

Family in transition: parents, children and grandparents in lesbian families give meaning to ‘doing family’

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Lesbian parents, their children and grandparents ‘do family’ in rich and diverse ways. This article draws on innovative grounded theory research using qualitative, multi-generational family interviews with twenty lesbian-parented families living in Victoria, Australia. The intersection between the public and the private in lesbian family life has been seriously neglected by family researchers, and in particular the perspectives of family members other than the lesbian parents themselves. This article addresses the question of ‘How members of lesbian-parented families define and describe their family’, and the results reported here focus on children’s and grandparents’ views, because they are the voices less well represented in the literature. Children and grandparents straddle both mainstream and marginalized spaces as they negotiate contemporary family life. We examine the interface and tensions between the traditional and the transformative, and the implications of these findings for family therapists are briefly discussed.

Introduction

‘At the beginning of her schooling . . . when I came to pick her up the Principal . . . said “Oh I’ve just had the longest argument with your daughter. I told her she *has* got a father and she’s been insisting she *hasn’t*.” And the Principal said, “she says she’s got a donor and I’ve told

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her that everyone has to have a father because you couldn't have been born without a father and she's been insisting that she hasn't got one.'" (Lucy: birth mother in the current study)

There has been very little written about lesbian family life by and for family therapists, and much can be learned from those who actively choose to construct their families in ways that challenge patriarchy and the dominance of heterosexuality and trial new ways of relating and 'doing' family. In our Australian context, only two clinical/research papers about lesbian-parented families have appeared in the twenty-five-year history of the mainstream *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* (Perlesz and McNair, 2004; Telford, 2004). There is a great deal that can be explored with lesbian-parented 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' (Benkov, 1995).

The phrase 'to do family' or 'doing family' is used throughout this article to highlight a shift away from a foundational concept of 'the family' where the addition of the definite article 'the' creates more of a sense of the family as a discrete social institution with actual boundaries. In counterpoint to this essentialist notion of 'the family' is the idea of 'family' as a verb rather than as a noun (Morgan, 1999; Stiles, 2002) supporting a more fluid, ambiguous and transitional language around family (Stacey, 1998; Weeks *et al.*, 2001). We have confined our interest to how family members in lesbian-parented families define their own family and, by implication, how they think about 'family' more generally. The views of children and grandparents have rarely been represented in the literature on lesbian-parented families, and although children and grandparents may not play proactive roles in creating new families of choice, they still remain central players in making sense of postmodern family formation.

When lesbian-parented families attempt to 'do family' differently by creating novel structures and ways of functioning, individual family members remain subject to heteronormative socially constructed discourses about 'the family'. Despite retaining dominant fixed ideas about families, individuals construct their private lives and families in diverse 'postmodern' ways. There is no such thing as *the* postmodern family but rather 'contemporary family arrangements are diverse, fluid and unresolved' (Stacey, 1990). In this article we explore the

lived experience of family members negotiating new ways of doing family and reflect on the implications for family therapy.

Lesbian-parented family research

Critical reviews and direct research on the outcomes of children raised in lesbian-parented families worldwide demonstrate convincingly that children's psychosocial adjustment and intellectual development 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, and that children with lesbian parents differ little from their heterosexually parented peers (Bre-waey's *et al.*, 1997; Parks, 1998; Fitzgerald, 1999; Patterson and Chan, 1999; Clarke, 2000; Gartrell *et al.*, 2000; Golombok, 2000; Anderssen *et al.*, 2002; Golombok *et al.*, 2003). Direct interviews with children of lesbian parents have generally been carried out as individual interviews with teenage and adult children from lesbian stepfamilies; that is, the children have been conceived in previous heterosexual relationships (Lewis, 1980; Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Wright, 1998). More recently, mostly younger children conceived within a lesbian relationship have also been involved in topic interviews (Vanfraussen *et al.*, 2001; Gartrell *et al.*, 2003).

Lesbianism and motherhood have traditionally been viewed to be contradictory institutions, and lesbian motherhood has been depicted as an oxymoron (Hequem-bourg and Farrell, 1999); lesbians do not/cannot have children, and if they do they cannot parent effectively (Muzio, 1996). Lesbian mothers share a marginal existence by virtue of their gay, non-heterosexual identities and a mainstream existence by virtue of their motherhood status. The lack of institutional recognition of 'the lesbian-parented family' by public figures, such as health and welfare workers, educators, legal bureaucrats and so on, has meant that the lesbian-parented family is forever needing to redefine itself in its interactions with the public domain (Dalton and Bielby, 2000).

It is the exploration of this intersection between the public and the private in lesbian-parented family life that has been seriously neglected by family researchers, and in particular the perspectives of family members other than the lesbian parents themselves. For instance, no lesbian-parented family studies have included grandparent perspectives directly, although some researchers have reported that children raised in lesbian-parented families have regular

contact with their grandparents, particularly biological grandparents (Patterson *et al.*, 1998; Fulcher *et al.*, 2002).

Earlier research comparing lesbian parenting with heterosexual parenting has been criticized for using heterosexual family formation as a 'benchmark' for 'normality', thereby failing to investigate more fully how lesbian-parented families retain their resilience and strengths in the face of the homophobic culture in which they live (Laird, 1993). The current study is part of an alternative research trend that has more directly investigated the lesbian-parented family per se in order to understand more fully the lived experience of change and fluidity in postmodern family life (Morgan, 1999).

