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**Women Parenting Together:  
Motherhood and Family Life in  
Same Sex Relationships**

**by**

**Kathryn Almack, BA (Hons), MA**

**Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
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## **Abstract**

This study is based on joint and separate in-depth interviews with twenty (female) same sex couples who planned and had their children together in the context of their relationship. These families are one example of the increasing possibilities to live in non-traditional relationships and family forms, in contemporary Western societies. While lesbian and gay parents have a long history, there is little precedence for same sex couples setting up families 'from scratch' i.e. choosing to have children in the context of their relationship. These possibilities can be placed in the context of wider transformations of intimacy.

There is widespread agreement that individualism in personal relationships has substantially increased, although opinions differ about the extent to which this individualism is essentially selfish. Lesbian parents, for example, have been portrayed as selfish individuals (Phillips, 1998) or alternatively as 'prime everyday experimenters' (Giddens, 1992), although the reality may be more nuanced than either of these polarities suggests. Overall, recent sociological research into both heterosexual and 'non-heterosexual' family lives suggests that transformations of intimacy are characterised by negotiated commitments and moral reasoning. However, to date, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which these themes may be modified by the presence of dependent children, particularly given the socially constructed nature of children's needs.

Respondents in my study are involved in both innovative family practices and the care of dependent children. As such, they can offer new insights to the above debates. They present a radical departure from dominant conventions of heterosexual gendered family norms and the biological imperatives of reproduction. However, while working out new ways of doing family, these practices are located within deeply conventional moralities of motherhood, which leave little space within which to offer up new stories of doing family.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

Our interpersonal existence is being transfigured, involving us all in what I shall call *everyday social experiments*, with which wider social changes more or less oblige us all to engage (Giddens, *Transformations of Intimacy*, 1992:8).

It is no longer possible to pronounce in some binding way what family, marriage, parenthood, sexuality or love mean, what they should or could be; rather, these vary in substance, expectations, norms and morality from individual to individual and from relationship to relationship (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, 1995:5).

In this thesis, I examine these claims in relation to one particular new family form, that of female same sex couples who have planned and had their first child within the context of their relationship. These families contribute to the unprecedented changes to family life in late twentieth century Western societies, which, as Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000:5) observe, have become the focus of 'enormous public scrutiny and debate'.

Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that rapid family change occurring under conditions of late modernity is dominated by an individualising tendency, which cuts across traditional mores. Central to their analysis is the idea that, instead of living by any fixed moral code, individuals are now faced with making their own decisions, negotiating commitments and responsibilities in a context where:

With a bit of imagination one can say 'anything goes' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995:34).

Giddens (1992:135) identifies 'gays' as 'the prime everyday experimenters' who have 'for some while experienced what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples'.

However, lesbian parent families have also been portrayed as the pursuit of a more selfish individualism, which threatens the long-term stability of the family and society as a whole (Dennis and Erdos, 1993, Phillips, 1999). This portrayal of the 'family in

crisis'<sup>1</sup> has raised attendant concerns and moral anxiety over the question of parental responsibilities towards children, emphasising, for example, the bad effects of divorce on children and the problem of children being raised by lone mothers. Within this perspective, lesbigay<sup>2</sup> families are portrayed as characteristic of the triumph of 'sexual individualism' over the obligations of the family (Phillips, 1998). I discuss these conflicting theoretical (and sometimes polemical) accounts in more detail in Chapter 2.

Empirical work has developed a more nuanced interpretation of what is actually going on inside personal relationships (Smart and Neale, 1999a, Lewis, 1999a, 1999b, Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). In Chapter 2, I discuss key findings that have emerged out of this research. First, the parenting of dependent children is identified as having a substantial impact upon the pursuit of individualism (Smart and Neale, 1999a, Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000). Second, 'non-heterosexuals' are identified as being at the forefront of wider changes to family lives (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). However, conclusions differ about the extent to which individuals are engaged in an individualistic pursuit of 'everyday social experiments'.

Public and popular perceptions about family change have been influenced by the rather more pessimistic accounts of the implications of family change, coalescing around concerns about parental responsibilities and obligations towards children. This is evident within the current Labour Government's consultation paper *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998). This was claimed as the first consultation document any government had produced on 'the family'. There was some recognition of an increasing diversity of 'families' (acknowledged in the paper's title) - although notably these did not include lesbigay families. In the foreword to this document, the Home Secretary<sup>3</sup> stated that the government's aim was not 'about pressuring people to stay in one type of relationship or forcing them to stay together'. However, while it

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<sup>1</sup> As noted by Smart (1997:319), these arguments call upon a historically and culturally specific family form of the 1950s - the mythical nuclear heterosexual family - which was never a universal reality.

<sup>2</sup> This term is adopted from Stacey and Biblarz (2001). I shall use it as a less cumbersome reference to mean 'lesbians, bisexuals and gay men'. In my opinion, it is preferable to the use of 'non-heterosexual'. Nevertheless, I acknowledge Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan's point that it is difficult to find a general label since all such terms are frequently contested (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Jack Straw, who was also the Chairman of the Ministerial Group on the Family (Home Office, 1998).

was thus claimed that the aim was not one of moralising about people's private lives, the paper strongly emphasised issues relating to the care, welfare and upbringing of children in contemporary family forms. As Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) point out, this document accorded the needs of children a status of public accountability. The overall focus for policy remained one of supporting and strengthening marriage as the 'most reliable framework for raising children' (Home Office, 1998:30).

Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan argue that same sex relationships, and in particular same sex parenting, are particularly controversial, posing a radical challenge to:

What for many are the cornerstones of western civilisation - the institution of marriage, the biological imperatives of reproduction, the social conditions of parenting (2001:2).

The possibilities of parenthood within same sex relationships, especially for women, have opened up through the increased visibility of reproductive technologies which, as well as treating infertility, have presented the means to conceive outside of (hetero)sexual relationships. There are also greater possibilities for living openly outside the traditional family. Within this context issues of same sex partnership rights and marriage and of same sex couples becoming families with children (through insemination, surrogacy or adoption) have become salient contemporary concerns. At the same time, parents within same sex relationships are subject to the wider societal and cultural norms of family life, even while presenting a challenge to them.

In the UK, the dominant attitude towards same sex relationships and parenting was most clearly symbolised by Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act (Wise, 2000). Section 28 outlawed the promotion of homosexuality within schools and included the clause that local authorities should not promote 'the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Underpinning this legislation was a widespread belief that young people may be vulnerable to proselytising by lesbian and gay adults, and, by implication, parenting by them posed a particular risk (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). In 2000, attempts made to repeal Section 28 met with hostile responses, based on claims that it was unacceptable to present homosexual relationships as morally equivalent to that of marriage.

More recently, in a review of adoption law, MPs voted to accept an amendment to the Adoption and Children Bill that will allow same-sex and heterosexual unmarried couples to adopt children. Many Conservative politicians and Christian organisations are against these changes which, they argue, undermine the institution of marriage. The Conservative Party tabled a specific amendment to exclude same sex couples from any extension of adoption rights<sup>4</sup>. Iain Duncan-Smith (Conservative Party Leader) stated:

Whether it is homosexual or heterosexual, the point is about the children ... the most important thing is the protection of the children, not satisfying different lifestyle choices (...) People who want to adopt have a very simple choice. They can get married to adopt children (BBC 1, *On the Record*<sup>5</sup>).

Marriage is defined exclusively as an institutionally sanctioned commitment between a woman and a man. In the UK, despite the progressive move being attempted towards allowing same sex couples to adopt, there have been no corresponding moves to endorse same sex marriage (and opposition to the registration and recognition of same sex partnerships). These controversies form a significant focus of concern for defenders of the traditional family.

Duncan-Smith's remarks also invoke the needs of children, which serve as a powerful rhetoric for defenders of the traditional family unit. These needs are accorded some status over and above the perceived (implicitly selfish) individual needs of adults. Children's needs are rarely spelled out in explicit terms, rather they are presented as universal needs, obscuring the ways in which these are socially constructed (Woodhead, 1997, Lawler, 2000). Parents, but especially mothers, are identified as the adults responsible to ensure that these needs are met, preferably under the optimum social conditions of the traditional family unit. Failure to do so is seen as detrimental to children's development with subsequent consequences for society as a whole, as the children become adults. As I discuss, the ways in which children's needs are defined are linked to the socially prescriptive meanings and responsibilities associated with 'good' motherhood, which have to some extent been emphasised in policy and practice

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<sup>4</sup> While Conservative moves to prevent same sex couples being able to adopt children failed, the legislation has yet to go to the House of Lords, where strong opposition to the amendment has already been voiced.

<sup>5</sup> Reported on gay.com news features, May 20th, 2002. <<http://www.uk.gay.com/newsfeatures/124>>

(Smart and Neale, 1999a) and through expert tracts on what constitutes good mothering (Nicholson, 1993). Being a mother (and mothering) is associated with the primary responsibility for meeting children's needs. As such, motherhood has been subject to a far greater scrutiny than that of fatherhood and valorised or policed accordingly. Importantly, as Lawler (2000:20) argues, 'this surveillance is increasingly bound up with processes of *self-surveillance*'.

This is the societal context within which lesbian couples plan and have children. They represent a new family form where there are two parents, but of the same gender. Their use of donor or self-insemination as a means of conception represents a less conventional method of procreation that does not require a heterosexual relationship. Furthermore they are intentionally setting up families that neither involve men as partners, nor (in most cases) as fathers. While changes in family forms may lead to possibilities to radicalise the meaning and content of family life (Weston, 1997), there appear to be few corresponding changes which open up possibilities to radicalise the meanings and content of motherhood. Thus, while lesbigay families may be at the forefront of reinventing family boundaries, lesbians as mothers cannot entirely escape the dominant constructions of the expectations and obligations attached to the role of 'mother'. These potentially constrain the pursuit of individualism and the possibilities to 'experiment' with family life.

The focus of this study, on lesbian couples having their children in the context of their relationship, enables an examination of a family form that is innovative, but which also involves the care of dependent children. The investigation of women's own understandings and meanings of motherhood and family life is designed to further inform debates about the possibilities and challenges of parenting within the context of an increasing diversity of family forms and concomitant public concerns that have been expressed about these developments.

## **1. Aims of the research project**

The aims of my research are:

- To examine how women in same sex relationships make sense of/construct meanings of motherhood and family life, both for themselves and for others.
- To examine the differential impact of the biological and social dimensions of the relationship between parent and child, and to investigate how these relate to wider moral discourses about what children need.
- To examine the relationship between dominant (moral) discourses and everyday understandings of new forms of motherhood and families.

My sample criteria identify a specific group of female same sex couples; those who have planned and had their children in the context of their relationship and whose children are aged six years or under. I outline the rationale for my criteria in Chapter 3. I interviewed twenty couples, carrying out joint interviews and a separate interview with each individual (a total of 60 interviews). Using these criteria, I have been able to examine developments within lesbian parent families, linked to wider issues relating to the significance of dependent children (at the stages of infancy and early childhood) in the working out of new forms of motherhood and family life.

The areas I investigated, in interviews with women, included decisions about conception; the issues that arise around the choice of a known or anonymous donor; the day to day practices involved in mothering/parenting; the significance (or not) of the two women's biological and/or social relationships to their children and the extent to which women felt their familial relationships were recognised, supported and validated in their interactions beyond the home.

## **2. Structure of thesis**

### **2.1 Chapter 2: Literature review**

In this chapter I outline the literature that forms the conceptual framework and rationale behind my research, some of which I have referred to in the above



introduction. In the subsequent chapters I introduce additional literature relating to fatherhood, motherhood, children's needs and to stigma.

Within this chapter I move between literature that specifically addresses issues relating to lesbian families and a wider literature addressing changes in the nature of everyday family and parenting relationships in contemporary Western societies. My starting point is to consider the evidence relating to the demographics of same sex parenting and the emergent trend of a so-called 'lesbian baby-boom'. I then review a psychological body of literature on lesbian parenting, which provides a foundation against which other lesbian research has subsequently developed. Recent debates surrounding this body of literature have highlighted the political nature of this area of research. As I point out this has an important implication for my work.

I examine theoretical literature, briefly referred to earlier in this introduction, which recognises and debates the momentous shifts in the nature of family lives. I consider two distinct approaches that provide contrasting explanations and conclusions about the changes perceived to be taking place. Set against these polarities, I draw upon recent sociological research in the UK that contributes a more nuanced analysis of the fluid and complex character of contemporary family lives. I focus first, on two studies that investigate the impact dependent children may have on changes to family forms, and second, on recent studies which explore the lives of a range of lesbian families. I highlight a key area which warrants further exploration and which my study aims to address; namely the investigation of families which appear to diverge radically from family norms but which also involve individuals working out family life as mothers of dependent children.

## **2.2 Chapter 3: Methodology**

In this chapter I provide a more detailed summary of the aims of my research project. I detail and map out the various stages of the research process and discuss key issues I have encountered along this route. These include the difficulties of locating respondents from a relatively 'hidden' population; issues related to the choice of methods employed and the dynamics and practicalities of carrying out interviews. I

then discuss my approach to analysis and writing up. Here I also focus on some key debates and issues that were central to this process. Throughout this chapter I embed my discussions in the theoretical debates about the process of doing research, paying particular attention to issues that arise in carrying out sensitive research of a potentially political nature. This includes the dilemmas raised in producing a public account of private lived experiences. Finally, I consider some of the neglected dilemmas of incorporating the 'researcher's story' into the research.

### **2.3 Chapter 4: Everyday experiments? Issues in working out routes to conception and donor involvement**

In this chapter, I do two things. Drawing upon the interview data, first I lay out the diverse range of practices involved for respondents in the taking and implementing of decisions about having a child together. In particular, I focus on decisions about routes to conception and negotiations of the role, status and responsibilities (if any) of the donor/father. Second, I identify common themes that underpin respondents' accounts of these practices.

Negotiating routes to conception and potential levels of involvement of donors are not straightforward choices. There are few existing scripts or models from which women can take guidance. In this sense, and in the families subsequently created, they may be perceived as 'prime everyday experimenters' (Giddens, 1992:135). However, while respondents faced dilemmas and choices in these decision-making processes, I identify an overarching preoccupation within their accounts, with addressing the needs of children. Their decision-making takes place within the context of established and dominant notions of children's 'needs' and 'best interests'. These are rarely spelt out or problematised, but appear in various guises. Two examples that respondents make reference to are, first, a child's need for a father and second, a child's need for information about her/his genetic origins. I discuss how respondents variously interpreted these 'needs' and how these are related to women's decision making. The moral discourses at play in respondents' accounts can broadly be summarised as a choice between children's need for (knowledge of) both biological parents and children's need for (social) family. As pointed out elsewhere (Edwards et al., 1999a),

in intact heterosexual families these themes are mutually reinforcing. For lesbian couples these pose considerable tensions but nevertheless represent the basis of an unquestioned and unquestionable moral imperative.

These two moral discourses present further tensions for the two women, one of whom has a biological relationship to her child (the birth mother) and one who does not (the social mother). If a child's need for biogenetic relationships are prioritised, this can compromise the status of the social mother. A discussion of these tensions forms part of the next chapter.

## **2.4 Chapter 5: Making new sense of motherhood: Definitions of and claims on parental status**

In this chapter my focus is on the ways in which women engage in making new sense of motherhood, in the context of same sex relationships. These processes are closely linked to the moral realm of the 'best interests' of children. I take a step back from these questions to consider how women define and negotiate their parental status within their relationship (while also acknowledging that it is not entirely possible to separate the two). The ways in which respondents also engage in making sense of their parental and familial status in interactions within a wider social realm, form part of the following chapter.

I briefly outline the literature about the status of motherhood in Western societies. To date, there has been little focus on the taken for granted status of biological motherhood, beyond research into infertility and adoption. I lay out a framework of key characteristics of the dominant social construction of the status of motherhood and I discuss how women draw upon these. All of the social mothers engaged with this framework of motherhood, even those who did not define themselves as mothers, but as parents. Social mothers' main claims to a parental status are formed through the relational aspect, the 'doing' of parenting a child. Here they went to great lengths to highlight the quality of their relational claims, which links in with the discourses of 'good' motherhood. Social mothers' accounts contrasted sharply with birth mothers' accounts where their claims to a parental status were taken for granted. Nevertheless,

birth mothers' accounts reveal a great deal of ambivalence between the privileges accorded through biology and aspirations to the project of shared motherhood. In part, being a 'good' mother is socially constructed as instinctual and natural, yet at the same time birth mothers felt obliged to play down the biological links - and hence the instinctual role - in order to support their partner's claim to a parental status.

At the point of having children and becoming mothers it is hard to escape this deeply conventional set of expectations and obligations attached to motherhood. There appears to be less of an 'ideological slippage' around motherhood than there is around families.

## **2.5 Chapter 6: Being out and about: Negotiating for the recognition and legitimacy of a parental and familial status**

In this chapter, I draw upon interview data relating to respondents' interactions with child-related and kin networks. I do two things. First I examine accounts of the work involved in gaining recognition and, second, the work of negotiating their legitimacy in the face of potential social censure.

In gaining recognition of their parental status, women again call upon the dominant characteristics of motherhood, as laid out in the previous chapter. This framework also underpins the ways in which other people, within their social networks, understand and make (new) sense of motherhood. This work forms part of their everyday family practices with children, such as encounters in the supermarket and at playgroups. It often involves 'coming out' and I discuss the various layers women describe in being 'out'.

Being out can involve dealing with anticipated or real censure from others. Stigma theory offers a useful framework to consider such interactions. I outline key aspects of this theory and employ these in my analysis of how women acknowledge but also resist potential social stigma while establishing the validity of their claims to a parental and familial status. The legitimacy of their motherhood may be vulnerable to further censure, given the tenacious discourses that portray their difference from the

norm as harmful to the developmental outcomes for their children (as I discuss in Chapter 2). Their accounts of negotiating difference are thus underpinned by the potential charge that what they are doing is putting their children at risk of harm. Consequently the ways in which respondents negotiate and present 'difference' are circumscribed by the moralities of (good) motherhood.

## **2.6 Chapter 7: Conclusions**

In the final chapter I draw together and discuss aspects of the main theme that runs throughout my thesis; namely the processes involved in reconciling radical family practices with the moralities and constraints of motherhood. While there are spaces and opportunities to do family life differently, which can be perceived as examples of Giddens' 'everyday social experiments', there are fewer opportunities to do motherhood differently. In particular, the construction of the 'good' mother cannot be avoided. Respondents' family practices may vary considerably but all are contained within an overarching non-negotiable obligation to put children's needs first. I discuss the implications of my findings for sociological debates about family change and transformations of intimacy. I also highlight ways in which the relatively new work of investigations of lesbian lives, within mainstream sociology, can be developed and taken forward.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

#### 1. Introduction

The current edition of a British advice book (*Valued Families: The Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, Harne and Rights of Women, 1997) begins:

There are now far more lesbians openly raising children than at any time in the past. More lesbians are choosing to have children through donor insemination, and the opportunity for lesbians to foster or adopt children has become a reality (1997:xi).

This book revises the 1986 original edition produced by the feminist organisation, Rights of Women (ROW) updated, in part, because the extent of change in terms of the increased visibility and acceptance of same sex families, over the past fifteen years or so. Harne and ROW (1997) note that lesbian (and gay) parents have a long history, but the idea that parenting can be openly chosen by lesbian couples in the context of their relationship is a relatively new development. The numbers of women in same sex relationships becoming mothers is generally reported to be on the increase, leading to the phrase 'lesbian baby-boom' (Lewin, 1993), or 'gay-by boom'<sup>6</sup> (Dunne, 1998a) being adopted. In Section 2, I consider the extent to which such claims can be substantiated. There is some evidence that points to an emerging trend for lesbians to plan and have children in the context of same sex relationships, but there is limited statistical evidence to corroborate the claims.

This emergent trend has also been connected to transformations within the lesbigay world and to the wider changes in the nature of everyday family and intimate lives within contemporary Western societies. These two sets of changes are inextricably linked and feed into each other. This will become evident throughout this chapter as I move back and forth between empirical studies (psychological and

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<sup>6</sup> The latter reflects the recognition that gay men may increasingly be part of this same trend.

sociological) specific to lesbian lives, the wider theoretical literature addressing contemporary changes to family lives, and empirical studies which focus on heterosexual families. This is intentional and necessary to the organisation of my discussion. It is indicative of the ways in which there are parallels to be drawn between the social world of lesbian lives and the wider changes of family lives in general, alongside particularities relevant to lesbian family relationships. Both the parallels and particularities can inform the wider debates. Recent progress in the field of sociological research into lesbian families means that this area of research is no longer marginal to the wider debates about the changing nature of heterosexual family lives. However, we have not yet reached a point where it is fully integrated into, rather than separate from, mainstream studies.

In Section 3, I review the largest body of research to date about lesbian parenting, which stems from a psychological perspective. The main focus of this work centres on the developmental outcomes for children raised by lesbian or gay parents compared to the developmental outcomes for children raised by heterosexual parents. The main question underpinning this research is one that asks whether children are adversely affected by being raised by lesbian or gay parents. As I discuss, this work has recently been the centre of controversy in America between those who do and do not support same sex parenting

In contrast to this volume of work, there is still relatively little known from the perspective of lesbian parents and of how they negotiate the social context within which they parent. There are signs that this is changing. Most recently there have been calls for the development of alternative conceptual frameworks in which to situate future research (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). These calls have yet to be met by psychological research but there have been some developments in the field of sociological research into lesbian parenting and family lives. In Britain, for example, the Economic and Social Research Council recently funded two studies, the Families of Choice project (carried out by Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and

Catherine Donovan, 1995 - 1997<sup>7</sup>) and the Lesbian Household Project (carried out by Gillian Dunne over the same period of time). Notably this research has been situated within the context of theoretical debates about wider societal changes, including the increasing diversity of family lives. I address the relevance of these debates about the changing nature of family life before addressing the empirical evidence.

The extent and nature of changes to family life have been the subject of extensive political and academic debates over the last decade. As I discuss in Section 4, a key factor within these debates is that of individualism with questions raised about the degree to which individualism is inherently selfish and incompatible with commitment and the stability of family life. Those who take the more pessimistic view of these developments (Murray, 1990, 1996, Dennis and Erdos, 1993) tend to present a portrayal of the family in crisis, which is viewed as synonymous with the wider breakdown of an ordered moral society. Much of this literature is polemical but, as I discuss, it has influenced policy and public debates. The more optimistic account (Giddens, 1992, Beck, 1994 and with Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002) conceptualises family lives as a reorganisation of ways of living in the context of wider transformations of contemporary society. I also discuss other important contributions to the theoretical debates, in particular David Morgan's conceptualisation of family practices (Morgan, 1996, 1999). This offers a useful focus on the realities of what families *do* rather than what they ought to be.

There is still little known about how these debates connect to or reflect the everyday experiences of family lives, although empirical work is beginning to address this gap. I discuss some key empirical studies that have made significant contributions to the theoretical debates through investigating what actually happens in the everyday practices of people's lives. Questions are raised about the extent to which the current theoretical debates about the changing nature of personal relationships might apply (Jamieson, 1998, 1999, Smart and Neale, 1999a, Lewis, 1999a, 1999b, Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000), especially when children are

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<sup>7</sup> This in turn was part of a wider ESRC programme on 'Population and Social Change', directed by Susan McRae, 1994 - 1998.



involved. In Section 5, I focus on two studies in particular whose conclusions both modify and extend ideas about the ways in which individualism, reflexivity, choices and constraints play out through family life at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However the emerging picture is by no means clear and what is known has focussed on the increasingly diverse forms of heterosexual family lives. It has been suggested that lesbians and gay men are 'prime everyday experimenters' (Giddens, 1992:135) who have, for some while, experienced what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples. As such they are identified to be at the leading edge of transformations of intimacy but within the UK there has been very little research in this context.

Finally, in Section 6, I discuss research (referred to above) that has most recently started to address this gap. I consider how this work contributes to the ongoing debates about the possibilities and challenges encompassed in these transformations. Placed alongside the picture emerging from studies of heterosexual families that suggests that children have substantial impacts on the individualistic pursuit of doing things differently, I argue that there is a need for more research that focuses specifically on those having children in the context of same sex relationships. To quote Stacey and Biblarz (2001):

Planned lesbigay families offers a veritable 'social laboratory' of family diversity (2001:179).

## **2. Demographics of same sex parenting**

### **2.1 The emergence of a lesbian 'babyboom'?**

In the UK, the earliest research of the experiences of lesbian mothers focussed mainly on lesbian parents who had conceived their children within heterosexual relationships. Hanscombe and Forster (1982) carried out this research. They identified elements within feminist, lesbian and gay politics in the 1960s and 1970s that were critical of lesbian motherhood. Some supported the feminist analysis that

conceptualised motherhood and the family as oppressive institutions, leading to calls to reject rather than embrace motherhood (Lewin, 1993).

This scenario is very different from contemporary assertions that the numbers of women becoming mothers in the context of same sex relationships represents a 'lesbian babyboom' (Lewin 1993), or 'gay-by boom' (Dunne, 1998a). This change in perceptions has occurred over a relatively short period of time. Changes in attitudes to parenting in the context of same sex relationships (and to the visibility of lesbian parenthood) are attributed to a range of factors in contemporary Western societies. At the wider level these include changes such as the extension of education and employment opportunities for many women, which have led to increased opportunities for women to live more independent lives beyond the boundaries of the heterosexual family unit (Dunne, 1997, 1998b, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002a). Contemporary notions of the family, though strongly contested, have also expanded to include a more diverse array of family forms which include lesbigay families (Silva and Smart, 1999b, Lempert and De Vault, 2000).

