume that family therapists represent a microcosm of Australian

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society in which heteronormative, heterosexist and homophobic attitudes are part and parcel of everyday life. We have defined ‘heteronormativity’ as the uncritical adoption of heterosexuality as an established norm or standard. ‘Heterosexism’ assumes heterosexuality to be the only acceptable, viable life option and hence superior, ‘natural’ and dominant. Homophobia refers to the fear and loathing of those identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

### **Heterosexism and Homophobia in the Helping Professions**

Researchers have found evidence of both homophobic and heterosexist attitudes among psychologists and social workers, professions well represented among family therapists (Bensimon, 1992; Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni, & Jordon, 1999; Crawford & Solliday, 1996; Proctor & Perlesz, 2002). A study funded by the British Psychological Society surveyed counselling psychologists about their experiences and observations of biased, inadequate, or inappropriate care *as well as* incidents of care demonstrating special sensitivity to lesbian or gay clients (Milton & Coyle, 1998; 1999). Exemplary practice was typified by open-minded, normalising, accepting and affirmative attitudes about homosexuality, and being reasonably knowledgeable about gay and lesbian issues.

As expected, most of the examples of deficient practices reported by Milton and Coyle’s respondents reflected negative and pathologising assumptions about homosexuality. Respondents reported examples where particular models of psychotherapy training required homosexual-identified trainees to question

and change their sexual orientation, and where gays and lesbians had been referred to as ‘perverts’ and ‘ill’ in a professional development seminar. Respondents also reported that they had observed therapists making assumptions that clients’ lesbian sexuality must be linked to a previous adverse/violent sexual experiences with men or must be to do with their relationships with their mothers. If the clients were gay or lesbian, therapists also over-emphasised the importance of sexual identity to the presenting problem. Therapists worked within conceptual frameworks that assumed heterosexuality to be the ‘default’ option, thereby pathologising homosexuality. Other problematic assumptions identified by participants included the unquestioning adoption of myths about gay and lesbian sexual practices and relationships. It was also suggested that some therapists were still attempting to change clients’ sexual orientation in order to assist them in resolving symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The lack of relevant training opportunities and discussion in the family therapy literature leaves family therapists largely ignorant about the experience of lesbian family life. Even if therapists actually have opportunities to work with gay and lesbian families, they are still only learning about lesbian parenting via a ‘selective’ sample — those families who actually seek therapeutic assistance.

### **Beyond the Deficit Model**

How do lesbian-led families compare with heterosexual-parented families and what is the outcome for children raised in them? This is one of the most common questions addressed in the international literature, and asked by participants in workshops we ourselves have conducted in this country. We present some research findings here by way of information for family therapists, though our own study has purposefully extended beyond this question.

Over the last two decades, intensive investigations have revealed that lesbian parents and their children are as emotionally and socially well-adjusted as their heterosexual peers. Researchers convincingly demonstrate that children’s psychosocial adjustment is influenced more by family processes (such as conflict between parents), than it is by family structure (such as the number of parents or their sexual orientation) (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Fitzgerald, 1999; Gartrell et al., 2000; Parks, 1998; Patterson, 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) go so far as to argue that *neither* mothers *nor*

fathers are essential to child development and that responsible parenting can occur within a variety of family structures and ought not be gender bound.

Children raised in lesbian-parented households have shown gender identity development, gender-role behaviour and sexual orientation similar to children raised in heterosexual-parented families (Patterson, 1995a). Other aspects of personal development such as intelligence, basic personality, self-esteem and moral judgement have not differed either (Patterson, 1992). Children raised by lesbian parents have been shown to have good relationships with peers (Gartrell et al., 2000) and good relationships with both their biological mothers and their co-mothers or lesbian step-parent (Tasker & Golombok, 1998). Children raised by lesbian mothers have also been found to have more positive attitudes to homosexuality than their peers in heterosexual families, and an acceptance of diversity and empathy for minority and oppressed groups (Saffron, 1998).

