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Familiar claims

Representations of same-gendered families in South African mainstream print media

Tracy Morison (Human Sciences Research Council / Rhodes University)
Vasu Reddy (Human Sciences Research Council/ University of KwaZulu-Natal)

Tracy Morison is a research psychologist who currently holds a position as a postdoctoral fellow in the Human and Social Development Research Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (Pretoria). She is an Honorary Research Associate in the psychology department at her *alma mater*, Rhodes University, where she attained her PhD. Her main research interests lie in the area of sexualities and reproductive decisions (including pathways to parenthood and child-freedom). She also has an interest in families, households, discursive methodology, and feminist theory.

Vasu Reddy is the Deputy Executive Director of Human and Social Development Research Programme at the Pretoria offices of the Human Sciences Research Council. He is an Honorary Associate Professor and Research Fellow in Gender Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where he obtained his PhD. He sits on various boards and is also an Editorial Collective Member of *Agenda* journal. Vasu has written extensively on the topics of gender and sexuality, HIV and AIDS, social cohesion, families, and households. He also interested in is critical theory, and Humanities-focused research. He is the lead editor of *From Social Silence to Social Science: Same-Sex Sexuality, HIV & AIDS and Gender in South Africa* (HSRC Press, 2009) and co-author of *The Country We Want to Live In: Hate Crimes and Homophobia in the Lives of Black Lesbian South Africans* (HSRC Press, 2010).

FAMILIAR CLAIMS: REPRESENTATIONS OF SAME-GENDERED FAMILIES IN SOUTH AFRICAN MAINSTREAM NEWS MEDIA

There has been significant reform of South African legislation pertaining to same-gendered familiesⁱ (Isaack, 2003; Reddy, 2006 & 2009). The Constitution supports the rights of gay men and lesbians to establish life partnerships or, more recently, to enter into civil unions, to adopt children, keep custody of their own children in divorce proceedings, and to undertake co-parenting of their created families (Lubbe, 2007). Despite—or maybe because of—these developments, public debate on these issues is as lively and vociferous as it has ever been (Roberts & Reddy, 2008). At the time of writing this chapter, for instance, a veteran journalist published a column in a national newspaper in which he denounced same-gendered family “arrangements” as “neither the norm nor ultimately desirable” (Mulholland, 2013). Children in same-gendered families must be informed of this, he claimed. His argument was unsupported, save for unsubstantiated claims regarding the unnaturalness of same-gendered families, which defy “the natural order of things”, and the vehement refusal that “same-sex matrimony is the same as that of heterosexuals” (Mulholland, 2013). Mulholland’s column, which met with outrage by various activists and academics, demonstrates some of the ideas that circulate in public discussion of same-gendered families: concerns regarding the differences between homosexual and heterosexual families and the effects that these ‘differences’ might have on children living in ‘alternative’ families (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005; Hicks, 2005; Landau, 2009; Riggs, 2004 & 2007).

In this chapter, we examine the public discussion, focusing on South African print media as a key site where debate has occurred. Recognising that the discussion of LGBTI issues in South Africa has increased in visibility over time, focusing on stories about coming out, rights, transgressions, stigma, discrimination and violence, this chapter concentrates on the public discussion in local print media that centre on ‘alternative’ family arrangements that are in contrast to a traditional heterosexual nuclear family. Drawing on a selection of print media reportage, we examine the social and public discourses that underpin and resist normative meanings associated with ‘the family’ as a social unit and, specifically, how same-gendered families (often rendered invisible and pathologised) are constructed within this material.

THE RAINBOW NATION AND RAINBOW FAMILIES

Since the advent of democracy, South Africans have endeavoured to detach themselves from the systematic and hierarchical arrangement of difference that characterised the apartheid state (Distiller, 2011). Dubbed the ‘rainbow nation’ⁱⁱ, South Africa was envisaged to be a state where diversity was celebrated and protected. Accordingly, the entitlement of homosexual people to various human and civil rights has been officially recognised (Lubbe, 2007 & 2008a; Reddy, 2009), as stated above. In

reality, however, this group has, for the most part, attained “theoretical citizenship”ⁱⁱⁱ (Distiller, 2011, p. 13).

Lack of acceptance—ranging from intolerance and prejudice to outright punitive violence committed by fellow citizens—is commonplace in the lives of South African lesbians and gay men (Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy & Moletsane, 2010; Roberts & Reddy, 2008). These negative experiences are of course, mediated by South Africa’s particular race-class nexus that was entrenched during the apartheid era (Distiller, 2011). White middle-class homosexuals may experience more subtle forms of discrimination and ‘mundane heterosexism’ (Hicks, 2005) while poorer Black lesbians and gay men may encounter brutal violence (Mkhize et al., 2010). Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the general climate in South Africa is at best intolerant and at worst openly hostile toward same-gendered sexuality for reasons that highlight cultural taboos, morality, and hetero-patriarchal sensitivities. Indeed, various political leaders have publically expressed negative views of homosexuality and fuelled claims that it is “un-African”. “South Africa, like other parts [of] Africa, is currently knee-deep in state-sanctioned homophobia” (Distiller, 2011, p. 4). For example, in 2009 President Zuma was reported as saying that same-gendered marriages are “a disgrace to the nation and to God” and should not be tolerated in normal society (Anonymous, 2012). More recently, King Goodwill Zwelithini, the Zulu traditional leader, remarked on the unacceptability of homosexuality, calling homosexuals “rotten” (Anonymous, 2012). It is against this backdrop of widespread and entrenched intolerance, homophobia, and heterosexism that discussions and debates of same-gendered families occur.