Within this climate the stigma attached to lesbian motherhood began to be challenged. For example, in 1983 the Lesbian Custody Project was established in London as part of the wider feminist organisation, Rights of Women (Radford, 1995). This project began to challenge legal discrimination against lesbian mothers and was indicative of a growing (if still limited) network of support available to lesbian mothers. These changes have also been connected to political and cultural shifts within gay and lesbian communities in the late 1970s and 1980s (Plummer, 1995, Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1996). Views emerged within lesbigay politics that challenged the notion of the family as the sole preserve of heterosexuals, signalling a growth of a movement to create distinctly lesbian and gay families (Weston, 1997). Motherhood and family life were increasingly reformulated by lesbians as an entitlement rather than a source of oppression for women and assimilation into the heterosexual world.

The phenomenon of living openly as lesbians and having children has also been linked to developments in the field of reproductive technologies that allowed the

possibility to have children through donor insemination. This technique is not new, but it achieved a greater public profile and acceptance alongside the development of newer reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilisation. Furthermore there was an increased awareness that it was a procedure that did not require medicalisation. As Saffron (1994) notes:

Self-insemination is a way for fertile women to get pregnant without sexual contact with a man and without medical intervention. It is technically very simple, needing no training and no medical equipment (1994:1).

Saffron's book is a resource book for women planning to have children by self-insemination. It forms part of a burgeoning British and American literature aimed at potential and actual lesbian parents (Pies, 1985, Pollack and Vaughn, 1987, Martin, 1994, Benkov, 1994, Arnup, 1995) that is frequently held to be illustrative of a growing trend of lesbians opting into motherhood in the context of same sex relationships or as single lesbians (Haines and Weiner, 2000, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001).

Weeks (1991) suggested that a key moment when UK lesbigay communities became visibly active and politicised in promoting their family lives centred on debates around the proposed 'Section 28' legislation, which constructed lesbian and gay families as 'pretended families'. Section 28 was part of the Local Government Act, 1988, introduced to bar the teaching and promotion in schools of homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship'. Weeks further argued that this legislation both reflected and assisted the increased visibility of non-heterosexual families. In the late 1980s and 1990s there were also the debates, referred to in Chapter 1, about lesbian parenthood in policy discussions about access for lesbians to donor clinics in the lead up to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (HFE Act), 1990, and the subsequent code of guidance.

Various commentators (Alldred, 1998, Beresford, 1998, Donovan, Heaphy and Weeks, 1999a) argue that the media have played a particular role in contributing to this increased visibility, although the media coverage of lesbigay families and parenthood has been and continues to be largely negative. Nevertheless, Donovan,

Heaphy and Weeks (1999a) argue that it has recognised and picked up on the social trend of lesbians opting into motherhood. As such they suggest it has contributed to both reflecting and shaping the controversies that surround this trend - although these discussions neglect considerations of what if any impact these public stories have on the everyday parenting experiences of lesbian mothers. I return to these points in more detail in Section 6.

## **2.2 Demographic estimates**

Estimating the demographic trends of lesbian couples planning and having children together is difficult, which makes it hard to corroborate the assertion of a 'lesbian babyboom'.

Some researchers have endeavoured to provide estimates of the demographic statistics - estimates of the number of same sex parents in the general population, how many children have lesbigay parents and so on. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) note that estimates vary from between nearly one and five million lesbian parents in the USA. Estimates in the USA are reached by various methods but there are no means of knowing quite how accurate these figures may be<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore they note that those who are hostile to lesbigay parenting tend to produce low estimates of the number of parents while those who are supportive produce higher numerical estimates.

In the UK, it is also hard to estimate the number of lesbigay parents. A combination of factors means that exact figures cannot be provided and no estimates have been arrived at. To date in the UK, national data such as the General Household Survey (GHS) and the Census have not included specific questions about people's own sexual orientation (Shaw and Haskey, 1999). Consequently it is not possible to identify cohabiting same sex couples, with or without children. Furthermore because social mothers cannot register on their child's birth certificate, children born to female same sex couples would appear in statistics as sole registrations

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<sup>8</sup> See Stacey and Biblarz, 2001, for a more detailed discussion.

(sometimes joint - if the father's name was also registered) of births outside of marriage. Other factors contributing to the difficulties of estimating these trends include the private nature of self-insemination (SI) and the possibility of lesbians and bisexual women attending donor clinics (DI) without wanting to reveal their sexual orientation. Although societal attitudes towards lesbigay people have become more tolerant over the years, there are still limits on what is seen as acceptable and this can impact on the extent to which many lesbigay individuals are willing to risk being fully out - and thus being counted - in all aspects of their lives. It is also hard to date when insemination started to be an option used by same sex couples who planned and had their children together.

Since 1991, statistics have been available on the number of children born as a result of donor insemination at donor clinics. Formal record-keeping only began in 1991 under the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Authority (established through the HFE Act, 1990). Their figures show that 18,000 children have been born as a result of donated gametes or embryos (Department of Health, 2002). The latest annual figures available<sup>9</sup> for the results of donor insemination show that 4338 patients were treated and 1174 babies were born as a result of treatment. However, there is no way of knowing how many children are born to lesbian couples.

Haimes and Weiner (2000) have provided a brief historical overview of lesbian donor and self-insemination in the UK. They date the first documentation of a self-insemination group to 1978. However, it is currently impossible to estimate how many children are born to lesbian couples each year as a result of self-insemination.

Overall, the (lack of) demographic data means it is difficult to estimate numbers but nevertheless lesbians having children by donor or self insemination has been the subject of significant attention over recent years, in policy debates and the media. There is also a developing literature of self-help books and anthologies on

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<sup>9</sup> These statistics are for the period April 1998 to March 1999. They are published in the HFE Authority 'Patients Guide to DI', 2000. The collation of figures is not yet available for the next edition. <<http://www.hfea.gov.uk>>

the subject, and an increasing attention paid to parenting issues in lesbian and gay publications. Importantly however, it is also possible to identify a gap between evidence available *about* lesbian parents and research that draws upon lesbians' own experiences and perceptions. In the following section I address the body of psychological research about lesbian parenthood. This does not specifically address this gap but it established the foundations of academic research into lesbian and gay families.

### **3. Psychological research findings on lesbian and gay parenting**

To date much of the research across Britain, America and Europe has been from a psychological perspective, involving the application of clinical and family system approaches. The main emphasis of this research has been on measuring the developmental outcomes for children growing up with lesbian mothers. Five key developmental outcomes have been identified. These can be summarised as gender identity, gender role behaviour and conformity, sexual orientation and preferences, psychological well-being and self-esteem, and finally, social stigma. This research has generally aimed to assess these developmental outcomes of children parented by lesbian and gay parents (focussing mainly on children raised by lesbian parents) in comparative studies with various samples of children living with heterosexual parents.

Findings from studies across the UK (Tasker and Golombok 1997), Europe (Englert, 1994) and the US (Patterson, 1995) almost uniformly conclude that children growing up with lesbian parents are not negatively affected by the sexual orientation of their parents (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1996). These conclusions appear to apply to both children who were born before their mothers identified as lesbian and those born to 'out' lesbians. This research<sup>10</sup> has frequently been cited as invaluable in challenging prejudicial attitudes especially in court cases where sexual orientation had long been a justification for depriving a lesbian

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<sup>10</sup> For detailed reviews see Falk (1994) and Patterson (1996).

parent of her child (Harne and ROW, 1997) and this contribution should not be under-estimated.

However most recently this research has been the subject of controversy in the United States, including a damning critique by Wardle (1997) and subsequent defence by Ball and Pea (1998). Wardle (1997) argues that parenting by lesbians or gay men is not in the best interests of children. To support this moral stance he refers to existing research that has studied the developmental outcomes for children raised by lesbian and gay parents. He argues that these studies are methodologically flawed by, for example, small samples that cannot provide reliable quantitative research conclusions, samples that are not randomly selected, and inadequate comparison groups. Despite highlighting methodological flaws, Wardle nevertheless suggests that there is evidence within these studies that should raise serious concerns about the potentially damaging effects upon children raised by lesbigay parents. For example, he points to evidence to suggest an increased possibility that children of same sex parents will develop homosexual interests and behaviours. He then lists associated risk factors stemming from homosexual behaviour among youth, including suicidal behaviour, substance abuse and HIV infection (although he does not indicate the source of this evidence). He suggests that those carrying out this research demonstrate a bias towards same sex parenting that have led some to 'disregard their own results in order to conclude that homosexuals are fit parents' (1997: 8).

Ball and Pea (1998:4) criticise Wardle's attempt to 'have it both ways'; while he argues these studies' conclusions are questionable because of methodological flaws, he nevertheless draws upon evidence within these studies. They agree that there are methodological limitations evident within this research but point out that researchers have acknowledged these. They challenge Wardle's assumption that this equates with methodological bias. Upon closer inspection, they suggest that Wardle's list of potential harms 'quickly disintegrate into unwarranted assumptions and questionable conclusions' (1998:40). However, it must also be said that they do not always produce the best defence. For example, in dismissing Wardle's claim that children raised by lesbigay parents are more likely to develop a lesbigay sexual

orientation, they cite evidence (without examining it in any detail) that sexual orientation may be hereditary rather than a result of children's upbringing.

These controversies prompted Stacey and Biblarz (2001) to carry out a rigorous assessment of these studies from a sociological perspective. They identified twenty-one studies (dating from 1981 to 1998) which met criteria they established for studies that, in their view, set up optimum conditions to address the questions about how parental sexual orientation matters to children. These criteria are listed as studies that had appropriate comparison groups, studies where differences were assessed statistically and those where findings were directly related to developmental outcomes. All twenty-one studies reported that there were no significant differences to be found in measures of parenting or developmental outcomes. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) also acknowledge the same methodological problems pointed out by Wardle (1997) and Ball and Pea (1998). Like Ball and Pea (1998), they also note that the authors of the studies they examined have usually made these limitations explicit in their research reports. They subsequently selected six out of the twenty-one studies for a more detailed discussion of the findings. These six studies (Flaks et al., 1995, Brewaeys et al., 1997, Chan, Raboy and Patterson, 1998, Chan, Brooks et al., 1998, Green et al., 1986 and Tasker and Golombok, 1997) were identified to have rigorous research designs which aimed 'to isolate whatever unique effects parents' sexual orientation might have on children' (2001:167). These studies either had a longitudinal design or were designed to reduce or address the potential for variables that might confound the impact on the effects of maternal sexual orientation, including the effects of separation and divorce and coming out as lesbian.

Through their assessment of the statistical evidence from these six studies, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) identified sources of differences. They suggest that researchers have tended to downplay findings that indicate differences regarding the developmental outcomes of children raised by lesbian parents or that differences highlighted were not always fully integrated into the analysis. They suggest that some of these differences could be perceived as advantageous while others are 'simply differences'. As one example, they interrogated the research findings on



children's gender preferences and behaviour. Overall the studies conclude that there are no or few significant differences between the children raised by lesbian and heterosexual mothers. Stacey and Biblarz point out that there is some evidence, however limited, to suggest lesbian parenting might lead to their children being less likely to conform to traditional gender stereotypes of feminine and masculine behaviour or activities. In Green et al.'s study (Green et al., 1986), they cite a count of at least 15 statistically significant differences in the gender behaviour and preferences among children, yet the study itself concluded that there were no or few significant differences. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) argue that a more detailed discussion of such findings could address questions about how children 'learn' gender. Other areas of differences they investigated included findings about children's self-esteem and well-being. The selected studies indicated that there were no significant differences between children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual mothers on all adopted measures of social and psychological adjustment. Stacey and Biblarz find little evidence to dispute these findings. However they suggest that, given some convincing evidence about the social stigma that children of lesbian parents face, these studies might in fact underplay the psychological strength exhibited by children of lesbian parents - a difference that deserves further study. In explaining the presence and lack of attention paid to such findings, Stacey and Biblarz argue:

The political stakes of this body of research are so high that the ideological 'family values' of scholars plays a greater part than usual in how they conduct, design and interpret their studies (2001:161).

Stacey and Biblarz argue that the ideological pressures hold the potential to constrain intellectual developments in this field. While those who do not support lesbian parenting may seek evidence of harm to support their case, supporters of lesbian parents defensively stress not only absence of harm but also absence of difference. Stacey and Biblarz allow that this defensive approach to 'terrains of difference' is understandable given the pervasiveness of social prejudice, but argue that it can be counter-productive in the long run. They are sensitive to concerns that their discussions could be vulnerable to misuse but argue that the fullest possible intellectual honesty is essential to the future development of knowledge across any

discipline exploring sexuality, gender and family. This discussion clearly has important methodological implications because it points to the potential for heterosexist assumptions to impact on any research carried out into lesbian and gay lives. I discuss these in more detail in Chapter 3.

Some commentators in the UK have raised concerns similar to those raised by Stacey and Biblarz (2001). In a paper discussing adult lesbian children's own views of their family, Saffron (1998) argues for the need to explore and highlight the potential positive outcomes of lesbian parenting rather than starting from the premise that lesbian parents subject their children to potentially harmful outcomes. Others have suggested abandoning comparative research on lesbian and heterosexual research altogether, arguing that it serves only to reinforce the heterosexual norm (Kitzinger and Coyle, 1995, Clarke, 2001). These authors favour an approach that concentrates on understanding the social obstacles to lesbian parenting, with the aim of developing strategies to challenge and change these conditions.

Stacey and Biblarz (2001:163) argue that sexual orientation of parents *does* matter and suggest a third alternative that 'moves beyond hetero-normativity without forfeiting the fruitful potential of comparative research'. As one example, they argue that the modest differences found in the comparative studies they examined might indicate the presence of 'compensatory processes' in lesbian and gay families, and suggest that an exploration of how parents help children cope with stigma in lesbian and gay families could prove helpful to all kinds of families. Consequently they identify ways to take forward research in this field within a less defensive conceptual framework. They suggest that a less defensive approach might, for example, allow innovative explorations of the acquisition of gender and sexual identity.

The current controversies surrounding the body of psychological research have re-emphasised the ongoing debates against lesbian and gay parenting. In critiquing existing psychological studies, opponents of same sex couples parenting children have also drawn upon the literature that forms part of the sociological debates about the

changing nature of family lives. In particular they draw upon the more polemic literature that suggests an increasing rise of a self-serving individualism that is linked to decline of the family and society (such as Popenoe, 1993). Wardle (1997) for example, argues that the trend of lesbians and gay men becoming parents are the selfish acts of individuals more interested in their own desires and needs than in the best interests of their children.

Overall the body of psychological research that has been developed to date relies on theories of family socialisation and generally neglects to investigate the societal conditions within which lesbians, bisexuals and gay men parent. There is also a notable absence of any considerations of the parents' own understandings and experience of living as a same sex couple with children, of the difficulties, contradictions and freedoms of their everyday family lives. As referred to in the introduction, more recently there have been UK studies which have developed the beginnings of such knowledge (Dunne, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, Haines and Weiner, 2000 and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). However before I examine these specific studies, I consider the wider sociological debates on family lives within which these studies are situated.

#### **4. Transformations of Intimacy: considerations of social change and the family**

In Section 4.1 I address the depiction of the family 'in crisis' (Murray, 1990, Popenoe, 1993). Importantly, these views have had some influence on policy frameworks which, to a large extent, continue to promote a particular model of family life, which in turn is viewed as the foundation stone for a stable society.

In Section 4.2 I address the relevance of the work of social theorists such as Giddens (1992), Beck (1992, 1994) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) who have developed a more optimistic account of recent family transformations. Their work has been influential in developing a conceptual framework that moves away from the negative evaluation of 'new' families. They conceptualise changes to

family lives as a re-organisation of intimate lives, taking place within the context of wider shifts in late modernity in Western societies. This is in contrast to the 'end of the family' scenario - with associated negative consequences for society as a whole. However it is also important to note that Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim offer a broad sweep account of family life.

There are others who have also made significant contributions to the shift away from a conventional emphasis of 'the family' (as an institution) towards one that focuses on family practices. In particular, in the final part of Section 4.2 (4.2.c), I consider the work of David Morgan (1996, 1999). His work has some parallels with that of Giddens (1992) but he focuses on the family in more detail.

In these discussions I also draw upon the work of researchers such as Stacey (1996) and Smart and Neale (1999a). Their research and that of others (such as Finch and Mason, 1993) has also contributed to the conceptual frameworks available for analyses of family life but I consider this field of work in more detail in Section 5.

#### **4.1 Individualism and 'the family' in crisis**

Those who hold a pessimistic view of the trend of individualism (Murray, 1990, 1996, Dennis and Erdos, 1993, Popenoe, 1993) argue that the growth of (selfish) individualism is synonymous with the breakdown of 'the family'<sup>11</sup> and this has dire consequences for the stability of society as a whole. To support the claims made, this analysis draws upon statistical evidence of family change. The increased incidence of, for example, divorce, lone parent families, teenage pregnancy and absent fathers are presented alongside statistics on delinquency, violence and crime, to develop a picture of 'the family' in decline with associated implications for the future of society as a whole. They defend a vision of the so-called 'traditional' family, which is portrayed as essential for the wider stability and

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<sup>11</sup> To some extent these viewpoints reflect earlier critiques of second wave feminism that condemned women's claims for and pursuit of some independence outside the family as signs of a selfish individualism which held negative consequences for the family and society as a whole (Jagger and Wright, 1999).

morality of society. In the UK in the early 1990s these arguments coalesced around popular and politic debates about lone motherhood. A subset of these debates (linked to concerns related to the availability of reproductive technologies) drew upon these same discourses. Here they were utilised to portray lesbian mothers as an undesirable category of selfish women choosing to have children independently of men (see, for example, discussions in Silva, 1996b).

Lone mothers and their (assumed fatherless) children were generally identified as a source of many contemporary social problems such as the rising rates of juvenile crime and the so-called emergence of an under-class (Murray, 1990, 1996).

Murray's notion of the underclass was characterised by illegitimacy, violent crime and disengagement from the labour force. He argued that boys in particular needed their fathers as male role models in order that they might be adequately socialised into responsible manhood. Adult men also required the role of fatherhood, in which they supported wife and children, in order to be civilised responsible human beings. Murray's proposed solution involved measures to reinstate the nuclear family and the role of the father within it. As Smart and Neale (1999a:28) point out, the nuclear family in Murray's scenario draws upon family life in the 1950s as a benchmark against which all subsequent developments can be measured. This particular family form is the heterosexual nuclear family with male breadwinner, female full-time homemaker and dependent children. It is constructed as universal and natural, a picture of what the family ought to be and ought to return to in order to halt and reverse the perceived current decline. In reality it has been identified as a particular social and historical construct (Nicholson, 1997) that has never had universal applicability (Hill Collins, 1990).

The above accounts rely on a reading of available statistical evidence (on divorce, births outside of marriage and so on) that has proved contentious. Statistics are presented as a series of facts employed to create a picture of the family on the brink of collapse. In criticising this use of statistics, Morgan (1999) argues:

They are not a set of more or less random facts about the modern family. In some cases there might be causal linkages between some individual elements (divorce rates and re-constituted households and lone parents, for

example) but more generally we are invited to view these items as signifiers of some underlying set of causes (or perhaps a single cause) or as a series of symptoms of some deeper social disorder (1999:14).

Smart and Neale (1999a:30) suggest that the danger of this use of statistics is that they are consequently viewed as objective measurements that 'embrace all that needs to be known about the family' and thus obscure the full complexity of both change and continuity in family lives.

Despite the highly problematic nature of these accounts, they have proved tenacious and influenced policy frameworks to reflect the view that the stability of 'the family' is necessary for the stability of society. Stacey (1996) points out that polemicists such as Charles Murray found influence in the US within right-wing think tanks and policy institutes where they have been able to disseminate their ideas without 'even the most modest of academic peer review' (1996:96). Murray's work was also disseminated in the UK. Here it was also taken up by academics such as Norman Dennis and A.H. Halsey (Dennis and Erdos, 1993) and by politicians. It was also disseminated through the British media and became highly influential in the negative discourses about lone motherhood that circulated widely in the early 1990s (Mann and Roseneil, 1999).

Opponents of lesbian parenthood (Wardle 1997, Phillips 1999) have also employed the pro-family-values debates in both the USA and the UK. A particular focus is placed on the putative risks of fatherlessness. Wardle (1997), for example, extrapolates from concerns expressed about single mother families to portray lesbian mothers as a danger to the stability of society. This ignores the fact that arguments against lone mothers are frequently based on comparisons that are unreliable and biased against lone motherhood (Stacey, 1994, Burghes, 1996). They do not, for example, take the influence of factors such as differences in access to economic and social resources for different groups into account. These same discourses had a further impact on the political and public debates about same sex parenting, although lesbigay families may most frequently be distinguished by their *absence* in policy discussions of changes to the family (Jagger and Wright, 1999). Smart and Neale (1999a) argue that the tenacity and popularity of the New Right

and Ethical Socialist accounts is largely because they had stood unchallenged. In outlining the history of family sociology they highlight a contemporary 'conceptual paucity' of alternative frameworks within which to reformulate the dominant account. They identify a renewed sociological interest in the family and recognise that alternative frameworks are now being developed. Here they refer to the work of Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995). They are careful to point out that these accounts are not the only developments in the contemporary field of family sociology, but recognise that they have made an important contribution in highlighting the centrality of the family to sociological concerns. I now turn to these accounts.

## **4.2 'Altruistic'<sup>12</sup> individualism and a pluralism of family forms**

In contrast to the rather negative view of the increasing array of family forms, Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) offer an alternative interpretation. This interpretation challenges the picture of 'the family' as an institution that should stay the same, providing an oasis of stability in a rapidly changing society. In general they suggest that the stereotype of individualism contributing to a me-first philosophy (also considered to have accompanying detrimental consequences on children and on society as a whole) does not reflect what is actually happening in contemporary society.

### **4.2.a Giddens: Transformations of Intimacy**

Giddens' focus on intimacy as the central component of meaningful personal relationships (Giddens, 1992) is often viewed as a development from his earlier work on the self and society in late modernity (Giddens, 1991). He links changes to 'the family', and the greater freedom individuals have to 'experiment' in everyday lives, with the wider transformations taking place in society (Giddens, 1992). This is not an entirely new development. Feminists in the 1970s and 1980s critiqued this private/public boundary i.e. between the family and other social institutions (Smart

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<sup>12</sup> A term adopted by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:xxii).

and Neale, 1999a). However it was only in the 1990s that it became more widely accepted that analyses of family lives were linked to, rather than separate from, other processes of social change. Giddens (1992) identifies late modernity as a period of rapid change, which is both sweeping away old certainties and producing new uncertainties. He argues that within these processes individuals are actively involved in renegotiating how to live, far from being passive inhabitants within the pre-ordained institution of the family. The opportunities for these negotiations are linked to and heightened by contemporary social changes. The implication of this argument is that the focus shifts towards questions of agency rather than structure.

Within Giddens' framework, individuals are seen to be actively and consciously engaging in experiments of living as traditional constraints and frameworks undergo radical upheavals as a consequence of wider social, political and economic shifts. In fact Giddens argues that individuals have little choice but to engage with 'everyday social experiments'. Importantly, he argues that this scenario of modern intimacy holds the potential for the development of emotional democracy with associated wider implications for a democratic society. While people may have no choice but to become more reflexive about how they live out their intimate lives, the potential exists to develop a greater self-awareness and equality in partnerships. Central to this argument, Giddens introduces the emergence of the 'pure relationship' and 'confluent love'. His concept of the pure relationship is central to this restructuring of intimacy:

It refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it (1992:58).

The pure relationship is not embedded in traditional institutions and normative expectations. Individuals are perceived to be making reflexive commitments rather than ones based on social prescriptions. Love thus becomes contingent rather than forever - Giddens uses the term confluent love:



Confluent love is active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the 'forever', the 'one and only' qualities of the romantic love complex (1992:61).

A key component of the pure relationship and confluent love is the 'project of the self' which involves individuals as conscious agents of change. Relationships may no longer be forever, but Giddens views the consequential fragility as a central component which holds the potential for a more profound equality between men and women, rather than symptomatic of the breakdown of 'the family' and moral decline of society. His discussion of the potential rise of democracy is also central to a renewed interest in the family as 'a site where new debates about moralities and ethics can be played out' (Smart and Neale 1999a:11).

Giddens suggests that women in general have played a major role in the transformations of intimacy and identifies men as 'laggards in the transitions occurring' (1992:58). He has argued that women in lesbian relationships are 'prime everyday experimenters' who have 'experienced for some time what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples' (1992:135). In other words, their relationships are more likely to be contingent (rather than forever) and reflect the essence of what he outlines as the 'pure relationship'. Giddens acknowledges that lesbians may be in long term relationships but suggests that they may struggle to gain any sense of security in them. Here he draws on selective material from the Hite reports<sup>13</sup> without, in his own words, 'worrying too much about how representative the material is' (1992:134). He suggests that same sex couples have not been able to draw upon many of the institutional frameworks that support heterosexual relationships - such as marriage. As a result, he argues that same sex couples have always had to engage in deeper levels of reflexivity in forming relationships, which are thus characterised by comparatively greater levels of emotional connection, equality and communication.

There is a body of research (although Giddens does not refer to it) that indicates that same sex couples and lesbians in particular tend to have more equal

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<sup>13</sup> Shere Hite (1988) *Women and Love* London: Viking

relationships than heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1993, Peplau 1994, Dunne, 1997) and greater levels of emotional literacy (Dunne 1997). However there is also some evidence that suggests that while the egalitarian relationship may be an ideal to aspire to, there is also the potential for inequality to exist within lesbian and gay relationships (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). Some research has also indicated a heightened sense of contingency in same sex relationships (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001:125) and a search for alternative ways of 'cementing' their relationships - although the latter is more about demonstrating a commitment in the here and now than being about 'forever'. The perceived fragility of these bonds is in keeping with Giddens' thesis of the 'pure relationship', but as yet there is too little evidence to draw firm conclusions.