The comparison of lesbian parenting to its heterosexual counterpart has created a 'deficit' body of research in an attempt to prove that lesbian families are legitimate social institutions for raising well-adjusted children (Laird, 1993: 210). This very process of legitimisation has meant that theoretical understandings continue to be constructed within inappropriate paradigms (Benkov, 1995; Malley & Tasker, 1999). In using heterosexual family formation as a 'benchmark' for 'normality', researchers have failed to investigate more fully how lesbian families retain their resilience and strengths in the face of the homophobic culture in which they live (Laird, 1993). As Benkov points out, there is a need to view lesbian families

... not as families on the margin to be compared to a central norm, but rather as people on the cutting edge of a key social shift from whom there [is] much to be learned about the meaning of family and about the nature of social change (1995: 58).

Such views have led to an alternative research trend that has more directly investigated the lesbian family per se as a unique, and highly diverse, postmodern family structure and the current study is representative of this trend. For example, the Australian Institute of Family Studies commenced the 'Development in Diverse Families' study in 2003, which aims to describe the development of children within diverse families (Wise, 2003). Two thousand families will be recruited, 200 of whom are to be same-sex parent families. Despite the compelling evidence of the legitimacy of lesbian-parented families

cited above, increasing community support for *individual* gay rights in recent years has not translated into positive community attitudes toward *gay families* (Allen, 1997; McLeod & Crawford, 1998). As McLeod & Crawford note,

... the perceived violation of traditional gender and family ideologies contribute to the ascription of an 'antifamily' status to gays and lesbians ... (1998: 218).

When our research team wrote a letter to *The Age* newspaper (25/4/02) summarising the international research findings on the positive outcomes for children raised in lesbian-led families (with no mention at all about the role of fathers), the following replies were published:

I'm not surprised that it takes four female academics, one a professor, to tell us we don't need fathers (Tony C. from Glen Iris, 25/4/02: 12).

Re 'Lesbian Parents no Disadvantage': three doctors, one professor. There appears to be a widening gap between knowledge and wisdom (Bill C. from Ringwood, 25/4/02: 12).

We are concerned that there may also be members within the family therapy community who prefer their own 'wisdom' about what is in the best interests of the child over the actual evidence to hand.

### What's in a Name?

Pathways to lesbian parenting are diverse. Lesbian stepfamilies that have formed post-heterosexual relationships exhibit vastly different social and emotional needs from those lesbian couples who choose to procreate (e.g. via donor insemination, adoption, fostering) within their own relationship (Allen, 1997; Patterson, 2000). Lesbian families are variously described as: dual-orientation; planned lesbian mother; lesbian-led; lesbian parented or 'reinvented'. Parents in these families have been labelled as the biological or birth mother, or as a co-parent, step-parent, stepmother, co-mother, non-biological mother, or invisible (m)other (Benkov, 1995; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Muzio, 1993). Lesbian parents of course also define themselves in a myriad ways.

Peter Churven, in a thoughtful review of Janet Wright's book *Lesbian Step-Families: An Ethnography of Love*, states that whilst he finds the text 'especially valuable for the discussion of the roles of biological and step-parents and the significance of gender in parenting', he does not find the distinctions Wright makes 'between a co-parent stance, a stepmother

stance and a co-mother stance ... *particularly useful* (2002: 120) (our emphasis). However, these descriptions or labels have meaning for, and make sense to, the small number of families (five) interviewed in depth in Wright's study, and for this reason alone *are* useful categories. In our own study, only a handful of families referred to themselves as stepfamilies or used the word 'stepmother'. Because of this variability in definition, we invite family therapists to be curious and open-minded about how members of lesbian-led families define themselves and their families, and to engage in creative thinking about contemporary family formation and language use.

Family members describe their wider networks and kin relationships in diverse ways, too. Dalton and Bielby (2000) suggest that the kinship ties of chosen lesbian families are based more on factors such as social and sexual identity, friendship, and emotional commitment than on biological connections. Yet our own findings suggest that lesbian parents are more likely to choose *known* sperm donors in order to retain pathways to biological connectedness for their children (McNair, Dempsey, Wise & Perlesz, 2002). Although lesbians are more open to broadening the notion of 'family' to encompass friends and wider social networks (Weston, 1991) increasing evidence shows that lesbian parents (particularly the birth mother), retain good contacts with grandparents and other family relatives (Patterson, Hurt, & Mason, 1998; Laird, 1998).

