

Responses to representational invisibility

1 **Abstract**2 **The heterogeneity of family: Responses to representational invisibility by LGBTQ**
3 **parents**

4 This article draws on qualitative research data collected in semi-structured interviews
5 conducted during 2013 and 2014 with 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ)
6 parents living in England and Scotland. It explores how LGBTQ parents respond to media
7 representations of families like theirs, and build narratives of family identity from limited
8 cultural resources. Media, encompassing a range of cultural representational resources,
9 including advertisements, television, books and films, produces specific knowledges about
10 LGBTQ families. Participants argued that popular entertainment media (including *Modern*
11 *Family*) offered a limited range of representations of LGBTQ parents and concretizes
12 knowledge about the shape of families. I argue that available representations fail to
13 acknowledge the diversity of non-heterosexual family forms and that this representational
14 gap results in socio-cultural invisibility. I explore the responses LGBTQ parents had to such
15 gaps and how they negotiated, or rejected representational meanings in order to consolidate
16 new narratives of family.

17 **Keywords:**

18 LGBTQ parents, parenting, media representation, culture, identity, family diversity,
19 qualitative, queer reading, LGBTQ issues.

20

Introduction

21 **The role of representation**

22 Media is a core constituent of identity (Kellner, 2011). It is through a complex and
23 ongoing process of refusals, re-articulations and identifications with representation, that we
24 can craft a sense of self (Driver, 2007). Cultural representations, their restriction, availability,
25 and circulation “have real consequences for real people” (Dyer, 2002a, p.3) as they try to
26 craft stable lives and access socio-cultural legitimation. It is in this context that this research
27 is located: focusing as it does on the interaction between available media representations and
28 the experiences of ordinary people in building social and family lives.

29 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people have been historically
30 marginalised through the censorship of representation and the use of legislation to restrict the
31 circulation of images and narratives of the legitimacy of non-heterosexual identity. In the UK
32 for example, until 2003 Section 28 prohibited local authorities from “intentionally
33 promot[ing] homosexuality or publish[ing] material with the intention of promoting
34 homosexuality” and from “teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of
35 homosexuality as a pretended family relationship” (*Local Government Act 1988*: chapter 9,
36 section 28). A book for children which represented a child with two gay fathers, *Jenny lives
37 with Eric and Martin* (1983), was decried as the tipping point of increasing circulation of
38 media which both represented *and* legitimated lesbian and gay relationships and was a key
39 prompt for the introduction of this legislation (Robinson, 2007, p.171). Both LGBTQ people
40 and their families were deemed an unsuitable topic for children to encounter. The availability
41 of media representations remains strongly tied to the politicised project of constituting and
42 publicly articulating stable identities for LGBTQ people (Dyer, 1990, p.286; Gross, 2001;
43 Muñoz, 1999). Examining LGBTQ people’s relationships to and use of media, therefore
44 offers a productive way to make sense of their experiences of constituting, sharing, and

45 transforming family identities in a socio-political context which recently refused the
46 legitimacy of such work. This project of transformation and narrative making is strongly tied
47 to cultural representation (Driver, 2007; Hall, 1996; Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011).

48 In a media-saturated culture, representation offers a way to locate ourselves in the
49 social world (Silverstone, 2007) and a route by which we might stake a claim in social
50 discourses and the process meaning-making. Representation, whether through restriction or
51 diversification, generates different possibilities in people's lives. This article asks what
52 possibilities of identity-narrative production and recognition in culture are created or
53 foreclosed for LGBTQ parents and their families.

54 **The representation of LGBTQ-parented families**

55 Visibility for LGBTQ parents' identities and families has been increasing for more
56 than two decades (Clark, 1995; Doty and Gove, 1997; Gross, 1994; Shugart, 2003), however,
57 the meanings and uses of the available representations are less clear-cut (Phelan, 1993;
58 Walters, 2012). Walters (2012) has described the current trend in LGBTQ representation as
59 one of "banal inclusion normalisation, assimilation, everyday unremarkable queerness but
60 also, of course, continued abjection" (p.918). Whilst LGBTQ people may be able to find
61 increasing number of images which ostensibly represent them, the diversity of lives and
62 identities which are depicted is limited. Further, representational visibility has increased
63 unevenly for the different identities under the LGBTQ banner (Barker et al, 2008; Dyer,
64 2002b; Clark, 1995; Gross, 1994; Halberstam, 2005; Weeks, 1977).

65 In this context of changing visibility and representational prominence, the experiences
66 of LGBTQ people who parent and collaboratively produce narratives of family identity out of
67 available cultural resources, remain underexamined. In particular, existing research does not
68 indicate how LGBTQ parents locate their families within a media culture which does not

69 equally represent the identities of those people involved in parenting, or routinely
70 acknowledge the validity of non-heterosexual family arrangements.

71 This article offers a way to understand the ongoing work of LGBTQ parents, who are
72 embedded in a media culture, as they shape and stabilise non-heterosexual family narratives.
73 This research aims to illuminate how the heterogeneous experience of family is revealed and
74 validated within what participants described in 2013/2014 as a narrow representational
75 context. To achieve this, I explore the available meanings and narratives offered in the
76 contemporary media productions which directly address, or allow scope for storytelling by,
77 LGBTQ parents. Using data from qualitative interviews, I detail the experiences of LGBTQ
78 parents in finding themselves in media, and report their work to produce and stabilise
79 narratives which affirm family validity, and recognise their family diversity.