Giddens suggests that the characteristics of confluent love are no less relevant to relations between adults and children (1992:109). Here he again draws selectively from psychological theory to illustrate how parent-child ties can be fragile and contingent. For example, he cites the work of Susan Forward<sup>14</sup>, whose book offers advice to adult children on how to re-work or end relationships with parents. However he does acknowledge that the parent-child relationship is complex, especially in relation to younger children. While Giddens asserts that the parent-child relationship has the potential to become more democratic, he does not attribute the full range of characteristics of the 'pure relationship' to the relationship between parent and dependent child. Jamieson (1999) observes that, unlike his discussion of couple relationships, his claims about the 'pure relationship' between adult and child have had little take up. Furthermore, she argues that his discussions relating to children fail to address how the presence of dependent children might impact on the adult-adult 'pure relationship'. Thus the question of how the presence of dependent children may impact on adult heterosexual or same sex intimate relationships remains to be fully explored. I return to these issues in Sections 5 and 6.

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Forward (1990) *Toxic Parents. Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life* New York: Bantam Books.

A key critique of Giddens' thesis has been that his focus is very much on the couple relationship. Furthermore his emphasis is on the quality of the relationship in terms of what may be gained from it - a 'calculus of costs and benefits' to the individual (Lewis, 1999a). He pays rather less attention to the more social dimensions of relationships - for example aspects of responsibilities owed to others and to one another, to children and to wider kin groups. As Smart and Neale (1999a) remark:

The field of intimacy seems very empty of players. It is almost as though Giddens (and Beck) have entered into the myopic vision of those who have recently fallen in love and who forget that other obligations and commitments continue (1999a:19. My brackets).

In Giddens' vision, individuals are separate and autonomous beings - required for the successful realisation of the (ungendered) reflexive project of self and a pre-condition of relating to others on an egalitarian way. This is at odds with the conception of self that is portrayed within feminist social theory. Here the individual concerns with needs and development of self are also firmly embedded in relational terms and hence the social agent is as a far less isolated agent than the one Giddens seems to portray (Roseneil, 2000)<sup>15</sup>.

A further criticism levelled at Giddens' work is that he places too great an emphasis on the creative agency of individuals at the expense of considerations of how structures and institutions may influence the creation of intimate relations. Lash (1994:120), for example, questions the extent to which structural conditions may limit the freedom of individuals to reflexively engage in the project of self. Such structural limitations may also operate in the living out of same sex relationships - for example through various forms of institutional discrimination or prejudice against lesbian and gay ways of life. This has been variously theorised as the 'hegemonic notion of heterosexuality' (Carabine, 1992) or the 'heterosexual assumption' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001), to refer to the ways in which heterosexuality is privileged and supported in contrast to the ongoing invalidation of non-

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<sup>15</sup> However while acknowledging the relational concept that individuals are inherently social beings, Roseneil has also cautioned against endorsing a model of self that is so fundamentally relational that this may negate any sense of individuality, separateness and capacity to act autonomously.

heterosexuality. Concrete examples include resistance to legislation allowing same sex marriage and the promotion of heterosexual marriage as the basis for a stable society as detailed in the Labour Government's consultation document *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998). As noted in Chapter 1, lesbigay families are notably absent in this document.

I shall now turn to the work of Beck (1992, 1994) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002). Their work has parallels with Giddens' thesis but their work is noted for a more detailed consideration of social inequalities that impact on the pursuit of individualism (Lash, 1994). They also provide a more detailed consideration of the impact of parenting dependent children. At the same time however, unlike Giddens, they neglect to incorporate lesbigay individuals and families within their considerations of newly emerging patterns of relationships.

#### 4.2 b Beck and Beck-Gernsheim: The totally normal chaos of love and the contours of the post-familial family<sup>16</sup>

Like Giddens (1992), Beck (1994) and with Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) link what is happening in intimate relationships to wider social processes, and they also challenge the stereotype of the 'me-first' society envisaged by pessimistic commentators on individualisation. In the context of the erosion of traditional structures and normative prescriptions - characteristic of late modernity - Beck identifies the emergence of new ways of life that are continually subject to change, the emergence of a 'do-it-yourself biography' (1994:15) whereby individuals are required to make their own way through life. However the consequences of these changes are interpreted rather more pessimistically than by Giddens. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) suggest that the consequences of the spread of individualisation are more likely to lead to increasing social inequalities than democracy.

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<sup>16</sup> In his foreword for the edited collection of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's work (2002), Lash refers to their book that appeared in English under the title *The Chaos of Love* (1995). The German title translates literally 'The Totally Normal Chaos of Love'. Lash suggests this more accurately reflects their argument that the chaos created by lack of role models has become totally normal. It is predictable even though it is chaotic.

Elsewhere, Beck-Gernsheim has paid specific attention to the impact of individualisation on women's lives. A paper written by Beck-Gernsheim in 1983 on individualisation and women is claimed as a key reference point in the German individualisation debates<sup>17</sup>. Beck-Gernsheim's discussions focus upon the situation of women in Germany. Nevertheless she suggests that the dilemmas women face in having children and living a life of one's own resonate with the experiences of women in other highly industrialised and individualised societies (Beck-Gernsheim 2002c). In her 1983 paper, Beck-Gernsheim (2002a) discussed some of the wider changes in society and the particular impact these held for women's lives. These include the changes in education, the labour market, reproductive technologies and so on that have presented women with new opportunities to move beyond the family. She argues that these changing social conditions have permitted but also compelled women to develop biographies that related beyond the family into new spheres of independence. Women's expectations might no longer centre on a lifelong dependency on a man - which could mean that many women had no choice but to develop a greater independence and self-sufficiency. She characterises women's position in 1983 to be between 'no longer' and 'not yet'. By this she suggests that women are confronted by new situations for which the conventional repertoire of behaviour and rules no longer applies, yet there are no readily accessible new models of how to deal with the new situations. She thus identified an intermediary stage whereby women had new opportunities to move beyond the family but still had to take more responsibility than men did for family life and did not have equal entry points into the labour market.

Some of these inequalities are well documented - for example in the literature about the domestic division of labour and the differences in the balance of home and work for men and women<sup>18</sup>. Overall this body of literature suggests that the circumstances of this intermediary stage, which Beck-Gernsheim identified in

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<sup>17</sup> The essay is reproduced in her most recent book with Beck (2002) and I reference it as Beck-Gernsheim (2002a).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the overview provided by Sarah Irwin (2000) "Conceptualising Social Change: Family, Work and the Changing Pattern of Social Reproduction" ESRC Research Group on Care, Values and the Future of Welfare, University of Leeds.  
<<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/cava/research/strand1/paper7aSarah.htm>>

1983, to some extent prevail. Furthermore the pace of change for women may not have been as great in the past two decades as it was in the twenty years leading up to 1983. Indeed some commentators such as Faludi (1992) and Walby (1993) have discussed the notion of a 'backlash' to the progress for women, which has required the necessity of diverting energies into defending rather than extending progress. This has been evident, for example, in the recent debates referred to earlier concerning the defence of lesbian parenting (Wise, 2000). Hence the notion of 'no longer' and 'not yet' is still relevant and worthy of attention. Stacey (1996) also draws attention to this pull of both the old and new in her discussions of the 'post-modern' family. She suggests the current re-structuring of family lives involve a movement backwards as well as forwards because people draw upon old and/or familiar family patterns as well as developing new ways of doing family.

Beck-Gernsheim (2000b) also makes reference to her earlier work (2000a) in her discussion of the 'contours of a 'post-familial family' that are taking shape' (2002b: 86). She suggests that increasingly the individual lives of family members comprise a set of competing demands, in part because of the impact of individualisation on women's biographies. Here she considers a range of elective family forms and argues that many families are increasingly faced with a wide range of dilemmas and questions that must be weighed up and decided upon in a relative absence of models or guidelines to follow. For example, she discusses the experiences of multicultural families, increasingly common because of the increased opportunities for women and men to move beyond their immediate familial communities. In this scenario Beck-Gernsheim (2000b:93) outlines a whole range of new questions to be resolved: Where shall we live? Who has what opportunities and where? Who might be without legal status or pension cover? Which language shall we communicate in? How are the children to be brought up, in your language or mine, in your religion or mine?

These discussions resonate with what we know (albeit limited) about lesbigay families creating new forms of family. Researchers have noted the working out necessary for these families who live within existing definitions and cultural norms of heterosexual family life while at the same time confronting and challenging the

restrictive nature of these boundaries (Lewin, 1993, Epstein, 1996, Weston, 1997, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). These 'workings out' may be pertinent in defining new models of shared motherhood where two women enter into parenthood together as a couple. This phenomenon is so recent that these women face uniquely new questions about, for example, which woman has the child, which route to conception to take, what involvement might a donor have in the family and so on. Furthermore these kinds of negotiations take place outside of the heterosexual framework that at least offers some shape to the kind of decision making outlined above in Beck-Gernsheim's discussion of multi-cultural families (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002b).

As in all of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's work (1995, 2002), Beck-Gernsheim's focus is on heterosexual relationships. However, she (2002a, b, c) addresses some of the potential complexities that arise from the juxtaposition of women as autonomous individuals and as mothers of dependent children. As such she offers a greater focus on the realities of the presence of children than is evident in Giddens' work (Giddens, 1992). Her perspective is closer to the feminist concept that reflexivity is relational. She suggests that the reflexive working out of how to live necessitates ongoing negotiations between the individual set of needs including children's needs and the desires of both members of the couple. This is rather different from Giddens' 'project of the self' where the focus is very much on the autonomy of each individual. Nevertheless, as Smart and Neale (1999a) point out, both accounts depict intimate relations in very narrow terms. The extent to which the couple might be embedded within a web of wider social relations which impact on family life are never fully explored. Here I turn to consider Morgan's sociological account of family lives (Morgan, 1996, 1999). He introduces the notion of 'family practices' which goes beyond the narrower dyadic focus of Giddens and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. Here the workings out of everyday family lives are firmly located in the intricacies of the wider social and cultural context within which individuals live their lives:

The notion of practices attempts to capture a sense of family woven into the wider networks and practices of everyday life in a society characterised by risk and uncertainty (Morgan, 1999:30).

#### 4.2 c Morgan: Family practices

Morgan's work is more concerned with the micro-level detail of family lives than the broad sweep approach of Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck Gernsheim (1995, 2002), but he also conceptualises individuals as active agents in current processes of change. He recognises that the way people live in families is changing, as are the practices that define what a family might be. He suggests that 'the family' invokes terminology loaded with symbolism but argues that to do away with this terminology is not the answer. Giddens has side-stepped these debates by focusing on the significance of transformations of intimacy at the level of personal relationships and individuals. Nevertheless, as Morgan recognises, at everyday levels the 'family' is still a term used by individuals to describe their most meaningful relationships and still has some resonance as an ideological concept. Morgan (1996, 1999) thus introduces the notion of 'family practices' which conceptualises the flux and fluidity of family lives without doing away with the terminology of the family. This enables recognition of the ongoing importance of families as a central relational entity in people's lives but challenges the rigidity of the ideology of 'the family'. The emphasis moves away from notions of what the family ought to look like towards opening up new ways to explore what families actually do. Furthermore in being active agents in the 'doing' of family practices, Morgan also emphasises that these practices are located in biographical, cultural, historical and material contexts and are thus not a series of disparate random practices. Equally they are not pre-given but subject to change according to circumstance. Morgan suggests that this perspective offers the possibility to see the family as 'less of a noun and more of an adjective or, possibly, a verb' (1999:16). In this context the complex realities of family living can be explored for what they are rather than assessing whether they live up to a normative standard of 'the family'.

Family practices are conceptualised as a series of practical and emotional everyday activities through which individuals live their lives. These can include all kinds of relational activities within but also beyond the home, all of which have a symbolic as well as a material relevance. It offers an important way to understand divergent family lives rather than placing some families outside the realm of 'the family'. De



Vault (1999a) suggests that the negotiations and working out of family practices in families which do not fit conventional frameworks may be all the more explicit and thus make visible the more common efforts and processes undertaken by all families.

Morgan's work, like that of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, is theoretically driven. There is still, however, limited knowledge about what is actually going on in family lives - how individuals think about and are living out family practices. In particular there is relatively little work that has explored how the theoretical debates outlined above connect to and reflect the everyday experiences of family lives.

I turn now to consider empirical work developing in the UK. Here I focus on some specific studies whose work draws upon some of the theoretical themes I have discussed - firstly on families including dependent children and, secondly, on lesbian lives.

## **5. Parents and children: transformations of intimacy**

In this section I examine research that has a particular focus on considerations of how the presence of dependent children might impact on the everyday nature of working out new ways of doing family life. I shall concentrate on two recent empirical studies that have addressed this question in their explorations of the working out, and everyday practices, of (heterosexual) family lives. There are other studies that have examined a range of aspects relating to the reorganisation of family lives (see, for example, Jamieson, 1998, for an overview). I have selected two studies in particular because of a shared focus on negotiating parenting and parental relationships, inter-linked with the wider social context within which lesbian mothers are also situated.

These are firstly Smart and Neale's ESRC funded project 'The Legal and Moral Ordering of Households in Transition', 1994 to 1996 (Smart, 1997, Smart and

Neale, 1997, 1999a, 1999b). This study focuses on the experiences of post-divorce parenting from the perspective of parents who had either divorced or separated (after the implementation of the Children Act 1989). Secondly, Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies' ESRC funded project 'Parenting and Step-Parenting after Divorce/Separation: Issues and Negotiations', 1996 to 1997 (Edwards, Gillies and Ribbens, 1999a, Edwards, Ribbens and Gillies, 1999b, Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2000). This study explores experiences of parenting within stepfamilies.

Both projects point to the relevance of their work for contemporary debates about the changing nature of family practices and to the recent theoretical work of Giddens (1992), Beck (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) on intimacy and (post) modernity. Both also discuss themes about the moral re-ordering of family life in transition and draw upon theoretical literature of the nature of contemporary morality (Bauman, 1992, Sevenhuijsen, 1998). Both studies are also influenced by Finch and Mason's empirical study (Finch, 1989, Finch and Mason, 1993) on how individuals approach the question about 'the proper thing to do' in adult kin relationships. Their study focused on family obligations between adults rather than towards children but is widely regarded as a formative classic for sociological research of everyday understandings of contemporary morality (Duncan, 2000).

Although these two studies consider different kinds of (heterosexual) family arrangements, the role of dependent children in the workings out of family lives is central to both. Their respondents are all, as Smart and Neale (1999a:121) put it 'deeply enmeshed' in caring relationships with children. Interestingly however, they draw quite different conclusions about whether these parental negotiations and re-negotiations fit within the conditions of post-modernity (Smart and Neale, 1999a) or within the framework of an modernist, morally absolute society (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000).

First, I briefly outline the different sampling frameworks of the two studies. Second, I point out some parallels I have identified within these two studies.

Finally, I examine the ways in which these two studies then diverge in their conclusions and consider explanations for this divergence.

Smart and Neale's project is a longitudinal study of sixty parents (thirty-one women and twenty-nine men), drawn from sixty different families (Smart and Neale, 1999a). Their sample covers a range of parental circumstances and experiences but does so from the perspective of one parent per family. They interviewed respondents at a point in time as close as possible to the point of legal divorce or completion of proceedings under the Children Act, 1989. They also explored the initial point of separation retrospectively in these first interviews. Second interviews were then carried out<sup>19</sup> between twelve and eighteen months after the first interview. This enabled the exploration of post-divorce parenting a year or so on from the procedural aspects of the relationship break-down, including considerations of how on-going negotiations about post-divorce parenting were carried out and might change over time.

Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) carried out interviews with forty-six individuals drawn from twenty-three step-clusters, thus (in many cases) they gathered multiple accounts from the same step-cluster. This included interviews with women and men who occupied different positions in the step-cluster (for example, residential mothers/fathers; non-residential mothers/fathers and stepparents<sup>20</sup>). The complexity of stepfamily characteristics is reflected within their sample<sup>21</sup>. For example, the degree of cross household parenting (i.e. level of contact with the non-resident biological parent) varied from shared care to no contact. The stepfamily clusters also involved different sets of children from previous and existing relationships. Edwards et al. (1999b) state that their sample involved a mixture of newly forming and established stepfamilies, although the length of the existing relationships (or the length of separation from previous partners) is not specified. While the two

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<sup>19</sup> At this point in time their sample included fifty-seven of the original respondents - thirty women and twenty-seven men.

<sup>20</sup> The largest groups of respondents were resident mothers (nineteen) and step-fathers (thirteen) In some cases just the residential mother was interviewed, in others interviews were carried out with several adults within the same stepfamily cluster.

<sup>21</sup> Although see Edwards et al. (1999b) for a discussion of the sample's boundaries.

studies focus on different experiences of family lives, it is possible that the circumstances of respondents in both studies might overlap. For example, Edwards et al.'s sample included newly formed stepfamilies (Edwards et al., 1999b). Smart and Neale's study also included respondents who, by the time of the second interview if not the first, had experience of stepfamily life, either within their own household or through their ex-partner being part of a new family.

As well as these potential similarities, there are some parallels within the findings of these two studies. In particular I focus on their findings about the ways in which their respondents identified and attended to the needs of their children, within the context of changing 'non-traditional' family situations. For example, Smart and Neale (1999a) state that their respondents articulated a clear awareness of a public morality around divorce, which poses divorce as potentially damaging to children. This corresponds with a similar discourse that suggests lesbian parents are acting selfishly in having children to meet their own needs. Edwards et al. (1999a) identified a similar awareness of moral dilemmas articulated by their respondents. In their study, these centred on moral (legal and everyday) discourses that children need (biological) parents and that children need (social) families. They argue that in intact nuclear heterosexual families these needs are mutually reinforced but in stepfamilies they are in considerable tension. Similarly these two sets of needs cannot simultaneously be met within the lesbian family.

Contemporary constructions of the needs of children are relevant to both studies. These are concerned with the promotion and protection of children's psychological welfare<sup>22</sup>. Parents and especially mothers are held morally accountable to meet these needs, while the child is positioned without moral agency<sup>23</sup>. Both studies found that the ways in which their respondents discussed and approached these kinds of moral dilemmas indicated a process of taking account of and balancing a

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<sup>22</sup> Woodhead (1997) points out how these constructions are culturally and historically specific. In previous times and other cultures children's economic utility and duties to their family take precedence.

<sup>23</sup> Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) discuss in more detail how children are sometimes constructed as 'evil' but nevertheless cannot be held morally accountable for their actions because they are not moral agents. This is distinct from having the social agency to act.

heterogeneous range of factors, the outcomes of which varied considerably. It is therefore interesting that they reach different conclusions from their findings. I attempt to briefly summarise these, at the risk of simplifying their conclusions. Smart and Neale's conclusions are framed overall within a post-modern ethical framework whereby individuals are seen to be post-modern moral subjects who are engaged in negotiating new moral terrains (Smart and Neale, 1999a). They found no clear consensus about 'the proper thing to do' but argue that respondents demonstrated morality in their working out of what to do in the absence of any clear guidelines. By contrast, Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) questioned the extent to which their respondents were able to exercise agency in negotiating moral obligations to dependent children. They identified the existence of a clear abstract norm - that adults should take responsibility for children in their care and seek to put those children's needs first. They conclude that this is a non-negotiable moral imperative that respondents were obliged to attend to, which left little room for manoeuvre, such that 'we still appear to be living in a modernist morally absolute society' (2000:38).

A key explanation for their different conclusions might lie in their analytical approaches to their data. I outline their analytical strategies and discuss the example of how each study analysed their findings about how respondents address the moral dilemmas related to children's needs (which, furthermore, were not always compatible with their own needs/wishes).

Smart and Neale (1999a:44) state that the accounts they gathered were 'reflections of the parents' lived experiences and framed the ways in which they lived their lives and negotiated with their children and former partners'. They acknowledge the complexity of these accounts, including the additional time dimension they gained from carrying out two interviews at different points in time. Their analysis was based on a grounded theory approach. Typically in grounded theory, theoretical and conceptual formulations are developed in a close and continuous relationship with the analysis of themes emerging from the data. Smart and Neale's analysis considers the contents of the interviews - identifying the ways in which their respondents talk about key events and experiences. Their stated aim is to explore the implicit

processes and meanings that shape those events, to identify and conceptualise themes that appear across the data set. One such theme was parental processes of negotiation over children. They identify how their respondents went through processes of balancing various factors. Here they draw up a schema of guidelines that reflect these considerations, identified from their respondents' accounts:

- Consider the present quality of their relationship with their spouse/partner
- Consider the nature of this relationship in the past
- Consider whether the action considered would disturb family relationships (especially between children and parents but also including grandparents)
- Consider whether this is the proper time to act (especially in relation to the age of the child or stage of a relationship)
- Consider the degree of harm/benefit that would accrue to all those involved

(Smart and Neale, 1999a:119)

This schema explicitly draws upon the earlier work of Finch (1989, and with Mason, 1993), which focused specifically on adult kin obligations about 'the proper thing to do'. Finch (1989) argues that the ways in which people negotiate moral obligations (in their study, to adult kin) are contextually situated, rather than defined in terms of abstract moral principles. She suggests that there is always more than one solution to a moral dilemma and people will take different routes to the right thing to do in particular circumstances. She thus developed a set of normative guidelines to reflect the processes involved. Smart and Neale modify this for their purposes. Through a number of exemplary case studies they then illustrate how their respondents move through the various stages outlined above, balancing different considerations. They suggest that what makes people moral agents is 'whether they reflect upon the decisions they take and weigh up the consequences' (1999a:114) and they present evidence to support their claim that this is indeed what their respondents were involved in doing. They also state there

was no evidence of their respondents acting immorally in relation to their perceived parental responsibilities.

For Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) it was also apparent that the ways in which their respondents experienced and acted upon dilemmas about what to do and how to act varied considerably. However, their conclusions are framed rather differently to Smart and Neale's. They suggest their respondents do not have the choice or dilemma of placing those children as not in need of their adult responsibility, such that this forms an abstract moral principle.

Ribbens McCarthy et al.'s analysis of their respondents' accounts was influenced by an approach that treats interviews as narratives (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000). They argue that one advantage of this approach is that it 'draws our attention to the nature of the interview material as a whole, rather than as a set of particular themes for dissection, classification and analysis' (2000:8). This approach opens up questions that are more about the forms of telling about experience than about the contents of the story being told. Thus Ribbens McCarthy et al.'s analytical perspective is informed by the question 'What sort of stories are our interviewees telling us?' (2000:8). Narrative analysis in sociology developed from the insight that people often make sense of their lives through the telling and interpretation of stories and this also necessitates a consideration of the audience to whom the story is told (De Vault, 1999b). In addition to the audience (in this case the interviewer) being part of the story constructed, Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) also suggest that interpretations of the story being told relies on the researcher being sensitive to the situated production of the account. This is in terms of, for example, the overall cultural assumptions and the specific understandings of the teller of the tale<sup>24</sup>. Commonly a narrative analysis focuses on a reading of a small number of stories that are studied in-depth. Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) also adopted a comparative approach across the data set to discern what elements the interview narratives had in common, as part of the process of analysing the narrative strategies used by their respondents in the production of moral tales.

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<sup>24</sup> I discuss this point in more detail in Chapter 3.

This approach enabled Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) to develop an analysis of how individuals 'stage performances of desirable selves for others to see' (Riessman, 2002:701). In this analysis they found little evidence to support a plurality of moral reasoning. Rather they identified the existence of a clear non-negotiable moral imperative that adults must seek to take responsibility for children in their care:

This is such a strong moral imperative that it seems to have been impossible for anyone to disagree with it in the accounts we heard. This is not just a guideline for action, nor is it open for negotiation; it is an unquestioned and unquestionable imperative, comprising a number of key elements for the sustaining of a moral identity. ... The narrator must present her - or himself as having tried to live up to this overall moral imperative concerning the prioritising of children's needs (2000:16).

They thus question the extent to which their respondents could exercise agency in their negotiations of responsibilities towards children or indeed tell an immoral tale. To be positioned as a moral adult means that the narrator must present her/himself as being responsible for children in their care, demonstrating a prioritisation of the child's needs above all else, even if they did not always succeed.

I have focussed above on just one aspect of the findings discussed by these two studies. Both studies suggest that the presence of children modifies the scenario drawn by Giddens (1992) about contemporary transformations of intimacy, although Smart and Neale's conclusions (Smart and Neale, 1999a) are closer to his analysis than those of Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000). Overall this empirical work produces a messier and less harmonious picture than that produced by Giddens (1992). Ultimately their conclusions are contradictory but that does not mean either study is fundamentally flawed in its analysis or that one analytical approach should be privileged over any other. Both find equal evidence to support their claims. Nevertheless, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest, thinking about data as narratives can enable us to examine the ways in which accounts and stories are socially and culturally managed and constructed. In doing so with their data, Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000:38) argue that their analysis 'throws light on the



issue of what it is to be moral in contemporary society' related in particular to the care of dependent children.

The differences in conclusions may also reflect the contested, ambivalent and undecided nature of family lives in contemporary society. In noting the difference between their own conclusions and those of Smart and Neale (1999a), Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) suggest that the issues involved in 'breaking' a family (divorce) are quite different to those involved in 'creating' a family (as with stepfamilies). They suggest this may be a reason why Smart and Neale found more evidence of 'post-modern' spaces that allowed the space to negotiate a more individualistic discourse than they found within their own data. Smart and Neale (1999a:121) argue that divorce appears to be a 'kind of threshold to a self-conscious project of the self', although this is also presented as an ongoing project. Equally however, Smart and Neale suggest that later in the process of coming to terms with divorce, their respondents' main focus of concern is upon their children and they found no cases where parents ignored or did not at least try to fulfil these responsibilities. Potentially, the further that parents move away from the picture of 'family life' which is seen to best meet children's needs, the more an absolute moral imperative, identified by Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000), cannot be avoided and the greater the attempts to construct accounts of morally adequate parenthood.