Our study is methodologically different too in that we have conducted multi-generational interviews with lesbian parents, their children, and in some instances by the choice of participants, grandparents and donor/fathers.

Methodology

This article presents findings from a grounded theory, qualitative research study¹ where we conducted multi-generational family interviews with twenty lesbian-parented families. A group of potential participating lesbian parents were recruited through a partial snowballing and selective purposive sampling technique via advertising in lesbian and gay media, at a gay pride march and gay and lesbian festival, lesbian community forums, and health professional networks in a search for less 'out' families. From this pool we selected for maximum diversity a sample of varying ages, family formation, ethnicity, class and geographical location in urban, rural and regional Victoria.

Lesbian parents were invited to nominate who they would like to be involved in a family interview and all but one family included their child/ren. The families were interviewed in one single in-depth interview (lasting from 1.5 hours to 5 hours and sometimes punctuated by a meal break). Participants included thirty-six lesbian parents (aged between 29 and 62 years), twenty children (aged 4 years to 34 years), three grandparents, and two donor/fathers. One family included the donor/father in the interview, while one donor/father was interviewed separately.

¹ This study was funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant, and the Victorian Association of Family Therapists (VAFT).

Of the twenty families interviewed in the study, almost half included lesbian parents who had conceived children through known or unknown donors in the context of their current lesbian partnership (one from a previous lesbian relationship). We have begun to call these families *de novo* lesbian-parented families (McNair, 2004). Although assisted reproduction and sperm donation has been legally denied lesbian-parented families in Victoria since 1984, an increasing number of lesbian couples are choosing to parent, with many choosing self-insemination with known donors and others travelling to other Australian states where they can access donor insemination services (McNair *et al.*, 2002).²

In the other eleven families who participated in the study children had been conceived and partially raised in heterosexual relationships prior to living with lesbian parents, and children sometimes moved between lesbian- and heterosexual-parented households. Seven of these families were lesbian-parented step-families and the remaining four were sole-parent families. Most families in the current study were white Anglo-Western families of mainly European heritage, though the sample also included families from the following diverse backgrounds: Latino, Asian, Indigenous Australian and Eastern European.

The research question addressed in this article is: 'How do members of lesbian-parented families define and describe their family? Broader research questions around the interface between the margins and the mainstream for lesbian-led families engaging in health and education contexts are addressed in other reports by our research team (Lindsay *et al.*, in press; McNair *et al.*, 2005; Perlesz *et al.*, 2006). At the beginning of each interview we asked family members in various ways and from different viewpoints about how they defined their own family. The results reported here focused on children's and grandparents' views, because they are the direct voices which are less well represented in the literature. These were non-structured interviews and the story of how the family was defined emerged within a family context, and family members made sense of their own experiences as they listened to each others' views. All interviews were audiotaped and fully transcribed in a sequential process, with subsequent interviews

² The 1984 Infertility (Medical Procedures) Act, Victoria, one of the first legislations in the world to regulate assisted reproductive technology (ART), excludes lesbians and single women from such services. According to the 2001 ABS Census, 16 per cent of lesbian couples had a dependent child in their household, and lesbian community surveys also indicate that one in five lesbians currently have children and more than 40 per cent surveyed planned to have children (LOTL, 2000).

and in-depth questioning and exploration being based on information gathered in previous interviews. Transcripts were given to families with the opportunity to make corrections, with only minor changes requested by family members. All identifying information was removed. Informed consent was gained to publish de-identified and anonymous data from the study. The final transcripts were coded according to themes emerging from the data and from the literature. An inductive analytic, grounded theory, constant comparative method was used to analyse the data, with research team members comparing codes, categories and emerging themes. The NVivo qualitative software package was used to support the data analysis.

Families in transition

Families have changed significantly in the past thirty years and family arrangements are now much more diverse than for previous generations (de Vaus, 2004). Key social shifts have facilitated the development of lesbian-parented families. Reduced marriage rates, later marriage, increased child-bearing outside of marriage and increased rates of divorce all open the way for recoupling with female partners and bringing children from ex-heterosexual partnerships into lesbian relationships.

The increasing economic independence of women and reduced pressure to marry early, along with increasingly public lesbian communities, have also encouraged women to partner with women at an earlier age and to consider child-rearing together from the beginning. It is easier for women to choose to raise children in single-parent households, with increasing infrastructures to support sole parents. It is within this context that increasing numbers of lesbian parents as well as gay men are exploring parenting options.

The growth of lesbian-parented families is significant because it deeply challenges the heteronormative dominant discourse about the family; that the family is both heterosexual and patriarchal. Lesbian-parented families provide us with a multiplicity of perspectives on alternative family life, because these families are made up of many members with a variety of views that can be *both* substantially traditional *and* radically different and transformative. We examine the interface and tensions between the traditional and the transformative.