### Recent Developments in the Literature

In contrast to the dearth of research interest shown in the past, *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* devoted a special issue to counselling gay and lesbian families in 2000. These more recent articles (e.g. Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Bernstein, 2000) have provided comprehensive and useful guidelines for therapists (straight and gay), and equally commendable are Maeve Malley's and Fiona Tasker's (1999) discussion in the *British Journal of Family Therapy*, and David Denborough's edited collection of Australian writings on queer counselling and narrative practice (Denborough, 2002a).

Missing from many of these papers, though, are the voices of the family members themselves, and an in-depth exploration of how lesbian parents describe their family life. It is this rich description that we now want to bring to family therapy readers, some of whom may

know little about lesbian culture and family experience. Children's perspectives and experiences of being raised in a lesbian family are rich and diverse (O'Connell, 1993; Paechter, 2000; Ralfs, 2002a, 2002b; Van Voorhis & McClain, 1997). Biological fathers' and donors' perspectives and roles within lesbian-led families are also important. None of these are addressed in this paper, because of our focus on how lesbian parents constructed their own parenting experience.

### The Current Study

Two hundred and seventy lesbian parents and prospective parents completed an anonymous questionnaire during 2001 and 2002. The detailed methodology and description of some of the quantitative findings is presented in McNair et al. (2002).<sup>3</sup> One hundred and fifty-one lesbian parents contributed written replies to open-ended questions on the strengths and challenges of lesbian parenting — 69 Victorian-based, 55 from New South Wales, 26 in South Australia and one from Queensland. Some included additional pages with copious notes, and several participants specifically thanked the researchers for the opportunity to share their experiences of non-traditional parenting. Each written response was rigorously analysed at the level of words, sentences, concepts and themes, with a constant comparison of codes and rearranging of the data to best reflect emerging themes in respondents' meanings (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995). In the presentation of these findings we have made reference to other literature only as it pertains to the issues raised by the women themselves, and thus we hope to privilege their voices and experience. Respondents were predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, urban, tertiary educated lesbians. Further research with children in lesbian parented families, and more rural-based, and ethnically and socio-economically diverse families would further enrich this view.

### Giving a Voice to Lesbian Mothers

Challenges of lesbian parenting will be presented first, followed by strengths.

#### Discrimination — Particularly at School

A recent study involving 48 Victorian children with gay fathers or lesbian mothers reported that just under half (44%) of the children in grades 3 to 6, and approximately one-third of secondary school children, had experienced teasing, bullying and

The greatest challenge for these lesbian parents was concern about discrimination and prejudice, much of which was based on prior experiences of homophobic rejection. Parents were concerned about their children being bullied and harassed at school and feared that their children might also be worried about discrimination.

homophobic language (Ray & Gregory, 2001). Similarly, in stage three of the National Lesbian Families Study in the United States, 18% of children had experienced some form of discrimination by age five (Gartrell et al., 2000).

Some participants' teenaged children had expressed fears about talking openly to their peers about their parents' sexuality. Adolescent children can initially find it very difficult to be open about their mother/s' sexuality, but as they get older they are more likely to 'come out' about their family to their peers (O'Connell, 1993; Paechter, 2000; Van Voorhis & McClain, 1997).

Other participants had experienced the extent to which some schools could be non-responsive when overt victimisation of children from lesbian-parented families had occurred.

Our son faced daily taunts and jibes, which culminated in a violent altercation with the boys concerned. The school was notified of the social ostracising but took quite some time to take action.

Homophobic attitudes have been reported in teachers and trainee teachers (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Maney & Cain, 1997; Proctor & Perlesz, 2002, 2003), just as they were reported in this study:

My child in grade 2 asked his teacher what lesbianism was. She responded, 'That is something awful we don't talk about'.

#### **Non-acceptance and Rejection**

Perceived rejection by family and friends, notably grandparents, created sadness and disappointment for a small number of the lesbian mothers in this group:

Having the kids has actually amplified our lesbian relationship and forced them to think and talk about it — as a result we have been pretty much ostracised — so much for grandchildren bringing us all closer together!