Jamieson's discussion of links between public stories and private stories that people tell about themselves is useful here (Jamieson, 1998). She suggests that people may draw upon public stories to interpret and make sense of their own lives, although these stories offer stereotypes and ideals; not the details and complexities of everyday lives. Public stories are also dependent on being told and retold in everyday lives. Jamieson argues that the new emphasis on transformations of intimacy has resonance in people's lives but that it is too selective a story to be more than a partial picture (and to date, one that focuses on the couple relationship) of an emerging future. She suggests that there are also alternative and competing stories and these warrant further explorations. The stories I examine in this study are the (public) stories that lesbian parents hear, in terms of the ways in which that

lesbian parents make sense of these and the ways in which these may inter-link with the (private) stories they tell about their everyday lives.

## **6. Lesbigay families: transformations of intimacy**

Having addressed the formative body of psychological research into lesbigay parenting and the sociological literature on an increasing diversity of heterosexual family lives, I shall now consider the smaller but valuable body of UK sociological research that focuses specifically on lesbigay lives. In particular I discuss two recent projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, as well as one smaller study of lesbian motherhood. The two ESRC projects are firstly Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan's 'Families of Choice: The Structure and Meanings of Non-heterosexual Relationships' (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1996, 1999, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks, 1999, Donovan, Heaphy and Weeks, 1999a, 1999b and Donovan, 2000). Secondly Dunne's 'Lesbian Household Project' (Dunne, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 2000a, 2000b). The third and smaller project is a study based on data collected from ten interviews aimed at exploring the experiences of lesbian couples who had become parents using donated sperm (Haines and Weiner, 2000).

My main focus is on the Families of Choice project. This study provides some valuable insights into the developments within non-heterosexual intimacies and provides a context in which to understand the new narratives that they identify. Parenthood in particular is pointed up as a key 'live' issue for non-heterosexuals, although Weeks and colleagues tend to place the greatest emphasis on the creative agency of individuals.

### **6.1 Families of Choice**

The Families of Choice study investigates the structure and meanings of newly emerging forms of non-heterosexual relationships (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1996, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 1997, 2001). The research involved

qualitative interviews with 48 women and 48 men, a total of 96 respondents. This included 16 joint interviews - 32 individuals were interviewed as 'couple' units, including one 'parenting unit'. Four group interviews were also carried out which included a group of gay and lesbian parents. Themes covered included questions about respondents' personal life and identity, friendships, household, partners, children, caring, HIV and AIDS, legalities, partnerships and marriage, families, trust and obligations, intimacy, sex and sexuality, love, and stigma (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). One unexpected finding reported upon in their End of Award report was 'the close involvement of a number of respondents in questions of parenting' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 1997:3). Such involvement ranged from being biological or adoptive parents, being parents through previous heterosexual relationships and/or having involvement with the children of current or ex-partners. Their sample covered five different age cohorts, to cover all age groups from age twenty upwards, a factor that could explain the range of parenting arrangements found within this study. For example, there is a long history of lesbian parents who had their children within the context of a heterosexual relationship and a more recent history of intentional parenting by self-identified lesbian parents.

The main focus of this study was to examine the ways in which respondents created and lived out their closest and intimate relationships, as partners, friends, parents, members of communities (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001:vii). In the book based on this research, themes addressed include the meanings of non-heterosexual relationships, the friendship ethic, partnership rites, sexual relations, aspects of non-heterosexual communities and citizenship. Although parenting is noted as a salient feature in their sample, overall the parenting experiences of respondents are not fully integrated into the subsequent analysis of all these themes. It is instead discussed as a separate chapter. First, I discuss their wider discussions of same sex intimacies and second, consider their discussions of parenting relationships. I suggest that this separation presents some contradictions within their overall analysis that are never fully addressed. A more in-depth consideration of these contradictions could offer an opportunity to develop a more detailed picture of contemporary lesbian lives in the UK.

Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) place their analysis within the context of theoretical debates about wider transformations of intimacy. They argue that there are parallels between non-heterosexual and heterosexual experiences of family change, whereby the erosion of old certainties has created the conditions which both facilitate and necessitate the re-organisation of relationships based on negotiated commitments rather than pre-determined rules, obligations and duties. However, they suggest that non-heterosexual relationships face fewer constraints than heterosexual relationships in terms of a freedom from embedded gendered patterns of behaviour and normative assumptions that Giddens (1992) suggests places constraints upon the wider transformations of intimacy in heterosexual relationships. Weeks and colleagues are largely in agreement with Giddens' suggestion that non-heterosexuals have been experiencing for some time what is now becoming more evident in the wider transformations of heterosexual intimacy, in the development of the 'pure relationship' of equals:

Amongst many non-heterosexuals, there is a sense that the necessity of fashioning oneself and one's relationship is a distinguishing feature of non-heterosexual experience (Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks, 1999:225).

These 'families of choice' are, they argue, a prime example of Giddens' 'everyday experiments in living'. They argue that their data point to the aspirations and possibilities of non-heterosexuals creating relationships that are based on ongoing reflexive evaluation, flexibility and negotiation, which hold the potential for a greater emotional democracy. These are central themes in Giddens' discussion of the pure relationship and confluent love. Weeks and colleagues suggest that further evidence of this trend towards confluent love is evident through their respondents' articulations of a heightened sense of contingency within their relationships (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001:125). This contingent sense of relationships is in keeping with Giddens' idea that relationships (and non-heterosexual relationships in particular) are increasingly voluntary and only 'good until further notice'. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) report that many respondents expressed the idea that people in same sex relationships stayed together because they wanted to rather than because of any notions of duty or other conventions, such as marriage, that were

perceived to be attached to heterosexual relationships. Giddens has also suggested that this consequent fragility of relationships is an inherent aspect of the quest for openness, equality and intimacy rather than symptomatic of any lack of commitment and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) consider their respondents' accounts correspond with this suggestion.

However there may also be other explanations for the sense of contingency in same sex relationships that Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan cite as evidence of confluent love. Maintaining long term same sex relationships can be difficult when placed within the wider societal context which, as Jamieson (1999:487) points out, is relatively hostile to its institutionalisation. Same sex couples may face a lack of support or even condemnation from kin, the social consequences of stigma or possible hostility and these are all factors which can place insurmountable stress on some relationships (see, for example, Stacey and Biblarz, 2001:177).

Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) do critique Giddens' lack of attention to factors that may constrain the ability for people to live out his vision of emotional democracy in practice. Within their data they identify constraints that may hamper the potential to pursue an egalitarian ideal within same sex relationships. They recognise the existence of institutional prejudice and discrimination against non-heterosexual ways of life, but their main focus is on constraints *within* the relationship<sup>25</sup> and their discussions focus mainly on the dyadic relationship rather than on parental relationships. Nevertheless, they argue that while egalitarian relationships do not develop automatically and require hard work, the majority of their respondents expressed a commitment to the development of equal and democratic relationships that combined individual autonomy with reciprocity.

Despite some doubts expressed about the overall validity of Giddens' thesis of the transformations of intimacy, Weeks and colleagues share his belief that non-heterosexuals are leading the way in radical transformations of intimacy. The emphasis on self-invention and creative agency is the strongest theme emerging

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<sup>25</sup> They identify a range of factors, which include inequalities of income, unequal emotional commitment, ethnic and class differences (Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks, 1999).

from their research, to the extent that this over-rides the recognition of factors that may potentially constrain the emergence of new non-heterosexual social forms:

The important factors (however) are not the limits, real as these are, but the ethos and values that many non-heterosexual women and men are expressing: that a sense of self-worth and cultural confidence is realised in and through the friendship networks that we describe as families of choice. (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 1999:89)

They suggest that where their respondents identified the presence of inequalities or conflict within their relationships, these appear alongside a greater emphasis on the processes of reflexivity and negotiation. Thus the limitations and restrictions are presented as part of the egalitarian project rather than the expressions of inequalities that may co-exist with intimacy.

I shall now consider the exploration of parenting within this study. As discussed in the previous section, key criticisms of Giddens' work centre on his focus on the couple relationship to the exclusion of all other players (Smart and Neale, 1999a). I suggest that Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) have similarly neglected a full exploration of the wider dimensions to the dyadic relationship - including aspects of responsibilities to children and the contradictions these may pose to the pursuit of the negotiation of intimacy between equals.

Their study included interviews with 21 women who were biological or legal parents. A further 11 women had involvement with children of their current or ex-partners (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 1997). There is some overlap between these two groups but it is possible to estimate that approximately 26 women (54% of female respondents) were involved in some way in parenting. Details are not provided about the ages of children although a substantial number have adult children. From the brief details given for each respondent (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001) it is possible to estimate that approximately four interviews were carried out with women who were in relationships in which they had planned and had their first child. Some female respondents were thinking about or planning to have children with a current partner, at the time of being interviewed for this study.

In their analysis of interviews with respondents who are involved in parenting (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, Chapter 7, 2001, Donovan, Heaphy and Weeks, 1999b, Donovan, 2000), Weeks and colleagues suggest that children are in fact the major exception to negotiated commitments. They report that their respondents' commitments towards children are overwhelmingly expressed in terms that are absolute and which over-ride all other considerations. This corresponds with Ribbens McCarthy et al.'s identification of a 'moral imperative' (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000). However, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001:179) present their findings as compatible with the wider picture of experiments in everyday living, concluding that non-heterosexual parenting practices are 'genuine experiments'.

Like Ribbens McCarthy et al., Weeks and colleagues state that their analysis takes a narrative approach. They were concerned to examine their respondents' stories for 'the role they play in lives, in contexts and in the contemporary social order' (2001:206). Their analysis of parenting stories focuses on what these stories tell us about the (old) impossibilities and (new) opportunities of lesbian parenting. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue there is no 'best' way to analyse the stories we collect. They suggest that one of the strengths of thinking about data as narratives is that it opens up the possibilities for a number of analytical strategies and hearing of different stories. Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) both found evidence that parents put their children's needs above all else. The differences in their subsequent analysis of these findings may stem from the different assumptions they brought to their research and highlights the importance of making these explicit. For example, Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) are explicit about their focus on the moral significance of their respondents' accounts while Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) are explicit about their focus on new narratives of intimate lives emerging in a rapidly changing world. While there are overlaps between the two, these different approaches inevitably influence what may be heard, found and told throughout the research process and in the final accounts produced. I return to these discussions in Chapter 3.

In a separate paper, Donovan (2000) focuses on the particular experiences of the small number of respondents who are parenting, or contemplating parenting, with

known donors/fathers. She acknowledges that her findings are speculative and shed light on only one aspect of lesbian families (i.e. parenting with known donors). With this proviso she nevertheless makes some quite sweeping claims about the possibilities presented for radical renegotiations of the meanings and content of family, motherhood and fatherhood. This, she argues, is in line with the analysis of Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), who argue that there are fundamental shifts in the relations between men and women underway, with many traditional roles and behaviours becoming redundant.

Others (such as Smart, 1997, Jamieson, 1998, 1999, Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000) argue that the presence of dependent children and the joint (or individual) project of raising children 'creates structures over and above a couple relationship' (Jamieson, 1999:488). Jamieson (1999) suggests that relationships that involve children impedes the picture of a new impetus towards the 'pure relationship' with its inherent potential for a greater democratisation of personal life alongside a greater fragility of intimate relationships. The extent to which children's needs - identified as an absolute non-negotiable priority - may impact or impede upon these everyday experiments and in the workings out of domestic relationships is never fully addressed by Weeks and colleagues and the inherent contradictions are glossed over.

Weeks and colleagues suggest that non-heterosexual parenting is 'probably the most controversial and contested aspect of families of choice' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001:8). As such they are undoubtedly sensitive to how their work might be received. Their conclusion, for example, to their chapter on parenting tends to emphasise the argument that non-heterosexuals make 'good' parents:

In the end what matters is the authenticity of the care and love that the children receive and we are in no doubt that it is received and reciprocated in non-heterosexual families. Stories about non-heterosexuals' parenting and caring practices constitute important challenges to traditional narratives of family life and the heterosexual assumption as popular anxiety reveals. Yet there is overwhelming evidence that parenting issues are being taken seriously by non-heterosexuals, and that the needs of children are seen as being the central concern. Non-heterosexual parents must always be aware of the general climate of opinion in which they care for their children. But



there is a growing tendency to affirm positively both the right to parent and the responsibilities this entails. These are not pretended families but genuine experiments in finding creative ways to respond well to old needs - to care for the young (2001:179).

To a degree these conclusions highlight the point raised by Stacey and Biblarz (2001), that researchers who are sympathetic to lesbian parenting defensively stress the absence of any negative outcomes of parenting in the face of an awareness that these arguments are in circulation. However, as Stacey and Biblarz discuss, defensive conceptual frameworks may hamper a full discussion of the constraints and vulnerabilities of lesbian parenting, as well as its strengths (2001: 164). Furthermore a defensive framework is likely to consider constraints and vulnerabilities as 'weaknesses' whereas a closer exploration may in fact reveal positive aspects to these experiences which can inform wider debates and challenge heterosexism.

Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan's conclusions that parents put the care and well-being of their children above all else certainly challenges heterosexist views of lesbian parenting. However, quite how this non-negotiable priority fits with their previous discussions of the non-heterosexual narratives of self-invention is not clear. There is a need for further explorations of not only the extent to which individuals can exercise agency but also the impact of parenting on these new family forms. This could add further dimensions to the ways in which individualism, reflexivity, choice and constraints play out in contemporary Western societies.

I shall now discuss the research carried out by Dunne (1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 2000a, 2000b) and Haines and Weiner (2000). These studies focus exclusively on lesbian parenting and predominantly on households where female couples have planned and had children as a joint project, using donor or self-insemination.

## **6.2 Lesbian motherhood**

Dunne (1998b) interviewed 37 cohabiting lesbian couples with dependent children. This included 28 couples (75%) who had planned and had a child by insemination

within their relationship. Some couples also had other children from previous relationships. Many (40%) had older dependent or non-dependent children. The study was designed to investigate whether lesbian couples with children were able to enact egalitarian relationships in relation to their domestic and employment lives and to consider how gendered roles might be mediated through sexuality. This investigation was situated in the context of existing sociological literature that examines the balancing of parenting and employment responsibilities within heterosexual families and households<sup>26</sup>.

However, my main interest in the Lesbian Household Project is in Dunne's analysis of the experiences of motherhood and family life of the couples who had planned and had children within their relationship, using insemination as the means of conception. Here Dunne (1998a, 2000a) draws upon the data gathered from interviews with 28 couples from the Lesbian Household Project. She identifies common themes that emerged across this sample and discusses these using a few detailed case studies.

Dunne (1998a, 2000a) suggests that women parenting together cannot draw easily upon the dominant frameworks that guide the parenting practices of heterosexual couples. She identifies how respondents in her study generally expressed a view of 'making it up as they go along' (2000a:13) which both necessitates and facilitates an engagement in a highly reflexive project of re-defining the boundaries, meanings and content of parenthood.

This reflexivity is, she argues, (2000a:16) an example of Giddens (1992) 'reflexive project' *par excellence*. However, in Giddens' vision, the reflexive project of the self is a highly individual project and Dunne indicates that the reflexive project that her respondents engaged in was firmly embedded in joint negotiations between the couple, with potential donors, and with wider social networks. This is more in keeping with the conception of self that is portrayed within feminist social theory. Here the individual concerns with needs and development of self are also firmly

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<sup>26</sup> Key studies cited by Dunne include Gregson and Lowe, 1995, Ferri and Smith, 1996 and Baxter and Western, 1998 (Dunne, 1998b, 1999a, 2000b).

embedded in relational terms and hence the social agent is as a far less isolated agent than the one Giddens seems to portray.

Dunne (1998a) refers to the potential difficulties and constraints which respondents experienced within and outside of their relationships. These are identified as a consequence of respondents' attempts to parent in ways outside of the prevailing heterosexual norm. Like Weeks and colleagues, Dunne's account of lesbian parenting is a highly optimistic one. She suggests that respondents prioritised the need to communicate and negotiate with each other on an ongoing basis so that any sources of conflict could be discussed and dealt with. This is presented as part of the egalitarian project and a necessary part of the working out of families of choice. Like Weeks and colleagues, Dunne concludes that where respondents identified the presence of inequalities or conflict within their relationships, that these re-emphasise the necessity of the processes of reflexivity and negotiation in the pursuit of democratic domestic arrangements.

Dunne (1999b) argues that women parenting together have more egalitarian approaches to financing and caring for children. Most respondents, for example, reported that parenting was jointly shared. Dunne suggests this is largely due to the absence of the gendered roles of mother and father that inform most heterosexual households. She argues that joint parenting was made possible by an investment that each partner makes to balance and integrate mothering and bread-winning roles and consequently, biological motherhood was a poor predictor of differences in income, employment hours or domestic contributions within partnerships. Dunne (1998a) suggests that the motherhood experiences of women parenting together are very different from those of heterosexual women and demonstrate a commitment from both parties to egalitarian approaches. In relation to biological mothers she argues:

Within the gender context framing their arrangements, they felt safe in identifying this special biological/psychological connectedness with a child because it did not ultimately lead to polarisation within the partnership in relation to access to other sources of social reward, such as an identity derived from paid employment (1998a:43).

Nevertheless this also indicates that biological and social motherhood were different experiences. For example, Dunne (1998a) notes that some social mothers identified an actual or potential power imbalance stemming from this 'special biological connection' between the birth mother and the child. Dunne pays little attention to how this might impact upon the working out of the egalitarian ideal, other than to suggest that social mothers might redress the balance by going through the biological process of having a child themselves. Furthermore some respondents expressed the belief that in the event of the relationship breaking down the child's main home would be with her/his birth mother which suggests a certain contingency to the egalitarian operation of parenting. Overall there is evidence to suggest some potential imbalance between biological and social motherhood, which warrants closer explorations.

Through her discussions of the 'joint project of motherhood', Dunne (1998a, 2000a) highlights interesting issues about the workings out of new ways of doing family and parenthood which she argues are necessitated and facilitated by their positioning outside of heterosexuality. At the same time she suggests that it is through motherhood that her respondents have made their lives more 'intelligible' to others. In other words she suggests that while lesbianism 'can appear strange and 'other' to heterosexual observers' (2000a:31), having children is an experience heterosexual observers can relate to. In support of this claim she presents evidence of some respondents' previously strained or difficult relationships with their parents, which had been transformed once those parents became grandparents. Furthermore she suggests that many respondents received high levels of support from heterosexual friends in their plans and experience of parenthood. However this positive analysis of the evidence may be overstated. A close reading of the evidence that Dunne (1998a, 2000a) presents suggests that some respondents have ongoing difficulties in their relationships with their parents and negotiating these requires a great deal of work. With regard to friendship networks, it is possible that respondents whose parenting decisions received high levels of support may also have experienced the same levels of support for their (previously childless) relationship. There is also evidence that some respondents have had to work at

friendships to receive support and affirmation of their familial and parental status (2000a:20-1).

Given that these themes were not the primary focus of her study, the main usefulness of these discussions is that it raises issues that warrant further explorations. To some extent these link in with questions raised by the Families of Choice study (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). These issues include, for example, the tensions that may be present between the responsibilities of parenthood and the reflexive pursuit of 'everyday experiments' and considerations of the impact of women's diverse bio-social routes into parenthood upon aspirations to egalitarian relationships and claims to parental status.

Haines and Weiner (2000) also raise interesting issues in their small-scale qualitative study of 8 individuals and 2 couples who had dependent children<sup>27</sup> conceived by donor insemination. The couples were co-parents whose children were conceived within the context of their present relationship and all of the respondents had had their children using donor or self-insemination. The study was designed to consider lesbian parents' own experiences of creating their families through the use of donor insemination and to examine the arrangements between lesbian couples and their donors.

They identify the ways in which these families transgress and challenge the conventional boundaries of family life through, for example, an avoidance of heterosexual procreation and setting up of families without opposite gender parents. They also discuss how these women present further challenges to legal and medical institutions. For example, self-insemination circumvents the regulatory legal and medical framework which applies to donor clinics.

In relation to the studies discussed above, their identification of respondents' considerations about how to meet their children's needs (2000:479) is of particular interest. Here again the notion of children's needs is raised as a dominant concern.

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<sup>27</sup> The children's ages ranged from 6 months to 12 years.

The authors argue that this presents a challenge to the stereotypical media portrayal of lesbians as selfish individuals who put their own needs above children's needs. They suggest that the ways in which women responded to children's needs are influenced by a 'web of other considerations and relationships' (2000:493) and that children's needs also influence these negotiations. They suggest that these families are displaying examples of how 'narratives of self-invention' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 1997:1) are formulated.

Weeks and colleagues (1997:1) further suggest that these narratives of self-invention relate in particular to self-identity and lifestyle and as such may be seen as examples of Giddens' everyday experiments in living (Giddens, 1992). Although not discussed by Haines and Weiner, this is suggestive of the post-modern scenario whereby individuals exercise agency and negotiate their responsibilities within a plurality of social practices and moral orientations. Equally however, Haines and Weiner's discussion of how women meet their children's needs has parallels with Ribbens McCarthy et al.'s discussion of what it means to be moral in contemporary society:

There may be choices and dilemmas for people about how they substantively exercise the responsibility for children in their care and exactly how they put children's needs first (...) they do not have a choice or dilemma about placing those children as not in need of their adult responsibility (2000:38)

Haines and Weiner (2000:496) rightly suggest that the full extent of the challenges presented by lesbian donor insemination are not known. Equally the full extent of enabling and constraining factors on lesbian 'narratives of self-invention' are not known, particularly where dependent children are involved and no firm conclusions can be drawn. Potentially however, there are tensions between the two, where the choices involved in creating 'families of choice' and the pursuit of self development jar with the responsibility to children's needs (which lie primarily with mothers). These issues also warrant further investigation.

## **7. Conclusion**

Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) argue that non-heterosexual 'families of choice' are indices of something new, the forerunners of change now evident in the wider transformations of (heterosexual) intimacy and associated increasing diversity of family forms. These include stepfamilies and post-divorce parenting across households, the subject of recent research as outlined above in Section 5.

These changes have been characterised as 'the family in crisis' and symptomatic of a wider moral decline, by those on the religious, moral and political right. They are concerned to shore up the boundaries of the traditional family unit and express the need to return to 'family values'. As noted this depiction of the family relies on a 1950s model of the heterosexual married couple and their children. Nevertheless, these views have had a profound influence on family policy and legislation. Within the wider public/popular discourses, one way that these views have been expressed is through the discourse of children's needs. 'Children's needs' have been enshrined in various ways within policy and legislation. The Children Act, 1989, for example, replaces the notion of parental rights with that of parental responsibilities to act in the best interests of the child. These 'best interests' are not explicitly defined within the Act but reference is made to children's physical, emotional, and educational needs (Smart, 1989, Smart and Neale, 1999a, 1999b).

Concerns about the 'best interests' and 'needs' of children are reflected in the psychological literature into lesbian parenting. Overall, this research is supportive of, rather than hostile to, lesbian parenting, but the main focus is on measuring the extent to which being raised by lesbian parents impacts upon children's development. As such, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) have problematised the defensive approach of much of this research, which is situated within an inherently 'social problem' framework.

Giddens (1992), Beck (1994) and with Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) have offered important new ways forward for sociological research into an increasing diversity of family forms. These transitions are seen to permit (but also compel) the

reformulation of family relationships as old prescriptions and assumptions about roles, responsibilities and relationships disappear. They argue that family lives are increasingly worked out as 'everyday experiments in living' or as 'do-it-yourself biographies'. Morgan (1996, 1999) has also made an important contribution to reconceptualising 'the family'. He argues that the notion of family practices allows an examination of what families are and what families do, rather than relying on an institutional definition of what families ought to be. As pointed out by Jamieson (1998), trends in cohabitation, divorce, remarriage have been interpreted as 'the family in crisis' scenario but equally they have been interpreted as a continuation but reorganisation of a profound commitment to family-type arrangements. She argues that these debates are speculative and ongoing (1998:41) and more empirical work is required to piece together a more detailed picture.

I have discussed several empirical studies of changing family forms, which engage with the wider theoretical literature about transformations of intimacy. The studies on post-divorce parenting (Smart and Neale, 1999a) and on stepfamilies (Edwards et al., 1999a, 1999b, Ribbens et al., 2000) identify ways in which their respondents are attempting something 'new' within a relative vacuum of existing normative guidelines. For example, Edwards et al. (1999b) suggest that one of the reasons many of their respondents took part in their study was because of the relative lack of guidance they felt was available for their kinds of families. Smart and Neale (1999a:127) observe that their respondents were 'orienteeing without maps and with few signposts'. Both studies also highlight ways in which these transformations are immensely more complex once dependent children enter the picture but interestingly reach contrasting conclusions about the nature of moral accountability within people's private lives. Smart and Neale's conclusions suggest that parents engage with plurality of moral reasoning which take account of a range of needs and desires amidst an ever changing context (Smart and Neale, 1999a). Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) argue that there is an overall moral imperative which arises out of an over-riding ethic of care for dependent children. I have argued that these differences may, in part, arise out different analytical approaches but also may be a reflection of the contested, ambivalent and undecided nature of



changing family lives. Both, however, challenge the discourses of 'the family in crisis' with its associated dire consequences for wider society.

