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**Resilience in Same-sex Parented
Families: The Lived Experience of Adults with Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual Parents.**

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay and bisexual parents experience stress, as heterocentrism and / or homonegativity permeate the Australian context. Despite challenges faced by these parents and their families, research consistently shows children raised by same-sex parents to be as psychologically healthy, and as socially and academically well-adjusted as their peers raised in traditional heterosexual parented families. The ability of these children to flourish despite the challenges they face, highlights the resilience of this minority group. Contrary to comparative research, the current study is framed by a phenomenological approach, and utilized narrative methodology to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of the adult children of same-sex parents. Participants (n=8) were over 18, lived in Australia and had at least one parent who identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Thematic analysis indicated that the dissolution of their biological parents' marriage and subsequent blending of two families were the most salient issues for participants. Participants did indicate fear and / or experience of homophobic reactions, parental modeling, controlling disclosure, social support, an outward perspective and time to adjust were important in coping with challenges. Participants also indicated that their non-traditional family structure gave them unique advantages and emphasized the importance of secure, loving relationships within their family.

Keywords: Resilience, parenting, gay, lesbian, bisexual, same-sex, same-sex parented families

Resilience in Same-sex Parented Families:

The Lived Experience of Adults with Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual Parents.

Families headed by same-sex parents are a minority group that face adversity stemming from the homophobic and heterocentric attitudes permeating society (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray & Hatton, 2007). Despite these challenges, and in contrast to the assumptions and stereotypes that tend to be associated with gay male, lesbian and bisexual parents, there are no reported significant differences in a range of areas between children of same-sex parents and those raised in more traditional heterosexual parented families (Milbank, 2003), thus highlighting the resilience of this group. The current study sought to investigate these non-traditional families and the dynamics underpinning their resilience.

History, Context and Prevalence

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2012) reported in 2011, that there were 33, 714 same-sex couple families living in Australia. Data indicated that 6, 210 children were living with same-sex-couples, 89% of which were headed by lesbian couples. However, even within same-sex parent families there is a great variety of family configurations, such as families with children from previous heterosexual relationships or adoptive children and children conceived during the same-sex relationship of their parents. The majority of children living in same-sex parent households were conceived from previous heterosexual relationships (ABS, 2009). However more recently, with the introduction of gay right laws, particularly in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, there has been an increase in same-sex parented families where same-sex couples adopt and/or conceive children within their union (Van Reyk, 2007).

Resilience

Literature supports the notion that gay, lesbian and bisexual parents are at least as competent,

nurturing and loving as their heterosexual counterparts (Patterson, 2009). Research examining the development of children and adolescents with same-sex parents also indicates that these children are resilient and well-adjusted (Patterson, 2009), despite the negative attitudes which surround their family structure. Given the consistent positive outcomes for children raised in same-sex parented families despite the additional challenges they face, the concept of resilience is important (Rivers, Poteat & Noret, 2008; Wainright & Patterson, 2006).

While there is no commonly accepted definition of resilience, literature conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic process, facilitating positive functioning within the context of significant adversity (Luthar, Cichetti, & Becker, 2000). This notion encompasses two important components; significant threat or severe adversity and positive coping despite these threats to development (Leipold & Greve, 2009). Research indicates that children of same-sex parents face significant socio-political challenges including discrimination within institutions like schools and churches, disparity in legal rights such as the right to marry and raise children and pervasive negative social attitudes towards same-sex parenting. Despite these challenges, there is consistent evidence of positive outcomes for children raised in same-sex parented families across a range of domains including social and psychological development, adjustment, well-being and peer relations (Patterson, 2002). The combination of these two factors indicate that resilience is a relevant and important concept for consideration in relation to same-sex parented families (Rivers, Poteat & Noret, 2008).

Masten (2001) argues that while resilience may be conceptualized as a unique special strength, it is in fact a common phenomenon arising from ordinary human adaptive processes, or “ordinary magic”. Leipold and Greve (2009) argue that at the centre of resilience, an individual’s coping reaction is an important element of any resilience model. Pooley and Cohen (2010) have identified the ecological nature of resilience and suggest a definition of resilience over the lifespan,

as the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external resources, in response to different contextual and developmental challenges. Pooley and Cohen clearly demonstrate the role of societal support systems in fostering resilience. This is of great importance to the current study, when considering the impact of heterosexism on families with same-sex parents, which in many ways are not supported by society.

Challenges Faced by the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Community

Non-heterosexual lives need to be understood against a background of prejudice and discrimination (Herek, 2000) that occurs across a range of domains (Patterson, 2008). From an ecological perspective, individuals who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual exist in a macro-environmental context which contributes to minority stress and creates additional challenges and lessening social support (Riggle, Rostosky & Horne, 2010). “Minority stress” is defined by Rostosky, Riggle, Gray and Hatton (2007) as chronic social stress that results from belonging to a stigmatized social category and is additional to the general stressors of everyday life. Rostosky and colleagues postulate that when applied to the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community, the minority stress model is composed of; experiences of discrimination, hiding and concealing their identities, dealing with internalized homophobia and developing coping strategies.