South African families are diverse in composition and traditional notions of *the family* are confronted with the increasing prevalence of diverse, unconventional family relationships brought about by a range of societal factors—such as HIV/AIDS, which leaves many households without adult caregivers, ‘childfree’ households, dual-earner families, divorce, adoption and, more recently, the same-gendered family (Lubbe, 2008b). Indeed, traditional nuclear families form only about a third of all family forms, as the table below presents (Holborn & Eddy, 2011).

Percentage (%) of children (0 – 17 years) living with...

biological grandparents	8
neither biological parent	23
two biological parents	35
father only	3
mother only	40

The absence of statistics on same-gendered families—as revealed in the table above—means there can be no clear picture of households in a changing South Africa. Moreover, official reporting of household statistics reveals a bias toward the nuclear family arrangements, shaped by the gender binary in hetero-patriarchal terms and pointing to the continuing myth of the ‘normal’ family.

Despite the large number of different family-forms in South Africa, and their increasing visibility, the married two-parent heterosexual family continues to be viewed as the normative ideal (Lubbe, 2008a). This nuclear family model, shaped to a large extent by received notions of culture, represents the conjugal parental couple with biological children. The idea of a natural and healthy family arrangement, only made possible by reproduction, stands in marked contrast to family arrangements that deviate from this perceived standard. The popular U.S. sitcom *Modern Family* (which centres on three inter-related families), for example, highlights issues of what constitutes an evolving ‘modern’ family that resists the traditional nuclear model of family arrangements. The myth of the normal, therefore, is a continuously debated source of meaning.

CHALLENGING THE MYTH OF THE ‘NORMAL’ FAMILY: REPRESENTATIONS OF SAME-GENDERED FAMILIES

Lubbe (2008a, p. 49) argues that “[t]he scarcity of positive images and the abundance of negative stereotypes as well as the invisibility of same-gendered families in the institutions outside of the family combine to create a sense of difference, uniqueness and secrecy”. While the news media have increasingly reported on gay and lesbian issues in South Africa, these representations, as Landau (2009, p. 83) asserts, continue to be disciplined, with homosexual parents portrayed in problematic ways—as “heterosexual clones or exotic threats”.

Visibility and recognisability of homosexuality—and same-gendered families in particular—is critical for lesbian and gay politics and the development of identities. Media representations of homosexuality are important, as many communication scholars and media theorists assert, because the media, and especially the news media, play a significant role in constructing and challenging contemporary politics (Landau, 2009). Alwood (cited in Landau, 2009, p. 81), writing in the North American context, argues: “The news media have [*sic*] long been one of the public’s few sources of information about homosexuals ... [and] [f]or much of American society, what people see and hear in the news is what they accept as reality”. This assertion would be applicable beyond the United States.

Research on the ways that lesbian and gay people and issues are represented in mainstream media is therefore crucial, and a number of studies have been conducted (Landau, 2009). However, as Landau (2009) points out, there has been comparatively less scholarly attention directed toward representations of same-gendered families. Such research is scarce and Landau’s (2009) own research is intended to address this gap.

Landau (2009) examines representations of gay and lesbian families in United States print media, concentrating in particular on the ways that the verbal and visual work together to represent

homosexuality. He concludes that although much of the reporting is overtly positive, it still maintains many heterosexist assumptions and ultimately does not further gay and lesbian politics. Likewise, Riggs (2007), who examined Australian mainstream media representations, concludes that supposedly positive representations of lesbian and gay parents are typically motivated by a desire to 'prove' the capability of gay and lesbian parents in relation to heterosexual parenting norms. Riggs' (2007) focus is on the ways in which constructions of race mediate the category of 'parent'. (See Distiller (2011) for an appraisal of this work in relation to the South African context.)

Another relevant study of media representations and debates about lesbian families was conducted by Clarke and Kitzinger (2005). The researchers studied the transcripts of 27 popular television talk shows and 11 documentaries about gay and lesbian families that were aired in the United Kingdom and New Zealand between 1997 and 2001. Adopting a discursive approach, they report on how traditional understandings of gender and sexual development are mobilised and sustained in discussions of the necessity of male role models for children growing up in lesbian families. No similar studies on representations of same-gendered families have been conducted in South Africa, where research on same-gendered families in general is limited (Distiller, 2011; Lubbe, 2008a).

THE DATA

The analysis that we present is based on an *ad hoc* collection of 41 newspaper articles that report on issues related to same-gendered parenting (e.g., surrogacy, custody, adoption) between 1994 and January 2013. We have deliberately chosen this time period, because it coincides with a number of significant legislative changes in relation to the civil and human rights of homosexuals, as a group, in South Africa (as discussed earlier). During this period of legislative reform, various landmark court cases occurred and were reported on in the media (e.g., *du Toit and Another v. Minister of Welfare and Population Development and Others*; *J and B v Director of Home Affairs and Others*; see also Isaack, 2003 and Reddy, 2006).