Recent research on same sex families (Weeks Heaphy and Donovan, 2001, Dunne 1998a, 2000a, Haines and Weiner, 2000) suggest that in the working out of family lives outside of heterosexuality, there are even fewer 'maps and signposts' than those available to the changing heterosexual family forms. Lesbian families are often presented to be at the forefront of transformations in intimacy (Giddens, 1992). As such these studies can offer a significant contribution to current sociological debates about the changing nature of family life. I believe that a study of lesbian couples who have planned and had their children in the context of their relationship can complement and develop this existing work. These families form a pivotal case because they are an expression of a relatively new phenomenon - such that there are few published studies that focus exclusively on their experiences. Most studies of lesbian families include families of self-identified lesbians who became parents in the context of heterosexual relationships. Consequently some of their experiences include parenting and becoming parents in more conventional circumstances, processes of coming out after having children and working out ways forward with ex-partners and so on. As such these studies can and do offer valuable contributions to family sociology. However, I suggest, as Stacey and Biblarz (2001) do, that explorations of planned lesbian parenthood might offer something new to offer to developing wider understandings of how people negotiate different ways of doing family once outside normative frameworks.

As pointed out by Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (1997), parenting raises questions of obligation, commitment and responsibility most sharply. Their conclusions present families of choice as an example of Giddens' everyday experiments in living. I have argued however that a more detailed examination is required of parenting practices that pose contradictions between the individualistic pursuit of intimate dyadic relationships and the notions of duty and responsibility towards children.

Parenting practices are more fully explored by Dunne's Lesbian Household Project (1998a) and by Haines and Weiner's research into the negotiations involved in setting up lesbian parent families (Haines and Weiner, 2000). The wider sociological debates about family lives and intimacy were not the main focus of these studies and my main interest in their work is in the issues they point out that warrant further explorations. One example is to examine in more detail how women talk about the working out of motherhood as a shared project and the implications of the diverse biosocial routes into parenthood. Furthermore, although these families are innovative and challenging at some levels, a further investigation of lesbian parenting practices is required to extend or modify the theme of 'narratives of self-invention' and the extent to which these are possible once dependent children are involved.

The public stories that circulate about lesbian parenting are largely negative and to some extent resonate with the dominant stories of post-divorce parenting and stepfamilies (see for example, this chapter, page 43). This poses the question: in a less defensive framework (as outlined by Stacey and Biblarz, 2001) might it be possible to attend to the stories lesbian parents tell in response to the wider context within which they parent? This requires a greater attention to the personal accounts of parenting and family practices that could complement or extend Weeks and colleagues' (2001) attention to the wider stories. As such this requires an approach which is probably closer to Morgan's conceptual framework of 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996, 1999) than to the broader sweep of Giddens (1992), although it is important to note that Morgan firmly locates family practices in their biographical, cultural, historical and material contexts. A narrative approach to analysis may provide the means to explore the interactions between specific family practices and the wider location within which they are situated. As Riessman (2002:697) suggests, an analysis of personal narratives can 'illuminate individual and collective action and meanings as well as the processes by which social life and human relationships are made and changed'. In the above discussions of empirical studies of both heterosexual and lesbian family lives and parenthood, I have raised questions about how the researchers' own understandings, assumptions, research questions and analytical perspectives can impact on what might be looked

for and what is found. These factors can all contribute to shaping the outcomes of the research and as such are important issues. I address these in a discussion of my own methodological approach in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **1. Introduction to the project**

This project has developed from work I carried out for my MA thesis (1993 - 1995) which examines the social and political implications of the use of donor or self-insemination by lesbians and bisexual women. Since the completion of my MA there have been new developments in the study of UK lesbian families, most notably Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan's Families of Choice project (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 1997, 2001) and the Lesbian Household Project (Dunne, 1998b) (discussed in Chapter 2). These two research projects also influenced the direction of my PhD research and the formulation of research questions for a closer examination of motherhood and family life as experienced by women having their first child together in the context of an ongoing relationship.

The areas I set out to examine included the decision-making processes involved in planning to have children, issues that arise around the choice of routes to conception and choice of donor, the day to day practices involved in mothering/parenting; the significance (or not) of the two women's biological and/or social relationships to their children and the extent to which women felt their parental and familial relationships were recognised, supported and validated in their interactions beyond the home.

#### **2. Sampling routes and strategies**

##### **2.1 Sample criteria and rationale**

I defined the following criteria for my sample:

- Female same sex cohabiting couple with child(ren), both parties willing to be interviewed separately and together
- Couples who had their first child together, and whose child(ren) are aged 6 or under
- Couples who had used donor insemination at a clinic (DI) or self-insemination (SI) as the means of conception<sup>28</sup>

### 2.1.a Terminology

My use of the terminology 'women in same sex relationships' was deliberate because, in seeking access to potential respondents, I did not want to impose any definition of sexual orientation on women in relationships together. I hoped, for example, to be inclusive of bisexual women who are often absent in research on female same sex relationships. However, despite strenuous efforts, I was unsuccessful in this respect. However, while the majority of respondents identified as lesbian, some respondents commented that they would not respond to requests to participate in 'research about lesbians' because they resented labels being put on them.

Issues raised here left me with a further question of finding a general term to describe my sample as a whole. Edwards et al. (1999b) discuss comparable difficulties in describing stepfamilies. They recognise that the terminology they adopt may not be compatible with their respondents' own understandings and constructions. Similarly my attachment of a general 'label' cannot fit every respondents' self-definition of their sexual orientation (or of their parental or familial status, as I discuss in Chapter 5). Because most women did identify as lesbian, this is the generic term I have chosen to use when referring to my sample as a whole. I was also influenced by Jill Radford's criticisms of researchers' linguistic attempts to be inclusive of women living outside of heterosexuality, but

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<sup>28</sup> I learnt not to assume that donor or self-insemination was the route of conception for all women in same sex relationships. I included one couple where the birth mother had conceived by (hetero) sexual intercourse, set up this as an arrangement where the man was considered as a donor to all intents and purposes.

who do not self-define as lesbian (Radford, 1997). She argues that this tends to mean that even if a majority self-identify as lesbians, they can become subsumed under a general heading of 'non-heterosexual' or similar (Dunne, 1997, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). However, like Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001:viii) I also recognise that terminology around sexual orientations remains a contested area in both emotive and political terms.

### 2.1.b Narrowing criteria

Existing studies on lesbian parenthood encompass a range of disparate family experiences. While this approach may still be necessary for some groups of lesbian parents which are still under-researched<sup>29</sup>, the possibilities to move beyond this stage are now opening up in terms of research into lesbian parenthood. There is the potential to extend existing research by being more specific in researching particular groups of lesbian parents and exploring different dimensions of lesbian family lives. There are many variations of lesbian parent family arrangements. These can include lesbian stepfamilies where children had been born into a previous heterosexual or same sex relationship, lesbians parenting as lone parents, lesbians with adopted children and lesbian families with older children.

By narrowing my criteria to women who had planned and had their children together in the context of their relationship, I was able to examine some specific dynamics at play, such as the diverse biosocial routes into parenthood, and avoid 'contamination' by wider social processes, such as the dynamics of re-constituted families. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001), for example, state there were different dynamics at play in their respondents' accounts of parenting in different situations. Respondents who had become parents in heterosexual relationships gave accounts of their children's experiences that were filtered through a sense of loss (following the breakdown of the relationship between their parents and subsequent separation). By contrast, the accounts of respondents who had become parents in

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<sup>29</sup> Dunne (1999b) argues there is a need for exploratory studies of gay fatherhood. Similar studies are also needed into the experiences of bisexual parents.

the context of a same sex relationship were marked by a sense of their children's experiences being filtered through a realisation of difference rather than loss.

#### 2.1.c. Dependent children aged 6 and under

I made a decision to restrict the age of children to 6 and under, because this represents a time when mothering typically requires a level of input that is more intensive in a particular way than it might be for older children. Through consulting with lesbian mothers of older children during the development of my research questions, it became clear that different issues arise as children get older and that the feelings and experiences of older children have a greater influence on the picture of family life. Lawler (2000) also argues that most mothers' experiences of motherhood and mothering change over time as their children grow older.

Furthermore, for parents of younger children routes into parenthood are more recent experiences and I wanted to explore these with participants.

#### 2.1.d Development of criteria over time

It would be disingenuous to claim I had my sample criteria worked out from the outset. Existing studies that encompass a disparate range of lesbian-headed family experiences originally influenced my formulation of criteria - to cover a similarly diverse group. My criteria developed over time, in tandem with my research questions, as I worked towards the development of a theoretically rigorous sampling framework.

While I refined my criteria over the same period of time as working out my research questions, I also re-examined it during the research process. The boundaries I placed around my sample meant that I turned down some potential respondents who were very keen to take part and have their stories heard. One woman, for example, felt the narrowness of my criteria 'negated' her family. She had had her child within a previous heterosexual relationship but was now co-parenting with her female partner. Another couple felt I was neglecting the

experiences of families with older children. I agreed these were both important aspects of lesbian parents' family experiences and at times it was hard to resist their arguments for inclusion<sup>30</sup>. However these discussions also strengthened my argument for the need to explore different dimensions of family life within different studies.

About six months into my fieldwork, I experienced difficulties in accessing more couples for my study. At this point I considered ways I might extend my criteria without making too many compromises. It had become clear that my existing criteria meant I was developing a picture of greater depth, rather than breadth, with the focus on one group of lesbian parents and I wanted to maintain my original aim of minimising the variables at play. I therefore carried out two further pilot interviews at this stage, with two families. One couple had separated but were still co-habiting and co-parenting their child. The other couple fit all my criteria but had older children, aged 9 and 15. Following these interviews, I postponed any final decision on how to extend my criteria. This later became unnecessary as I located more couples who fitted my original criteria<sup>31</sup>. This ongoing process of thinking about my criteria contributed to the clearly defined focus of my research and strengthened the rationale for the choices I made.

## **2.2 Methods of recruitment**

Given the general invisibility of lesbians in the population and the sensitivity of the research topic, it was necessary to sample opportunistically. As noted, there were points in time when even this sampling strategy presented difficulties.

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<sup>30</sup> There is clearly scope for separate research to be carried out with a focus on lesbian parent families where children were originally born into a heterosexual relationship and for research to be carried out with families that include older children. These may be children born into a heterosexual relationship but will increasingly include children born through donor or self-insemination. Research is also required that takes account of the children's own perspectives.

<sup>31</sup> The only change I made was to include a couple where the birth mother had conceived through having (hetero)sexual intercourse rather than use of donor or self-insemination. To all intents and purposes they saw the man involved as a donor rather than a father.



Appendix 2, 'Map of potential routes to respondents', and Appendix 3, 'Mapping of successful routes to respondents', visually lay out the details of methods of recruitment adopted (Appendix 2) and those which were successful (Appendix 3).

I produced a leaflet (Appendix 1) and a flyer to circulate to potential respondents. Leaflets were distributed in two ways. First, by friends, colleagues, and so on and secondly, through various mailings sent out by women's organisations such as Rape Crisis<sup>32</sup> and through lesbian and bisexual groups and parenting groups that I knew of. The flyer was distributed through lesbian, gay and bisexual media and organisations, locally and nationally, and was put up in independent bookshops, women's centres and so on in my hometown and other areas where I had contacts.

My starting point was made through my own personal networks. However it is important to note that this included minimal use of any well-defined lesbian, gay or bisexual 'communities' (I return to this point in Section 4.1.c.). The use of my own social networks gradually spread further afield into personal networks of friends, friends of friends and colleagues. Initially I planned to use a 'snowballing' method. I assumed that when I successfully recruited some respondents they would be able to put me in touch with other couples. While this is frequently cited as a common approach by other studies of lesbigay lives, it was not a particularly successful approach in my study.

Out of the 40 women interviewed (20 couples) I only knew one woman personally, but 'word of mouth' recruitment still proved to be the most successful route. Many women commented that the key factor which influenced their decision to take part in my study was that a friend or colleague had spoken to them or written to them about my research.

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<sup>32</sup> The Rape Crisis Federation contacted me to suggest a mail out of my leaflets to their members might result in members being able to circulate the leaflet more widely amongst their own social networks.

Recruitment to the study took place between January 2000 and July 2001. I interviewed 17 couples in the first year, and another 3 couples in the second period (January to July 2001) when I was less actively pursuing recruitment strategies.

## **2.3 Sample profile**

Full details of the sample profile are provided in Appendix 4. I interviewed 20 couples.

I asked each woman to complete a background questionnaire (Appendix 5). This required details of the children's full names and ages and questions about the women's ages, occupation, income and education. The final question asked each woman about their own self-identity in terms of sexual identity, ethnicity/race/nationality, class (of origin and/or current) and disability. This question was left open for women to define their own terms rather than just tick boxes with pre-defined categories.

Respondents' ages ranged between 28 and 47 (median age: 38). Children's ages ranged between 6 months and 6 years (median age: 2 years, 6 months). The length of couples' relationships ranged between 5 and 17 years (median length of relationship: 10 years). In terms of employment, 29 out of 40 women worked in the public sectors (mainly social services, health, and education) or were employed in similar jobs within the voluntary sector. The other 11 women were self employed or not in paid employment. Nearly half the women worked full-time (19<sup>33</sup>). Fifteen worked part-time and 6 were at home on a full time basis.

Women generally had high levels of educational attainment. Fifteen were educated up to O/A levels but all these women also had work-related qualifications and 2 were currently studying at degree level. Twenty-five were educated up to degree and post-graduate levels. A total of 23 women had work-related qualifications.

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<sup>33</sup> This includes one full-time student.

The majority (36) of respondents identified as 'lesbian' or 'gay' (the latter was used inter-changeably with 'lesbian' during the interviews). Four women objected to labels being put on their sexuality and did not complete this question. Just over half of all respondents (23) identified as middle class. A further 6 felt they had moved into the middle classes from a working class background, by virtue of education and occupation. Six identified as working class, 4 did not give any definition and 1 wrote 'classless'.

My sample was predominantly white (37) but this included 5 Jewish women and 3 Irish women. Three women identified as Black (1 mixed race, 2 African Caribbean).

No woman identified herself as having disabilities.

I interviewed 12 couples who lived in cities and 8 couples living in rural areas and/or small towns. Of those living in rural areas and small towns, 3 couples lived in areas that are widely recognised to include communities where 'alternative lifestyles' are practised and recognised.

I discuss the implications of the socio-demography of my sample at various points throughout my thesis (in this chapter, for example, see Sections 4.1.b and 4.1.c).

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Linking research questions to appropriate methods**

I identified qualitative methods as the most appropriate methods to meet my aim of accessing women's experiences of their domestic and family lives.

Existing research in this field is still at a stage where quantitative studies in developmental psychology and medicine outnumber sociological studies, as noted in Chapter 2. Some researchers, such as Peplau (1994), argue the merits of these studies. She argues that the use of fairly large samples, standardised measures of assessment and statistical analyses, are especially effective in comparative studies aimed at refuting negative stereotypes about lesbian and gay relationships. Laird (1993), however, suggests that some of the complexity of the data may be overlooked by the sole presentation of a statistical analysis. She argues that what is currently needed to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge are detailed holistic accounts of the complexity, richness and diversity of the everyday family lives of 'non-heterosexuals'. More recently, as discussed in Chapter 2, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) have challenged the defensive conceptual framework, which they identify as characteristic of psychological research into lesbian and gay lives. They outline the potential value of qualitative studies to examine dynamics at play that are largely neglected by psychological studies, such as 'contextual effects' (2001:178) of the society in which lesbian parent families live.

Edwards and Ribbens (1998) put forward a strong case for using qualitative methods for the sociological investigation of women's family and household lives. However they also use the term 'qualitative research' to refer to a 'broad range of methods, that may not in practice be so neatly dichotomised from quantitative research' (1998:20).

Given the above considerations I decided to use in-depth semi structured interviews. I also decided to carry out separate and joint interviews with each couple (discussed in more detail below). Within these discussions I shall also point out other methods that I considered and rejected.

### **3.2 Joint and/or separate interviews?**

In carrying out family research, the question of whether to interview family members individually or collectively raises a number of dilemmas, which have

been widely debated (Hertz, 1995, Duncombe and Marsden, 1996, Valentine, 1999).

Traditionally, research on the 'family' within sociology has been based on interviews with women but it is increasingly recognised that even within the domestic sphere - traditionally viewed as women's domain - different family members may have different perspectives which could be worth exploring. The question then arises about whether to interview family members together, separately or a combination of both. There is an increasing trend to interview couples both together and separately. (Doucet, 1995, Duncombe and Marsden, 1996, Dunne, 1997, Valentine, 1999).

Some researchers argue that joint interviews, where a couple are interviewed together, encourage men to participate in areas where they have previously been ignored and/or act as a way to stimulate recall and clarification by respondents (Allan, 1980). Valentine (1999) argues that couples do not always validate each other's accounts. She suggests that one of the most valuable aspects of a joint interview is that respondents may challenge their partner's account or provide different perspectives. Given these dynamics, she suggests that joint interviews may reveal processes of negotiation and 'encourage spontaneous further discussions providing richer, more detailed and validated accounts than those generated by individuals' (1999:68). However, she connects this point to one of the major drawbacks of the joint interview, which is the potential to expose underlying tensions between the participating couple (which may catch the interviewer 'in the middle'<sup>34</sup>).

Hertz (1995), on the other hand, suggests that the joint interview, rather than producing a complex account of greater depth, produces little more than a simplified 'official' account, the family's public face. She argues that separate interviews are preferable, in creating an environment where respondents feel freer to express their own individual views, and disrupt the collective 'public' account

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<sup>34</sup> Ethical dilemmas are also raised, as I shall discuss later in this chapter.

that a couple may put forward. This is problematic on two levels. Firstly, there is the suggestion that these 'official' accounts are of little value in terms of what they can reveal about family dynamics. Appropriately analysed, they can tell us a great deal (Ribbens McCarthy, Holland and Gillies, 2001). Secondly, there is also an implicit suggestion that hidden from view behind such 'official' accounts there are other more authentic accounts which may only be accessed by interviewing family members separately.

Hertz's argument implies that separate interviews provide 'truer' accounts than those accessed by a joint interview (Hertz, 1995). However, no interview provides *the* story of a respondent's experience of family life. As Skeggs (1998:28) argues, the account the respondent produces for the interviewer will already be the product of interpretations mediated by the respondent. These are further shaped in response to the interviewer's agenda. Thus, rather than accessing the authentic account or searching for 'truths', the researcher's task should be to treat the interview as a social account produced by both the respondent and researcher.

In their study of non-heterosexual households, Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan (1998) adopt a dual approach to the question of interviewing couples together and/or separately. They gathered a range of collective and individual accounts - but not necessarily from the same couples. They suggest that individuals may not be as forthcoming in interviews if their partner is also being interviewed. For example, they interviewed one man who spoke of his attitudes to monogamy. He was not monogamous in his relationship but denied this to his partner. Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan (1998) argue it is unlikely that this respondent would have revealed this in the context of a joint interview, or in a separate interview, if he knew his partner was also being interviewed. This is possibly true but there is no way of knowing. However, they do not suggest that their approach led them to authentic accounts; rather that some disclosures become more accessible through interviewing just one member of a couple and consequently add to the exploration of personal meanings and interpretations. On a practical basis, one advantage to their approach is that where only one member of a couple agrees to be interviewed, they can still be included. Some researchers (Arksey, 1996) have cautioned that joint interviews

(and/or separate interviews with each member of a couple) may result in a lower response rate from respondents.

Observational data may provide a different perspective on people's lives although the data collected can still only offer partial insights (Silverman 2000:39). I decided against this approach for two reasons. Firstly, this may have provided data about current family practices but I was also interested in women's past experiences, in particular their accounts of planning to have children and their routes to conception. I also believed that an ethnographic study would be too difficult to set up, although I later came across a study that demonstrated it can be done. This was an ethnography of lesbian stepfamilies (Wright, 1998) in the US. However I remain convinced that an ethnographic study of this nature would be over-ambitious for a PhD project. For example, Wright states that while she did not find it difficult to find families to fit her sampling criteria, finding families to participate was difficult because the project required a large commitment of time.

In conclusion there is no definitive approach but a combined approach of joint and separate interviews can offer the greater potential 'to explore the complexities and contradictions of the contested realities of shared lives' (Valentine, 1999:73). This is the approach I adopted.

This decision was influenced by a number of factors (see Appendix 6 'Linking research questions to methods'). For example, the choice of techniques I wanted to use (the Household Portrait and the Social Networks Map, discussed below) required joint discussions. I also wanted to explore the different and personal perspectives and experiences of entering into parenthood as a birth parent and as a social parent. Separate interviews seemed well matched to these kinds of explorations. In doing so I was also mindful of the debates about the accountable nature of interview data. Multiple accounts can in fact highlight questions about how to treat different and potentially conflicting accounts of the same events and experiences re-told by different members within the same family. I return to this point in Section 5.3.

### **3.3 Details of methods employed**

In total I gathered 60 interviews. This included 20 joint interviews and 40 separate interviews. Each interview (joint and separate) lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes<sup>35</sup>. All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed.

The sequence of the interviews varied. This was largely dependent on practicalities; for example, carrying out the joint interview to fit in with a child being asleep sometimes meant doing the separate interviews first. Most commonly I carried out the three interviews with each couple in one visit and this was not always ideal, particularly where I had no break between the interviews. However it was again necessitated by practicalities - I had to travel long distances to interview some couples and two or more trips in each case would have proved exceptionally difficult (in terms of time and financing travel). I consider some of these issues in greater depth in Section 4.2.

#### **3.3.a The joint interview**

In the joint interview I used two techniques. These were the Household Portrait and the Social Networks Map. Both techniques require an active input from the respondents in visually laying out their domestic division of labour (Household Portrait) and people in their social networks (Social Networks Map). As Doucet (1996) argues, the use of visual and participatory techniques can assist in encouraging greater reflexivity and analysis by research participants, which in turn leads to a greater understanding of how household labour and parenting are organised in a range of family households.

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<sup>35</sup> While there is a standard convention to report on the length of interviews, one should be cautious of any tendency to equate the length of the interview with the quality of the interview.



## *The Household Portrait*

The Household Portrait is a visual participatory technique developed by Doucet (1995) for the study of the domestic division of labour within households. This technique requires a joint interview with (adult) household members. Rather than asking a list of questions, the researcher's role becomes more one of being a facilitator and listener to the thoughts and feelings of the participants.

This technique involves sorting through several sets of coloured cards, each of which has a household task/chore or responsibility written on them. These tasks and responsibilities fall under different colour-coded categories, which I adapted from Doucet (1995)<sup>36</sup>. The categories I used were:

1. **Housework** (under this category there were 16 tasks written on yellow cards, including for example vacuuming, ironing, food shopping)
2. **Childcare** (17 tasks written on orange cards, including sorting/buying of child's clothes, clearing up toys, carrying out childcare arrangements)
3. **Finances** (3 tasks written on blue cards including paying bills. Some financial tasks overlapped with other categories - for example, household budgeting fell under household responsibility)
4. **Keeping in touch/Kin work** (5 tasks written on pink cards including phoning family and sending Christmas cards)
5. **Overall Responsibility** (For childcare and household. 11 tasks written on green cards including decisions about childcare, planning holidays)
6. **Miscellaneous** (6 tasks written on brown cards including waiting in for deliveries and feeding pets)

Appendix 7: 'The Household Portrait', provides a full list of the tasks under each category and a list of prompts that I used to encourage discussions.

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<sup>36</sup> Doucet used seven colour-coded categories of tasks and responsibilities. These were [1] Housework; [2] Caring work; [3] Household service work; [4] DIY; [5] Financial management; [6] Household subsistence activities; and [7] Overall responsibility for housework and childcare.

The couple is asked to place these coloured pieces of card onto a large board. This board has five columns to represent the person who does that task or takes on the responsibility for a selected range of tasks. In my study these columns were:

[1] Woman A; [2] Woman A with Woman B Helping; [3] Shared Equally; [4] Woman B with Woman A Helping; and [5] Woman B<sup>37</sup>.

At the end of the exercise the board is covered with a total of 58 cards, variously distributed by the respondents, under their five columns. Because the tasks were written on different coloured-coded cards, it was possible to see at a glance how the different sorts of tasks, for example, childcare or housework were distributed across the different columns.

My aim was to examine the everyday practices within the one household. However if a donor's role is such that, for example, parenting is shared three ways equally or that he makes a contribution to childcare costs, his input can be represented in another column<sup>38</sup>. Respondents were also given the opportunity to add to the list of tasks or responsibilities if I had not covered something that they felt was central to their household<sup>39</sup>.

Another option I considered, to collect data about the allocation of tasks, was time diaries. These can provide an alternative perspective on domestic arrangements (Gershuny, 2000). Dunne (1998b), for example, used time diaries to complement the use of the Household Portrait, in her study of the organisation of paid and

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<sup>37</sup> In the actual interviews using the Portrait Board, these columns were personalised by writing in the names of the two women doing the exercise rather than using 'Woman A' and 'Woman B' etc.

<sup>38</sup> This extra column was not used in my study to include any input from donors/fathers. However, on one occasion a five-year-old boy who was present during the interview wanted his contributions as emptying bins and tidying his room to be included. In general children's contributions to domestic tasks are ignored but this may be relevant to include, especially as children get older (in my study the average age of children was three). The Household Portrait has the flexibility to be adapted to explore these dimensions of the domestic division of labour.

<sup>39</sup> Respondents seldom did this but examples of tasks added included 'going to the tip' and 'dog walking'.

domestic work of lesbian mothers' families<sup>40</sup>. Typically in the use of time diaries, individuals are asked to complete a diary over a specified period of time. A main advantage cited for this method is that it can address the problem of a reliance on individuals' perceptions of what they do, which can be influenced by the potential desire to present oneself in a 'good light'. Time diaries allegedly overcome this problem through the measurement of how an individual's time is actually distributed across a range of tasks. A major drawback is that this method is time-consuming for respondents and relies on high levels of commitment. Furthermore they are not necessarily bias free (Bell, 1998).