80 **Methods**

81 **Participants**

82 This article draws on qualitative data collected during in-person, semi-structured
83 interviews with 30 LGBTQ parents, which were conducted during 2013 and 2014. The
84 participant criteria sought the following: people who were over 18, self-identify as lesbian,
85 gay, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, trans, genderqueer, non-binary, or queer, and a parent
86 living in the UK. Participant recruitment was restricted to those living in the UK given the
87 culturally specific nature of media representation and reception (Silverstone, 2007).
88 Participants were recruited through LGBTQ studies mailing lists, community organisations,
89 community radio, personal networks, and Twitter.

90 Despite a flexible approach to recruitment, with a combination of snowball and
91 purposive sampling, the sample referred to here is largely homogenous. Only eight
92 participants described their class in another way than middle-class and all participants, except
93 one, described themselves as white. Participant ages ranged from 26-56 years and included

94 British, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, European and American people, all of whom were living in
95 Scotland or England at the time of our interview. Children of participants ranged in age from
96 5 months to 27 years old. Six participants identified as gay, 7 as bisexual, 12 as lesbian, 1
97 used the terms both lesbian and queer, and 4 identified as queer, non-heterosexual, or
98 “heterosexual with a bisexual past” (Sarah). The sample included 4 participants who
99 described themselves as poly (or ‘polyamorous’, see Sheff, 2014), and 4 participants who
100 identified themselves as trans.

101 The sample was not representative, nor was it intended to be. There is sparse data on
102 the number of people in the UK with non-heterosexual identities and even less on how many
103 of those people parent. This study, therefore does not represent all LGBTQ people, or even all
104 LGBTQ parents; achieving this, Weston (1997) has explained, is impossible for a “population
105 [which] is not only partially hidden or closeted but also lacks consensus as to the criteria for
106 membership” (p.9). Rather, this study is a glimpse at the lives, experiences, and media
107 interactions of a given group of people who are diverse in some respects (age, location,
108 nationality, life experience) and homogenous in others (race, class).

109 **The interview and analysis**

110 Interviews were conducted in person and there were no restrictions on how many
111 people could take part in each interview; a number of participants chose to be interviewed
112 with their partner. In total I conducted 7 ‘couple’ interviews with 14 people (including one
113 participant’s non-parent heterosexual partner, whose responses are not included here), and 17
114 individual interviews. Conducting interviews with two people present provided an
115 opportunity for “insights into the practice of knowledge production” within these families
116 (Cameron, 2005, p.117) as participants jointly explored their perspectives on their family and
117 its place in a wider social context.

118 Participants were interviewed in a range of locations. Sin (2003) has noted that being
119 able to receive researchers in one's home indicates a degree of economic and social capital
120 and insisting on this location may therefore exclude some from participation. Participants
121 were therefore invited to select a space which they felt most comfortable in. Those
122 participants with young children most frequently chose to be interviewed at home as they
123 could attend to childcare whilst we spoke. In all, 12 interviews were conducted in
124 participant's homes, 7 in café-bars or coffee shops, 3 in workplaces, 1 in a hotel, and 1 in a
125 community centre. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes, and 2 hours 30 minutes.

126 Interviews were semi-structured with a small set of core questions regarding family
127 narrative (who is in your family? What story about your family do you invite your children to
128 tell?), media usage (what media do you like and dislike? What media represents families like
129 yours?), and how decisions about family narratives were made (have you used any parenting
130 guides or resources? How did you make decisions about what to call the adults who parent in
131 your family?). Participants were briefed that 'media' could encompass a broad range of
132 sources from broadcast, to community and online productions; television; film; radio; books;
133 magazines; blogs; music; or anything else they felt constituted 'media'. Demographic data
134 was collected verbally, at the end of interviews.

135 Interviews were audio recorded on a digital Dictaphone, stored electronically on a
136 secure hard drive under randomly assigned pseudonyms, and later transcribed verbatim. At
137 the point of transcription identifying information, such as detail on workplaces and schools
138 were removed, and names of family members and pets were replaced with pseudonyms.

139 All interviews were coded in Nvivo. Nvivo allows data to be coded at multiple top-
140 level 'nodes' representing key themes and further coded to sub-category 'nodes' within each
141 theme. Informed by a discourse analysis approach to identifying significant content, those
142 topics or issues which were repeatedly commented on, or those which were discussed at

143 length in multiple interviews were designated as having “worth and validity” (Waite, 2005,
144 p.182) and formed ‘top level’ nodes. Repetitions of prominent phrases, ideas, and meanings
145 in the data were noted and used to establish which themes were most significant within the
146 data (Hannam, 2002; Smith, 1995). This article deals with the two most prominent themes:
147 lack of representation and feelings of invisibility.