The articles appeared in mainstream English (36) and Afrikaans (5) newspapers (print and online) and were located via the *SA Media* archive (hosted by University of the Free State) and the *Independent Online (IOL)* search engines. The latter features news stories that have appeared in print media as well as original reports. The articles that were published in January 2013 were written by and in response to journalist Stephen Mulholland and appeared during the writing of this chapter, but did not emerge from the original search. We decided to include these particular articles due to the controversy that they created in the South African public and their relevance to our argument.

Afrikaans articles were analysed in the original and extracts that have been used in this chapter have been translated in English by the first author (using back translation to ascertain the veracity of the translation). We analyse the data within a constructionist framework, synthesising various discursive approaches, including discursive psychology and the narrative-discursive method (Morison

& Macleod, 2013). Our objective in this chapter is to explore the constructions of same-gendered families in mainstream South African news discourse. Our analysis sought to answer the following questions:

- (a) How are same-gendered families/lesbian and gay parents and their children rendered visible in contemporary print news discourse?
- (b) What understandings of same-gendered parenting, and sexualities more generally, are constructed in news reports?

ANALYSIS

Our analysis was informed by a combination of critical discursive perspectives and post-structural feminist theory. Below we discuss two overarching and interlinked concerns that were present in the data, namely: (i) the issue of difference and sameness of homosexual families in relation to the hetero-normative ideal of the nuclear family; and (ii) concerns regarding the welfare of children who live in same gendered-families, specifically in terms of gay parents' ability to meet children's various needs, including the 'need' for gender role models.

(i) Same, different, or deficient?

A central feature in the discussion of same-gendered families is their unconventional or 'alternative' character. There are some commentators who equate difference *from the heterosexual nuclear family* with deficiency, limitation and loss and, as we discuss later, with potential disadvantage or damage to children. For example, in the recent controversial column discussed in the introduction, the author states:

There can be little argument against the desirability of a child being raised by two caring parents approved by the relevant authorities rather than in an orphanage, however well run [*sic*] it might be. But although same-sex couples have every right to their lifestyles and will have to pass scrutiny as desirable parents, some will argue in good faith that being brought up in a same-sex family is against the natural order of things. Certainly, mere observation and the biological methods devised by nature (or whatever) for the preservation of the species suggest that instructing children that same-sex matrimony is the same as that of heterosexuals flies in the face of reason. ... Thus, as same-sex relationships are increasingly, and appropriately, accepted in society, it is also fair to expect same-sex parents to be frank with their children that such arrangements are neither the norm, nor ultimately desirable—even if they are loving relationships. (Mulholland, 2013)

In this excerpt, the invocation of the natural/unnatural binary renders the same-gendered family fundamentally and irrevocably different from heterosexual families. The scientific, almost Darwinian, language and vocabulary ("desirability", "pass scrutiny", "natural order of things", "preservation of species") reinforces the author's appeal to "reason" and common sense and obvious differences given "by nature". Underwriting his argument is the authority and privileging of patriarchy (which we have progressively seen to valorise male power). This perspective confirms the view that reproduction of the species (an effect of patriarchy) is thereby interrupted by same-gendered parenting. The fact that homosexual couples cannot jointly produce a child without outside intervention is seen as setting same-

gendered families apart, an inferior, and ultimately undesirable poor cousin to the 'normal' heterosexual family. The same-gendered family, therefore, is viewed as a violation of the 'natural' and must be accounted for (Folgerø, 2008). As Walters (2001 cited in Landau, 2009, p. 90) points out, justification for discriminating against homosexuals has frequently been based on "the assumption that gay 'lifestyles' threaten the sanctity of the nuclear family by proposing and practicing a sexuality not centered on reproduction" (p. 211).

The author's argument rests on "heterosexist and heteronormative ideologies that assume and privilege biological inception by intercourse between a male and female" (Landau, 2009, p. 89). The 'logic' of this is so taken for granted and apparently self-evident, that the author fails to even offer any substantiation of this point. This 'alternative' family-form, the author suggests, may be tolerated simply due to the demand for good parents, but lesbian or gay parents had better account for their differences and, importantly, make their children aware of the inferiority. This family configuration therefore troubles essentialist, traditional understandings of kinship and parenthood (Folgerø, 2008).

Nevertheless, the denouncement of same-gendered families was exceptional in the corpus of data that we analysed. The majority of the articles, particularly those published in the last decade, emphasise homosexual couples' "triumph" and have a somewhat celebratory or sympathetic tone. They tend to highlight the suitability and competence of homosexual parents by describing the relationship stability (most articles state the duration of a couple's relationship) and their economic stability (the professional status of parents is almost always cited). In addition, the couples' desire for children and ability to care emotionally for children forms part of the narrative. Same-gendered parents are thus positioned as 'good parents' in these reports. Significantly, for the most part, the reports downplay or deny difference, arguing that lesbian and gay parents and families are just the same or almost the same as heterosexual ones, as seen in the following illustrations:

I try to encourage her [the daughter] to question these [stereotypes] by discussing different types of families ... Like any other mother I feel I am trying to be the best parent I can be. (Henning, 1994)

He [adoptive father] is also confident that whatever issues arise in their relationship, they will cope ... His basic philosophy is: "I'm a gay parent. I'm like every other parent just a little bit different". (Beaver, 2000)