The personal experience of defining family. . .kith and kin

Participants' answers to the question about how they define and describe their family provided data on the interplay between how

family members *think* about ‘family’ and how they actually ‘do family,’ leading us to conclude that these lesbian-parented families demonstrate brave social experiments in creating non-traditional families of choice. We are careful in our use of Weeks *et al.*’s term ‘experiments in living’ because the lesbians in our study do not see their lives as ‘experiments’, but rather as fully thought-out preparation for ‘doing and being’ family in non-heterosexual, non-patriarchal ways. We have retained the use of ‘experiment’ in that these family forms are trialling and testing new ways of family formation (Weeks *et al.*, 2001).

‘Family’ was defined by participants as consisting of both kin and kith – including immediate and extended biological connections, *as well as* broader social and friendship networks. The idea of ‘family of choice’ within gay and lesbian community networks (e.g. Weston, 1991; Weeks *et al.*, 2001) is a significant ideology that delivers gay men and lesbians the right to choose their families and shape their family life beyond the boundaries of mainstream heterosexuality and biological kinship. Consistent with this, a small number of parents in our study spoke about the central significance of gay and lesbian partnerships, friendships and community networks in their definition of their own family:

‘I really don’t understand what family is to be honest, because for me my family blew apart, my biological family blew apart, so I have no sense of that. But if you talk about family as a sense of people who you can rely on, people who you can be close to, people that are there then um there’s (my lesbian partner), there is probably a couple of other people that are friends but that would be about it.’

(Non-birth mother)

Others recognized the distinction between biological and social relationships and struggled with their desire to exclude biology as a defining feature, even though there was pressure from extended family members to include blood relatives. For example, a lesbian birth mother acknowledged her brother as central to her biological family, but quite marginal as an emotional support and in that sense not part of her immediate family:

‘That’s interesting because I do consider him (family). . . biologically he is 100 per cent part of my family, but emotionally I get absolutely nothing from him. . . but mum says “yes, but he’s your brother.”’

This revisioning of kinship or the shift from ‘biological relationships’ to ‘social relationships’ is an important means of legitimizing the wider

network of lesbian friendships, and a deliberate attempt by some within the gay and lesbian community to dilute the 'tyranny of biology' by promoting and enacting new postmodern ideas and concrete ways of living more fluid family relationships, 'doing family,' or creating families of choice (Morgan, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001; Styles, 2002).

However, more often within our study both *de novo* and step-families included *both* kith *and* kin in attributing family status on the basis of friendship, biological kinship and partnership, with the knowledge that different family members would hold different views because 'blood and love' lines have complex connections within the one family. This does not dilute the fluidity of 'doing family' but it does acknowledge the role of both biological and social connectedness. Moreover, for many family members their understandings of family remained strongly influenced by the dominant social discourse around 'the family'. In various shapes and forms the family members in our study included biological and non-biological connections in their definitions, as well as implying frequently that there was some standard ideal for what families *should* or *should not* be.

Dictionary definitions of family too have always included defining criteria of 'family' that have embraced both kith *and* kin: 'The group of persons consisting of the parents and their children, whether actually living together or not; in wider sense *the unity formed by those who are nearly connected by blood and affinity*' (emphasis added) (The Compact Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971, p. 958).

Both *blood* and *affinity* are undeniably significant in the consideration of defining family. Within a heteronormative context, to say that someone important to the family is 'like family' is very different from saying within a minority, marginalized homosexual community that someone important to the family 'is family,' even though they are not biologically related. Both kin and kith are important for lesbian-parented families as they articulate definitions of family, but kith and kin have different valences for different families and for individual family members within particular families.

Lesbian mothers involved in lesbian, gay and bisexual communities are likely to be influenced by different subcultures and have different views to their predominately heterosexual parents or children. However, the mothers themselves in this study had also generally been raised by heterosexual parents, or in some instances were in prior heterosexual marriages (42 per cent of our participants). That interface or space between the margins and the mainstream necessarily

carries with it a range of dominant and subjugated discourses about family life and none of the families were able to escape heteronormativity, heterosexism or homophobia³ in their everyday lives.

One of the biological grandparents interviewed, 70-year-old Lillian, who was both supportive and involved as a grandparent, provided a pithy summary of the coexistence of kith and kin in her description of family relationships. It is the history of love and affinity that defines the family, with or without biological relatedness:

‘Well you can be connected by blood and you can be connected by love and sometimes when you are lucky you are connected by blood and love. . . . So I personally have blood connections, love connections and blood and love connections. . . . To me it’s a history of love. . . . I just think we’re flexible, we’re not stuck in this is what patriarchy says family looks like basically.’

There is no need to place biology and social connectedness in opposition to each other. In fact, they are so much part of defining both traditional and alternative family forms that ironically the discussion about biology and social affinity does not necessarily enhance our understanding about lesbian-parented families. Step-parenting, remarriage, nannies, adoption and so on in heterosexual-parented families have always generated a multiplicity of pathways of family connectedness. Divorce and remarriage, for instance, have been particularly important in problematizing who is in and who is not in a family, making this an issue not only for lesbian-parented families but also for family diversity more generally (Bernstein, 1999). Significantly, too, the private and public definitions of family differ because the heteronormative, sociocultural context moulds the legitimacy of who can be included in ‘family’, both in one’s personal understandings and in how we talk about and represent our family within the public domain. A lack of accepted and universally understood terms to describe lesbian-parented family relationships can also be constraining to family narratives (Swainson and Tasker, 2005). All families spoke with some frustration about the lack of language to clearly define their relationships in the public domain:

³ We have defined heteronormativity as the uncritical adoption of heterosexuality as an established norm or standard. Heterosexism is the system by which heterosexuality is assumed to be the only acceptable and viable life option and hence to be superior, more natural and dominant. Homophobia refers to the fear and loathing of those identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual often accompanied by feelings of anxiety, disgust, aversion, anger and hostility.