148 The media examples discussed here were all identified by participants. These named
149 texts were given both in response to questions which directed participants to list their
150 favourite and least favourite media, and in more wide ranging discussions on the type of
151 representation which participants found useful or valuable. Once identified from the
152 interview data, each text was viewed multiple times to identify particularly salient features of
153 the content, with reference to the key characteristics which participants suggested it
154 contained. In subsequent viewings, I reflected on how these features contributed to the
155 overall narrative or discursive meaning of the text (Riggs, 2014, p.160). Analysis of the
156 meanings and discourses available in the media texts is offered here in order to situate
157 participant responses to representation, and to facilitate reflection on the role these texts
158 played in shaping and supporting the narratives participants offered of their families (Kress,
159 1996; Thompson, 1988, pp.12-13).

160 **Language**

161 This work aims to acknowledge and represent the complex and multi-faceted
162 experiences of LGBTQ parents in the UK today. With this in mind, I note that the available
163 language to describe relationships tends toward a division of couples into either
164 ‘heterosexual’ or ‘same-sex’ pairings. These terms both collapse gender and sex, and allow
165 no room to acknowledge non-heterosexual identities of individuals in different gender
166 couples. Additionally, same-sex is increasingly used interchangeably with ‘gay’ or
167 ‘homosexual’ (see Bingham, 2014, for example) and this risks erasing the non-binary,

168 multiple, and non-homosexual attractions of bisexual, queer, and non-heterosexual parents
169 who are in same-sex or same-gender relationships. In the interests of clarity, I chose to refer
170 to couples who are in relationships with someone who describes their gender in the same way
171 as them, as being a 'homogendered' couple; and to describe couples whose gender identities
172 are different as a 'heterogendered' couple.

173 Finally, I note that I did not ask participants if they were cisgender but I did actively
174 recruit trans participants. Cisgender describes people whose gender identity is the same as the
175 one they were assigned at birth. It forms a counterpoint to transgender, which describes
176 people whose gender identity differs from the one they were assigned at birth. In order to
177 most accurately represent individuals' identities, I use trans and cisgender only in relation to
178 participants who explicitly described themselves with reference to those terms.

179 **Findings**

180 The two key themes which I will explore mirror the findings of previous research on LGBTQ
181 people's responses to media representation (Barker et al, 2008; Halberstam, 2005; Pallotta-
182 Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003). Namely that certain identities remain proportionally
183 underrepresented in mainstream cultural images (theme 1) and that this representational
184 homogeneity results in feelings of cultural and social invisibility (theme 2). These two
185 themes offer an insight into the prompts and challenges LGBTQ parents experience in
186 producing culturally intelligible family narratives in the media landscape of 2013/2014.

187 **Theme 1: Limited representations in mainstream media sources**

188 Participants felt strongly that there was a limited scope of representation for LGBTQ-
189 headed families in the contemporary media landscape. They had forceful criticism for the
190 different ways they felt representations which ostensibly addressed people like them, failed to
191 equally validate or represent their experiences.

192 **The ‘anti-lesbian thing’: Good gay men and the refusal to acknowledge the value**
 193 **of lesbian parenting.** In response to prompts to tell me about the media they enjoyed as a
 194 family and media which they felt represented families like theirs, over half of all the
 195 participants I spoke with identified American sitcom, *Modern Family*. *Modern Family*, which
 196 first aired in 2009, follows the lives of 3 generations of the Pritchett family living across three
 197 households. Presented in a ‘mocumentary’ style, it includes a gay couple – Mitchell and
 198 Cameron – who parent their adopted daughter Lily.

199 *Modern Family* was commonly watched collectively by a participant’s whole family
 200 and was deemed by participants to contain broadly positive representations of non-
 201 heterosexual parents. However, participants were not uncritical of the way in which this
 202 representation was constructed. Darren, a father to two children, whom he co-parented with
 203 his ex-partner and two lesbian women said:

204 there’s an anti-lesbian thing sometimes [in *Modern Family*], which I think is
 205 uncomfortable for me, when I’m watching with the kids. Sometimes it feels like –
 206 their Mums are lesbians – so I think interestingly in a supposedly inclusive [show],
 207 actually what gets marginalised is lesbian parenthood and lesbians as a group.”

208 (Darren, gay man)

209 To understand the context of Darren’s stated discomfort, it is useful to examine the
 210 themes present in the sole *Modern Family* episode to prominently feature lesbian characters:
 211 ‘Schooled’ (Levitan and O’Shannon, 2012). In the episode, gay couple Cam and Mitchell are
 212 called into their daughter Lily’s school to meet with the principal after Lily fought with
 213 Connor, the son of lesbian couple, Pam and Susan. The moment Cam and Mitchell discover
 214 that Connor’s parents are lesbians their demeanour immediately changes; they exclaim in
 215 horror “lesbians!” Pam and Susan are portrayed as aggressive through their explosive
 216 entrance, their confrontational introduction (Pam exclaims: “whoever made our son cry has

217 messed with the wrong Moms!’’) and signalled as non-feminine by their utilitarian style of
218 dress. In their antagonistic exchange with these women, Cam and Mitchell go on to imply
219 that Pam and Susan, like all lesbians, are incapable of maintaining a welcoming home
220 (Levitan and O’Shannon, 2012).