Parents, too, were not always accepting:

My partner's mother was very rude and mean to her when she was pregnant, calling it an embarrassment.

Several participants noted that it had only become fashionable to raise children within the lesbian community in recent years and others suggested that the earlier rejection of children by lesbian peers related to the non-acceptance of boys in separatist communities.

Lack of support in the LGBTI community is the most traumatising issue and deepest grief I deal with as a parent ... it is worse because I parent a

boy and have been confronted with lesbian anti-male attitudes.

Some participants had been subjected to disparaging comments from other members of the gay and lesbian community. In some instances, childless lesbians were perceived as drifting away from friendships since the lesbian parents could no longer socialise freely and flexibly, because of the demands of raising young children. There was also perceived to be an ideologically correct way to conceive children in lesbian relationships:

I find myself under pressure to explain my daughter's conception (I had my baby after a casual encounter with a straight man — so I don't quite fit into the donor model). This is easier among straight friends than among lesbians. I have been subjected to a *grilling* by lesbians ... I am often asked in public by lesbians about my daughter's 'donor' — I feel like I'm being a bit out of date by thinking of him as her father. I find there is a 'right' way to be a lesbian family and a 'wrong' way.

Similarly, respondents expressed concerns about 'various judgmental responses from people about using an anonymous donor'.

#### **Disenfranchised Grief and Social Isolation**

Several respondents wrote about significant losses that remained unacknowledged or publicly invisible, such as broken relationships, death of a partner, miscarriages, loss of contact with children and parents, and deaths of babies where there was no adequate ritualisation of the loss (Rycroft & Perlesz, 2001).

The main difficulty is our tragedy — babies aren't supposed to die in either straight or gay communities. So we are complete failures ... Rainbow Babies have dropped us totally from their mailing lists like *we* are deceased.

Such losses have been described as disenfranchised grief because 'the loss cannot be openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned' (Doka, 1988: xv), and such a loss has been poignantly written about in the lesbian community in relation to miscarriage following sperm donation (Denborough, 2002b; Stiles, 2002). David Denborough's and Suzy Stiles' linked papers explore lesbian family formation, including the experience of miscarriage and lost dreams. Through a eulogy/song, Denborough models ways of creating alternative rituals of acknowledgement '... dedicated to all of us who have had losses that are hard to explain' (2002b: 21).

Perceptions that social and community support for lesbian families was available were by no means universal. Some participants lamented the dearth of adequate social support for their families, and others had experienced social ostracism of their children. Lesbians living in more socially conservative outer urban areas and rural communities report feeling particularly isolated (Brown, Perlesz & Proctor, 2002; Proctor & Perlesz, 2002), and our study found the same:

Not living in a big city, I feel very isolated. I would really enjoy lesbian mother playgroups where I could relax and not feel 'other' and 'odd'.

#### *Non-legitimation, Non-recognition*

Participants highlighted the absence of legal recognition as a major source of concern, disappointment, grief, and anger for families. Participants were also keenly aware of a lack of social and political recognition. One mother took stock of precisely how 'difference' impacted on her and her family's daily life:

On a day to day basis I am continually reminded that I am 'different'. I sat down and wrote a list of all the things that had occurred in the last couple of years that had caused me a degree of grief and had occurred due to the fact that I'm a lesbian: applying for a home loan — broker just couldn't seem to understand that we were a committed couple; going to our local GP — assumed I had a husband; census — no facility for same-sex couples on the census form; Centrelink (and taxation) — they have no idea of how to cope with same-sex couples; Antenatal classes whilst pregnant — the nurse kept referring to 'husbands'; tennis club — homophobic references and jokes; dealings with real estate agents, utilities (e.g. electricity, phone) all seem to have problems when it comes to same-sex couples.