Lucy [birth mother]: I really don't like society's narrow small definition of family and it really does tie us up in knots [others agreeing] and produces fear and anxiety and um makes me feel like I'm lying, when I'm not lying

Lillian [biological grandmother, Lucy's mother]: Yes, yes

Lucy: And I really hate their small definition

Lillian: That's right

Lucy: I feel really excluded from that. And when I try to put myself into, into their definition I feel like a fraud

Lillian: Yes, I often do that too.

The mothers in lesbian-parented families have had greater agency in the shaping of their family life than their children and the children's grandparents. It is for this reason that we are interested in the views of other family members.

Being a child in a lesbian-parented family

When the child quoted at the head of this paper insists she has a donor but no father and the school principal attempts to disavow her of this view, we have a view espoused by a 5-year-old girl in her first year of school; a view that seems yet to be tainted by peer pressure about who/what *is* family. The principal's strongly expressed view reflects the dominant discourse of how families are and should be constructed. The argument between the adult and the child is a fine example of the interplay between the subjugated and dominant voice in defining 'family', and/or the semantic confusion over definitions of social and biological parenthood, donorhood and fatherhood (Dempsey, 2004). This is the landscape inhabited by children in lesbian-parented families.

Other Australian research with lesbian-parented families has also shown that younger children appear to be less affected by dominant views of 'what is' family. Vivien Ray and Robin Gregory (Ray and Gregory, 2001) reported that many of the 5- to 8-year-olds who they interviewed, who were born into a lesbian relationship, called both parents mum or mummy, and tended to hold firm on the simple fact that they had two mothers, despite persistent and curious questioning by their peers: 'How were you born then?' and 'One must be an aunt' (p. 31).

Typically, children in this age group simply list who is in their family, based mainly on who they have most frequent contact with. For example, 6-year-old Melanie in the current study included: '*my mum,*

my grandparents, and my great aunty. . . I mean my grandma. . . and nan. . . and then there's uncle Colin, that's my mum's brother.'

A similarly unaffected response by 9-year-old Erin included all the following in her family: *'My mum and dad and my dogs, and my two dogs and my two cats and my rabbit and Maureen (mum's partner) and my dad, and my fish.'*

One could argue here that in Erin's lengthy list she has placed the dogs, cats and rabbits prior to her mother's partner, but we have not asked her to define who is most important or significant in her family. She initially left her 13-year-old brother, Lachlan, off her list but added him very quickly. We think of this as an 'unaffected' response, because it is a checklist of who is in the family, rather than a self-conscious construction of who should or should not be in her family.

Compare our 9-year-old's list of parents, pets and mother's lesbian partner to the following dialogue between a 14-year-old girl, Alison, and her single, lesbian, birth mother, Lorraine:

Researcher: We've been asking families how they actually define their family and who they actually call their family. . . . What do you think you might say your family is, who do you think you would say your family is?

Alison: Well two parents, loving, caring

Lorraine: No our family, honey what do you call it?

Alison: Um. . .

Lorraine: Who do you include as being part of our family?

Alison: You and me, that's about it.

Despite living in a single-parent household and having no contact with her father who had left the family almost ten years previously, Alison's immediate response to defining 'her family' is an idealized version of two loving and caring parents. This is a traditional view of the family, and being a child in a single, lesbian-parented home within a supportive lesbian community does not automatically translate into radical or alternative definitions of the family. There remains a dissonance between the lived experience and the dominant views about family. The shift from the ideal view of 'family' to the sole inclusion of herself and her mother (to the exclusion of biologically related, extended family members whom the mother and daughter saw rarely) was later explained by Alison as frequency of social contact being a key factor in determining 'family':

'Family biologically is family that you might not see so often you know, but they are still your family. Family I'm talking about is the family I see, talk to.'

As families become larger and more complex too, it becomes increasingly difficult for children to describe and define family relationships. Biological genealogy, frequency of contact, family pets, and functional roles of being cared for and being loved, supported and respected by, and knowing and trusting friends or family all contribute to how children define their families.

Erin's 13-year-old brother Lachlan's view of his family was: 'Um just close people. . . . Oh and animals as well. Um, ah Erin, Maureen, Mum, Dad, um, ah Martha and Andrew and Toby and all the pets apart from the fish.' This list adds in his father's partner and her children. These lists are direct responses to the researcher's questions: 'Who do you call your family?' and 'Who would be in your family?'

However, when we ask questions around relationships within the family a more complex picture begins to emerge. Lachlan was 9 years old when his mother Annette and her partner Maureen began their relationship. For the first three years Maureen visited the household each evening, but had only moved into the home in the last year. Unprompted, Lachlan reported that his views of his mother's lesbian relationship had changed over time (as he moved from being a child to being a teenager) and that he was wary about how he presented this gay relationship in the public sphere of secondary school.