Social Challenges The majority of individuals living in Australia identify as heterosexual (Rotosky et. al., 2007) and perhaps as a result, heterocentric beliefs permeate society and represent consistent challenges faced by same-sex parented families. Fox (2007) discusses heteronormativity and the understated ways in which it is reinforced in society, with a special focus on how it is reinforced in childcare settings. Fox illustrates the way in which same-sex parented families are subtly excluded, from registration forms that ask for the names of children’s mother and father, to children’s literature which predominantly and often exclusively depict biological families headed

by heterosexual couples.

While heterocentric beliefs inadvertently exclude same-sex headed families, homophobic and/or homonegative beliefs directly impact same-sex couples and their families in a much less passive way. While attitudes towards same-sex relationships are constantly being challenged, negative beliefs surrounding the LGBT community include stereotypes that gay men and lesbian women are emotionally unstable, unable to form lasting relationships, are self-indulgent, incompetent during a crisis, indecisive, impulsive and have a proclivity to sexually abuse children (Avery et al., 2007). While these negative beliefs are not supported by empirical evidence, additional negative stereotypes surround parenting by gay and lesbian individuals, including that gay parents will not be as loving as their heterosexual counterparts and will negatively influence their children's gender, social development and sexual orientation (Golombok & Tasker, 1996). Given the pervasiveness of negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships, it seems unlikely that anyone could reach adulthood without some element of internalized homophobia and / or fear of discrimination (Green, 2004).

Legal and Political Challenges Social attitudes towards same-sex relationships are both exemplified and reinforced by legal and government policy surrounding LGBT rights, particularly those pertaining to family life. Although laws and policies surrounding gay rights are continually being questioned and amended, same-sex couples do not have the same legal rights as their heterosexual counterparts. In 2002, the *Artificial Conception Act* (1985) (WA) was amended so that when a lesbian woman undergoes the artificial fertilisation process with her female partner, the de facto partner is conclusively presumed to be the parent of any child conceived. In Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, two parents of the same-sex can be named on a child's birth certificate, giving both parents equal rights concerning the child (Short, 2007). Despite legislative advances and research indicating that same-sex couples and their

children are likely to benefit in numerous ways from legal recognition of their families (Herek, 2006), same-sex couples in Australia are currently unable to enter into matrimony. While legislative advances aid same-sex couples to form families, the disparity between the rights of same-sex and heterosexual couples can represent additional challenges for families.

Challenges Specific to Same-sex Parented Families Much of the policy and public perception of the adequacy of parenting in same-sex headed families is based on the premise that it is problematic and less than ideal for children (Milbank, 2003). Evidence of this specific discrimination against gay parents can be seen in a 1995 study by Fraser, Fish and Mackenzie. Participants were found to be less likely to favour a lesbian or gay male parent winning custody when compared to a heterosexual parent, despite the fact that the stimulus court case depicted opposing parents as equally loving and competent. Drawing on a sample of 360 lesbian mothers, Van Dam's (2004) qualitative study of lesbian-headed families and stepfamilies examined maternal experiences with stigma, family support systems and burdens. The study found that issues surrounding custody rights, incidence of harassment, fears over children being harassed as a result of parental sexuality, discrimination from religious organisations and perceptions of children's problems being attributed to parental sexuality regardless of literary evidence, were significant stressors for lesbian parents. These issues can be conceptualized as occurring due to a heterocentric and / or homophobic socio-political climate.

As explored by Griffiths and Pooley (2011), Heineman (2004) argues that lesbian couples often bring with them into parenthood, a deeply rooted sense of fraudulence, paradoxically colluding with those who openly claim that their sexual orientation makes them unfit for parenting. Similarly, participants in Van Dam's 2004 study expressed fear that any problems experienced by the children would be perceived by outsiders as a result of their sexuality, indicating that LGBT parents are aware of the homo-negative beliefs that surround their parenting abilities and they

experience these beliefs as significant unique challenges.

Positive Coping in Same-sex Parented Families

The second component of resilience requires positive coping despite adversity, threat or challenge (Leipold & Greve, 2009). Throughout this discussion, mention has been made of positive outcomes for children raised by same-sex parents across a range of domains. Specifically there have been no reported differences for children raised in same-sex parent families in the areas of social skills, well-being, academic performance, sexual orientation, happiness, peer relations and adjustment (Avery et al., 2007; Patterson, 2002; Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007; Van Dam, 2004). Qualitative and quantitative studies have consistently found positive outcomes for children raised in same-sex parented families (Patterson, 2009). Indeed the overall health and psychological outcomes of children raised by same-sex parents seem to be determined by family stability, the quality of parent-child relationship and interactions among family members, as opposed to family structure or household composition (Patterson, 2002). Furthermore, family pride and openness have been associated positively with outcomes for children (Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007). Research does not support the stereotype that same-sex couples / parents affect the sexual orientation of their children (Hershberger, 1997). Studies have however found that children raised by same-sex parents tend to be more tolerant of diversity, not specifically relating to sexuality (Negy & McKinny, 2006).

Development of Children Raised by Same-sex Parents Concerns are often held for the development of children who are raised by same-sex parents in terms of social and psychological development, academic achievement, well-being, peer relations and gender identity development. It is also feared, including by gay and lesbian parents (Van Dam, 2004), that children would experience increased bullying and social rejection as a result of negative reactions to their parents' sexuality.