After carrying out a pilot study of the Household Portrait, I was not convinced that time-diaries justified the required time commitment in terms of what these data could add to that generated by the Household Portrait. The discussions that the couple engaged in as they put together their household portrait were audio-taped, so the data collection went beyond the 'portraits' that emerged. The overall aim of the exercise is that, in the process of sorting through the cards, respondents are encouraged to reflect and discuss together how their household is run, to agree or disagree with each other. Each can contribute their own analysis of how things get done, and outline their own definitions of household tasks as chores, hobbies, leisure activities. Further discussions also arise when looking at the household portrait once completed; couples were often surprised to see how it looked.

The usefulness of this technique lies in the way it can open up discussions and analysis of how family practices are organised through the input of the participants. In my study the advantages of this were emphasised through interviewing households where creative and innovative approaches to household labour and parenting have been developed, which do not conform to traditional patterns.

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<sup>40</sup> Dunne's approach to her analysis of the material from the Household Portrait is different from mine in that she quantified the resulting data. Furthermore the use of time-diaries was specifically included to facilitate comparisons with other time-use studies, carried out collaboration with Jonathan Gershuny.

### *Mapping exercise*

Mapping is a popular method used in psychometrics and social work practice as a diagnostic tool to measure social integration and family relationships. More recently it has been used to trace out new family forms. Ribbens (1994), for example, asked her participants to draw 'spatial maps' to indicate the people who were important to them in their current lives.

Given the potential complexities of the family arrangements in my research, it was a useful technique to visually lay out the important family relationships, and also if possible to 'label' them. I developed this exercise from the social work practice of 'ecomaps' (Hartman, 1979) which are used to map out family networks. There are two ways to carry out this exercise. One is to ask participants to carry out the exercise separately and then compare and discuss what their 'maps' look like. For example, are there differences in who has been included and where people have been placed? What reasons lay behind these differences? Alternatively participants can do one map of their family together, in which case the discussions can be taped during the production of their 'map'.

In order to facilitate discussions in the process of producing the map, I asked couples to map out their family networks as a joint collaborative exercise, and these discussions were audio-taped. Each couple was given a sheet of prompts about the kinds of networks I wanted them to think about (see Appendix 8, 'Questions and guidelines for mapping out social networks'), pens and a large blank sheet of paper. The ways in which couples carried out this task varied enormously but again my main interest was in the jointly produced discussions about who formed part of their networks, who was included and why.

The data produced from the Household Portraits and the Social Network maps *per se* is not as central to my thesis as I had originally anticipated it would be. However, the discussions generated as a result of doing these exercises are central to my analysis and informed my focus on the moralities of motherhood.

### 3.3.b Separate interviews

I carried out quite different explorations in the separate interviews (see Appendix 9: Interview schedule). In particular I investigated the individual experiences of becoming a mother (or a parent) from the perspectives of having given birth to the child or not, and the subsequent experiences of being a mother/parent. Topics covered in these interviews included:

- The experiences of being a birth mother or a social mother (or both)
- Personal thoughts and feelings about having a known or an anonymous donor
- Issues that arise around 'naming' – surnames, names used by child for both mothers
- Legal or formal steps considered or taken in relation to their family arrangements
- Relationships with kin and friends.
- Feelings and thoughts about the balance of work and home

Having outlined the details of the methods I used, I shall address the general process of doing research in more detail, including considerations about how my chosen methods worked out in practice.

## **4. The process of doing research**

Textbook conventions of research reporting outline requirements to give details about how many interviews are carried out, length of interviews and so on (these details for my study are in Section 3.3). Oakley (1993:222) suggests that this guidance does not encompass the 'humanisation of the interview experience', and that this is devalued against the superior aims of objectivity and rationality.

The process of doing research raises a whole series of methodological, ethical and political dilemmas. Diane Wolf (1996:2) suggests that feminists may raise more questions about the ethics of research 'because they often (although not always) are

'moved by commitments to women'<sup>41</sup>. The emphasis in feminist debates about the research process has changed and these debates have grown increasingly complex over time. As I discuss later, some feminists have raised concerns about the consequent disengagement from the practicalities of doing research (Kelly et al., 1994, Mauthner and Doucet, 1998).

In the account that follows I address some key methodological, ethical and political dilemmas that arose in my research practice. Inevitably this is a partial account of research carried out over a four-year period. Central issues include:

- Feeling indebted to respondents, who gave me their time and their accounts, inter-linked with feelings of accountability to do justice to their accounts.
- An acknowledgement of my influence on the research, which raises questions about how to write about this in the public arena where I would not have the benefit of anonymity afforded to respondents.
- Addressing dilemmas relating to the sensitive and political nature of my research.

I shall address these issues below in a reflexive account of my research, focusing on issues that were particularly salient for my project and on dilemmas I encountered that were difficult to resolve, if indeed this is possible when faced with complex and ethical dilemmas. In this account I place the practicalities of doing research alongside relevant theoretical debates, in particular drawing upon feminist debates that have influenced and informed my work.

#### **4.1 Recruitment**

In this section I examine a range of practical and ethical issues related to the processes of recruiting respondents to my study. First, I return to issues related to the stage of making contact with potential respondents (noted in Section 2.3). Second, I consider the self-selected nature of my sample. Finally, I address some

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<sup>41</sup> Here Wolf quotes Patai 1991:138

wider issues raised by these discussions, which are related to the general invisibility of lesbian and gay populations and the sensitivity of my research topic.

#### 4.1.a Making contact with potential respondents

The majority (fifteen couples) of respondents were recruited through word of mouth. This is laid out in a visual format in Appendix 3. This number included four 'snowball' contacts (i.e. couples contacted for me by respondents I interviewed). Five couples made contact with me through indirect routes. These were firstly an advertisement placed in a national monthly magazine for lesbian and bisexual women ('Diva'), and secondly, a flyer mailed out by a lesbian parenting network in the South West.

The most effective recruitment strategy was undoubtedly where someone - a friend, colleague or another respondent - acted as an intermediary in making contact for me with potential respondents. I shall return to this issue in Section 4.1.c.

At the first stage of my direct contact with potential respondents, I asked what they had been told already about my research. Most had at this point received a copy of my leaflet (Appendix 1). I outlined the project and issues of confidentiality in some more detail. I also checked that they fitted my criteria and asked them if they wanted to know anything else about myself, or about my interest in doing this research. The information I was asked to give out in response to respondents' questions varied in detail. The issue of what a researcher reveals about herself to her respondents links to debates about the impact of the researcher in determining access to respondents - and also in developing rapport in the interviews and I shall return to these debates in Section 4.3. Below I address issues related to respondents' self-selection in taking part in my research.

#### 4.1.b Issues of self-selection

I asked respondents what had motivated them to take part in my research. Common reasons cited included:

- To get information out for other lesbian couples planning to have children (as long as it was positive).
- To educate others and to help change opinions and attitudes.
- To find out information about same sex parenting.
- To process and think about issues in relation to their own family.

Statements such as, 'X knew you and she said you were nice/sound' were also common. This point relates to further issues of respondents 'checking out' who I was, what my aims and motivations were in doing this research. In part this explains why word of mouth recruitment was the most successful route, and gave respondents some reassurance that their own objectives (above) in taking part could be met.

Finding out why respondents are willing to be interviewed provides another dimension to the context of the interview and of the account produced. Some motivations were about making a contribution to the knowledge available about lesbian parenting, or seeking to find out information for themselves. This signals the extent to which respondents felt their families represented something 'new'<sup>42</sup>.

Heaphy (2001) discusses respondents' potential assumptions that they hold the same 'political agenda' as the researcher. This may have implications for the stories being told. For example, respondents may want to present a positive public account of their family life, leading to the concealment of aspects of their lives which did not 'fit' with this picture. I agree with Heaphy that this does not necessarily invalidate accounts. It becomes another dimension to take into consideration, with regard to the context of the accounts produced. As such, it does need to be taken on board in addressing the relationship between lived lives and research stories.

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<sup>42</sup> This links in to discussions I shall expand upon in later chapters about how respondents felt there was a relative absence of guidance available to assist in the working out of how to proceed.



Equally important are reasons why potential respondents do not want to take part, although of course these can be harder to find out about. From initial contacts made by intermediaries, that I was aware of, I had some information fed back to me where couples did not want to take part. Two couples did not feel confident enough about 'being out' to take part, and in two other cases only one partner in the couple wanted to take part. This relates back to some of the practical issues of aiming to carry out joint and separate interviews, noted in Section 3.2. Another couple, approached on my behalf, felt unable to take part because of problems within their relationship. They have subsequently separated. This highlighted the fact that I was only likely to gain access to couples whose relationship and parenting arrangements are relatively stable and unproblematic.

I was mindful that all of these incidences would have a bearing on the subsequent data. For example, as Edwards et al. (1999b) argue, if people exclude themselves from research projects because they feel they cannot present positive or 'successful' accounts of their family lives, this can have implications for the sorts of stories that can be accessed and told. Farquhar (2000) raises a further dimension to these considerations. She argues that the silencing of debates on about violence in lesbian relationships suggests that lesbians may have a high level of investment in maintaining positive images of lesbian relationships. I do not want to suggest that any woman who refused to take part in my study was in a violent relationship<sup>43</sup> but Farquhar's point connects to questions about wider investments in, for example, lesbian parents maintaining idealised constructions of 'egalitarian parenting projects'. As she suggests:

The desire to maintain a positive image of lesbianism and to minimise dissonance between disseminated ideals and lived realities, may lead lesbians (...) to disguise relationships which fail to meet this ideal (2000:229).

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<sup>43</sup> However, it is worth noting that the taboo nature of violence within lesbian relationships might well mean that lesbians in violent relationships would not come forward to take part in any research.

Thus, reasons for not taking part, whatever they may be, can highlight issues that might inform us about 'absences' within the samples accessed, and potential 'silences' within our final accounts.

Ultimately the recruitment of my sample proved to be a lengthy and time-consuming exercise and I shall now address wider issues related to some of the difficulties I experienced.

#### 4.1.c Seeking out hidden populations

Given the general invisibility of women in same sex relationships in the population and the sensitivity of the research topic, recruiting a representative sample was not possible. Not least because I am not even sure we can know what one might look like, such is the hidden nature of some sections of the lesbian communities.

Other researchers have encountered similar difficulties in finding lesbian respondents (Dunne, 1997, Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan, 1998, Heaphy, 2001). Heaphy (2001) argues that this sometimes becomes a justification for an over-reliance on recruiting respondents within the most visible sections of lesbian communities. These are generally found in urban areas, and tend to consist of (mainly) middle class white educated lesbians and gay men (and sometimes, bisexuals). These kind of difficulties are often highlighted as a limitation by existing studies, but little is done to address the possibilities for broader recruitment (with notable exceptions such as Yip, 2002).

Other identities intersect with sexual orientation, including those of class, race, religion, age, disability and so on. Additional factors such as geographical locations of respondents can also be important to consider.

In some respects I have not been successful in achieving a great deal of diversity into my study. I used my own networks and tapped into other people's networks because these proved to be the most successful routes of recruitment. These routes have some limitations and these were perhaps reflected in the final sample, despite

efforts to compensate by using other methods of recruitment. However I achieved some diversity in terms of recruiting a mix of respondents living in urban and rural areas. Furthermore, in urban areas, I had no reliance on lesbian networks and communities.

PhD students inevitably face restrictions such as finite financial resources and time available. Nevertheless it is important to recognise and be explicit about these kinds of limitations because they have implications for the stories that may be accessed and from which we draw conclusions.

Seeking out lesbian and bisexual parents *per se* holds additional difficulties. As my recruitment and fieldwork progressed it became apparent that there were several reasons why parents in same sex relationships are not necessarily that visible or 'find-able'. For example, respondents made comments about how their priorities had changed upon having children (in particular having less inclination, time and energy to pursue other activities outside the home). This is an experience common to many new parents and especially mothers. However, for women in same sex relationships, this can also mean that those who previously made use of lesbian and/or bisexual 'spaces' (whatever they might be) were less likely to do so. Research also indicates that lesbians and bisexual women (with or without children) are less likely to use the traditional gay scene of clubs and pubs and more commonly use their homes as spaces to socialise (Richardson, 2000).

Furthermore respondents commonly reported experiences of moving increasingly into heterosexual spaces after having children, although no respondents had found other lesbian parents circulating in these 'spaces'. Parent and toddler groups are one example of the spaces I am referring to here. I had considered contacting such groups in areas reputed to be areas where lesbian parents lived, as a possible strategy of recruitment. However comments made by respondents living in such areas<sup>44</sup>, that they had not found other lesbian/bisexual mothers at these kinds of groups led me to re-consider this option.

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<sup>44</sup> Examples of such areas would include Chorlton in Manchester, the NG7 area of Nottingham and Hackney in London.

As a Community Development Worker, I was involved in assisting a group of women who set up a self-insemination (SI) group (1995-1996). I encountered a diverse range of women<sup>45</sup> who came along to, or made contact with, this group. I have been unable to reproduce this diversity in my study. In part, this may relate to women's levels of confidence in being out and participating in research. Some women gave this reason as an explanation of not being willing to take part in my research. Heaphy (2001) raises a further explanation to consider, when he argues that 'hard to reach' populations may partly be so because 'our research agenda does not *connect* with, or reflect the interests and experiences of these people'. This point furnishes a possible explanation in relation to my example of the self-insemination group. While I used many of the same routes to advertise this group that I later used to advertise my research project, the motivations for taking part in research and attending a 'self-help' group are likely to be different. For the latter, women are likely to be seeking out support, information and discussion about planning to have a child. However, when asking women why they were willing to take part in my research, a common reason given was the hope of getting something out of the research. For example, respondents cited a motivation to seek out information about same sex parenting and any knowledge about networks they might tap into, or were explicit that they saw the interview as an opportunity to 'process' issues (and see Section 4.2.d, 'Feedback from respondents').

Ultimately I can only guess why I was unable to recruit certain sections of group of lesbian and bisexual mothers. Possibly some of the women who came along to the SI group have not been able to progress with their desire to have children. Possibly the women I accessed are best positioned to make choices to have children (in the context of my criteria). As noted in my sample profile, they are mostly middle class professional women/couples who have material resources that may enable them to cope with any potential difficulties and these same resources also potentially open

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<sup>45</sup> This included, for example, Asian women and working class women (class is notoriously difficult to define and I relied on self-definition). Several couples were not out to anyone and making contact with the group was their first 'coming out'. The group had several discussions about whether it was possible to have children and not be 'out'.

up more choices. This can be as varied as being able to afford the choice of using a donor clinic, having some level of choice about where to live, working in environments where, for most, it is possible to be out without having to fear the consequences. The question remains about who else is out there, how do we reach them, what extra issues and difficulties might arise for them in being visible? I do not have the answers but it is a research study that needs carrying out, and possibly one with more resources than those available to an individual PhD student.

## **4.2 Doing the interviews**

First in this section, I consider some of the practicalities involved in setting up and carrying out multiple interviews. Second, I discuss some questions related to the ethics of confidentiality and consent. Third, I highlight issues that arose out of the dynamics of the interview setting, including the power dynamics at play. Finally, I consider the feedback I received from women about taking part in the interviews.

### **4.2.a Practicalities**

Practicalities included:

- Setting up interviews that fitted around the commitments of work, childcare and so on for three women (myself, and the two respondents).
- Interviewing with small children - dealing with distractions.

Doing three interviews in a row is not ideal but was in most cases necessary primarily because of the distance I had to travel which made repeat visits impractical. Maintaining the flow of the interview and ensuring all themes are covered is hard work (Mason, 1996). It requires active listening and maintaining concentration to make connections between relevant points, to follow up on issues raised or not yet covered and to keep respondents to the points I wanted to focus on. Towards the end of third interview (or sometimes approaching the third interview) these levels of concentration were harder to maintain.

I spent varying lengths of time with each family - ranging from a very 'business like' set of interviews, which were completed in under 3 hours, to spending a whole day with a family, eating meals with them, seeing children return from nursery/school, women returning from work and so on. In retrospect it may have been useful to keep field notes of these visits. I was initially unsure about what to write in a research diary and I missed the opportunity to make consistently detailed 'field notes' such as observations about the household interactions, nor did I negotiate any use of such data with respondents. With hindsight this was a learning process. I would now consider writing more detailed field notes. However the use of this kind of data raises questions about what can ethically be used as data and this links in to my discussion below about informed consent.

#### 4.2.b Confidentiality and consent

I sent a statement of confidentiality and consent (Appendix 10) to respondents when I sent a letter to confirm the interview dates and times in writing. I also went through this statement at the beginning of each interview. I was surprised to find that this process was of more importance to myself than to my respondents, many of whom were not especially bothered about the details. Perhaps they trusted my intentions but it raised another question for me. Confidentiality contracts can be as much about protecting the researcher as they are about protecting our respondents. Nevertheless, ethically I was committed to reading through the statement with each respondent, even though they sometimes seemed impatient with this process.

Carrying out separate interviews with each member of the couple adds additional dimensions to issues of confidentiality. Each respondent was offered confidentiality whereby I would not discuss or reveal anything she said to me, with her partner. This was sometimes difficult especially in the second separate interview. For example, some respondents wondered aloud if they were repeating

(or contradicting) their partner's account. This may have had some impact on the story they then told, although I cannot know for sure.<sup>46</sup>

Occasionally respondents disclosed information in the separate interviews, that was probably not known to her partner<sup>47</sup>. This kind of information was too sensitive to use in analysis. In offering guarantees of confidentiality to each respondent, I am aware that there is always the likelihood that couples may recognise themselves and each other in my account.

### *Informed consent*

Mason (1996) suggests that the issue of gaining *informed* consent is a difficult and complex process. What are respondents consenting to? I was clearest about gaining consent to the interview, and explicit that women were free not to answer any questions and could withdraw their consent at any stage. However I did not discuss consent to 'off the record' information. This included information given when I spoke to respondents by telephone to arrange the interviews, or in observing the family dynamics when spending several hours with the family and eating meals with them. As one example, I arrived at one couple's house as they were returning home from work having picked up their children from nursery on the way home. In the interactions that occurred in getting into the house, seeing to the children and so on, I observed quite a lot that was later contradicted by some of the discussion in the Household Portrait exercise. I do not think it is possible to totally ignore this kind of information but I did not have consent to do 'participant observation'. As such these are not data I can use but nevertheless they influenced my reading of their interview accounts.

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<sup>46</sup> Larger research projects have overcome this problem by arranging for two researchers to carry out the separate interviews at the same time (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> This contradicts Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan's belief, referred to earlier, that secrets that couples keep from each other may not come out if both partners in the couple are interviewed jointly and/or separately (Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan, 1998).

Some women asked me what I intended to do with the interviews. For example, one respondent reflected a common line of questioning when she asked: 'How are you going to analyse all this stuff?' Mason (1996) suggests that respondents may be unfamiliar with the principles and techniques of analysis. However it was also the case that I could not fully explain what I intended to do with the interview data (even in 'lay' language), especially in the early stages of my fieldwork. Initially I used a grounded theory approach and was later influenced by a narrative approach (discussed in Section 5). Consequently I was not explicit about my analytical intentions.

I have since felt uncomfortable at times about exercising my 'interpretative authority'. In relation to this authority, Chase (1996) suggests that in part this may stem from our failure to alert respondents to the ways in which we will use their words. With the best intentions, this is not always attainable. The best I achieved was to be honest with respondents about not knowing all the answers. I generally indicated that I would have a total of sixty interviews and my final account would be interpretations of these combined with a reading of a wider literature and influenced by my own perspectives and experiences. It would be my story of their story although in terms of how this was to be produced I was less clear.

I was able to be clear in my statement about the fact that the work resulting from the research would be a public document and that I also hoped to publish more widely as a result of the research. I was alerted to the importance of raising these points with respondents at the time of my MA research. One woman had agreed to take part but clearly stated she did not want her account to be used for any other purpose than my MA. That included the publication of any material from my MA thesis.

In considerations of issues relating to informed consent, I agree with Mason's observation that this requires researchers 'to take the issue of informed consent more rather than less seriously, in ensuring they adopt an ethical form of practice' (Mason, 1996:58).



#### 4.2.c Interview dynamics

As stated, the length of time I spent with each household varied and the way in which women approached the interviews varied. With one couple, despite my best efforts, the interviews took on a questions and answers format. More commonly however, interviews flowed more easily but variables included the respondents' approach to the interviews, how respondents and I felt at the time and the presence of distractions, such as children (and/or dogs) being around.

Power within these research interactions bore little resemblance to many feminist discussions about power within the interview setting (Oakley, 1981, 1998, Maynard, 1994). I did not feel, for example, that there were exploitative power imbalances between myself and respondents. Most women I interviewed were highly articulate and confident. At the risk of simplifying the range of dynamics at play, most women had a similar social position to myself and we were all mothers of a similar age, with young children. Nevertheless it is important not to assume shared understandings and remain alert to potential differences. Differences could arise in all kinds of ways. One example came up through a discussion of different values and attitudes about motherhood. The respondent articulated strongly held views that young children should be cared for at home by their mothers and I was aware that my childcare arrangements did not meet her definition of good motherhood. These kinds of interactions confirmed my belief that subjective 'listenedings' and interpretations form an integral part of the research interaction. Rather than 'taint' the research I argue that they form part of the richness of the data - but this needs to be made explicit. I shall return to this issue in Section 5.5 when I discuss the impact of the researcher's own biography at the stages of analysis and writing up.

There were differences at other levels such as ethnicity. Three respondents identified as Black<sup>48</sup>. Riessman (1991) suggests that a lack of shared cultural norms can create barriers to understanding and that for women interviewing women about their lives:

Such (cultural) barriers to understandings are particularly consequential, for they reproduce (...) divisions between women that feminists have tried so hard to diminish (1991:217)<sup>49</sup>.

At the start of my fieldwork, I believed that I should not offer too much information about myself, perhaps influenced by the textbook definitions of how to carry out interviews. However, feminist critiques of objectivity (such as Gelsthorpe, 1992) gave me 'permission', and some confidence, to act in a way that I felt was more natural in the interview setting. I believe that if women were willing to tell me about their lives, it was only right that I answer relevant questions they might want to ask me. I did not volunteer information about myself but, at the first contact and at the beginning of each interview, I offered women the opportunity to raise questions with me. Some were more curious than others to know more about me. In the interview setting, these conversations took place before, between and/or after the interviews. I did not enter into conversations during the interview - respondents rarely asked me for information about myself in this setting. In a discussion about reciprocity, Ribbens (1989) argues that to talk about oneself (as the researcher) during the interview can be seen as 'breaking the research contract' where the focus is on the respondent who has:

Permission to do what is normally seen as indulgence and socially reprehensible: to talk about oneself at great length (1989:584).

Several respondents commented that the most enjoyable aspect of taking part in the research was precisely this - the opportunity to talk about themselves. Reciprocity

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<sup>48</sup> Race is one example of an aspect of identity that can cut across and inform the lesbian identity. The three Black women in my study were all in relationships with white women. I aimed to pay attention to the dimension of race within the interviews and the accounts produced. It is not, however, a central issue within my analysis.

<sup>49</sup> Other useful discussions here include Edwards (1996) and De Vault (1999b), Chapter 5: 'Ethnicity and Expertise: Racial-Ethnic Knowledge in Sociological Research'.

in the interview setting has been discussed in depth, particularly within feminist methodology, as a way to reduce exploitative power imbalances between researcher and respondent, and to develop rapport with respondents. Ribbens (1989) discusses different levels of reciprocity. One level relates to how the researcher responds to questions she is asked; she argues that while we are able to choose how much we wish to disclose this rarely leads us to the same level of exposure that we ask of our respondents.

At another level, Ribbens argues that to be open about ourselves can impact significantly on what respondents reveal during the interviews. She highlights a danger that such reciprocity may inveigle respondents into revealing more than they had perhaps intended. Finch (1984), who felt that her respondents needed to know how to protect themselves (in order not to reveal too much) from her, in the interview situation, has also made this point. I am not convinced that women I interviewed could be so easily duped into revelations they did not want to make. The dynamics of an interview situation are not quite so simple as this might suggest (I return to this point below) but it is important to recognise respondents can also make choices about what they reveal. During my research this was sometimes made explicit (but equally there may be other situations where information was not disclosed and I was not aware of this). For example, in one set of interviews, one woman told me about a temporary separation in the couple's relationship following the birth of their first child. This was not raised in the other two interviews but when we all came together before I left, this woman's partner found out that I had been told about the temporary separation and responded, 'How embarrassing, I really didn't want Kathy to know that'. Another couple told me they had decided they would not talk to me in any detail about their donor and the difficulties they had experienced within this relationship. It was still very sensitive and they did not want to risk entrusting me with this information. One said to me, 'I know it would probably be helpful for your research to know about (the donor) but we feel it is better for us that we don't tell you'.

As researchers we can never be sure how much of the story is or is not revealed, at most we should only expect to gather partial narratives. Gilgun et al. (1992:4)

suggest that when interviewing different members of a family group, secrets and loyalties will remain inaccessible to us. However, they also argue that limitations such as these can provide an insight into the ways in which boundaries are defined and maintained in families. Thus they are an equally rich source of data.

Overall, respondents seemed clear about what they were and were not happy to reveal. This is not to say there were no difficult moments within the interviews. Occasionally I touched on areas that were a source of pain, discomfort or embarrassment. In one interview with a social mother for example, I inadvertently touched on the pain of infertility. Here the ethics of not probing issues that were too painful to recall took precedence over the gathering of data. In other situations I respected clear signals given by women that I have touched upon an area they would rather not talk about. One example was an interview with a woman who had talked at length on many issues, but when I asked about her family of origin, replied with a very short sentence that they were not important to her. I asked why that was, and again received a very perfunctory response. From the brief information she had given me, it was clear it was a painful area that she did not really want to discuss with me, and I made the decision to move on to other areas, rather than probe further. These were also ethical decisions and similar ethical issues arose in some of the joint interviews.