Two children and their parents. A family. A happy family. Almost dead normal. Except that the two children are darker than their parents, are adopted children, and both of their parents are women. Quite a few things for a child to cope with. ... The De Vos-du Toit family's story reads almost like a fairy tale with a horrible part and a (subsequent) happy part. Once upon a time there were two women who loved each other and wanted to have children. And there was a sister and her baby brother in an orphanage, and they would possibly spend their entire childhood there with thirty other children. Now these two are well-adjusted children who excel at school and will possibly attend university or technikon after school and realise their full potential, thanks to the love and attention of their two parents. ... Precisely because they are now a happy "almost dead normal" family, Anna-Marie and Suzanne are prepared to bring an application to the high court ... [to allow] them as a gay couple to both be recognised as the legal parents of the children. (Hudson, 2000)

These extracts show how difference was minimised or denied, with parents positioning themselves as virtually the same as “every other parent”, in other words, ‘normal’, presumably heterosexual, parents. The basis of this comparison is that they too love and want the best for their children. This is most apparent in the third extract where the claim about the children having a lot to “cope” with owing to their different family form (trans-racial, same-gendered, adopted) is undercut by focusing on the parents’ capability as being good caregivers (Riggs, 2007).

In addition, the parents’ desire to have children is rendered normal, familiar, and understandable by utilising the recognisable fairy tale story-line, and thus drawing on a familiar script of romantic coupledness. This script rests on an array of positive socio-cultural norms about passion and romance (Fennell 2006) and parenthood as a sign or overflow of a couple’s love. This script is co-opted from the heteronormative story line and thus functions to normalize the same-gendered family by using it to structure the family’s story of origin. The description of this ‘almost normal’ family is therefore overwhelmingly positive.

Such positive renditions that minimise difference, Riggs (2007) maintains, serve to establish that same-gendered mothers and fathers are capable and acceptable parents. These claims suggest a somewhat defensive position: to assert that same-gendered families are more similar than different from heterosexual families, that the differences are negligible and, importantly, do not render the families deficient (Hicks, 2005). In other words, they compare favourably with the heterosexual norm. Behind such claims, therefore “rests a standard against which these are determined, and here this has to be a ‘heterosexual assumption’” (Hicks, 2005, p. 163).

It is upon the basis of presumed difference that concerns and questions arise regarding the potential effects on children who grow up in same-gendered families. This features prominently in debates surrounding same-gendered families, which we turn to next. As we show, lesbian and gay parents are called to account for themselves and their parenting practices. Their family arrangements are open to scrutiny, and ultimately to regulation.

(ii) The child’s best interests

The wellbeing of children who live in same-gendered families is central to the public debate. The principle of ‘the best interests of the child’ is used by the courts to pronounce on matters related to lesbian and gay families, and is often the basis for public responses to same-gendered families. A large corpus of literature on the effects of homosexual parenting on children also exists (Landau, 2009; Lubbe, 2008b). This topic was a major preoccupation in media reports, with an overriding concern, as we have previously mentioned, being that of legitimating same-gendered parenting as “just as good” as heterosexual parenting (Riggs, 2004).

'Needs talk' in discussions of same-gendered families

The notion of "children's needs" is based upon the modern view of the 'sacralised child', in which children are seen as emotionally priceless, with their needs deemed to be paramount (Zelizer, 1985). This construction is based upon a particular contemporary construction of children as helpless, passive, and, wholly reliant on their parents (Woodhead, 1997). Talk of children's welfare or 'needs' comprises a significant and powerful discursive tool that acts as an 'unchallengeable discourse' because the 'best interests of children' are given a moral priority (Adenæs, 2005). However, needs talk is not the transparent, apolitical talk it might represent itself as being. Rather, it is political and theory-laden talk that obscures the socio-political preoccupations underwriting its production through its claims to describe something inherent within a child's so-called nature (Lawler, 1999). In this manner, 'needs' statements allow value judgements and normative relationships to appear to be timeless, universal facts and lend them moral force (Meyer, 2007; Woodhead, 1997). Consequently, such talk is powerful and carries tremendous authority that compels others to act (Lawler, 1999).

Needs talk featured prominently in discussions about the ideal conditions for parenting. Implicit in these discussions are expert and often psychologised understandings of childhood and parenting (Woodhead, 1997). Indeed expert commentators, most often psychologists (but also sociologists and similar) are cited in articles, thus lending further weight to whatever claims are being made about the effects of same-gendered parenting. Significantly, needs talk could be harnessed toward various discursive ends: explanatory, justificatory or regulatory, as well as a means of resistance.

On one hand, the rhetoric of children's needs provided a formidable defence of normative relationships. It was drawn upon to censure same-sex families and to legitimise the nuclear family form as the most appropriate context for childbearing. For instance, in a letter to the editor, which appeared with the headline "Adoption by lesbians is not good for the child", the writer's status as a psychologist is stated in bold at the outset. She argues:

The adopted child in a lesbian family can encounter many problems when he realises that he is adopted by two women and not by a mother and father like other adopted children. I do not by any means judge homosexuals, but I believe that it is unfair toward adopted children that have to be raised in such a home. A good self-image is the most valuable gift that any parent can give his child (Esterhuizen, 1994).