Frustration centered on actual discrimination, community ignorance, and one's status as a family being questioned by government and other institutions:

It makes me really angry to think that the Prime Minister is dismissive of gay rights, particularly around adoption and lack of same-sex recognition of families/superannuation, tax laws, inheritance, etcetera

The media also received its share of the blame:

Another major difficulty is hearing and seeing evidence of homophobia continually in the media. Just a few months ago in *The Age* was an article stating 60% of Australians disapprove of gay relationships or something similar. I get very angry

when I think my child will be reading garbage like that in a few years.

The role of the non-birth mother or co-parent is recognised to be particularly difficult in terms of lack of defined status (legal, social and familial) — and indeed in the lack of a suitable name. The non-birth mother is generally defined as 'other' to the biological or birth mother (Gabb, 2001; Muzio, 1993; Nelson, 1999; Wilson, 2001).

People always want to know who the 'real' mother is — fuck biology.

The majority of lesbian parents in this study were partnered, and the majority of partners co-parenting. Quite a few families contained biological children of both mothers. Almost all respondents had something to say about this, and the many challenges for the non-birth mother: not knowing one's place in the extended family; feeling out of place in contact with mainstream organisations like schools; being ignored and rendered invisible by health service providers; not being acknowledged as a 'real' mother; and not having the nomenclature or being accorded the legal or social responsibility that accurately reflected one's parenting role in one's child's life:

I'm not entirely a 'mum' with respect to the birth/breast feeding ... nor am I a 'dad' — what am I? How do my daughters place and identify me adequately when there is no generic label for me that is identifiable by other people.

The non-birth mother's need for legal recognition of her parental status may not become apparent until couples separate and the birth mother begins to refuse contact with the child:

I was the non-biological mother in my previous relationship. When this broke down I initially had our daughter half the week. My ex-partner slowly decreased this and then she refused me any contact. I went through family court and mediation but there was no law to protect my rights and the primary bond I had with my daughter. This is shocking, devastating and has to change!

#### *'Coming out'*

Challenges to the 'coming out' process ranged from the perceived burden of having to maintain total secrecy and hide one's sexuality, to the irritation of having repeatedly to explain '*our situation*' to others (*'the constant process*' of coming-out) and '*dropping the lesbian bombshell*'.

### **Parenting: Pressures and Pride**

Although couples recognised that the challenges of parenting are universal, and 'new parenting' can place particular stresses on the couple relationship, some couples felt that they were under 'extra' pressure to prove that they could parent effectively:

Everybody has an opinion on two women raising children and you constantly feel under scrutiny. This puts extra pressure on to do 'OK' in raising 'normal' kids — you almost overcompensate to show that 'We can do this too'!

Several single lesbian parents reported that their identity as a single mother was as relevant to their parenting as their lesbianism. Moreover, the social and economic circumstances of single lesbian parenting contributed to even greater marginalisation.

The major strength that lesbian-led families identified was their pride in successfully raising well-adjusted, happy children despite the constraints and challenges of living within a homophobic society. Participants described their families as: thoughtfully planned; proud, accepting and celebratory of diversity and difference; flexible in gender-roles; and having interesting, supportive, extended kinship networks that included a wide range of positive role models for children.

### **Diversity, Pride and Self Esteem**

Benefits for children growing up with same-sex parents have been repeatedly emphasised (Allen & Burrell, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1999; Patterson, 1992). In the current study, many participants noted the benefits of bringing up children with a greater acceptance, and experience, of diversity. The positive and celebratory views about difference and diversity were not confined to sexuality, but included broader statements about non-judgmental attitudes to a wider range of socio-cultural and family differences. Children and parents were variously described as appreciating, valuing, celebrating, being more understanding of, and broad-minded about, difference and diversity in general, and minority groups and multiculturalism in particular.

In addition to being proud of their difference in a broader social context, participants described their individual sense of pride and commitment to parenting:

I'm extremely happy that we're thriving as a family unit, in spite of a poor support network ... I'm glad we have survived and are expecting another child, conceived in the 'traditional' lesbian 'known donor' way. I take great pride in seeing my children grow and develop well, outside a 'mainstream' family.

Several respondents emphasised that having a child had significantly changed their lives for the better, and told many stories of delighted pride in alternative, non-traditional family formation:

I became pregnant (again) with the help of a clinic and an anonymous donor. My daughter, nine at the time, was thrilled to tell her friends ... and she explained the sticky mechanics of donor insemination to a classroom full of captivated Year 4 girls and their teacher.