221 Whilst *Modern Family* is a comedy, and Cam and Mitchell’s disdain for lesbians is
222 dramatized as an opportunity for comedic conflict, the meanings of such representation which
223 insists on an antagonistic and oppositional relationship between lesbians and gay men
224 exceeds the boundaries of the show, as Darren’s uneasiness attested. Although *Modern*
225 *Family* broadly offers celebration and legitimation of gay men parenting (Cavalcante, 2015),
226 it does this by marginalising and abjecting lesbians and gay women who take on the same
227 roles. In the confessional-style segment to camera in the ‘Schooled’ episode, Cam and
228 Mitchell explain their aversion to lesbians; characterising them as fundamentally estranged
229 from gay men because of both their gender, and their sexual desire for women. As gay men
230 (or sexual outsiders) parenting, Cam and Mitchell are potentially threatening to the dominant
231 order but, through the resignification of lesbians as the “constitutive outside”, the show
232 consolidates the mainstream inclusion of, and the (presumed heterosexual) audience’s
233 identification with, gay men (Hall, 1996). Cam and Mitchell’s description of their ‘natural’
234 solidarities with heterosexual women and straight men offers the audience an assurance that
235 accepting gay male parents does not mean all the structures of hetero-patriarchal power must
236 be undone (Rothmann, 2013, p. 68. Rich, 1980). Indeed, through the assurance of their
237 fraternity with straight men and women, Cam and Mitchell’s non-heterosexuality is
238 constituted as benign and their style of parenting is ‘normalised’ by their expression of
239 distance from the “uncontainable” lesbian mothers (Riggs, 2011, p.298). Gay men are
240 positioned as allies of patriarchy, champions of heteronormativity (Shugart, 2003), whilst
241 lesbians’ capacity to parent well is dismissed off-hand. This representation therefore offered

242 an implicit denial of the parenting arrangement which Darren had with his children's mothers
243 and rendered his family unimaginable within the representational language of the show.

244 **Femmes only: Invisibility of gender non-conforming women.** In addition to
245 participants arguing that gay men parenting are preferentially represented (as in *Modern*
246 *Family*), a number of the lesbian, bi and queer women interviewed also suggested there were
247 further gendered inequalities in the media representations they referred to.

248 Ivy spoke passionately about the type of femininity on show when women were
249 represented in the media. Speaking about the advertising choices made by a buggy
250 manufacturer, she expressed her frustration at what she felt was an implicit denial by the
251 company that their advertised products could appeal to her, a non-heterosexual women with
252 little interest in traditional femininity:

253 I was quite irritated by Phil and Teds [...] because Phil and Ted's pushchairs actually
254 appeal to lesbians, they are off-road pushchairs, you can go hiking, and they're
255 missing a fucking trick! [...] they've marketed to gay men. Gay men parenting are
256 much more of a minority than lesbian parents and I think lesbian parents still get
257 marginalised in that way and they get kind of forgotten about [...] I don't know if I
258 feel represented myself [...] if they'd done an ad with a lesbian couple going hiking,
259 with a Phil and Ted's pushchair, I'd have been like 'hey! That's me!' because that's
260 why I got that fucking pushchair, not because I want to go hiking, but because it
261 appeals to me. I'm not prissy and I like functional. (Ivy, lesbian woman)

262 Ivy described a desire to see both lesbians, and non-traditional femininities represented in
263 buggy advertising, and for the buggy to be sold for the qualities she valued in it; that it is a
264 functional, robust tool to fit her active and practical lifestyle.

265 In the advertising for Phil and Teds which Ivy referred to, immaculately turned out,
266 femme women in urban environments jump for joy, with lipsticked-smiles, as they push their

267 buggies in colour-coordinated outfits. Similarly slick, groomed men in fashionable outfits
268 dote on children sitting in buggies dubbed ‘travel systems’ which come in colours such as
269 ‘noir’ and ‘graphite’ (see Phil and Teds, 2017). These glamorous bodies engage with stylish
270 products which promise effortless, luxury childcare; offering a link from “off-road” and
271 “functional” buggies to a lifestyle which “transcends the banalities of femininity” (Skeggs,
272 1997, p.111) and the mundane tasks associated with childcare and motherhood. By contrast,
273 the practical and ‘functional’ marketing Ivy wished for, would serve to reinforce bodily
274 labour. Butch or non-femme bodies that may visually indicate lesbian subjectivity (in a way
275 these images of hyper-femme women and metrosexual men do not) are thus associated with
276 toil and cannot be deployed to signal aspirational lifestyles and products. Ivy was explicit in
277 arguing that this representational inequality in images of women and lesbians parenting
278 needed to change: “there’s an awful lot of butch lesbians having kids and they are beautiful
279 people too, I think that [representational invisibility] needs to be redressed really.” (Ivy,
280 lesbian woman).

281 Other women also commented on the way in which they felt media only offered
282 representations of women who conformed to traditional femininities. Talking about what she
283 felt this meant for trans women’s cultural visibility, Sarah said:

284 Paris [Lees – a trans woman, activist, and journalist] is young and beautiful and
285 consequently he [sic] can get on to television whereas I couldn’t, and there are many
286 far more prominent trans women than me in Britain who also would never be on
287 television because they’re not good looking enough. (Sarah, trans woman)

288 Available representations of both trans and cis women in mainstream media are
289 defined by narratives and images which affirm traditional femininity as ideal, and restrict the
290 possibility of increasing cultural visibility of and knowledge about women who do not fit this
291 model. This has particular significance for non-heterosexual women who parent, who may

292 only find mainstream representation if their gender performance conforms to these narrow
293 possibilities; something both Ivy and Sarah expressed in their comments.