One of the most comprehensive studies of children with lesbian parents was carried out by Golombok and colleagues (2003). The findings of this study are largely in line with those of earlier studies of lesbian mother families that pointed to positive mother-child relationships and well-adjusted children. In general, the study suggests that children reared by lesbian mothers appear to be functioning well and that they do not experience negative psychological consequences arising from their family environment. Although the possibility that lesbian mothers set out to portray themselves more positively cannot be ignored, multiple measures from multiple respondents were employed to minimize this problem. These findings are consistent with those reported by Avery and colleagues (2007) which support that, compared to children raised by single mothers and those raised by heterosexual couples, the children of lesbian couples have similar outcomes in terms of social skills, well-being and academic performance. No significant differences were found between children in lesbian mother families and children in heterosexual families with respect to abnormal behaviour, psychiatric health or socio-emotional development.

In terms of adolescent adjustment, Wainright and Patterson (2006) found that across a diverse array of assessments, including measures of delinquent behaviour, victimisation, substances abuse and quality of family relationships, adolescents with female same-sex parents did not differ significantly from a matched group of adolescents living with different sex parents. Quality of parent relationship, as opposed to family composition, has been found to be associated with positive outcomes for adolescents (Patterson & Wainright, 2008, Golombok, 1999, Wainright & Patterson, 2006).

Family Relationships In terms of literature focusing on family dynamics, Golombok et al (2003) found no main effects for maternal warmth between heterosexual and lesbian mothers, although mothers in two parent households were found to have higher overall parenting quality and enjoyment of motherhood regardless of sexuality. Lesbian mothers were found to engage in

significantly more imaginative play than heterosexual mothers. Although emotional involvement was higher for fathers than co-mothers, this result became non-significant when co-mothers who had raised the child from birth were separated from stepmothers. Fathers reported a significantly greater frequency of disputes than co-mothers. Co-mothers were found to engage in more domestic play than fathers.

Peer Relations Rivers, Poteat and Noret (2008) focused on research which indicates that children raised by same-sex couples can experience a range of difficulties related to heterosexism. In their investigation of the psychological and social functioning of these children beyond the central family unit, participants were matched for age, sex, school year, allowance, and sexual orientation. In terms of peer victimisation, there were no differences between the amount and nature of bullying between same-sex parented children and their heterosexual parented peers. In terms of social support, the data indicated that children of same-sex couples were more likely to report going to peer or family sources of support than to those offered at school. No significant differences were found in terms of psychological functioning and social concerns. Overall, the study indicates that the psychological and social challenges faced by children of same-sex parents do not differ from those faced by children of heterosexual parents. The authors raised issues of visibility, acknowledging that choosing not to disclose family structure may reduce bullying incidents. Golombok and colleagues (2003) found a non-significant trend toward higher scores on the Peer Problems Subscale for children of lesbian mothers, as rated by mothers. The children themselves did not report greater problems with peers, and it is interesting to consider whether this difference in perception is due to children not reporting problems with peers, or increased maternal sensitivity to problems with peers experienced by children, perhaps due to fear that the children will be stigmatized as a result of parental sexual orientation (Van Dam, 2004). As noted, studies have found that children raised by same-sex parents tend to be more tolerant of diversity, not

specifically relating to sexuality (Negy & McKinny, 2006), indicating that there may be some positive differences between children raised in same-sex parented families.

Using a phenomenological approach, Griffiths and Pooley (2011) interviewed a West Australian sample of 5 lesbian and gay male couples (n=10) that had at least one child under the age of 18. Creating family unity, preparation, support, “outness”, flexibility, normalisation and humour were identified as key themes in exploring family resilience.

In summary, research focusing on the offspring of non-heterosexual parents has yielded results of remarkable clarity. Regardless of whether participants are the children of divorced gay, lesbian or bisexual parents, and regardless of whether children or adolescents were studied, studies examining sexual identity, self-esteem, adjustment or quality of social relationships have been consistent. In study after study, the offspring of lesbian, gay and bisexual parents have been found to be at least as well-adjusted overall as those of other parents (Patterson, 2009), clearly indicating positive coping despite additional adversity, threat and / or challenge.

Limitations of the Current Body of Knowledge

The growing body of knowledge focusing on gay and lesbian headed families is however not without its limitations. Although gay or lesbian headed families are more likely to have people from more than one ethnic background (Rosenfield, 2007), samples tend to be made up of Caucasian participants, which potentially limits the generalisability and cultural awareness of research (Chow & Cheng, 2010; Greene, 1994). In addition a large proportion literature does not differentiate between gay, lesbian and bisexual participants and on occasion uses the terms gay and bisexual interchangeably. As discussed by Breno and Galupo (2013) and Hackl, Boyer and Galupo (2013), this trend often creates a situation where bisexual individuals remain largely invisible in the research and where findings regarding gay and/or lesbian individuals are generalised more broadly to non-heterosexual individuals. While maintaining the language originally used in referenced

studies, the current discussion does attempt to redress. Another limitation is the lack of research on families with two fathers, and an assumption that research on lesbian headed families can generalise to families headed by two men. Given the 89% of children in Australia that are raised in a same-sex parented family are raised by lesbian women' the reduced number of participants from families headed by gay men is understandable.

In terms of understanding and supporting Australian same-sex parented families, it should be noted that much of the research stems from America and the United Kingdom and as such cannot necessarily be generalized to an Australian population. While relying on a small, volunteer and Caucasian sample, the current study aims to address the need for greater Australian-based research. By examining the issues from a phenomenological framework, it does not seek to compare the adult children of lesbian and gay male parents to their peers raised by heterosexual parents, but instead seeks to understand their unique lived experiences from their own perspectives.