Lachlan: I didn't really get it until like at least a year and a half (ago). . .

Researcher: So you were about 9 were you when (your mum and Maureen got together). . .

Lachlan: 9 yeah. And um it just kind of felt normal. But now, no offence, but it doesn't really feel normal now.

Maureen: We are not offended Lachlan

Lachlan: Thank you

Maureen: And it's not news to us anyway

Lachlan: Mm, yep.

As a younger child, the son has personally constructed his mother's relationship or special friendship as 'normal'. It used to feel normal but it no longer does. Underlying this shift is the realization that his mother is in a lesbian relationship, and it is perhaps the sexual element of this relationship which is not normal in his eyes. This brave disclosure of a son's discomfort in front of his mother, her lesbian partner and his sister is a significant defining moment in the interview because it happens in the context of a warm, generous, loving, humour-filled, thoughtful and candid family occasion. To the outside observer, this is a happy and contented family. There is

nothing said in this family interview that does not reinforce the view that this is a 'well-functioning', satisfied family. Yet at the same time his mother's relationship is perceived by the son as not normal, and this affects how he publicly talks about his family.

The disjuncture between the private and public lives of families is not unique to gay and lesbian-parented families. There are many reasons why children might think their families are different to other families or 'not normal'. This may include families from ethnic minorities, or parental behaviour such as too much violence, alcohol or gambling, absent parents, parents with serious mental illness or disability, or who sexually abuse their children or non-conforming parents such as artists or musicians. These are families who are 'behaving badly (madly, or sadly)' or just differently. Here too is a discourse around normality, and much of this 'different' family behaviour is likely to be hidden from the public gaze to protect the protagonists from shame or social disapproval. The difference between these mainstream families and the lesbian-parented families in our study is that in the former it is the *behaviour* that is hidden while in the latter if we hide the lesbian parent behaviour we actually negate the parents' relationship and 'the family' is rendered invisible, or at least those new, non-traditional, family experiments disappear back to the margins. Thus, within this 13-year-old lad's view of family normality lies the very constraint to lesbian-parented families' legitimacy within mainstream heteronormative society.

Regardless of how we define Lachlan's view of 'the family,' though, we can observe the balancing of dominant and subjugated discourses in their everyday lives. Because they continue to live as a family with lesbian parents and children under the one roof, they all define themselves as a family, and they do this within the bounds of reasonable happiness, mutual respect and shared love and devotion towards each other. They are 'doing family' in a non-traditional way within a homophobic, patriarchal culture with no easy ways to describe the more radical relationships within the family, particularly between the non-birth co-parent or step-parent and her lesbian partner's biological children (Muzio, 1999; Dunne, 2000; Wilson, 2000; Wilton and Kaufmann, 2001). Although Lachlan bestows upon Maureen the status of being both like a mum and different to a mum, Maureen actually refers to Lachlan and Erin as her son and her daughter in public. Lachlan, on the other hand, does not experience being Maureen's son, though he does include her within his family.

There are some similarities here with heterosexual step-parenting but the key difference is that the son is not easily able to publicly name the step-parenting relationship, because to do so involves a public acknowledgement and legitimisation of his mother's lesbian relationship.

Researcher: How would you describe Maureen's relationship to you?

Lachlan: Yeah, like a mum, except like, like mum, (but) not like a mum, do you know what I mean. . . . It's like at school and stuff, um, they're kind of like, they don't know that my parents are gay except like closer friends. They kind of worked it out and they don't care Yeah, it kind of all works out in the end but like, it's kind of hard to say Maureen's like, with mum, do you know what I mean, yeah. . .

Researcher: And what do the kids say when you tell them?

Lachlan: I expect that they are in a state of shock . . . like closer friends already know, yeah, but yeah just going to high school you meet new friends and stuff . . . (and it's harder to say).

As children get older, their fears and experiences of being teased and bullied lead them to be more secretive and guarded about how they describe their families (Ray and Gregory, 2001). Parents are also cautious about disclosing their sexuality if they believe their children may be affected (Mercier and Harold, 2003; Perlesz and McNair, 2004). This tells us something about the understandable and warranted fear of homophobia, with just under half of Ray and Gregory's sample of children aged 8 to 16 years having been teased and bullied at school because they had lesbian or gay parents.

The literature is consistent with Lachlan's experience, and indicates that one of the more awkward times for children dealing with their parent's homosexuality and the private and public interface for all members of lesbian-parented families are the early teenage years, say, 13 to 16 years of age or the junior and middle years of secondary schooling (O'Connell, 1993; Van Voorhis and McClain, 1997; Gershon *et al.*, 1999; Paechter, 2000). It goes without saying that as children begin to deal with their own puberty, emerging sexuality and complex social relationships, the social pressure to appear as 'normal' as possible can impact upon how they define their families. These definitions consequently can appear to be more strategic, thoughtful and socially driven.