294 **The two-parent model: The disappearing of co-parents and lone-parents.** Moving
295 beyond evaluation of the differences in the way in which lesbians are represented compared
296 to gay men parenting, participants also offered reflections on which models of family
297 arrangement were privileged in representations. A lack of representations of families beyond
298 the two-parent model, which acknowledge co-parenting arrangements, was a frequent point
299 of discussion.

300 Seb was a step-parent to two children and was in a homogendered relationship with
301 the children's father, who in turn co-parented with a lesbian couple. He reflected on the
302 images and narratives of LGBTQ family which had dominated news media during the
303 campaign for civil partnerships:

304 to gain that equality there almost had to be a lot of [representation about] the
305 significance of a civil partnerships [...] but I think one of the secondary effects of that
306 is that it's almost narrowed the idea of family down to couples. Which in a way kind
307 of, it can be about, but then you try to expand on that or do something that's leftfield
308 of that, or a bit different and there isn't any visibility of that [...] it's quite
309 deterministic now whereas if you go back before that, the idea of LGBT families [...]
310 felt like it could be a bit more creative." (Seb, gay man)

311 Seb lamented how these dominant narratives on the arrangement of LGBTQ families limited
312 the possibility to imagine different ways to arrange parenting and queer relationships. But he
313 also went on, in common with other parents I spoke with, to highlight how such
314 representations prevented him from achieving recognition and comprehension for the non-
315 dyadic parenting arrangements of his family:

316 People really struggle to understand the set up because there isn't any point of
317 reference for it. [I have to tell them that] co-parenting isn't to do with sexual
318 relationships, that it isn't to do with previous relationships, isn't to do with people
319 being infertile, isn't to do with adopting, there isn't much representation of that or any
320 points of reference for that. (Seb, gay man)

321 Lynne was a lone parent who had conceived through self-insemination and initially
322 co-parented with a male heterosexual friend. Like Seb, Lynne reported that disbelief and
323 misunderstanding were common when her daughter, Zoë, attempted to tell people the story of
324 her family: "She sometimes finds it difficult when people don't quite get it – I think their
325 assumption is 'have you got this quite right Zoë?'" (Lynne, bisexual woman).

326 Lynne described how she had put a great deal of energy into seeking out media which
327 represented parents and families like hers, in order to make herself and her family
328 "recognizable" subjects (Butler, 2004). Despite this undertaking, she found that the majority
329 of resources for LGBTQ parented families presented parenting dyads. Books including *King*
330 *and King* (2002), *If I Had 100 Mummies* (2007), *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), and
331 *Mommy, Mama and Me* (2009) were widely cited by participants as offering representations
332 of 'families like ours' for their children, but these texts continued to privilege a two parent
333 model. Such dyadic images offered little help for parents like Seb and Lynne who sought
334 material to support their narratives of family, and make the arrangement of their families
335 comprehensible to the people they and their children encountered.

336 **Theme 2: Feeling invisible in culture and society**

337 Participants were united in their belief that the various representational restrictions
338 and narrow range of cultural narratives available resulted in feelings of invisibility. In
339 addition to a lack of diversity in media images, they detailed how their individual
340 circumstances and identities complicated the potential to be identified as non-heterosexual,

341 and limited the possibility of finding representations to identify with. Mary and Paul, a
 342 heterogendered couple, spoke about how their poly identities inflected their sense of
 343 invisibility. Paul described his perception of how his family was misread: "when we're just
 344 out and about with just [son] James [it] looks like a straight, monogamous, het[erosexual]
 345 relationship, you know?" (Paul, bisexual man). Similarly, Charlie, a bisexual woman in a
 346 heterogendered, poly relationship, lamented that "pregnancy and childbirth and so on are
 347 horribly heteronormative" and concluded that such 'heteronormative' associations
 348 compounded "the normal bisexual problem, which is of invisibility" (Charlie, bisexual
 349 woman). Participants suggested that their apparent conformity to heterosexual models of
 350 parenting and families meant their non-heterosexual identities were "invisibilised" (Pallotta-
 351 Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003 p.56). The parents I spoke to said that a lack of cultural
 352 supports by which they might be known and recognised made this invisibility difficult to
 353 challenge or change.

354 Julia, a lone parent to one daughter, suggested that for her such cultural support would
 355 transform her interactions with other, heterosexual, parents at her daughter's playgroup:

356 I feel like [having] someone to identify with – [being able to say:] 'yeah that's pretty
 357 much how it is for me' – you know, would make me feel a bit less 'the only one' at
 358 the playgroup, as the only person that doesn't fit into the norm. (Julia, queer woman)

359 Julia's wish for people "to identify with" echoes Valentine's (1993) summary of the
 360 strategies employed by lesbians in heterosexual environments, who "consciously seek out
 361 other gay people...to affirm their own identity and right to be there" (p. 244).