This denouncement is very much in line with the Mulholland's column, discussed earlier, in which the author denies ill-feeling toward homosexuals, but instead mobilises children's welfare to condemn same-gendered families. Unlike Mulholland's piece, this letter attempts to substantiate the claim that same-gendered families are detrimental to children's wellbeing. As the extract shows, the author claims that psychological wellbeing (self-image) will be impaired due to the child's perception of being different from other adopted children. Another claim she makes in this letter, which we take up in more depth later, is that children's gender identity development will be impaired due to the absence of a father in the lesbian family.

This extract shows how the notion of children's needs may be harnessed to sanction childbearing under certain conditions and thereby proscribe parenthood for certain individuals, such as gay men and lesbians. Needs talk masks and, in this case, preserves politically powerful and institutionalised beliefs about who should become a parent, and under what circumstances. These beliefs encourage parenthood in those who most closely resemble the ideal hetero-patriarchal family (i.e., "White", heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class and wealthy), providing them with ever-expanding options and opportunities to become parents. In contrast, the desire to parent, and the actual parenting practices, of those who do not live up to the ideal are not similarly supported (Morell, 2000).

On the other hand, needs talk could also function to defend same gendered parenting. For example, in the following expert comment on a judgement where a lesbian parent was granted custody:

"His [the judge's] decision to return the minor child to the custody of her mother is a signal to child care agencies, magistrates and courts to respect the Constitution and to act in the best interests of children ... Removing a child from his or her parent's custody solely because of the parent's sexual orientation will further stigmatise and prejudice the parent as well as traumatise the child," he said. Being lesbian or gay had nothing to do with the ability of parents to love and care for their children, he said. (Anonymous, 1998)

In contrast to the preceding expert opinion, here we see that staying with a same-gendered parent is constructed as being "in the best interests of children" based on the potential trauma that separation could cause. The commentator refutes ideas of potential damage caused by the lesbian family by pointing out that lesbian parents are able to meet children's basic psychological/emotional and other needs by providing "love and care".

In addition to expert claims about children's welfare, the majority of the articles also quote parents on the issue, as in the following extract from an article about a lesbian family entitled "An unusual, but happy family". One of the parents is quoted as saying:

We began doing research. We bought and read the book *Gay and lesbian parenting* by April Martin. We also read and kept every article on this issue in the *Unisa* [University of South Africa] library - we wanted to arm ourselves with scientific facts in order to convince a court that it would not necessarily be detrimental for children to be raised in a gay home ... The findings also indicated that children who are raised in gay homes are exposed to more emotional challenges that make them more resilient. In homes where parents did not keep their sexuality a secret, children did not suffer any damage. We were convinced that it would be better for a child to be with us than in an orphanage, and that the child would be raised in a relatively normal way (Hudson, 2000)

This quote functions to highlight the parent's consideration of what would be best for the child, rather than simply acting on their desire to be parents. This lengthy quotation also lists the research that the women undertook in order to ascertain whether and how a child might be affected growing up in their home, and how this impacted on their final decision to adopt. The mother cites expert evidence that highlights the benefits of lesbian families (e.g., emotional resilience); although she implicitly concedes that their family is not entirely "normal". This concession inadvertently reiterates the structural and

ideological underpinnings of the traditional heterosexual nuclear family and ultimately reinforces hetero-patriarchal norms.

Regardless of whether needs talk was used to denounce or support homosexual parenting, the construction of sacralised childhood and the belief in the intrinsic value of children remained central. This demonstrates both the ubiquity and power of this construction. Indeed, Landau (2009, p. 85) argues that children are foregrounded in media discussions of same-gendered families, which frames same-sex parenting “as if it is exclusively relevant for its impact on relationships with children. Children, then, become the yardstick by which gays, as parents, are evaluated”.

Emphasis was placed on one ‘need’ in particular in most of the articles: children’s need for gender role models. As we discuss in the following section, this preoccupation stems from a concern regarding children’s sexuality and ‘proper’ gender development (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005; Folgerø, 2008; Hicks, 2005). We concentrate on how the articles address idea that children of homosexual parents are “at risk of experiencing ‘confusion’ about their gender and sexuality, and, at worst, may themselves become lesbian or gay” (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005, p. 138). We focus especially on how parents’ responses to this potential ‘threat’ are reported and the effects of their arguments.

Children’s gender development and compulsory heterosexuality

The homosexual, especially lesbian, parents were frequently quoted about their children’s gender identity and sexual orientation. This suggests that they may have been directly asked about this (by the journalist); that they themselves were familiar with and anticipated this particular charge; and/or that this was their personal concern. Some illustrative quotes appear below.

[A] “Our child will be raised straight,” said Lucia. “As soon as the child is old enough to understand what goes on in the world, we will explain to him: ‘she is your mom, and I am Lucia’. Or ‘aunty Lucia’.” But children need male and female role models. What role model can two homosexual women be for a boy? Rouxnel answers that there will be more than enough uncles and grandfathers in his life. Lucia says that she will buy the boy a rugby ball and cheer from the side-lines of the rugby field. She reckons that she and Rouxnel will both be the father *and* the mother. “If the child needs a hiding, then I will give it. But, if he has fallen and his knee is sore, then I have enough motherliness to also be a mother for him,” says Rouxnel. They want to raise the child with as much love in his life as possible. “Rouxnel and I have so much to give.” (van Rensberg, 1997).