As discussed earlier, Valentine (1999) identifies the potential to expose underlying tensions between the participating couple. I was aware that my focus on the couple's division of labour was one such area that could highlight aspects of domestic arrangements that were a source of conflict between the two parties, and which could lead to arguments or challenges about the arrangements. Murphy and Dingwall (2001) discuss two views of this kind of scenario. Firstly this outcome could be regarded as beneficial in opening up possibilities for positive changes to be made. Alternatively, the outcomes may be harmful, for example, in causing a disruption of the status quo. Murphy and Dingwall also note that the first stance, which raises the idea of consciousness raising through the interview 'risks the charge of arrogance' (2001:340).

As discussed earlier, couples in my study were self-selected. As such, I had some level of reliance that they must themselves have a degree of confidence in the health and cohesion of their family in order for both to agree to take part and subject themselves to scrutiny. However this did not equate with approaching the interviews in a complacent manner. I was wary of the risks of potential involvement in respondents' lives<sup>50</sup>. Even though self-selected, motives for this varied. One respondent, for example, told me she had taken part because she wanted her partner (the birth mother) to understand more about the difficulties she had experienced through her position as the social mother. The joint interview exposed a number of differences and some tensions in their different approaches to household chores, and it was a difficult interview to 'facilitate'. However, they were happy to continue with the interview and I cannot be sure of the outcomes (harmful or beneficial, if either) after I left.

#### 4.2.d Feedback from respondents

I agree with Kelly et al.'s point about extending the practice of reflexivity through asking respondents to comment on the interview process and reasons for taking part (Kelly et al., 1994:36). I provided opportunities for feedback at the end of the interview and again when I sent respondents copies of their transcripts and/or wrote to thank them for their participation.

Most commonly the only feedback I received was at the end of the interview and most respondents said they had enjoyed the experience. As one respondent said she enjoyed talking to me rather than with me; I was a 'captive audience'! There was no feedback that suggested any negative outcomes from having taken part<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> For example, I had sought guidance on my research design from a number of friends and colleagues. Several were unsure whether they would like to do the Household Portrait with their partner.

<sup>51</sup> I did not ask respondents whether any motives they expressed as reasons for taking part had been fulfilled. (This oversight was pointed out to me by my proof-reader!) However, because my request for feedback came at the end of the interview, I did not think to ask any 'follow up' questions in order to elicit more information than was volunteered by respondents at this stage. Nevertheless, I did provide some respondents with information that they said was useful. For example, I gave some respondents information about how social mothers can apply for parental responsibility. I was also able to put some respondents living in the same area in touch with each other (with their permission) or give information about lesbian parenting networks.

Ten couples took up my offer send copies of their interviews transcripts to them. I maintained the confidentiality of each respondent by sending the separate interviews to the relevant individual, as well as sending the joint interview, which could be jointly addressed to the couple. This aim of returning transcripts was to provide women with another opportunity to reflect on the interview and on whether there was any information they had provided that they did not want me to use. This was combined with a further opportunity to provide any general feedback on the interview or the project. I received no responses at this stage. As Patai (1991) observes, respondents are not necessarily interested in any follow up and this applies to all stages following the interview. I shall discuss these issues of ongoing respondent involvement further in Section 5.4.

The feedback I received at the end of the interviews and the lack of subsequent feedback contributes an interesting point to the debates about how the developing of rapport in interviews by and with women could be confused with friendship (Oakley, 1981, Finch, 1984, Cotterill, 1992). In my research these boundaries were clearly drawn by respondents as well as by myself. Women welcomed me warmly into their homes and were generous with their time. I often had meals with the families I visited and on these occasions conversations moved beyond the interview topics but this did not fall into the category of 'friendship', which would have included ongoing contact.

Increasingly I consider that we can sometimes over-estimate our influence and impact on respondents' lives<sup>52</sup>. This may in fact work in reverse. For example, I often came away from interviews preoccupied with respondents' accounts and observations of their domestic lives. As I drove home (often a long journey given the distance I had to travel to interview respondents) I considered how the accounts I had just heard connected to the previous accounts I had gathered and to my own experiences and reading of literature. Meanwhile my respondents were more likely to be getting on with making a meal for the family, putting children to bed and so

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<sup>52</sup> A point made in a discussion at a meeting of the Women's Workshop on Qualitative Family/Household Research (Oct 2000).

on (I often left to the smells of food being cooked for tea, children's baths being run and other domestic undertakings). Being interviewed is not always an experience that has any influence beyond the interview setting itself, for the respondent.

#### **4.3 Access and rapport: the impact of the researcher's identity**

In carrying out research with lesbian, bisexual and gay respondents, many researchers refer to difficulties in finding participants because of issues of sensitivity and the generally hidden nature of this population - particularly outside of urban gay 'spaces' (Bell and Valentine, 1995, and see discussion in Section 4.1.c.). It is often claimed that a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity can assist a researcher in negotiating access with lesbian, gay or bisexual respondents. Recent sociological research into lesbian and gay lives makes such assertions. For example, Haines and Weiner (2000) state that the lesbian identity of one of the interviewers was 'central' to gaining access to interviewees (and also to the formulation of their research project). Dunne (1997) believes that many women in her study into 'lesbian lifestyles' would not have agreed to be interviewed had she not been 'out' as a lesbian researcher. She further suggests that other lesbian researchers such as Kitzinger (1987)<sup>53</sup> share these views. Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan (1998:456) also suggest that the willingness of respondents to take part in their study was in part influenced by the fact that the interviewers disclosed their own gay and lesbian identities to respondents.

These discussions sometimes contain the further notion about the subsequent (and automatic) development of rapport in the interview situation. For example, Dunne (1997) argues that her lesbian identity also helped to establish rapport which assisted the development of 'high levels of trust necessary for conducting sensitive research' (1997:24). The implicit assumption here is that lesbian, bisexual and gay researchers are best placed to conduct interviews with (respectively) lesbians,

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<sup>53</sup> Celia Kitzinger (1987) *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* London: Sage

bisexuals and gay men because of their more authentic understanding of lesbian and gay experience.

These claims appear to be informed by the earlier feminist assumptions that commonalities such as gender or sexual orientation are homogenous categories that provide a basis to mediate access and rapport and, by implication, 'good quality' data, in a relatively unproblematic way. Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan (1998) provide one exception, in their acknowledgement that the existence of perceived commonalities on the grounds of sexual orientation can be over-stated, but they do not discuss if or how this may have impacted on their research and its outcomes. The advantages of researcher and respondents having a shared identity have been widely debated in terms of gender by feminist researchers<sup>54</sup>. Some of the earliest writing of second wave feminist research (such as Oakley, 1981) argue that women researchers enjoy the advantages of having an 'insider' status when interviewing other women. More recent debates challenge this portrayal of feminist research (Maynard, 1994)<sup>55</sup>. Riessman (1991), for example, notes that shared gender is not necessarily enough to produce easy rapport and Reay (1995:205) discusses 'the fallacy of easy access'.

Kong et al. (2002:245) question whether researchers should be part of the communities they study. They suggest this might actually work to obscure rather than discover knowledge<sup>56</sup>. Similarly Kelly et al. (1994) argue that assumed similarities do not always work to the benefit of the researcher. They suggest that if a respondent feels she might be judged by the researcher's 'insider' knowledge, this may work to limit disclosures or, alternatively, the respondent may not experience the researcher's presumptions of similarities in the same way, if at all.

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<sup>54</sup> Earlier debates are evident in classic fieldwork discussions such as Merton's paper on the advantages and disadvantages of having insider/outsider status in relation to the group being studied (Merton, 1972).

<sup>55</sup> Maynard (1994) also critiques the notion that feminist research involves women interviewing women.

<sup>56</sup> This discussion resonates with issues raised by Stacey and Biblarz (2001) as discussed in Chapter 2.



De Vault (1999b:85) argues that the debates about the researcher's positioning in relation to achieving access and rapport are only the beginning. She suggests that there are other important considerations concerning the researcher's identity, which are less commonly integrated into the analysis, interpretation and writing up of research. I shall return to these in section 5.5.

## **5. Analysis and writing up**

In this section I consider the processes of analysing interview transcripts but it is perhaps worth noting that data analysis is not a discrete phase of the research project. All stages of the project including research design, data collection, analysis and writing up inter-link and merge to form a coherent whole. For example, when carrying out interviews, my interpretations and understandings of what respondents told me formed part of the analytical process. I made decisions about what was of interest, what I wanted to follow up or ignore. As my fieldwork progressed new ideas and issues emerged, which I pursued in subsequent interviews. One example was around the issue of naming. I had not thought to question the decision-making processes that lay behind respondents' choice of surnames for their children but it quickly became apparent that this was a useful area to incorporate into my interview schedule.

### **5.1 Data analysis of interview transcripts: starting out**

In my preliminary analysis, I took a grounded theory approach to my analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally developed this approach, although they have subsequently offered different interpretations of their original work (Melia, 1996, Strauss and Corbin, 1990). However, grounded theory can be characterised as an approach whereby theoretical formulations are developed in a close and continuous relationship to the data collected, in contrast to working to *a priori* assumptions or testing out existing theories. The strengths of a grounded theory approach lie in the data analysis being grounded in the data. This requires an ongoing active awareness

to take direction from what emerges from the data, formulating new ideas or approaches as the interviewing progresses, rather than try to fit the data into a pre-existing framework. However, while my interview material was not to be 'tested' against a set of theoretical assumptions, I nevertheless approached the interviews within the context of a developing theoretical framework (such as the theoretical perspectives on individualisation). Throughout the stages of analysis and ongoing interviewing, I moved backwards and forwards between the two.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally laid out a step by step approach to data analysis based on their central proposition that meaning inheres in the data and it is the task of the grounded theorist to discover it. The researcher's role is to represent the data gathered rather than be part of its production. Charmaz (2002) outlines another variant of grounded theory, which places a greater emphasis on viewing the data as jointly produced by researcher and respondent. This draws upon perspectives in social research that interpret research data as a social construct, not simply as empirically available facts gathered by the researcher. Although I could not have articulated this at the beginning, my approach was influenced by this constructivist stance that takes a more interpretative approach to the data.

## **5.2 Decisions about CAQDAS (computer assisted qualitative data analysis software)**

Debates about CAQDAS recently suggest that we need to think critically about the use of these computer software programmes, which were originally designed to facilitate the organisation of coding data. They offer obvious advantages such as the speed and comprehensiveness of the subsequent retrieval of coded data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). However, this depends on the careful inputting of all the data. Some (Coffey et al., 1996) have cautioned against an over-reliance on computer programmes which can create a distance from the data and lend a deceptive 'scientific gloss' to data analysis.

When I started my analysis, I intended to use a computer software package and spent some time researching different packages. However, my initial coding framework was too complex. To input all my data using this framework would have taken an inordinate amount of time. I thus delayed a final decision about using a programme and proceeded with my preliminary analysis. I revised my coding framework and drew up 'theme tables'. Each table related to a key theme emerging from my data. On these I summarised and referenced relevant data from the interview transcripts for each couple. These tables provided useful overviews of my data and referencing the data by the page numbers in the interview transcripts assisted the retrieval of relevant material. I also carried out a more detailed case study analysis of selected sets of interviews and moved between these and the sample as a whole. Organising the data in this way brought out different dimensions to the data set (which I was still in the process of collecting). I had by now developed a manageable coding framework but by this stage I felt that the time advantages in using a package (in the subsequent ease of retrieving data) were outweighed by the time that would be required to input the data.

My preliminary analysis, combined with the fact that I carried out all the interviews myself, meant that I became very familiar with all my data. Potentially the PhD student working on a small scale study has this familiarity with the whole data set that is harder to achieve on a team project where the sharing of data via a computer based programme may be more advantageous. Through the processes of preliminary analysis, I also became aware of dimensions to the data that could not be broken down into coded segments. For example, I recognised 'silences' in the accounts of birth mothers about their status as mothers. These silences became evident through comparing them with the accounts of social mothers who spoke at length and often with great emotion about the work involved in claiming a parental status. For these comparisons, I sorted the interviews into two groups - birth mothers and social mothers. Another dimension was revealed by separate considerations of each set of interviews, which provided multiple accounts of the same events from different perspectives. Organising my data in this way revealed many contradictions and complexities between and within accounts in each set of interviews. I was also increasingly interested in being able to return to the

interviews as a whole, tracing threads within the accounts, some of which might have been lost had I gone ahead with inputting all my data onto a computer package. I became interested in the stories being told and in the different 'layers of stories' (Plummer, 1995:170).

### **5.3 Stories and narratives**

Plummer (1995) identifies the useful development of a 'sociology of stories' for research with a focus on the personal narratives of individual intimate lives<sup>57</sup>. His use of the term 'story' has also been adopted by other sociologists (Jamieson, 1998, Lawler, 2000, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001) and reflects a narrative approach to sociological research. Lawler (2000) notes that the term 'story' can imply overtones of fiction or duplicity but emphasises that the veracity of the research interview is not the point. A narrative approach considers the ways in which the account is 'storied' and recognises that the storied account does not provide the whole or only possible story. Lawler (2000) discusses how stories involve fragments of people's lives, events and episodes that are selected, interpreted and presented into a more or less coherent personal narrative, shaped by the respondent and the researcher.

Following some preliminary analysis, I was increasingly drawn to this kind of narrative approach, which seemed particularly suited to my research. In particular, as noted above, analysing multiple accounts of the same events can highlight the extent to which individuals tell their own stories. For example, the emphasis on certain aspects of the story may be emphasised by one more than by another, memories of 'what actually happened' vary, there are also silences in some accounts which become apparent in contrast to their partner's account. These factors became apparent through examining the separate interviews carried out with both members of the couple alongside each other. I gave an example above of how I also 'grouped'

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<sup>57</sup> The use of a similar approach is well documented in medical sociology (Baruch, 1981, Riessman, 1990).

accounts in other ways (considering the stories of the birth mothers alongside the stories of the social mothers) in order to facilitate further analysis.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest that one of the main advantages of narrative analysis is that it enables the researcher to consider how the respondents tells her/his story (the form) which can be as informative as what s/he says (content). They argue that this approach complements and counteracts the inherent problems of a fragmentation of data, which can often lead researchers to overlook the form of their data. This fragmentation of data is an intrinsic part of more traditional approaches whereby the researcher identifies analytical themes and codes data in accordance with the developing conceptual framework. As discussed above, this was also my starting point. However in adopting a narrative analysis approach, it is also important to acknowledge the point made by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) who argue that this is not a uniquely privileged means of analysis. There is no 'best' way to analyse interview accounts.

As with any analytical strategy there are many ways to examine stories under this particular framework (Riessman, 1993). The classic approach involves a consideration of the whole interview, the whole 'story' and the researcher would generally analyse a small number of stories in detail focussing primarily upon the formal narrative structures. The analysis of narratives can also focus on the social action implied in the text. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest this approach requires a slightly less systematic and structured approach to analysis and relies more on the contextual frameworks (which may or may not be made explicit in the interview) to explain the meanings that inhere within the story. This is closer to the approach I adopted and here I was influenced by some of the research I discuss in Chapter 2, in particular that of Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001).

Chase (1996) outlines a central aim of this kind of narrative approach to analysis. She suggests that the aim is not to impose definitive interpretations on respondents' accounts or to challenge the meanings that respondents attach to their stories, but to focus attention on 'the taken-for-granted cultural processes embedded in the

everyday practices of story telling' (1996:55). She argues that to understand the meaning and significance of a story requires understanding how it is communicated within or against specific cultural discourses. Jamieson (1998) and Lawler (2000) also identify how the narratives that make up respondents' stories, and through which people make sense of their lives, are not 'free-floating' but inextricably linked to broader social narratives. These include academic, political and moral public stories that are told about personal life. These public stories provide an important contextual framework for the understanding of personal accounts, one that is both socially and historically specific.

Narrative analysis is a highly interpretative process and the researcher plays a central role in shaping the written account that emerges from the respondents' stories. The interpretative processes begin in the interview setting but as the researcher moves from being a participant in the interview she/he alone has control over the interpretative processes that occur through analysis, processes which reflect her/his particular interests, choices and concerns. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) suggest that these stages of research are especially difficult to write about because of the subjective and intuitive nature of the work involved. They argue that:

... we are directly confronted with the subjective, interpretative nature of what we do - having to interpret respondents' words in some way, while realising that these words could be interpreted in a multitude of ways (1998:122)

As Mauthner and Doucet note, while this can be an exciting stage of research, it can also be deeply uncomfortable - and difficult to articulate. I turn to some of the issues raised by these processes of interpretation in the following section.

## **5.4 Dilemmas in the representations of private lives: issues of interpretation and validity**

Considerations about the role of the researcher in the creating, interpreting and theorising of research data form a particular, although not exclusive, concern of feminist debates (Stacey, 1988, Maynard, 1994), which have focussed on two key areas of the research process. Firstly, questions about the nature of the research relationship. I refer to one example of this above in a discussion about the impact of the researcher's location at the stages of access and carrying out interviews. Secondly, in debating the subjective, interpretative nature of research, feminists have argued that the production of knowledge is a social activity which is culturally, socially and historically embedded thus resulting in 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988). In recognition of this, Harding (1992) recommends an explicit and systematic examination and account of our biases, beliefs and social locations. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) have subsequently pointed out the difficulties in achieving this, not least because it requires a profound level of self-awareness that few of us possess. While these discussions have produced a rich literature about what a feminist methodology or epistemology might look like, the nature of these debates has also become increasingly abstract and philosophical. As such they have more recently been criticised for their inaccessibility and disengagement from the practicalities of research (Kelly et al., 1994, Mauthner and Doucet, 1998).

More recently, attempts have been made to redress this balance. One example is the edited collection by Ribbens and Edwards (1998) which includes the chapter by Mauthner and Doucet (1998). They identify a contradiction between two fundamental principles of feminist research. These are the issues of listening to respondents' voices in their own terms, and the recognition that the researcher ultimately shapes the research process and product. If the first aim increasingly appears to be a feminist ideal rather than a reality, Mauthner and Doucet suggest it is essential to pay attention to the issue of how we interpret and represent our respondents' accounts (while also acknowledging limits to the ability to have a

complete awareness of how we shape our work). This raises issues of accountability to our respondents. Glucksmann (1994:150) argues that no amount of sensitivity or reciprocity in the interview situation alters the fact that it is the researcher's task to produce knowledge.

Throughout my research, a central issue related to my 'production of knowledge' has been a feeling of accountability to the women who took part in my research and concerns about what they might make of my interpretations and my theorising of their accounts. Many feminists have written about similar dilemmas (eloquent accounts are provided, for example, by Skeggs, 1998 and De Vault, 1999b), which are often connected to a personal investment in the research undertaken. Edwards and Ribbens (1998) suggest that many feminist researchers have a special type of commitment to their research, in choosing to research topics to which they have a particular personal and/or political commitment. They argue that this presents difficult ethical and practical dilemmas arising out of simultaneous commitments to the production of academic public knowledge and to the integrity of both the respondents' and the researcher's privately based everyday knowledge and ways of knowing. These are issues that are particularly salient in areas of research that are of a sensitive and/or political nature, and as such these are central issues to my research project.

Some feminist researchers (Acker et al., 1983) argue that one way to address these dilemmas is to engage in collaborative interpretative work with respondents. However there are many problems with this approach. Not all respondents would view involvement beyond the interview to be part of their 'research contract'. There are also issues about how to maintain the confidentiality of the respondents, if sharing work in progress with them. In my research, for example, there have been instances where one member of a couple has revealed information that was not known to her partner and which would be potentially damaging information, if revealed. The solution here would be to confer about analysis only at an individual level but the researcher then still maintains control (and power) over the overall interpretation.



I agree there may be some merit to sharing work in progress with respondents. For example, respondents' feedback on how their words are interpreted might make the analysis stronger. Skeggs (1994) argues this point in her ethnography of white working class young women, although she also notes that this approach does not necessarily lead to agreement on how and what interpretations should be made. In a later account of this research (Skeggs, 1998:30-31), she discusses her refusal to abandon an interpretation of her respondents' accounts through the perspective of class even though her respondents rejected this for themselves. She suggests that this raises questions, that researchers must address, about being both accountable and responsible whilst wanting to retain one's interpretations. These are central questions I have considered in my own research and reflect concerns about making my own interpretations whilst also questioning how my respondents might receive these.

As I discussed earlier, many respondents in my study hoped to contribute to information available for lesbian mothers and those planning to have children. For some this was a major motivation in taking part. One couple said that they had often thought of producing an anthology of lesbian parents' experiences, in recognition of the general absence of UK literature in this area. In these kinds of discussions, all agreed that a PhD was not the most accessible format for these kinds of aims. To provide some kind of anthology of the stories I collected would need to be a separate project which would be more akin to letting women's experiences 'speak for themselves' rather than providing an analysis of women's accounts of their experiences. Respondents made some general enquiries about what I intended to do with their accounts<sup>58</sup>. This was frequently followed up with comments which represented a 'rather you than me' stance. They clearly did not see the analysis as a collective endeavour (even had I hoped for this) and unlike Skeggs (1994), I did not share my emerging analysis with respondents. Generally respondents seemed unconcerned about the theoretical product that would emerge from my research. I do not believe this stemmed from a disinterest in what I was

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<sup>58</sup> This point forms part of my discussion of informed consent in Section 4.2.b.

doing but rather from a feeling that it was in and of itself a worthwhile endeavour that they were taking part in.

However, this raises the questions of responsibility and accountability referred to above. I hope to do justice to the accounts given to me and this is accentuated by a personal commitment to my work and the belief expressed by many respondents that I was doing worthwhile work. At the same time I am aware that not all my respondents might be in full agreement with the interpretations I make and that a different story could be produced out of the same material by any of them or by another researcher.

The production of a valid account also depends upon recognising as much as we can, how we are implicated in the research process and in the production of our final accounts. This then requires some acknowledgement of who we are, where we are situated and how this impacts on how we filter information. Stanley and Wise (1993) argue that the researcher's personal history is part of the process through which 'conclusions' are reached and as such must be made explicit. While I agree with the central tenets of reflexivity (in so far as this is possible), there are no easy solutions to the issues raised. I have struggled in particular with how to write about my own biography as part of this account. I turn to discussions of these dilemmas in the final section below.

## **5.5 The researcher's story**

In Section 4.3, I discuss the debates about the impact of the researcher's identity (in terms of gender, sexual orientation and so on) in relation to access to respondents and developing rapport and trust in the interview setting. Here I want to focus on the equally problematic assumptions that 'insider' knowledge can also grant an 'epistemic privilege'. Feminists (such as Edwards, 1993, M. Wolf, 1996, De Vault, 1999b, Reinharz and Chase, 2002) highlight the dangers of assuming that 'gender' or 'sexual orientation' are homogenous categories and that 'matching' of researcher and respondent along these lines will necessarily result in the production of more

authentic research accounts. Such assumptions overlook the heterogeneity of experiences that go beyond gender or sexual orientation and which are mediated by the experience of class, race, ethnicity, and disability, as well as other factors which might include parenthood, political affiliations and so on. Reinharz and Chase (2002) suggest that these more recent feminist debates bring a welcome complexity to reflections on the diversity of researchers' and respondents' social locations and subjectivities. They discuss the example of research into women's experiences of motherhood by (female) researchers who are not mothers, and they highlight researchers' different conclusions about the ways in which being 'non-mothers' impacted on their work. One example they provide is the work of Verta Taylor (1996<sup>59</sup>) who studied the self-help movement surrounding postpartum depression. She felt she had both an insider status (shared experience of depression) as well as an outsider status (no children) and that her 'outsider' status was not questioned by her respondents<sup>60</sup>.

Ellen Lewin (1998) is another researcher who has observed her insider/outsider status, and she reaches a different conclusion to Taylor. Reflecting upon her earlier study of lesbian motherhood (Lewin, 1993), she discusses how her respondents were telling stories formulated for a lesbian non-mother and states:

How their narratives would have been shaped had I also been a mother I cannot know, but I feel sure they would have been different, if not in substance then in emphasis (1998:41)

By contrast, in her study of lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies, Lewin (1998) points out her closeness to the topic, having had a commitment ceremony with her partner. This she suggests situates her as an insider. One can imagine that sharing this information with her respondents would help to develop trust with her respondents who would know of her enthusiasm for such ceremonies (which she makes explicit in her introduction). Nevertheless, there may still be other factors at

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<sup>59</sup> Taylor, Verta (1996) *Rock-a-By Baby: Feminism, Self-Help and Postpartum Depression* New York: Routledge

<sup>60</sup> It is interesting in itself that she felt her status as a 'non-mother' might have been challenged by the mothers she interviewed.

play (ethnicity or class, for example) that might problematise her all-embracing declaration of an 'insider' stance in this research and here she provides a less thoughtful account of these issues than that evident in her discussion of her research into lesbian motherhood.

Within the above examples there is little evidence of any discussion of the ways in which the analysis of interview data can be affected by the researcher's personal biographies. However there are some accounts which do address this issue. Griffith and Smith (1987) carried out research to explore the ways in which mothers experienced the schooling of their children<sup>61</sup> and they point out that their personal histories as mothers provided the impetus for this study. They provide a useful account of the ways in which the researchers' own experiences can become a resource for analysis. Griffith's field-notes, for example, detailed her emotional reaction to one interview she had carried out, which made her feel her own mothering had been inadequate. Her observations here resonate with my experiences in the interview setting where I found myself mentally comparing my mothering (sometimes favourably as well as sometimes negatively) against the mothering of women I was interviewing. Griffith and Smith demonstrate how these kinds of personal reactions can go beyond being part of the interview dynamics and be utilised to enrich the subsequent analysis. Griffith's reflections on her experience in a particular interview setting alerted them to the 'moral dimension' of mothering and the social constructions of 'good'/'bad' mothering. They then employed this recognition to look for other illustrations of this dimension to mothering in other accounts.