Research Aims

The current study aims to explore the experience of adult children raised in same-sex parent families. This study aims to explore the unique challenges experienced by same-sex parented families and the factors contributing towards resilience, from the perspective of children raised in these families.

Methodology

The current study is framed by a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach aims to study situations in the everyday world from the viewpoint of the person experiencing them (Becker, 1992). Within this perspective, a narrative approach was taken, utilising in-depth qualitative interviews to allow participants to tell their stories, make sense of their experience and explain their perceptions through the act of storytelling. Importantly, narrative studies have been influenced by the emphasis on understanding lived experience (phenomenology) (Patton, 2002).

Reissman's (1993) model of narrative analysis involves five levels of representation following primary experience in the research process; attending, telling, transcribing, analysing and reading. Narrative methodology, framed by a phenomenological perspective is ideally aligned with the research aim of providing an avenue for the adult children of same-sex parents to share their experiences, telling their stories in their own words.

Recruitment

Initial recruitment occurred through an advertisement placed in The Perth Outdoor Group's quarterly newsletter. The Perth Outdoor Group is a social group for lesbian, gay and bisexual people living in Western Australia, with a target age range of over 50 years. The researcher also attended a local PFlag (Parents and family of gays and lesbians) meeting to recruit participants. These channels yielded one participant. Informal networks that were not directly connected to the LGBT community, were also used extensively to recruit participants. These informal social networks and word of mouth yielded seven participants. Further recruitment relied on a snowballing technique, whereby participants are asked to refer other potential participants. Snowballing is a particularly effective technique when populations are hidden and / or when the topic is sensitive (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). One participant was recruited through snowballing.

Participants

The age of participants ranged from 18 to 46 years old, with a mean age of 25.5 years and a standard deviation of 10.07 years. While there was significant diversity in the stories and family structure of participants, all participants had one biological parent who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual and were conceived within the context of a heterosexual marriage. The mean length of time since their parent had "come out" was 16.87 years, with a standard deviation of 8.77 years. At the time of their parent's coming out, participants had a mean age of 8.62 years, with a standard

deviation of 3.58 years. None of the participants were related to one another or part of the same blended family. All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Mandy, 46. Mandy has a biological sister who is two years younger than her. When she was 11 years old, her different-sex parents divorced and soon after her mother began a relationship with her stepmother. Mandy had little contact with her father from the time of the separation until she was about 18 years old. Mandy's stepmother had three children; a girl two years older than Mandy, a boy one year younger than Mandy and another boy four years younger than Mandy. All five children lived in the same house with both mothers. Mandy's mother and stepmother remain in a relationship. Mandy has been married for over 25 years and has two sons, aged 24 and 21.

Andrew, 22. Andrew has a younger brother and sister. He was 10 years old when his parents separated and his mother became involved with his stepmother. His stepmother had twin daughters and a son, all younger than Andrew. Andrew and his biological siblings have no contact with their father. All six children lived in the same house and were co-parented equally by both mothers. Andrew's mother and his stepmother remain in a relationship. Andrew considers himself to have two mothers, five siblings and no father.

Katherine, 21. Katherine has one biological sister who is 18 months younger than her. Her parents were divorced when she was two years old. She has no memory of her biological father and can only ever remember her mother identifying as lesbian. Throughout her life, Katherine has largely been parented solely by her mother, supported by her maternal grandparents. Her mother had one long term female partner, who lived with Katherine's family for between eight and nine years and did not have children of her own. This partner did partially take on co-parenting responsibilities, although she no longer has contact with Katherine. Katherine now lives with her fiancé.

Amy, 19. Amy has one biological brother four years younger than her. When Amy was 12 years old, her mother came out and separated from her father, although the family continued to share a residence. When Amy was 15 years old she moved out of the family home with her mother and brother. They were joined about six months later by her mother's female partner and her children (two boys and one girl). Her mother and her stepmother remain in a relationship and co-parent Amy and her brother. Amy's stepsiblings now live with their biological father.

Danica, 19. Danica was two years old when her father came out and separated from her mother. Her parents continue to have a very positive relationship and are still legally married. They have lived in numerous locations across Australia, often sharing a home and have always shared equal and flexible custody of Danica. Danica found out that her father was gay when she was eight years old. He had numerous partners during Danica's childhood, all of whom Danica liked, but none of whom fulfilled the role of stepfather.

Rebecca, 36. Rebecca has one brother who is three years older than her and one brother who is two years younger than her. She was eight years old when her parents separated and she approximately 12 years old when her mother came out. Her mother has had two long term female partners, the first while Rebecca was in high school. While this partner never co-parented Rebecca, she was very fond of her and they had a positive relationship. Approximately five years ago, Rebecca's mother began a relationship with her current partner. While Rebecca doesn't consider her mother's current partner to be a second mother, she has a close relationship with her, and is supportive of their union. Rebecca is legally married, has two stepchildren and a young son. Rebecca's son refers to her mother and her mother's partner as "Nana", something that was never decided but evolved quite organically.