[B] “I don’t have a problem with how I’m bringing up my daughter,” she says. Research has shown that most lesbians have heterosexual parents and most lesbian mothers produce heterosexual children. “My daughter’s dad is involved with a woman. Her grandparents are heterosexual. So she has a lot of influences other than me. I would never force anything upon her. Who knows, maybe I’m giving her something to rebel against!” (Henning, 1994)

[C] “The scientific findings from the articles were dumbfounding. They indicated that exactly the same *per centage* of children that grew up in a gay household are gay or straight as those who grew up in straight homes. That the parents are gay has no influence on the children’s sexual orientation. It was important for us to know that. We didn’t want the children’s choices to necessarily be influenced by our lifestyles.” ... Marié is 11, first in the standard 5 [grade 7] class, shines in various sports, is mad about horse-riding and is a leader in her class. She is

conscientious and an achiever. Stephen is turning 8. He is in grade 2 and is mad about rugby and cricket. He takes part in wrestling, just so that he can have a bit of male bonding (Hudson, 2000).

[D] Michelle has been studying the findings of a Harvard University research project on lesbian and gay parenting. “They found no evidence that lesbians and gays are unfit to be parents,” she says. ... There is also no evidence that suggests that the children of gay parents will themselves become gay.” ... Michelle said that they were committed to allowing their child to develop in as normal an environment as possible. “We do not intend to bring our child up in a solely gay and lesbian community. We want to raise our child within a mixed community and let him or her lead as normal and balanced life as possible.” (Knowler & Donaldson, 2002)

In these extracts—all from reports about lesbian mothers—two main issues are emphasised. The first is the issue of children’s appropriate gender development facilitated through gender ‘role models’, most explicitly raised in extract A. As we see above, the mothers adopted one of two rhetorical strategies outlined by Clarke and Kitzinger (2005) to respond to arguments about the need for gender role models. First, they emphasised the presence of males in the children’s lives, especially within the extended family. For instance, one mother (extract A) claims that her child will have “more than enough uncles and grandfathers” and another (extract B) lists the various (heterosexual) family members who could act as role models. These women use extreme case formulations (“more than enough”, “a lot”, and listing) to bolster their argument against disagreement. The second rhetorical strategy is the emphasis on influences beyond the same-gendered family and gay community. For instance, the mothers refer to their children having “a lot of influences other than me” (a lesbian – extract A) and the desire to raise the child in a “normal and balanced” way “within a mixed community” (extract C) thus allaying possible fears that their children will be limited to all-female, or all-lesbian, environments without role models who can facilitate “normal” development.

We also see how the gender presentations of children were described in the articles. Many articles that focus on lesbian families include descriptions of children’s gender-appropriate behaviour: girls were “mad about horse-riding” (extract C) while boys are interested in rugby (extracts A & C), for example. These extracts engage with the common construction of gender “as a fundamental and complementary difference between ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Folgerø, 2008, p. 136) so that parents are able to make a unique contribution to meeting a child’s needs, based on received notions of masculinity and femininity. Lesbian parents who were interviewed therefore engage with the belief that healthy or ‘normal’ child development depends on experiencing this fundamental difference within families (Folgerø, 2008). In extract A, for instance, the parent claims that she and her partner “will be the father *and* the mother” so that the child is able to receive both discipline and emotional care—roles stereotypically performed by men (fathers) and women (mothers) respectively.

This particular construal of gender is informed by a discourse of heterosexual gender complementarity.

The gender complementarity of heterosexual parents has in this perspective a universal and functional basis: to grow up with a “mother” (female) and a “father” (male) is an imperative prerequisite for a “normal” development of personality, enabling boys to develop an identity as heterosexual men and girls to develop an identity as heterosexual women (Folgerø, 2008, p. 138).

This thinking has been reinforced by psychological theories of gender development. The circulation of developmental psychological concepts and terms—such as that of a gender “role model”, “identification” or “socialisation”—in public debates regarding children’s needs and best interests inform not only popular understandings of gender, but also of (good) parenting (Folgerø, 2008); which in itself is a marker of preconceived value-laden beliefs that highlight a moral perspective in respect of perceived good parenting..

Discussions of role models were concerned specifically with *male* role models. In extracts A and B the mothers discuss the male “influences” that their children will encounter and in extract C the son is exposed to “male bonding” through participation in a traditionally male sport. Folgerø (2008) reports, that in his study

... the issue of “role models” [was] a question of *fatherhood*, of the value of having a father participating in the care for the children. The informants clearly looked upon fathers as “role models,” while mothers simply were mothers. Mothers can certainly be good or bad, but the informants did not consider it necessary to argue that mothers are needed to ensure that children have “female role models.” For this reason, there are plenty of discussions of fatherhood in the interviews while the gender specificity of being a mother was either absent or implicit in the interviews (p. 136).

Likewise, in our data corpus, the unique attributes and skills of men *as men*—absent in lesbian families—were emphasised. As we have highlighted, the quotes above are unsurprisingly all from lesbian parents and reflect the general public concern with the lack of male role models in lesbian families and (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005).