362 There were two key elements which resulted from this sense of needing to resolve
 363 feelings of cultural invisibility in order to "affirm their...right to be there" (Valentine, 1993:
 364 244) which are explored in detail below. Firstly, there was a sense of pressure on, and
 365 instability in family narratives. Secondly, participants appeared to feel prompted to generate

366 creative responses to media representation in order to heal or mitigate this sense of pressure
367 or instability.

368 **Pressures of invisibility: Difficulties sustaining non-heterosexual family**
369 **narratives at home.** Jelena and Hannah were a homogendered couple. Hannah had one
370 daughter with a gay male friend, George, when she was single. After beginning her
371 relationship with Jelena, Hannah had a second daughter, again with George as father. Hannah
372 and Jelena co-parented both girls with George. George was also in a homogendered
373 relationship, although his partner was not involved in parenting decisions. Jelena and Hannah
374 told me about the occasionally painful interactions Jelena had with their daughters, Lexi and
375 Becca, who indicated an ambivalence about Jelena's role in the family:

376 Jelena: They've got the Sylvanians, the little [animal toy] families. When they were
377 playing one day they said 'oh that's a Mum, that's a Dad' I said 'where is the Jelena
378 then?'

379 Hannah: Their games are still quite mummy-daddy-baby.

380 Jelena: But I've had that conversation with them both and they try, they say 'ok, well this
381 is a Jelena' and sometimes they say 'we do! Sometimes we do play Mummy and Jelena'
382 and I say 'no. Not often enough!' [...] again I got upset sometimes and Lexi had done
383 some drawings 'there's Mummy, there's Daddy, and me and my sister gone on holiday' I
384 said 'how often has that been the case? Never. There is either just Mummy and Daddy
385 and Joe [Daddy's partner], or two of you, or all of us' [...] so again, it's a bit personal.

386 Hannah: It doesn't get much more personal than that. How you are seen by your kids,
387 how you are valued within the family, it's highly, highly emotive.

388 (Hannah and Jelena, lesbian women)

389 The dominance of the nuclear family narrative within mainstream media provided a source of
390 resistance to the narrative of family which Jelena and Hannah offer, and this is indicated in
391 the preferred model the girls reproduced in their play. Lexi and Becca had reshaped their
392 experience to fit a heterosexual mould. In Lexi and Becca's play, the biological father was
393 reoriented in the centre of their family, replacing the space and role which Jelena would have
394 taken and, as Hannah presented it, generating a highly charged emotional exchange in which
395 Jelena had to push the girls to reinvest her in their family. Whilst parents can offer different
396 family narratives, the narrative of the heterosexual nuclear family was so culturally
397 significant (Nelson, 2006, p.16) that it repeatedly reasserted itself within the homes of these
398 non-heterosexual families.

399 **Talking family through media: Finding ways to locate families in culture.** It is
400 notable that parents explicitly stated that feeling invisible, and experiencing significant
401 emotional pressures in narrating family, as above, were not new or unexpected experiences.
402 When I asked if a sense of invisibility weighed heavily upon her and her partner, Ivy said: "I
403 think feeling alienated is just a way of life for most gay people. It's just something you
404 become very used to, you don't really even realise it." (Ivy, lesbian woman). I suggest this
405 expectation or feeling that it is "a way of life" is indicative of a "border existence," where
406 subjects do not comfortably or neatly fit into existing categories (Pallotta-Chiarolli and
407 Lubowitz, 2003: 74). Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz (2003) suggested that experiencing
408 such alienation and marginal subjectivity does, however, "open up space for
409 experimentation" (p.74). The parents I spoke to responded to emotional pressure and
410 alienation by experimenting with [re]reading representation, placing their families in dialogue
411 with different types of media images, and attempting to establish a place in the cultural
412 imaginary.

413 Lynne described how she prompted and pushed her daughter to consider identities
414 which were not visible:

415 you could have a story book about a single parent and they might be bisexual but it's
416 not stated. I think I would sometimes say those sort of things to Zoë [...] things like
417 'that person, who knows? They might be bisexual, they might have a trans history, we
418 don't know do we?' It's not explicit but it might be in there. So sometimes books
419 were – probably it's not been in the author's mind – but I would put it in there.

420 (Lynne, bisexual woman)

421 In this way, the specific representational needs of Lynne's family could be drawn from pre-
422 existing representational resources. Her practice of prompting and questioning functioned on
423 two levels, both highlighting to her daughter the invisibility of certain identities, and
424 emphasising the sameness of their family to these narratives by inserting identities like hers
425 into the gaps in the text.

426 Other parents cited texts including *Lilo and Stitch* (Spencer, 2002) (a film which tells
427 the story of Lilo, her adult sister Nani, and their journey to forming a new family with an
428 alien named Stitch, after their parents die), and *The Gruffalo's Child* (Donaldson and
429 Scheffler, 2005) (a picture book which narrates the adventures of the apparently lone-parent
430 Gruffalo and his son) as resources which allowed space for this type of reading. These
431 parents sought to draw parallels between these culturally legitimated, but *flexible* images (see
432 Jenkins, 2006), and their unique family arrangements and values.