Hollie, 23. Hollie has one biological sister who is 16 months younger than her. Their parents' marriage ended when she was in pre-primary and her mother began a same-sex relationship. Her mother was with that partner for approximately three years; her partner did not have children. During her childhood, Hollie's mother had two other partners, both of whom had children. Hollie's mother had a commitment ceremony with her current partner last year. Hollie describes this as the best thing to have happened to her family. She considers her mother's partner and her children (one boy aged 25, male twins aged 20 and a 16 year old girl) to be her family and has a close and positive relationship with them all. Hollie identifies as bisexual and has one pre-school aged son.

Aidon, 18. Aidon has a biological brother, aged 22, and sister, aged 20. When he was seven years old, his parents divorced and his mother became involved with his stepmother who had two daughters, aged 22 and 19. All five children lived with and were co-parented by both mothers, who remain in a relationship.

Procedure

Once ethics had been obtained from the administering institution, potential participants were recruited and then interviewed. As interviews were open-ended and conversational, misconceptions were clarified as they occurred (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews took approximately one hour. Some interviews (n=3) were recorded, however where participants indicated that they were not comfortable being recorded (n=5), notes were taken and narratives based on the notes written by the researcher. Where this occurred, narratives were sent back to participants for member checking. All amendments indicated by participants were included, with all participants indicating that they felt satisfied that the narratives were an accurate and honest reflection of their stories.

Researcher reflexivity was an explicit element of the research process, and constant

reflection was carried out regarding the way questions in the interview were asked, how participants were treated and how narratives and interpretation were shaped by the researcher. Reflexivity requires the researcher to constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of the data (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Analysis

Thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcribed data was inductively coded; this is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it to a pre-defined framework. This data driven analysis followed the guidelines / stages defined by Braun and Clarke (2006); the researcher will initially familiarize herself with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes within these codes, review themes, define and name themes and produce the report.

Throughout the process, the researcher aimed to enhance rigour. Theoretical rigour is achieved, as the adoption of in-depth interview method framed by a phenomenological approach, is ideally suited to the research goal of allowing children of same-sex parents to share their everyday lived experiences. Procedural rigour was enhanced by providing an explicit account of how research was conducted. Interpretative rigour refers to the trustworthiness of the interpretations. While data was inductively analysed, it is acknowledged that themes do not passively emerge or become discovered, as the researcher plays an active role in identifying patterns/ themes and selecting which are of importance and should be reported to readers (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). To enhance the scientific value of the analysis, researcher reflexivity was explicitly applied. Additionally, data was independently co-coded and all major coding and reporting decisions were discussed with an independent person, who was familiar with the data (Liamputtong, 2009).

Results and Interpretation

The goal of the current study was first and foremost to understand the lived experience of adult children raised by lesbian, gay or bisexual parents. While the participant narratives differed greatly, there were common threads running through the narratives. Based on the thematic consistency of the data, the participant with a gay father was not deemed different enough from the participants with lesbian or bisexual mothers to warrant being discussed separately, or excluded from the analysis.

Saturation was reached after the sixth interview. This is consistent with Polkinghorne's (1989) recommends that researchers interview between 5 and 25 participants each with experience of the phenomenon in question. In all eight themes emerged, each is summarized in the table below.

Table 1

Themes and sub-themes identified in participants' narratives

| Themes | Sub-themes |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Divorce/blended family issues | Relative importance of sexuality Hostility from non-gay parent |
| | Challenges of blending families – emotional, logistical, financial Parents better supported in new relationship Additional benefits of stepparent and stepsiblings Quality of relationship between biological parents |
| Homophobic reactions | Pre-emptive fears of what reactions will be Anger and frustration towards homophobic reactions Adaptive coping mechanisms |
| Parental modeling | Confidence, pride, “outness” Adaptability to different settings Honesty and openness Humour |
| Controlling | Language Dress |
| Disclosure | Public displays of affection Controlling how parents are portrayed |

| | |
|--|--|
| Social support | Friends and family – social network Professionals – teachers, counselors Gay community Rejection from extended family |
| Outward perspective | Protectiveness of siblings and parents Comparisons between themselves and siblings |
| Time to adjust | Time to get adjust to new family dynamic Challenging of their own beliefs and attitudes |
| Unique advantages | Attitudes to same-sex relationships Open mindedness and acceptance of difference in general Additional and alternative experiences and knowledge |
| The importance of secure loving relationships within the immediate family | |

Dissolution of Parents' Marriage and Subsequent Blending of Two Families When

participants shared their stories, their parents' sexuality was not the most poignant theme. Largely, participants discussed the dissolution of their biological parent's marriage, and the transition into a blended family as important parts of their stories (see Green, 1982). While their parents' sexuality was an important issue in their lives, it was not necessarily the central focal point of their narratives. Participants discussed their parents' divorces in detail, outlining the tension that surrounded that period in their lives and the hostility that came from their heterosexual parent. While this particular hostility may be unique to instances where one parent has come out following or preceding the dissolution of a marriage (see Van Dam, 2004), participants also discussed issues surrounding the blending of two families that were not unique to same-sex parented blended families.

Participants discussed interpersonal conflict as they adjusted to a new stepparent, who often assumed parental responsibilities and also to stepsiblings with whom their lives were now intertwined. Participants described an "*us and them*" environment, feeling as if they were not getting enough of their biological parent's attention and difficulties adjusting to custody arrangements. Some participants acknowledged that by caring for larger blended families, their parents were under significant pressure (see Van Dam, 2004).