Other demographic factors aside from age that constrain children's comfort with 'coming out' about their families are if they live in more conservative outer suburban areas or rural regions. We also found

that those families who live in generally more open-minded, inner-city suburbs that were both cosmopolitan and diverse reported more positive experiences and less discrimination within school settings. The socio-economic status (SES) and ethnic diversity in the local community also had an impact upon school experiences. Working-class or high SES areas seemed less accommodating than middle-class areas, particularly those dominated by people from white Anglo backgrounds (Lindsay *et al.*, in press).

Mark, 17 years old, describes this process of hiding one's family identity and how this changes over time:

'Having lesbian parents is no disadvantage, you've just got to get used to it and learn to be able to live with it, 'cos it's like it has to be in its place you *cannot talk* about it and you *cannot show* it you just have to hide it when you're at school . . . up until my age. Now I can meet people and just say yeah my mum's gay like she has been and that's the reason for the divorce and they can just understand that but Penny's age (14 years) and younger it's just not on, you don't do it, otherwise you're just not going to fit in.'

Mark's 14-year-old sister Penny confirms (as does Lachlan, above) that she can tell only very close friends at school that her mother is gay (this family doesn't use the word 'lesbian'). Privately, Penny accepts the gay relationship, and accepts her mother's lover as part of her family:

'I would definitely call Robyn [mother's gay partner] part of the family more than Helen [father's heterosexual partner], even though we'd known Helen as long as we've known Robyn.'

While privately thinking of Robyn as a second mother, publicly she calls her a family friend, and Penny is acutely self-conscious of Robyn's role as her guardian. When filling out forms she uses an abbreviated version of her name in order to make it appear that her mother is in a heterosexual and more socially acceptable relationship:

'I call her a family friend (to my friends) . . . but as I know her I suppose yes I suppose she'd be a second mum . . . [but when filling out forms] I would put her down as Rob not Robyn so they. . . they didn't, they always assumed I suppose it was a male.'

Almost all the adolescent and post-adolescent children in this study had at some time felt acutely embarrassed about their family make-up due to their mothers' lesbianism, and almost all of them coped by

'hiding' their families from their peer group. Kristen, aged 30 years, was typical in not telling any of her friends:

[Crying in the interview]. . . because it was embarrassing. . . not in high school. . . . It wasn't normal and. . . the school I went to, everyone's parents were married and very family oriented.'

These 'coming out' or 'not coming out' stories show how some of these young people, despite being raised in radically different families, at particular points in their lives were less able to embrace this new way of 'doing family' because it lay so overtly in tension with mainstream family life. However, it is also the case that these children and young adults had agreed to be interviewed and for this reason alone are likely to represent a group of adult children who *have* come to terms with their parents' lesbianism.

Twenty-five-year-old Edward was unlike most of the participants in this study in that he had always been at ease with his mother's lesbianism and viewed her re-partnering post-separation (from his father) as a means to making the family 'complete again'. This seemingly radical acceptance of the lesbian partnership coexists with the preference for two parents. Implicit in Edward's delight in his mother's re-partnering is the idea that single-parent families are somehow incomplete, or not 'intact'. The ideology around two parents and children being the ideal family in this instance overrides any need for these parents to be in a heterosexual relationship:

'I don't recall having been at all distressed, um or having much embarrassment about it. Um, I think I had rather a naïve kind of excitement and anticipation about it, um what it was going to be like, and a sense of being a "complete family again".'

Children raised in de novo lesbian-parented families

In each of the examples discussed thus far, the children's mother has re-partnered in a lesbian relationship following a heterosexual marriage. Wendy, 13 years old at the time of interview, was the child who had the argument with the school principal about having a donor and not a father. Wendy's family circumstances are unusual in this sample of families, because her biological grandmother is also a lesbian. In her view it is '*normal*' to be raised by lesbian parents, and when asked

about her family by friends and peers at school, she answers: *'I just [say] I have two mums.'*

Lucy: We always just [called ourselves] Lucy and Sarah and that's what [Wendy] was brought up saying and then yeah, she decided at some stage that she would also like to call us mum, and so she decided that we were both mums. That never came from us, that was her decision that we were both mum And that she had two mums, so we went with that.

. . . .

Researcher: And did kids ask you about that when you say that, that you have two mums? Do they understand that?

Wendy: It's hard to tell because when they are kind of like in primary school, like everyone just asks anything and they're like 'how did that happen, what happened' but when they are kind of older it's just kind of, Ok we'll leave it. Yeah. . . . Well not like totally leave it, I just like telling my best friends and stuff. . . . Not because I'm keeping a secret but nobody else really wants to know, like nobody asks.

Wendy provides a different picture to other children interviewed here. She appears to be genuinely less anxious about disclosing publicly that she has lesbian parents, she is non-heterosexist in her views of families and parenting, and she has a strong narrative about donors contributing to conception rather than fathers being necessary to make families 'complete' (she has met the donor once but has not requested to see him again and has had no further contact). Lucy, her biological mother, tells the following story:

'When we went on holidays, every time you go to an accommodation place they always have a bible in the drawer. And one time she got Sarah [lesbian co-parent] to read her the bible and um, [Sarah] said 'oh Mary had a virgin birth' and [Wendy] said 'what's that' and we told her and then she said 'well Joseph must be the donor!'