Enhanced self-esteem for children and a sense of self-worth for parents was attributed to effective parenting and children being loved, wanted and secure; but living in homophobic socio-cultural contexts was also seen as contributing to increased inner strength, self-esteem and resilience:

To create together is a remarkable gift of love. To be part of this wonderful, frantic, hilarious, disastrous, stupendous mix of people, little and big, is a daily affirmation for us that what we are doing is so very right and good for the world. Having grown up in the heterosexual, dysfunctional family from hell, I can't believe how great a family can be.

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“Related to this, the invisibility and ambiguous role of the co-mother or non-birth mother can contribute to confusion and tension.”

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Related to their greater acceptance of diversity were parents' statements of pride in their own and their families' difference from mainstream families: *'I feel proud to be different, proud that my family is different'*, and the idea that the differences of lesbian-led families can offer alternative perspectives on family life more generally: *'We bring different values and attitudes to life/families'*. Respondents also commented on the opportunity to be politically active in support of these alternative family structures and to proactively fight prejudice: *'It's an opportunity to be political. It confronts people's preconceptions about homosexuals and family structure and hopefully challenges them'*.

### **Planned Parenting is Effective Parenting**

Compared with heterosexual couples, lesbian couples consider the decision about donor insemination for longer (Jacob, Klock, & Maier, 1999), and many

researchers have highlighted the significance of choice and planning in lesbian family formation (Gabb, 2001; Pies, 1989; Weeks, Donovan, & Heaphy, 1996). For the lesbian parents in our study, the act of planning was deemed to be important in raising children and identifying key values to assist in effective parenting:

Being in a lesbian relationship and wanting to have children for us has meant a lot of thinking, discussing and planning because you don't have children 'accidentally' ... I feel we are better prepared to be parents because we have put in and will continue putting in more energy into what parents need to do in their parental roles. I am still amazed at how little investigative effort heterosexual couples put into becoming parents.

A second aspect of planned parenting was the idea that many people within the community, including family and friends, could become involved in the planning:

Our decision was a very conscious one, and I like it that so many other people contributed to our decision-making. It makes me feel like our family was planned and wanted by a whole community.

Many participants believed the difficulties and constraints involved in organising conception increased the likelihood that the children would feel wanted, loved and respected.

#### **Flexible Parenting/Gender Roles**

One of the key strengths noted by lesbian parents is the prevalence of supportive and egalitarian co-parenting and positive couple relationships (Dunne, 2000). Patterson (1995b) showed that co-mothers share parenting tasks more equally than fathers in heterosexual families, and 75% of co-mothers in the US longitudinal lesbian families study considered they were equal co-parents (Gartrell et al., 1999).

Our own participants cited more equitable arrangements among themselves than among heterosexual couples, with shared household tasks and responsibilities; child-rearing and financial arrangements; greater empathy and understanding about parenting, and shared experiences of pregnancy, birth and breast feeding when both parents had experienced birth:

We have more freedom to define our parenting roles than heterosexual couples who have to cope with social pressure about mother/father roles ... heterosexual people find it harder to share parenting and [they] feel that two women may find it easier.

This applied not only within the same-sex couple relationship, but also in relation to the gender roles played by donor/fathers:

[My child's] two gay fathers are utterly devoted, incredibly good with him, not scared to show him affection and 100% reliable. It's like having two husbands who I don't have to sleep with/live with ... but who still come around and put my rubbish out without being asked.

#### **Positive Role Models and Extended Kinship Networks**

Parents viewed as strengths the potential for wider networks of potential role models. Both sons and daughters raised by gay male parents and/or lesbian mothers were perceived as having a *real* choice regarding their own sexuality rather than being pressured towards heterosexuality. They also approved of sons having greater contact with women role-models:

I think he has benefited by not being forced into a macho role. He is a very expressive, creative, strong, loving child.