While participants highlighted the dissolution of their parents' marriage and transition into a blended family as particularly stressful, there were many positive aspects of this transition. Participants indicated that their parents were happier and better supported in their new same-sex relationship. Many indicated that this pleased them, and set the foundation for a positive relationship with their new stepparent. *"I suppose because I've always seen the support she gives my mum I've always gotten along with her," Andrew, 22.* Additionally, participants felt a strong connection to their parent's new partner, and regardless of whether they perceived this person as an additional parent, they acknowledged the benefits of having an additional, caring, positive adult in their lives. Participants valued the additional external resources that a stepparent provided them with, and also highlighted the way in which additional stepsiblings added to their social support networks. Many of the participants felt that having additional siblings meant having additional support, and feeling as if there was *"always someone there for you," Andrew, 22.* The cumulative impact on resilience, of having a parent who was better supported, as well as having the additional external resources of stepparents and stepsiblings, was of significant consequence to participants. There was substantial variation in the quality of relationship between the biological parents of participants. Where a positive relationship existed, participants emphasized the value they felt this had given them, and conveyed sincere appreciation that their biological parents had treated each other with respect and had remained supportive of one another (see McHale et al, 2002).

Homophobic and/or Homonegative Reactions To varying extents, all participants experienced discrimination and marginalization as a result of their parents' sexuality. Some participants did not feel significantly impacted by homophobia while others experienced quite horrific bullying. Some participants described losing friends once their parent's sexuality was disclosed, *"I know some people who beforehand didn't know and we were really close and then as soon as I told them they kind of went away, that was really hard .", Amy, 19.*

Andrew, 22, described how his mother was removed from the Parents and Friends Committee at his school as a result of her sexuality. A few participants experienced more severe bullying. Hollie, 23, described being tied to a pole, and assaulted by school peers, while profanities regarding her mother's sexuality were screamed at her. The incident was witnessed by a large group of her peers. Hollie also described how her sister was beaten as a result of her mother's sexuality, receiving a large laceration to her face. The attack was filmed and later broadcast on the internet. While the severity of these instances should not be minimized, a common thread through most participants' narratives was that their fear of homophobic reactions was worse than the reactions they actually received once they disclosed their family structure. Amy, 19, described her initial hesitation to openly discuss her mother's sexuality, "*We kept it quiet for quite some time, because it was like what will people think, how will they judge, or stereotype? Of course I told my close friends which I was really scared and worried about.*" When reflecting on the reactions she actually received, this same participant remarked "*It was surprising because I didn't think other people would be that accepting.*"

Participants indicated that they were angered and frustrated when there was negative reception of their parents' sexuality. Andrew, 22, described his anger towards homonegative views, "*It frustrated me, it made me angry because the way I always viewed it was, it was mum's decision, it is not going to affect any of those people... so why does it bother them?*"

A number of participants indicated that as they (and their peers) got older, more mature and familiar with the situation, teasing and bullying dissipated. While this may be a result of maturity of peers, participants also felt that as time progressed they became more competent in coping with negative reactions, through cognitive re-structuring. Many participants described, becoming more equipped to ignore homophobic comments, and becoming less emotionally responsive to homophobic jokes and also to rejection from within their peer groups. As Danica, 19, described, "*if*

someone doesn't want to be my friend because my dad is gay, then that's not really the kind of friend I want anyway so it's not a real loss." Participants also perceived homophobia as stemming from ignorance, and they sometimes even expressed pity for people who held homophobic attitudes. The ability to ignore, dismiss and devalue homophobic reactions is an adaptive coping mechanism facilitating resilience (Rostosky et al, 2007).

Parental Modeling Pride has been found to be a sub-theme of "outness", a term which refers to the degree to which a person is forthcoming about their sexuality (Griffiths & Pooley, 2011). From the perspective of same-sex parents raising children, Griffiths and Pooley identified that the way in which parents exemplified pride regarding their sexuality was important in fostering resilience. This finding was supported by the current study, with participants taking their cues on whether to be proud and open regarding their family structure from their parents. When one participant was asked what factors influenced the development of her self-professed confidence she quickly replied that her confidence came from her father, *"its like his confidence bounced straight off him and came to me."* The current study identifies that this is an important factor for children of LGB parents, and also identifies that children often refer to their parents to know when to "come out". As described by Amy, 19 *"every time I basically told someone, I would ask mum first, I wanted to get her permission because it was her thing."*

One of the coping mechanisms modelled by parents was humour. As described by Amy, 19, *"I didn't know how to approach it, or what to say, but they were making jokes so they were teaching me how to be ok with it"*. Sense of humour plays an important role in the ability to make light of adversity, to enhance coping mechanisms and to moderate the intensity of emotional reactions (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007; Richardson, 2002). In addition to pride, adaptability and humor, participants valued open and honest communication from their parents.

Controlling Disclosure Related to the adaptability to different settings modelled by

parents, Rivers and colleagues (2008) suggest that one mechanism children of same-sex parents use to protect themselves from discrimination and even bullying, is to control when and how to disclose their family structure. Often parents' sexuality is not visible and disclosure can be at one's discretion. Participants indicated that they often consciously and unconsciously chose not to disclose family structure, especially in unfamiliar environments when they were unsure of how accepting people would be.