A re-visioning of the virgin birth with Joseph as the donor and Wendy's unselfconscious sense of normality with her lesbian mothers gives us a taste of a postmodern family – there are many possibilities for fathering, mothering, parenting and conception, and the lived experience of being parented by lesbians is defocused or becomes a non-issue:

Lucy: It's a non-issue. It's actually a non-issue.

Researcher: How do you account for that, that it has been an absolute non-issue?

Sarah: She was born into it I think. When you are born into it you don't know any different do you really?

Lucy: That's what she said to you, 'it's normal'.

We cannot assume though that all children from *de novo* lesbian-parented families will adopt similar views, and there is much scope here for further research. We now turn to the place of grandparents in lesbian-parented families.

Being a grandparent in a lesbian-parented family

As would be expected, grandparents are likely to be more familiar with the experience of living in heterosexual families and, like children, they have had little say in the lesbian parents choosing to parent. The grandparents who we interviewed in this study were supportive of their lesbian daughters' choices to parent, but they are a selected group who have agreed to be interviewed. However, there were grandparents described in the study who, though not directly interviewed, positioned themselves in heterosexist and at times homophobic ways in relation to their daughters' lesbian parenting, but then at the same time were able to participate in the 'experiment' of being extended family in the ongoing task of lesbian family formation. These are important instances of how heterosexist ideology and discourse around what 'the real family' should be can coexist with flexible accommodations to new ways of 'doing family' – hence the idea of 'family in transition'.

Fiona and Jacqui had been together for four years and had a 2-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Imogen. Jacqui was the birth mother, and the lesbian mothers informed both their families only when Jacqui was already pregnant:

Jacqui: Oh what was that comment (your dad made), oh, he was atrocious what was his comment 'So are you going to be daddy' or something.

Researcher: That wasn't a term of endearment?

Jacqui: 'So you're going to play daddy'

Fiona: Yeah, he thought it was a joke.

Researcher: So you think he was trying to make it a joke?

Fiona: I don't think, I *know!*

...

Researcher: And um, has that position of his changed? [since Imogen was born]

Jacqui: Oh he's good with Imogen isn't he?

Fiona: Yeah My sister rang him up and said he was a jerk he should give me a call back

...

Jacqui: That's right she did. And he calls himself Pop to Imogen doesn't he?

Fiona: Yeah

Jacqui: Yeah

Fiona: Oh and he's been great since. It's been an interesting thing. I actually think my family deal with my sexuality better when I'm not in a relationship than when I'm in it. I think they can ignore it until I am in a relationship.

Here we have a non-biological grandparent initially making a heterosexist joke about his daughter 'playing daddy' in her prospective lesbian co-parenting role. An off-the-cuff comment, somewhat dismissive perhaps, but a comment that shows how easy it is to slip into conventional, heterosexist language around parenting roles when describing lesbian-parented family formation. However, when given an opportunity to 'do family,' this grandfather adopts the title of 'Pop' and embraces a grandparent role in relation to his non-biological granddaughter. The biological grandmother in this family initially takes a similarly doubtful position in relation to the decision of her daughter to parent in a lesbian relationship, but after the child is born she is also able to actively and positively take on the role of the grandparent.

Fiona: . . . you do think about your own parents, how you were parented when you have a child and like Jacqui's family, as much as they are a pain in the butt sometimes, they're actually, it's nice having them around you know. Like your mum, Imogen has a great time with your mum. Your mum is bloody atrocious sometimes with some of the stuff that she says but her relationship with Imogen is really good.

Jacqui: Yeah it is good.

Fiona: And it is great, it's fabulous seeing that. . . .

In Wendy's family Lillian, the 70-year-old lesbian, biological grandmother, is still very connected to her ex-husband, and we see the different views the grandparents have about their daughter having a child:

Lillian: Um I was absolutely over the moon I was so pleased

Sarah [co-parent]: About being a grandmother or

Lillian: Yeah about being a grandmother. Um and, it was, now it is a joke because Ralph [ex-husband and biological grandfather] adores Wendy, but at the time he was quite shocked because you know 'what are these two lesbians doing?' . . . But now . . . he just loves her to death. . . . People were shocked that you know, but they got over the fact that she is a

lesbian and . . . and then ‘she’s having a baby for God’s sake’. So that was like, and Ralph went ‘she shouldn’t be having a baby’ but he got over it. *Lucy* [birth mother]: I talked to him about that. He said that um, that it would be a difficult thing for the child to live in this society having lesbian parents and that it wouldn’t be fair to do that to a child because they would be teased and harassed and they’d have a really hard time, and you shouldn’t do that knowing that that’s what’s going to happen. It hasn’t happened at all.

Although the grandfather expresses caution and concerns about homophobic discrimination towards his grandchild and initially resists the idea of ‘doing family differently’, both grandparents wholeheartedly participate as extended family, and easily and lovingly embrace the grandparent role and their ‘daughter-in-law’ (their term) Sarah. Ralph is acutely aware that doing family differently will be a difficult experience in the current social context.

Another grandmother, Ruth, in her late fifties, was very positive about her lesbian daughter’s pregnancy and the devotion and skills that both lesbian parents applied to caring for their young children (one a toddler and one a baby – both lesbian partners are birth mothers with the same donor). This family arrangement is a radical shift within patriarchal culture, because the role and rule of ‘the father’ is marginalized and compartmentalized into the role of biological sperm provider. This is a politically, socially and personally unsettling act that directly challenges patriarchy and family ideology. This is doing lesbian families in its boldest postmodern form.