433 For Mary and Paul, a heterogendered couple who had poly relationships, texts which
434 offered flexible representations of gender, reproduction, and family provided a foundation for
435 building their narrative of family. *The Clangers* was a popular choice for both them and son
436 James. They spoke to me about the episode 'The Egg' (Postgate, 1970). In it, the Clangers, a
437 diminutive mouse-like race who live on a small moon, rally around their friend the Soup

438 Dragon to help create a Baby Soup Dragon and ensure she is “no longer the only Soup
439 Dragon in the universe” (Postgate, 1970). In our interview, Mary spoke about a lesbian friend
440 she had supported through pregnancy and birth, and continued to support as a lone parent.
441 Mary also had another partner, Matthew, who lived with her and Paul. Mary clarified that
442 whilst Matthew did not take on a parenting role towards James, he did support her and Paul in
443 caring for their child. The multiple and flexible relations which constituted Mary and Paul’s
444 family, and their friends’ families, found representation in *The Clangers*, which cheerfully
445 narrated a community-centred family analogous to the one which James was being raised in.
446 Like Susan Driver’s (2007) ‘queer girls’, Mary and Paul’s reading of this popular text offers
447 the possibility of meaning-making which is “convoluted” and multiple (Driver, 2007, p.13).
448 Engaging with *The Clangers* in their family-activities therefore helped open space for family
449 identity to be constituted through unclear and obtuse narratives of formation; something
450 which corresponded with Mary and Paul’s stated wish to model expanded notions of family,
451 relationship arrangements, and families of choice.

452 Some parents I spoke to narrated their similarity to images that relied on more
453 traditional parenting-dyads, I suggest this is a strategy for achieving recognition and stability
454 for their family stories. Martha and Paige, a homogendered couple, who co-parented with a
455 homogendered male couple, described their response to children’s books which limited
456 images to two-parent families:

457 I realised that anything we read, most books obviously have Mommy and Daddy but
458 she has Mommies *and* Daddies so it’s actually not a problem, um, I mean the book
459 we’re talking about, the page says ‘some kids have two mommies and some have two
460 daddies’ and I always say to her ‘and you have two mommies *and* two daddies!’
461 (Paige, lesbian woman, participant’s emphasis)

462 However, for Lynne and some other parents this approach did not fully address their wish for
463 easy recognition of their identities and the intentionally chosen shape of their families. By
464 using images of family which rely on the idea that non-heterosexual family-difference is
465 identifiable exclusively through cues of homogendered relationships (“some kids have two
466 mommies”), parents unwittingly reinforced to their children a notion that families can be
467 easily categorised into ‘heterosexual’ or ‘same-sex’, and that identities do not expand beyond
468 what can be signalled by a romantic-dyadic relationship. Poaching from media which is so
469 heavily tied to dominant binary heterosexual or same-gender couple narratives of family can
470 mean that parents are no closer to making their bisexual or non-monosexual identities visible.
471 Reflecting on this, Lynne said:

472 It’s not all about same-sex relationships, it’s not [even] just about relationships, how
473 do you show images of people who are single and bisexual? You take a picture of me,
474 who would know? So I think it’s really hard to find and depict visually. (Lynne,
475 bisexual woman)

476 Participant’s comments indicated that they felt strategies of representation which
477 *visually* signal inclusion of non-heterosexual parents would always fail to fully represent
478 some parents. Within this context, the work many participants reported doing to mitigate
479 representational restrictions and invisibility of their family, was of limited success.

480 Discussion

481 The LGBTQ parents who participated in this study felt that the scope of media and
482 cultural images which represented non-heterosexual families was severely limited. This lack
483 of representational diversity generated discomfort and frustration for parents. Returning to
484 Darren, who identified *Modern Family’s* portrayal of lesbians as ‘uncomfortable’, it is
485 possible to see how even comedic representations can have wide reaching impacts on the
486 experience of family and the possibility to celebrate and affirm LGBTQ people’s suitability

487 and desirability as parents. Representation can thus enact a symbolic violence on LGBTQ
488 people denying validation and recognition of life patterns through the use of specific types of
489 characterisation (Gross 1994, p.143). In the case of *Modern Family*, it was not only lesbians
490 who were marginalised by this representation, but also any LGBTQ person who shared a
491 connection with lesbian women.

492 Similarly, Ivy and Sarah's comments about their feelings of cultural invisibility as
493 women who perform non-traditional femininities, pointed to a degree of representational
494 invisibility which amounts to symbolic annihilation of butch women in mainstream media
495 (Gross, 1994, p.143). For these women, and the various parents whose families expanded
496 beyond a two-parent model, representational invisibility placed them in "nonplaces [sic]
497 where recognition...proves precarious if not elusive, in spite of one's best efforts to be a
498 subject in some recognizable sense" (Butler, 2004, p.108).

499 These findings are in contrast to various studies which cautiously point to an
500 expansion of the "lexicon of legitimation" (Butler, 2004, p.108) and cultural normalisation of
501 families headed by LGBTQ parents (GLAAD, 2015; Schacher, Auerbach & Silverstein,
502 2005; Walters, 2012; Warner, 1999). This study indicates the importance of continued
503 scrutiny for the emergence of new hierarchies of insider/outsider, preferred/other in cultural
504 representations. As Seb argued in his comments, the debate accompanying the changes in
505 UK law to allow same-sex marriage in 2013 (*Marriage [Same Sex Couples] Act 2013*) offer
506 one example of the way in which the arrangement of a two-parent non-heterosexual family
507 may be concretized both in the cultural imaginary and in legislation.