Much of the attention that fathers receive in relation to children’s welfare is focused on *absent* fathers. In both popular and academic *fora*, it is the father’s physical presence/absence that is considered to be a determinant of how children—and boys in particular—turn out (Lawler, 1999). Likewise, in our study there was a relative lack of concern for children’s need for a mother. This absence can be understood in relation to the unremarkable character of mothering for women. Such gender positioning is within the usual ambit of the female gender role, that is, women are traditionally children’s caregivers.

As Clarke and Kitzinger (2005) point out, the reasons that male role models and fathers are necessary are not often spelled out. Hence, it appears that this idea is so much part of our cultural common sense that arguments for the necessity of male role models do not require much explanation or justification. Rather, “it would seem that the mere presence of a man is what is important” (p. 148 – 149). The lesbian parents’ responses in these news interviews— highlighting the presence of men and other masculine “influences”—effectively admit to the supposed necessity of male role models (Clarke

& Kitzinger, 2005). Thus, as Clarke and Kitzinger (2005) maintain, such responses “attend to and sustain traditional understandings of gender and sexual development” (p. 137).

The second issue that is underscored by these extracts is the homophobic premise that same-gendered parents bring about homosexuality in their children (Landau, 2009). This premise rests on the dominant narrative of heterosexuality as the preferred and sanctioned mode of intimate relationships and family life (Lubbe, 2008b). The extracts above show lesbian parents responding to this concern. A common strategy is to cite research findings that ‘prove’ that this fear is unwarranted. The lesbian women therefore draw on expert knowledges to sanction their claim to motherhood. Several scholars point out the political and ideological problems with the research studies cited by the parents (Folgerø, 2008; Riggs, 2007). Such research may ostensibly appear to be “homo-friendly”, because the findings show that being raised by homosexual parents is not against children’s best interests. Yet, the problem with this work becomes apparent if we envisage the potential implications if the findings had been the opposite. This research is based upon the heteronormative assumption that the heterosexual nuclear family is the ideal place to raise children (Folgerø, 2008). This rhetorical strategy effectively “weights the negative implications of homosexuality and gay parenting ... [and] reasserts heterosexuality as the ideal” (Landau, 2009, p. 91).

DISCUSSION

Our examination of South African news articles about same-gendered families demonstrates that, as in the U.S. media, representations of these families are for the most part positive and apparently progressive (Landau, 2009). It is possible to see that these representations do indeed present some challenge to traditional family forms, in that, as Lubbe (2008b) suggests, they raise “uncomfortable questions such as: ‘What is a parent?’; ‘What is a family?’; ‘What is a father and what is a mother?’”. These representations may potentially extend traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Nonetheless, like Landau (2009), we found that constructions of same-gendered families were rhetorically disciplined so that their potential challenge was minimized and hetero-patriarchy was re-stabilised.

Although at face-value claims to ‘sameness’ or ‘normality’ appear to be positive and may have positive effects, they may still operate to re-entrench heteronormativity (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005; Hicks, 2005; Riggs, 2007). Riggs (2007) lists a number of socio-political implications of claiming that gay parents are ‘just like’ straight parents, namely: (1) the promotion of heterosexual parenting as the ‘gold standard’ against which all parenting is measured;(2) obscuring the radical differences that shape same-gendered parents’ lives; (3) denial of the benefits of lesbian and gay parenting; and (4) diverting attention from the ways in which institutionalised discrimination oppresses lesbian and gay parents.

Claims to sameness originate within a liberal equality discourse (Hicks, 2005) and are an outcome of mainstreaming politics that stresses common humanity and requires that sexuality be kept cloistered (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005). Thus, while claims to sameness may serve to include same-

gendered families in the mainstream, Clarke and Kitzinger (2005) maintain, they also structure resistance to heteronormativity in terms of the oppressor's discourse, the discourse of difference. This strategy is thus limited since it produces only 'virtual equality' asking "only for tolerance within existing structures" (Hicks, 2005, p. 164). The 'gold standard' of heterosexual parenting therefore goes unchallenged and the normative status of heterosexuality is reinforced (Riggs, 2004).

As a result, same-gendered families are always compared against the normative benchmark of the heterosexual family (Hicks, 2005). The construction of 'the good parent' is judged by the standards of heterosexual parenting, and homosexual parents are required to prove their suitability in ways that straight parents do not. Thus, as Hicks (2005, p. 163) argues, "'difference' is the effect of a range of discourses that locate, define and maintain the very idea of 'the lesbian or gay family' as different, subordinate, and even subversive, not as a result of a set of essential characteristics". This is illustrated in a satirical response to Mulholland's article entitled "Heterosexuals: Should we let them raise children?" The author of this spoof article writes: "Most critically of all, the exposure to the heterosexual influence of their parents may produce children who grow up to believe that heterosexual parenting is the only normal and desirable kind" (Davis, 2013).