Participants described monitoring the language that they used, dependant on the environment and also described being able to control the disclosure of their family structure when their parents / stepparents were not openly affectionate with one another in public, and when their parents did not dress or present themselves as stereotypically "gay". None of the participants expressed being ashamed of their parents sexuality, however many postulated that had their parents presented themselves as more visibly gay, or had their parents been more affectionate with their partners in public, they may have experienced more discrimination and found the situation more difficult.

In addition to controlling when to disclose their parents' sexuality, participants also expressed a desire to control how their parents' parenting skills were portrayed. As described by Katherine, 21,

"I learned from an early age, and I had certain responses I'd give. Things I'd say, certain things I wouldn't say... I understood that there was some sort of bad juju attached to same-sex couples, so I just wanted to portray her as an effective mother, a capable mother. People wanted to know "is she doing the right thing by the kids?" and I just wanted to make sure that everyone knew that she was. She was amazing."

This desire to control which aspects of their family's structure and functioning are disclosed and the subsequent demand characteristics, need to be considered as limitations of the

current study.

Social Support Participants discussed a number of external resources stemming from societal support systems including the LGBT community, professionals, family and friends. Many of the participants described support from within the LGBT community, either directly or as support for their parents, which aided family resilience. The LGBT community was described as welcoming, inclusive and helpful in difficult times. Some participants enjoyed participating in Mardi Gras or other events in the LGBT community and some actively campaigned for equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual individuals. This finding is consistent with those of Bos and van Balen (2008), and Bos, Gartell, van Balen, Peyser and Sandfort (2008) which found that in the United States and Netherlands, children between the ages of eight and 12 with gay and lesbian parents and with more frequent contact with the gay community, were less vulnerable to the effects of stigmatisation and were more resilient to homophobia.

A major concern that is widely held for children of same-sex couples is that they lack a role model of each sex (Patterson, 2002). While Aidon, 18, noted that he felt he had missed out on having an active male role model, other participants felt that people within their extended family and social network fulfilled this role. Extended family was indicated by many participants as an external resource facilitating resilience. However, all participants to varying extents experienced estrangement or difficult relations within their extended family as a result of their parent's sexuality. This ranged from grandparents who tolerated rather than accepted their parents' sexuality (Green, 2004), to complete estrangement from members of their extended family. Some of the participants had siblings who were no longer in contact with their parents as a result of their sexuality and they described the grief that this caused. Participants often expressed dissent for extended family who had alienated their parent due to their sexuality.

Outward Perspective Participants expressed a strong sense of protectiveness of siblings

and parents in the face of discrimination and bullying. A protective tendency towards younger children was identified, *“I have thick skin I can deal with it but my sister was younger than me. So I was scared that they would come up to her and tease her, for me that was the hardest thing”* Katherine, 21. Van Dam (2004) described the fear that Australian lesbian mothers have that their children will be bullied as a result of their sexuality. Children of same-sex parents do report anecdotal evidence of bullying that focus on parental sexual orientation, however the prevalence of this bullying is not supported by empirical evidence (Rivers, Poteat & Noret, 2008). Perhaps explaining some of the discrepancy between anecdotal and empirical evidence, participants in the current study showed a reluctance to share instances when they had been bullied with their parents. Andrew, 22, explained his experience with disclosing an incident where he had been bullied regarding his mother’s sexuality, *“I actually never really told her about it initially, because I didn’t want her to know that I was getting picked on for it.”* As illustrated, this reluctance was often motivated by a desire to protect parents from feeling guilty or responsible.

Further to an outward perspective that facilitated protectiveness, participants also compared themselves and their own individual resilience and coping, to that of their siblings. This outward perspective and favourable comparison may be in itself a protective factor, relating to resilience. Most participants identified at least one sibling who they perceived to be less resilient than themselves, or to not have coped with or adjusted to the adversity caused by their parents’ sexuality. A number of female participants identified that they felt having lesbian or bisexual mothers would be more difficult for boys, although when questioned they could not articulate why they thought this. The participants’ speculation that having same-sex parents was more difficult for some children than others, coupled with the volunteer basis of this study creates a need for more stratified and representative research to examine if and where these differences in coping between children in the same family lie.

Time to Adjust Participants described needing time to adjust to their parents' sexuality and to the subsequent transitions in their family structure. Green (2004) argues that given the homonegative context in Western society, it is unlikely that people, regardless of their sexuality, can reach adulthood without some sort of internalized homophobia. Many participants believed that should their parent not have been lesbian, gay or bisexual, they would have themselves held homonegative beliefs. In addition to needing time to adjust to their new family structure, to learn coping mechanisms and to come to terms with their parents' sexuality, participants indicated that they needed time to adjust their own beliefs so that they could accept their parents' sexuality. Even participants who did not think that they held homonegative beliefs would occasionally surprise themselves by instinctively hiding, lying or feeling embarrassed about their parents' sexuality. Many participants indicated that they struggled, or reacted negatively when their parents initially came out, but given time, adjusted and thrived not only in spite of their parents' sexuality but often because of it.