The extent and variety of biological and social kinships was emphasised, some citing the joy and pride experienced by grandparents that their gay children were able to be parents themselves. Recent research indicates that biological grandparents in particular have strong links with children raised in lesbian-led families (Laird, 1998; Patterson et al., 1998). As well as having good connections with grandparents, the majority of our respondents reported being supported by their family and friends.

The ability to choose the extended 'family' was presented as a positive:

Our daughter has very important relationships with other adults, somewhat independently of us. These include a bevy of adoring lesbian 'aunty' types. Because we question so much of the way(s) 'family' is constructed, we place a lot of importance on these other relationships.

#### **Implications for Family Therapy Practice**

These lesbian parents' voices signal some of the many issues that might arise in our everyday therapy practice. For instance, children presenting with behaviour problems may be being bullied at school because their parents are lesbian or gay. Clinical presentations of anxiety, depression and substance abuse in lesbian parents and their children can mask unarticulated concerns about rejection and lack of support not only

from mainstream services, but also from within more intimate social and kinship networks, and from internalised homophobia that impacts negatively on self-esteem. Social isolation and lack of support can be more pronounced in rural communities and for single lesbian mothers. Hidden and disenfranchised grief can linger in the absence of a legal framework to support post-separation custody and access arrangements in gay and lesbian families. Negotiating the role of the donor or father, and/or the lesbian co-mother in parenting arrangements and supporting ongoing emotional attachments can become an important part of post-separation family healing. Related to this, the invisibility and ambiguous role of the co-mother or non-birth mother can contribute to confusion and tension. The pressure to be 'better than normal' parents can also take its toll on inexperienced parents.

Another frequent presenting problem includes the anxieties inherent in the actual shift that a mother/wife might make from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity and the impact this has on children and fathers/husbands. Fathers and ex-husbands need support in their experience of confusion, unarticulated shame and grief as their partners develop relationships with other women. Equally, women leaving heterosexual relationships may require support in dealing with homophobic and angry reactions from their ex-partner, and in protecting their children from such negative reactions. In everyday couple work, presentations of sexual dysfunction and heterosexual relationship breakdown can also mask issues of sexual identity and bisexual and homoerotic desire — particularly for women who may identify themselves as lesbian or bisexual but who have not had a lesbian sexual experience.

As noted earlier, other authors specifically examine practice issues for mainstream therapists working with gay and lesbian clients and their families. We have not repeated those guidelines for practice here. Our data suggest, however, that therapists can be assisted to adopt a more grounded and compassionate lesbian-friendly approach in their work through an increasing awareness of the lack of social and legal legitimisation of lesbian-parented families, and a deeper understanding of the interface between their private lives and a heterosexist and at times homophobic public arena where lesbians and their children have to negotiate daily discrimination. A recent government policy review and a discussion paper on assisted reproductive technology and adoption law reform have recognised system discrimination

and legislative anomalies affecting gay and lesbian-led families in Victoria (Leonard, 2003; Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2003). Family therapists should be aware of these policy initiatives and be willing to advocate for further reform within the wider health care system.

### Conclusion

The diversity of perspectives reported by the lesbian parents in our study highlights the wide range of experiences in non-mainstream parenting, and the creative and positive ways that lesbian-led families adjust to the challenges of raising children in heteronormative, heterosexist and at times homophobic social and family contexts. We invite therapists of lesbian-led families to see if the issues raised by our participants have any resonance for their own clients or for them personally. Either way, the themes highlighted here will hopefully contribute to family therapists' understanding of the lesbian family experience.

### Endnotes

- 1 Criteria for determining journal influence are complex, but in this case included factors such as an analysis of prolific authors, institutions, content, patterns in *Social Sciences Citation Index* and a survey of experts in the field.
- 2 It is only in recent years (aside from the groundbreaking work of the specialist HIV/AIDS team for more than a decade) that The Bouverie Centre has included sessions on working with gay and lesbian families in its more general academic and continuing education programs.
- 3 The larger study included issues of methods of family formation, health issues relating to conception, donor arrangements and social supports. Details of the full study sample and results were also presented at the Eighth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Melbourne, February, 2003 and are available on the AIFS website: [www.aifs.org.au](http://www.aifs.org.au)

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