508 Even whilst media "limits what can be said" about any identity, it also "makes saying
509 possible" (Dyer, 1990, p.1). Without mainstream cultural narratives of non-heterosexual
510 families which affirm and represent family heterogeneity, the possibility of speaking about

511 these families, and accessing legislative change which recognises and protects different types
512 of family, is significantly restricted.

513 The lack of media representations depicting diverse non-heterosexual families
514 generated emotional stress. Meanings which circulated in media spilled out into homes and
515 the interactions these parents had with their children, as Jelena and Hannah's comments
516 detailed. Participants in this study reported investing an enormous amount of ongoing
517 emotional energy to help resolve the resulting cultural invisibility and alleviate symbolic
518 annihilation. This was significant as it was in addition to any work they had done to stabilise
519 their *individual* identities as non-heterosexual people. They worked to orientate their children
520 within their family, and to locate their families within a media culture that did not offer
521 significant recognition for either multi-parent or non-heterosexual families. Participants'
522 work illuminates two key elements of contemporary life within a media saturated culture.
523 Firstly, it points to the impossibility of stepping outside of representation (Abel, 2007).
524 Instead, LGBTQ parents must commit to transforming representations and finding spaces in
525 the cultural lexicon, through which they can enable recognition and validation for families
526 like theirs. Secondly, it evidences the central role of media in producing ourselves as social
527 and cultural subjects, and the active participation with, and critique of media which subjects
528 must maintain, and expand, when negotiating new collective identities.

529 This second point was well illustrated by both Lynne's, and Mary and Paul's family
530 media-engagement and practices of narrative making. They offered their children examples
531 of how to find alternative, evolving, and open-ended narratives of family within mainstream
532 and conventional representations, but also modelled how to *respond* to representation. These
533 parents employ skills honed as LGBTQ youths in a heteronormative culture – the skills of
534 queer reading (Driver, 2007; Liming, 2007) – to reclaim and repurpose the content of
535 representations in support of collective, family identities. Parents' knowledge of the potential

536 of queer[ed] practices of reading to help [re]locate them in a heterosexist culture is leveraged
537 as a strategy which can be used by their whole family to respond to, and redeploy, the narrow
538 media representations which they saw. As families, they worked reflexively and discursively
539 with mainstream media representations to achieve meaningful identification, and to signal to
540 their children the culturally-validated location of their families.

541 Passing on the skills of critical queer reading is part of the everyday maintenance and
542 production of these families and marks them as a formation distinct from the rigidly
543 structured, authorised, images of family which circulate in culture. Teaching, repeating, and
544 reinforcing these critical responses is an integral part of what these families mean. LGBTQ-
545 headed families are reflexive, participatory, and continuously created and stabilised through
546 discursive practices. The reflexive discourses of LGBTQ-led families contrasts with
547 traditional, dyadic, nuclear family identity-building which, although still involving reflexive
548 narrative practices, draws on a much narrower range of meanings and sources, and can
549 comfortably be legitimated through pre-established discourses.

550 **Conclusion**

551 This study has highlighted the significant degree to which the representations that
552 circulate through the mainstream media and cultural productions of the UK shape the
553 experiences of non-heterosexual families. Whilst participants agreed there were an increasing
554 number of images and representations of non-heterosexual family, they repeatedly
555 highlighted the lack of diversity in these images. When the messages and meanings of these
556 images were set against participants' individual family-identity narratives there was a
557 disjuncture between the types of family arrangements which were represented and culturally-
558 known, and their lived experience of forming family as LGBTQ people. In particular,
559 participants repeatedly attributed feelings of cultural invisibility, ongoing social-dislocation
560 or exclusion, and experiences of family conflict to this representational lack.

561 Attempts by these LGBTQ parents to heal representational invisibility through
562 strategies of queer reading and creative use of mainstream media texts were of limited
563 success. Participants who had co-parenting arrangements, non-dyadic romantic relationships,
564 and non-monosexual identities continued to report feelings of cultural invisibility and
565 lamented the ongoing emotional labour required from them to alleviate the associated
566 pressures.

567 For future research, this study points to the importance of acknowledging identities
568 beyond gay men and lesbians in research on non-heterosexual lives. Exploring connections
569 between groups under the LGBTQ banner is especially instructive when considering the way
570 representation facilitates different family narratives even as lesbian and gay subjectivities are
571 increasingly represented by mainstream media. Secondly, responses of participants to media
572 representations indicated that media not only contributes to the ordering of everyday life
573 (Silverstone, 2007) but is also central in [dis]allowing the production of [stabilising] family
574 narratives. Media which offers diverse representations of social groups, and represents these
575 various subjectivities as equally valuable and legitimate, are urgently needed. Such
576 representations facilitate LGBTQ people to speak their experiences and families, open
577 dialogue with their children about family identity, and provide a foundation on which
578 narratives of location and connection can be built, ultimately providing families with a sense
579 of fitting or being 'in place'.

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