Unique Advantages Perhaps one of the most prominent themes identified in the data is the way in which participants conceptualized the unique positive differences to their upbringing as a result of their parent's sexuality. Participants identified that their attitudes toward homosexuality in particular, and difference in general, had been impacted. They pointed to additional experiences, knowledge and beliefs as a result of their unconventional family structure. With particular reference to accepting same-sex relationships, participants felt that their values had been altered as a result of their parents' sexuality. This was illustrated by Katherine, 21, "*if mum wasn't gay, I'd probably be one of those judgmental people I hate.*" Katherine also identified that this change in attitude towards same-sex relationships is not only a direct result of having a gay or bisexual parent, but is also reinforced by dynamic changes in her larger social support network as a result of her mother's sexuality.

Danica, 19, perhaps summarized the advantages given to children of same-sex parents most eloquently, *“I feel that it has given me a unique experience, allowed me to meet lots of different people, to see a different side to life, I’ve been given an extended knowledge, so I’m really equipped to be an adult.”* The ability to frame the experience of being part of a minority group that often faces discrimination, and additional challenges into a positive experience, adds unique value to and undoubtedly showcases resilience.

Secure, Loving Relationships in the Immediate Family One of the most consistent findings in research focusing on children of same-sex parents, is that the overall health and psychological outcomes of children raised seem to be determined by family stability, the quality of parent-child relationship and interactions among family members as opposed to family structure or household composition (Patterson, 2002). This finding was supported by the current study. Participants did not believe that they had been negatively impacted by their parents’ sexuality, or by being part of a minority group that faced discrimination and argued that regardless of their family structure, they always felt loved and cared for. Many participants attributed their resilience to the strong, secure and loving relationships within their immediate families, and especially with their parents.

Conclusion

The current study adds another dimension to the gathering body of knowledge focusing on same-sex parented families. Stepping away from comparative research, this study shares the narratives of the now-grown children of gay, lesbian and bisexual parents. Often when it comes to debates regarding same-sex parenting, many parties seem to have an opinion. Largely missing from the debate is the voice of children raised by same-sex parents – this study seeks to redress that.

Whilst the present study illuminates many themes relevant to the “process” of family dissolution and reestablishment, i.e. themes such as parental modelling, time, controlling

disclosure etc., it is interesting to note the unique advantages that these participants regard as important in their development of understanding diversity and difference generally. This substantiates the view held by Negy & McKinny, (2006) that children raised in same sex parented families tend to be more tolerant of diversity.

Consistent with prior research, this study indicates that the quality of parent-child relationships and family dynamics are more important than family composition, that time to adjust and learn coping mechanisms are important, as is parental modelling and social support.

Limitations and Future Research

While participants did not report that their parents' sexuality was the most prominent issue in their stories, each had experienced marginalisation, discrimination or harassment on some level. The extent and nature of this adversity differed greatly, and is not clearly illuminated by the literature (Rostosky et al, 2007). Although anecdotal evidence of bullying (Van Dam, 2004) does not necessarily match empirical evidence (Rivers, Poteat & Noret, 2008), the instances of being excluded from friendships or peer groups due to parental sexuality and even severe physical violence cannot be ignored. This issue is complicated by reluctance on the part of children to discuss harassment with parents (and presumably researchers) and also by a sensitivity of parents to any harassment endured by their children as a result of their sexuality (Van Dam, 2004). Research to further examine the nature and expression of heterocentricism and homophobia in the current Australian context, and the impact on same-sex parented families is needed.

Another issue which should be understood in more depth is the fine balance between family pride and "outness" and the ability to control disclosure according to setting (Griffiths & Pooley, 2011). Many participants indicated that pride was important in facilitating resilience. Participants also expressed a strong attention to knowing when, and how to disclose their family structure, often informed by parental modelling. Participants described the fact that their parents were not overly

affectionate with one another or did not dress in a stereotypically “*gay way*”, as protective, promoting resilience. This complex paradox is discussed by Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson and Downing (2011). The authors note that persons with same-sex parents may feel proud of their families but may also have concerns about safety that lead them to limit disclosure about their families in the dominant community. The authors argue that young (mostly heterosexual) adults with gay or bisexual parents often find themselves on the border of two communities and may need to compartmentalize to satisfy the dual expectations of both the dominant and minority communities in which they are imbedded. At the very least it appears that balancing family pride and outness with safety, through adaptability to different settings, is a complex process which may be perceived differently by parents and children in these families.

Memory effects and hindsight bias are a major limitation of the study and future research should seek to understand the experience of young children and adolescents of same-sex parents. In the current study, participants’ parents had been “out” for a mean of 16.87 years, with a standard deviation of 8.77 years. Participants indicated that they became more accepting of their parents sexuality and their new family structure, and that given time to adjust, cognitively restructure and learn coping mechanisms, they developed resilience. The process of this development is not clearly illuminated by the current study. Future phenomenological longitudinal research should aim to explore the experiences of younger children, speaking with them at a time closer to when their parents initially came out.

Meyer (1995) describes minority stress as the psychosocial stress derived from minority status, and found that odds ratios suggested that men who had high levels of minority stress were two to three times more likely also to suffer from distress. Interestingly, the identified themes align easily with Rostosky and colleagues’ (2007) minority stress model as applied to the lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. The current study potentially supports the extension of the minority stress

model to the children of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, and the use of this model to explain the experiences of same-sex parented families should be explored further.

Furthermore, given that participants indicated variation in coping within their families, additional research on an individual level should inform and lead to research which focuses on resilience at the family level, allowing for familial processes and dynamics to be more clearly understood, with the aim of better supporting these minority families and the individuals within them.

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