However, despite both lesbian parents being birth mothers and interchangeably providing for each of the children’s complex needs, the grandmother still equated the biological mother with ‘the real mother’. This was even though Fran, the co-parent, had formed a much stronger maternal bond to Josh than Kate, his birth mother:

Kate [birth mother of Josh]: I didn’t bond with Josh straight after he was born. People talk about your maternal bond with the child and all those things. And it didn’t really happen with me, whereas Fran [co-parent of Josh] was instantly bonded, you know, felt this instant bond with him. Whereas for me it took quite a while until I got to know him, it took quite a few weeks before I really felt this love for him.

. . .

Fran: Ruth [Kate’s mother] didn’t mean to be offensive I think, but . . . Ruth rang up in the afternoon . . . and she said something to me about, because I was at home by myself with the baby, about being a real mother (because I had looked after Josh for the day).

Kate: 'Feel what it's like now'

Fran: 'It's what it's like to be a real mother' and I found that really distressing. . . . Very distressing, very upsetting because I thought I *was* a real mother anyway um.

Ruth did not use the biological connection to explain why Josh was so special to her, but rather that he was the first grandchild and a boy. Yet Ruth maintained genuine surprise and delight that Fran could also feel so close to Josh (despite being the non-birth mother):

'Yes I was more excited when Kate had the baby of course because it was the first baby . . . and as he was born I felt this incredible bond with this little child and ah, yeah it's been, I don't know, I feel a very close, close relationship with Josh, really close to him . . . you know Martha [Fran's biological daughter] will be pretty special in her own right um . . . and being a girl she is very special you know . . . Josh being a boy he was a bit different to me because I had two girls and even though it shouldn't make any difference it still is.

. . .
' . . . But I was just, I'm just amazed to see how Fran's really um . . . um . . . how close Fran is to Josh too. Which is wonderful.'

Despite Ruth's support and enthusiasm for her daughter's family she articulated a sadness she felt that Josh would not have an actively involved father:

'At the playground seeing Josh you know when there is a man around, he just gravitates to men. And when he was littler he would just stand there and look at . . . I saw a smile on his face when a dad was coming to help his child and Josh thought he was coming for him to play with him, he was observing this father with the boy and I got a bit sad that's all.'

Josh was too young to interview in this study, and we will never know what he thought of in that fleeting moment in the playground when his grandmother sadly notes that he is missing out on social fathering, even though he has access to his biological genealogy through knowing who his donor/father is. Here we have a window into the mix of traditional and alternative ways of doing family. The parents embrace a new way of doing family while the grandmother has her feet placed firmly in both alternative and traditional ways of doing family.

Concluding thoughts on implications for family therapists

When we began to write this article we were thinking about this grandmother, so embedded in her past views of family, yet so bravely negotiating the future with her husband, her lesbian daughter and her partner, her two grandchildren, an uninvolved donor/father and the donor's mother and his girlfriend's mother who also see themselves as part of the family. It's complex, isn't it? In recent years, in our teaching and clinical work, we have always referred to lesbian-parented families as a quintessential example of a postmodern family. The participants in our study 'do family' in rich and diverse ways; yet the traditional dominant discourse about family – that families involve two heterosexual parents with children – continued to influence the way many of the children and grandparents understood family and presented their family to the outside world.

Jim McGuigan, a UK sociologist, adopts a position that there is a complex interplay between the modern and the postmodern, and the best way to grasp our social and cultural condition is not to place the two in too sharp a contrast with each other, but rather to study the interface between the modern and postmodern in a range of different spheres. We believe we have done just this in our discussion of our families. Similarly, Judith Stacy's attempt to describe contemporary family arrangements is an accurate assessment of our data: 'We are living, I believe, through a transitional and contested period of family history, a period *after* the modern family order, but before what we cannot foretell' (emphasis in original) (Stacey, 1990). We are looking at the postmodern, but we have yet to know and experience that landscape fully. Studying the exemplary case of lesbian-parented families, and the views of children and grandparents, gives us, and hopefully the families with whom we share these new understandings, some insight into that which *'we cannot foretell'*.

Personal and professional assumptions about 'family' are rarely articulated in family therapy theory and practice (Malley and Tasker, 2004). Viewing 'family' through a lens provided by those on the margins and those in the process of experimenting in new ways of 'doing family' invites us to locate and critique our own ideas and practices in our work with families. It is as simple as that in a way. It is a route to deconstructing the dominant discourse around the family. Sometimes modality-specific and theory-driven battlegrounds, and checklists on how to be sensitively engaged, collaborative or heroic therapists can distract us from the core meaning of our work – acknowledging that people

'do family' differently. Thinking of ourselves and our clients as 'doing family' opens up a greater repertoire for flexibility, negotiated meanings, fluidity and ambiguity. It acknowledges too that families are in a social time of transition and flux. The families in our study show us that it is not always comfortable living differently. Understanding the tension that arises in attempting to do family within and beyond a heteronormative frame provides a useful starting point for tackling the everyday vicissitudes of family life that bring lesbian, gay and straight families to therapy.

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