As we have shown, gay parenting is condoned, or at best tolerated, on condition that heterosexuality is reproduced—that is, that straight children are produced. This, in our view, reconfirms a prevailing heteronormativity that shapes responses to gay parenting, fuelled by and underwritten through patriarchy. Engaging with concerns about proper gender and sexual development, especially in the psychologised terms of 'identification' and role modelling, legitimates heterosexist norms and reinforces traditional ideas about sexuality and gender (Landau, 2009). Attempts to refute claims that same-gendered family environments are lacking the necessary agents of gender socialisation—a *father* in particular—have limited efficacy. First, these defences amount to a concession to the hetero-patriarchal belief that children need fathers, or male role models at the very least, and that father absence is bad for children. Second, using scientific evidence to counter these claims is not enough. Hicks (2005, p. 165) maintains that

...we cannot and should not assess lesbian and gay parenting on the basis of 'research evidence' alone, since evidence is always open to a series of interpretations which ultimately relate to a moral and political stance. ...such homophobic discourses (as I see them) cannot be simply opposed by rational arguments that suggest an alternative 'truth' because there are no such truths about sexuality that can be based upon readings of 'the evidence'.

Instead, Hicks (2005) argues that "gender and sexuality are not things acquired, but rather sets of ideas, or practices that are socially achieved" (p. 165).

When parents themselves adopt the strategies we discussed in this chapter (emphasising their sameness; highlighting the presence of (male) role models in their children's lives; stressing their attempts to "raise their children straight" or in a "balanced" way; and attempting to "prove" that they will not impact on their child's sexuality) they position themselves as 'good gays' who are not a threat

to the hetero-patriarchal order (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005). Their children's (hetero)sexuality is used as evidence for good parenting (Landau, 2009).

Landau (2009) argues that the emphasis on children, and their needs and development, in news reporting means that "same-sex parenting is framed as if it is exclusively relevant for its impact on relationships with children" (p. 85). The rhetoric of children's needs is powerful and, as we have demonstrated, can be used to resist the normalisation of hetero-patriarchal arrangements like the nuclear family; this strategy may be limited though. Andenæs (2005) argues that ideas about good parenting are often

[i]nspired by the kind of developmental psychology that has constructed children as abstract individuals with universal needs, [so that] it is possible to turn one's gaze away from the actual conditions of those responsible for the children. It then becomes of minor interest who these people are, whether they are men or women, and what their life circumstances are (p. 214).

Consequently, children's needs may take precedence over those of the parents and, in turn, take priority over fairness and social justice in relation to family arrangements. This rhetoric could easily be re-appropriated and mobilised toward conservative ends insofar as the focus is on what is best for children and *not* on equity. Hicks (2005) argues that we would do better to instead highlight that concerns about children's welfare are rooted in ideas of difference and that "this 'difference' is the effect of a range of discourses that locate, define and maintain the very idea of 'the lesbian or gay family' as different, subordinate and even subversive, not as a result of a set of essential characteristics" (p. 163). Rather than engaging in debates regarding children's needs and wellbeing, and thus adopting a defensive and heteronormative stance, Hicks (2005) argues that we should be exposing the assumed heterosexual normality and homogeneity that underpin these concerns and the "very system of sexual knowledge that organizes contemporary ideas about 'sexuality'" (pp. 164 – 165).

The generally accepting tone in the articles we analysed is, in our view, a provisional or "paradoxical" acceptance, as Landau (2009) argues "gay families may be okay given that the children grow up to be 'straight' appropriately feminine or masculine and, of course, heterosexual" (Landau, 2009, p. 95). Aside from their heteronormative basis, representations of same-gendered families as being no different to heterosexual families, and a space that can meet children's developmental 'needs' can be equally met, may well prove useful in the political debate and contribute toward transformation (Folgerø, 2008). However, the transformation is limited to the tolerance of 'alternative' families in hetero-patriarchal society. The dominance of the heterosexual nuclear family as an ideal, and the power of the father role within it, remains. True "liberation 'for gay people is to define for ourselves how and with whom we live, instead of measuring our relationships by straight values" (Adam, 1995, cited in Landau, 2009, p. 96). It is necessary then to represent same-gendered families on their own terms, not only in relation to heterosexuals and for reasons beyond just their homosexuality.

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Notes:

ⁱ We follow Lubbe (2008a) in our usage of the term 'same-gendered family' to refer to families formed by gay parents. Such families are also commonly referred to as 'lesbian' or 'gay' families or 'same-sex' families, and these terms are also reflected in the text. Though these terms may be used interchangeably at times, our preference is for the term 'same-gendered'. This term captures the constitutive and regulatory effects of discourses that serve to fashion both sex and gender.

ⁱⁱ This term draws on the biblical image of the rainbow which appeared after Noah's flood and was first coined by Desmond Tutu after South Africa's first democratic elections. The term describes the ethos of post-apartheid South Africa, which embraces diversity and multiculturalism.

ⁱⁱⁱ Distiller (2009) uses this term in a discussion of the importance of social recognition for same-gendered families. Our meaning may differ somewhat from hers in that we wish to invoke the disparity between official legitimization of homosexuality and actual experiences of LGBTI people in relation to exercising the rights they have been accorded.

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Megan Southey | Editor

Tel: +27 11 628 3234 | Cell: 081 382 4830 | Fax: +27 11 482 7280

megan@jacana.co.za www.jacana.co.za

10 Orange Street, Sunnyside, Auckland Park, 2092, Johannesburg, South Africa
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Pretoria 0001, South Africa
Tel: (0)21-302-2302