Doucet (1998) has discussed how aspects of the researcher's personal experience can impact on the analysis in other ways. She argues that her experiences of caring for her three small children had a profound affect on all the stages of her doctoral research, but most significantly during her analysis. For example, she suggests she was drawn to make sense of her data within a theoretical framework that debated the complexities of 'care' and 'care-work' precisely because she was so deeply

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<sup>61</sup> They interviewed mothers about what they do to help their children in school, how they manage children's experiences within the school, relations with teachers and the institutions of schooling.

involved in care-work herself. However, she also observes that 'I did not realise it at the time (but) my life was almost completely taken up with caring and writing about caring' (1998:53). Thus while she provides a lucid account about the impact of her own experiences of motherhood on her analysis, her account also highlights that to some extent we may only see these kinds of processes at play with the benefit of hindsight.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) argue that the critical issue is to attempt to trace and document our data analysis processes and the choices and decisions made. In this way, they suggest, others can see for themselves what may have been lost or gained in the processes of moving from private lives (the researcher's and the respondents accounts) into public knowledge:

We need to document these reflexive processes, not just in general terms such as our class, gender and ethnic background; but in a more concrete and nitty-gritty way in terms of where, how and why particular decisions are made at particular stages (1998:138).

Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994:145) similarly highlight the social nature of interpretation and suggest that 'some form of openly reflexive interpretation then seems essential if we are to claim any validity for our conclusions'. However, Holland and Ramazanoglu also acknowledge that such aims are not always, if ever, reached in practice. As noted by Stanley and Wise (1993:177), researchers should also be cautious about the extent to which they reveal themselves within the final account, not least because 'to locate oneself within research and writing is a hazardous and frightening business'.

Finally, these discussions touch upon the extent of self-disclosure the researcher is prepared to incorporate into the writing up of the research. In relation to lesbian research, this has been relatively unproblematised. There is a tendency, for example, to write about being out as a lesbian, bisexual or gay researcher in relation to being out to respondents. As noted (Section 4.3), this is usually raised in discussions of gaining access to and trust of respondents. There is however a wider issue about self-disclosure. In addition to debates about how much we reveal about

ourselves to respondents there is also a wider debate about how much we are prepared to reveal about ourselves in public accounts of our work in claiming validity for our conclusions. While there is very little literature that considers the impact of self-disclosure in the interview situation, there is even less that considers self-disclosure when writing up and publishing our work. Edwards and Ribbens (1998) offer a rare account of these dilemmas. They note that researchers do not have the protection of anonymity that is offered to research participants and suggest therefore that there should be limits on self-revelations in the public domain. Researchers have a right to privacy, as do their respondents. There is a further dilemma in that our own self-disclosure may also encroach upon the privacy of those close to us. I argue that we need to ask questions about what this might achieve rather than accept it as the orthodox convention to be followed.

In the previous chapter I discussed the work of Stacey and Biblarz (2001) who reviewed the body of psychological research into lesbian parenting. Given the 'inescapably ideological and emotional nature' of this area of research, they argue that 'it is incumbent on scholars to acknowledge the personal convictions that they bring to the discussion' (2001:161). They suggest that the influence of the researcher can play a greater part than usual in how the research is carried out and in how the findings are interpreted and presented. For example, they outline how a political commitment to lesbian parenting can have a detrimental influence if it is allowed to compromise the development of knowledge that is of a particularly sensitive nature. Their discussion raised important methodological issues for all research that is of a sensitive and political nature and I place my research into this category. I hope some of my personal convictions are evident throughout this account. I also hope to have demonstrated my awareness of how the researcher's (my) position shapes the research and that this occurs throughout the project rather than at any discrete phase. I have aimed to provide examples of this, making myself visible within the process while maintaining my own privacy in the final writing up of this account.

## Chapter 4

### **'Everyday experiments': Issues in working out routes to conception and donor involvement**

#### **1. Introduction**

In Chapter 2, I discuss the work of theorists of late modernity (Giddens, 1992, Beck, 1992, and with Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002), who make a connection between the greater freedom individuals have to 'experiment' in their everyday lives and the wider social transformations in contemporary Western societies. They argue that we are living through a period that can be characterised as one in transition from old certainties, and where family lives are increasingly worked out rather than taken for granted. They highlight key characteristics influencing the way in which individuals approach life in contemporary Western societies. These include increased individualisation, reflexivity, and choice (also linked to increased risk and uncertainty).

These are themes that, some argue, fit well with same sex families. Recent sociological research into lesbian and gay experiences of family life and parenthood (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 1997, 2001, Dunne, 2000a, Haines and Weiner, 2000) suggest that these 'families of choice' are displaying 'narratives of self invention' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). As such, these authors argue they form a prime example of what Giddens (1992) describes as 'experiments in everyday living', where there are few role models or ascribed norms about what should be done.

Over the same period of time, other sociological family research has investigated changing aspects of heterosexual family lives (Smart and Neale, 1999a, Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000). These studies suggest that the existence of dependent children may have a considerable impact upon the nature of intimacy in modern

societies, although their conclusions differ about the extent to which this may be so.

The families in my study offer an opportunity to further examine some of the contradictions posed by the findings of existing empirical work. In this chapter I consider two aspects of respondents' family practices that can generally be subsumed under decisions about having a child together. These are first, the chosen routes to conception (most commonly donor insemination, DI, or self-insemination, SI). Second, the setting up of families where both parents are the same gender, and which do not include a man as a resident father (if indeed in any father role). These are points at which women having their first child in the context of their relationship most explicitly diverge from traditional family norms.

Drawing upon the interview data about the decisions involved in having a child together, I do two things. First, I lay out the diverse range of practices involved in these decisions, focusing on the two aspects outlined above. Second, as I describe the practices, I also identify common themes that underpin respondents' accounts of these (very different) practices.

In this examination, a major (moral) theme emerges; namely that of an overall prioritisation of the needs of children. Respondents' accounts of their decision making all placed children's needs above their own needs or preferences, although the ways in which they did so vary considerably. Some respondents, for example, emphasised the idea that children need (at the least, knowledge of) biological parents. Self-insemination with a known donor offers the possibility of meeting those needs. However, an emphasis on biological parenthood can present tensions when placed alongside the work involved in creating a family unit (also seen as being in the child's best interests) where only one woman has a biological connection to her child. Other respondents place a greater emphasis on the belief that children's needs are best met within a (social) family unit, asserting that social relationships are more important than biological considerations. As I shall discuss, in this discourse, respondents prioritise the two female parent family, which does not need to involve the biological father. Insemination via donor clinics offers the



possibilities of meeting these needs because the donor is anonymous and can pose no threat to the integrity of the family the couple are creating. However prioritising these needs is in tension with the more dominant assertions of children's needs for knowledge of their genetic origins and/or for a father. These perceived needs cannot be reconciled within a same sex DI family.

These two moralities, which can be broadly summarised as 'children need 'knowledge of (if not to know) both biological parents' and 'children need (social) families', are both seen to be in children's best interests. Edwards et al. (1999a) point out that these elements are mutually reinforced in intact nuclear heterosexual families, but in families that have diverse biological and social relationships (including stepfamilies and same sex families) they are in considerable tension.

In the next section I outline some of the moral discourses that can impact on lesbian couples' decisions. In Sections 3 and 4, I shall lay out the diverse range of practices that respondents reported were involved in planning and having children. In doing so, I identify ways in which respondents draw upon and deal with competing moralities centred on children's needs. An analysis of the ways in which women talk about the practices involved in having children can reveal a great deal about the moral realities of having children within same sex relationships, and the wider moralities of parenthood (especially motherhood) and family lives where dependent children are involved.

## **2. Dominant discourses relevant to parenthood and the choice of donor or self-insemination**

### **2.1 Children's needs**

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the changing nature of family lives has fuelled public anxieties over what is happening to 'the family'. Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) argue that many of these concerns coalesce around the needs of children, focusing on the potentially detrimental 'outcomes' for children of living in variable

circumstances and structures i.e. outside the heterosexual nuclear family. Women having children together in the context of their relationship form one such example. They frequently face accusations that their decisions are driven by their own selfish desires rather than by any consideration of the child's needs (Lawler, 1999, Haines and Weiner, 2000). These accusations are put by those on the religious, moral and political right, and voiced within the media (Alldred, 1998). The rhetoric of children's needs is employed as a powerful device to support the traditional family unit, which is presented as the most appropriate family form within which children's needs can be fully met (Phillips, 2002). These needs are not always made explicit but Phillips (2002) identifies the needs for stability, security and a sense of identity.

Theories that mothers are best placed to meet children's needs, being 'naturally attuned' to children's needs, originate in developmental psychology. The work of theorists Bowlby (1953) and Winnicott (1957, 1960) has been particularly influential. Lawler (2000) suggests that this influence has been exceptionally enduring and while others have modified their original theories, few reject them. Bowlby (1953) and Winnicott (1957) both stressed the need for child-centredness. The notion of 'good enough mothering' (Winnicott, 1957), which has endured over time, was developed to explain the mother's role in the development of the child's self. It was based on the belief that the mother is uniquely placed to best meet the needs of the child, including the needs for physical and emotional care, protection, love and discipline. As Woodhead (1997) argues, these needs are generally presented as universal immutable truths, effectively disguising the ways in which they are socially and historically specific constructions. He further argues that the contemporary formulation of children's needs have profound moral implications. Once children are defined in terms of needs, something must be done to meet those needs. Mothers, in particular, are identified as the 'primary meeters' of those needs (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991) and a defining feature of good (enough) mothering is how adequately mothers meet those needs (Lawler, 1999<sup>62</sup>, 2000).

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<sup>62</sup> Lawler (1999) points out that fathers has also received attention in relation to children's needs but that this attention has tended to focus predominantly on absent fathers.

The ways in which respondents in my study set up their families involve some radical departures from conventional heterosexual norms of family and procreation. However, I suggest that as mothers/potential mothers, they cannot escape the expectations attached to the role of mother in being primarily held responsible for meeting their child's needs and for the 'normal development' of their child (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991). Furthermore, as lesbian mothers, they are at risk of being seen as 'unfit' mothers. The legitimacy of their motherhood and their families is potentially open to question and social censure (see, for example, the discussion below concerning attempts to restrict access to DI to married women only). Respondents may therefore be constrained by the obligations and expectations attached to motherhood and have to work harder than most to demonstrate that their child's welfare is not in jeopardy.

Two public/popular discourses play a particular role in forming the socio-political context within which lesbian couples are entering into parenthood, by donor or self-insemination. These are first, a child's need for a father, and second, a child's need to have access to genetic origins information, and I address each in turn below.

## **2.2 The need for a father**

Lewis (2001) argues that recent shifts in social policy and family law have re-emphasised the importance of fathers, reflecting the concerns of negative outcomes, attributed to the absence of a father. In the past, men, as fathers, had full authority over their offspring if married to the child's mother although these rights have been eroded on the twentieth century (Neale, 1995). However, as Lewis argues, a relatively new aspect to these recent shifts is the increasing emphasis on the maintenance of links between fathers and their biological children, whether the father is married to the child's mother or not. This emphasis originates in part, from the New Right discourses that focussed attention on absent fathers. Various proponents of these discourses (Murray, 1990, 1996, Dennis and Erdos, 1993) suggest that men need to be tied into families in order to be civilised and boys, in

particular, need fathers as male role models. They argue that fatherless families pose dangers for the stability of society as a whole and the solution is to reassert the nuclear family and the power of the role of the father within it.

Within this context, lesbians having children by DI or SI pose a threat because this offers both the possibilities of conception without the need for a relationship with a man and the possibility that men would be excluded from family lives with their offspring (Radford, 1991, Donovan, 2000).

One example of debates that focussed on a child's need for a father can be seen in the consultation process instigated by the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology<sup>63</sup>. The Committee's remit was to consider the social, legal and ethical implications in the field of assisted reproduction. Although not new, DI was included in the remit because it was not 'universally accepted nor indeed regulated by law' (DHSS, 1984). The recommendations of this Committee formed the basis for the 1987 Government White Paper and the resulting Human and Fertilisation and Embryology Act (HFE Act, 1990).

For heterosexual couples, using DI as a way to overcome a husband's infertility has become increasingly acceptable and provides a means to reproduce the structural and ideological underpinnings of the traditional family model (Haimes, 1990). To assist this, the HFE Act (1990) allows the infertile husband to take the place of the donor as the child's father. He can, for example, legitimately be named on the child's birth certificate as the child's father. Secrecy around the use of DI has also been condoned, in part to allow the resultant family to 'pass as normal' (Blyth, 2000).

However, the legitimacy of same sex couples using DI remains far more open to question. While heterosexual couples use DI as a means to overcome male infertility, lesbian couples use DI to create families without fathers. This potentially subversive use of DI allows women to conceive without having a sexual

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<sup>63</sup> This committee was set up in 1982 and became widely known as the Warnock Committee (DHSS, 1984).

relationship with a man and does not require any kind of attachment to a man who will take on the role of father in place of the anonymous donor. During the passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, a proposal was put forward to restrict access of insemination techniques to married couples. The arguments in favour of this proposal focussed on the welfare of the child, the need for children to have male role models and the selfishness of lesbians wanting to have children while denying them a father (Donovan, 1992). The attempts to restrict access failed but a last minute amendment was proposed which was formally enacted as section 13(5) of the Act:

A woman shall not be provided with treatment services unless account has been taken of the welfare of any child who may be born as a result of the treatment – including the need of that child for a father (S13 [5] HFE Act, 1990).

This clause signalled a preference to validate only certain types of families - heterosexual families with fathers. In practice, clinics interpret this legislation in different ways but a significant number adopt the policy of only accepting married couples or heterosexual co-habiting couples for DI treatment. Recently, PinkParents<sup>64</sup> carried out a postal survey of private and National Health Service clinics to investigate how many offered donor insemination treatment to lesbians. They report that less than 25% of clinics accept lesbian clients.

Alongside these debates about access to donor clinics, there was a growing awareness that DI was a technique so simple that it did not require medical supervision. Lesbians have increasingly made private arrangements as an alternative to DI (see also section 3.1.b). The practice of SI remains a source of controversy given that it not only enables lesbians to set up families without fathers but it side-steps any official regulation. It does however allow the possibility for those conceived to have a greater access to knowledge of their birth origins than is currently available by DI.

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<sup>64</sup> Pink Parents UK Resources, February 2001, accessed on their web-site <<http://www.pinkparents.org.uk>>. PinkParents is a national organisation of lesbian, gay and bisexual parents, parents-to-be and their children, which aims to provide information, support and resources for lesbian parenting.

## 2.3 The need for genetic origins information

There is a widespread acceptance of the idea that it is important for any child to know of her/his origins. This has grown out of the literature on adoption over the past 30 years (McWhinnie, undated, Triseliotis, 1973), which has presented the argument that children have rights to know of their biological origins and, further that this knowledge is pivotal to a child's identity formation and should not be withheld. These arguments have also influenced debates about removing the anonymity which sperm donors who donate to UK donor clinics currently enjoy.

Shenfield (1999) argues that adoption and DI are not comparable, primarily because children born by DI have been long wanted by their parents, at least one of whom is also the child's genetic parent. She contrasts this with the situation of an adopted child who has often been given up (or, as Shenfield puts it, 'abandoned') by her/his biological parents. She concludes that there is no moral imperative on parents to tell their donor-conceived children the truth. However, her position ignores the argument that secrets in the family can be damaging and it is morally wrong to withhold information from children about their origins. This argument was considered by the Warnock Committee (DHSS, 1984) but they were equally concerned to protect the rights of the donor. The HFE Act (1990) retains donor anonymity<sup>65</sup> and a further sub-section prevents identifying information from being made available retrospectively (unless primary legislation is introduced).

More recently the Department of Health (DoH, 2002) has issued an open consultation document to consider the introduction of new regulations under the 1990 Act that would allow people conceived by DI to have access to more information about their genetic origins, including the donor's identity. Baroness

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<sup>65</sup> Section 31 of the HFE Act stipulates that people conceived by DI are, after the age of 16, entitled to ask the HFE Authority whether someone they intend to marry is genetically related to them and, at 18, whether they were conceived by sperm or egg donation (Section 31 of the HFE Act, 1990). Any other information they receive would depend on what the clinic told the prospective child's parent and what the parent chooses to pass on to their child. However, as the law stands, people conceived by DI have no right to obtain that information if their parents choose not to pass it on.

Warnock who chaired the original committee is reported to have said she would now advocate removing the anonymity of donors so that people conceived by DI should have the same 'right to know' as adopted people. Her position is said to be based on an awareness that 'since 1984, we have become much more sensitive to the idea of genetic inheritance' (*The Guardian*, May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2002).

### **3. Working out the route of conception**

#### **3.1 The main features of donor or self insemination**

The two main routes of conception used by women in same sex relationships are donor insemination (DI) at a clinic or by negotiating private arrangements with a donor – commonly referred to as self-insemination (SI). The other option is (hetero)sexual intercourse. Some lesbians take this route, although it is unlikely that this would involve an ongoing sexual relationship.

##### **3.1.a. Donor clinics**

Donor insemination (DI) is the oldest form of assisted conception (Haines and Daniels, 1998). However it was only in the 1980s that it gained a wider public profile through public debates leading up to the HFE Act (1990). This Act established the regulatory body, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFE Authority), whose remit included the establishment of a licensing system and a Code of Guidance. All fertility centres that stored gametes and/or offered treatment which involved the use of donated gametes were obliged to register with the HFE Authority and to adhere to these regulations (Blank, 1998).

Clinics thoroughly screen donor sperm for sexually transmitted diseases and certain genetic conditions. They hold reserves of donor sperm and donors at UK clinics remain anonymous. Donor insemination can be expensive. For example, private

clinics charge for an initial consultation (£100 to £250) and fees for the insemination range from £250 up to £600/cycle<sup>66</sup>. Access to clinics can also be difficult in terms of finding a clinic that will accept lesbian couples or women who do not have a male partner.

### 3.1.b. Self insemination

Self-insemination (SI) involves making a private arrangement whereby women find their own donor and organise insemination for themselves. SI is defined as 'the simple act of placing a man's sperm in a woman's vagina without intimate contact' (PinkParents, 2001). It does not require medical intervention or supervision since all that is required is a small container to hold the sperm and a needleless syringe to transfer the sperm into the vagina. Women may make some payment to their donor but this is often a nominal fee or a payment to cover expenses.

SI raises many additional issues such as making decisions about whether any ongoing contact with the donor is desirable, and finding a suitable donor. Some women may want their child to have some level of regular contact with the donor while others opt for a 'traceable donor'. The latter denotes an agreement whereby there is no ongoing contact but the donor is willing to be traced in the future. It may also be possible to arrange SI with an anonymous donor by using a SI group or a friend to act as an intermediary between the couple and the donor.

Women may know men within their networks to ask or they may ask friends to make enquiries on their behalf. An increasingly common option is to advertise in the gay press. Alternatively, women may access donors through a self-insemination group or network. The remit of SI groups varies. Some provide advice and support, while others also provide the service of acting as an intermediary contact between donors and recipients of donor sperm.

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<sup>66</sup> Based on information from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority web-site. <<http://www.hfea.co.uk>>



### 3.2 Finding out about alternative routes to conception

Many couples noted that finding out information about DI or SI was not always straightforward. Suzie, for example said:

We didn't know how to go about having a baby (laughs). I mean I didn't think it was possible without having a one-night stand or something like that. We were quite isolated for a long time, we weren't out to anyone (Suzie – birth mother).

Suzie and Jayne wanted a child for many years but Suzie felt it was impossible without resorting to a 'one-night stand'. They indefinitely deferred their plans to have a child and this only changed when they saw a documentary about gay parenting on Channel 4, which featured a lesbian couple who were attending a donor clinic for treatment. This is a rare example of mainstream visibility of lesbian couples using DI.

Another couple, Stella and Denise negotiated an agreement, with a man Stella had known for many years, that he would help them to have a child together. However, they did not know about alternatives to sexual intercourse and remained unaware of the options of DI or SI at the time of trying to conceive:

Had I known (about insemination) I would not have done it that way, we just didn't think there was any other way, and I desperately wanted a child. We were very naïve, we didn't have any knowledge about fertility clinics and things like that (Stella – birth mother).

Stella's decision to enter into a sexual relationship with a man was not necessarily a 'choice' (as it might be for some lesbians) but it was the only way that she knew of to conceive a child. Her account highlights the fact that it cannot be taken for granted that information about DI or SI is widely available to individuals during the course of growing up and becoming adults, in contrast to information about the biological facts of heterosexual reproduction.

Furthermore, Stella, Suzie and their partners were not 'out' to anyone prior to their pregnancies. They had no knowledge of any lesbian/gay community or networks

nor had they any lesbian, gay or bisexual friends. One of the few ways for lesbians to find out information about DI or SI is through links into what might be termed a 'sub-culture'. As Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001:89) argue, 'to come out in present day western societies is to encounter a wealth of knowledge on *how* it is possible to be as non-heterosexuals'. The above two couples had no access to this wealth of knowledge. Others who had this access were often couples who had been confidently out for many years. As one respondent put it, she felt they had 'imbibed' knowledge about DI or SI 'along the way'.

However, for other couples, including some who had been out for many years and who were involved in lesbian/gay/bisexual networks, the acquisition of knowledge about becoming parents was not easily acquired:

We live in this tiny village ... we have lots of lesbian friends and networks in (*name of city*), but we didn't know anyone who had kids and we didn't know how to get started. In the end we literally just got out the phonebook, and started finding out what the services were. There's not enough information out there really (Tina - social mother).

Alternative routes to conception may be known about in theory but finding out the necessary information to put theory into practice is not always routinely acquired. Rather it must be actively sought out and this may be dependent upon a number of factors, including geographical factors. Lesbian parenting networks tend to be concentrated in larger cities but even then knowledge of such networks can be very much word of mouth.

### **3.3 Routes taken by respondents in my study**

One couple conceived by taking the route of sexual intercourse. However, to all intents and purposes this couple perceived the man involved as their 'donor'. Their arrangement was otherwise similar to the self-insemination arrangements whereby the 'donor' is traceable but there is no ongoing contact.

Seven couples conceived via a donor clinic. For six couples this was their preferred option. One couple initially tried to conceive via SI arrangements, which proved unsuccessful. Donor clinics can only provide minimal and non-identifying knowledge of the biological father. Under the current legislation (HFE Act, 1990) present and past donors will remain anonymous.

Twelve couples conceived using SI. One couple initially tried to conceive through inseminations at a donor clinic but when this proved unsuccessful they negotiated an anonymous SI agreement. For eleven couples, SI was their first choice. Seven couples agreed to have some level of involvement or ongoing contact with their donor. The remaining five couples do not have any ongoing contact, but in most cases their donors are 'traceable', which leaves open the possibility of future contact. It is usually agreed this will be instigated by the couple not the donor.

*Table 1: Details of respondents' routes to conception:*

<b>Routes to conception:</b>	
Donor Clinics (DI)	7
Self-insemination (SI)	13*
Sexual intercourse	1
TOTAL:	21*

<b>Donor types:</b>	
Some level of ongoing contact agreed	7
Traceable	6*
Anonymous	8
TOTAL:	21*

<b>Self-insemination/private arrangements:</b>	
Number of gay donors	4
Number of heterosexual donors	10*
TOTAL:	14*
<b>Prior relationship with donor:</b>	
Donor known well - close/old friend	7
Donor known slightly - acquaintance, friend of friend or colleague	3
Donor not known at all - other than for SI discussions	4*
TOTAL:	14*

\* One couple had two children conceived by self-insemination arrangements with two different donors.

In the process of translating choice into practice women sometimes encountered practical constraints such as finding a donor for SI or finding a clinic that would not discriminate against lesbian couples. Not all couples were able to follow their preferred route.

### **3.4 Opting to use Self-Insemination**

For the majority of couples who decided to use SI, the potential for their child to have some knowledge of their genetic origins is presented as a key factor:

We were always very clear that it was in the best interests of the child to understand their biological heritage, we just felt strongly we wanted our child to have that knowledge (Vicky - birth mother).

I didn't think it would be fair on the child if they had no knowledge of half their genetic origins (Anna - social mother).

Knowing about your roots, a sense of who you are and where you came from is essential I think ... (Linda - birth mother).

These statements identify a common belief displayed by respondents who used SI, that it is in the child's best interests to have knowledge of both biological parents. This reflects dominant discourses around adoption and more recently an emerging consensus that DI offspring should have access to knowledge of their genetic origins (see Section 2.2). Having *knowledge of* their children's biological father was often linked to the possibility for their child to meet the donor at some future but that did not mean respondents viewed the donor as a parent:

The ground rules we sort of set were that basically we are William's parents. But as well we wanted William to have the option of knowing something about his father, we agreed that (Denise - social mother).

We wanted Adam to be able to know something about his origins and have some possibility of future contact maybe, but we don't see the donor as his father. Ruth and I are his parents, his family. We were very clear about that, we didn't want to risk any third party disrupting the stability and security that we could offer a child (Sara - birth mother).

I didn't want the donor involved, we set very clear boundaries around, you know, we're the boys' family and he is not part of that. I don't want the children's lives messed up because of the desires of an adult who doesn't know our family all that well (Emma - social mother).

These and other respondents commonly distinguished a child's need *for knowledge of* both biological parents from the need *to know* both biological parents in terms of being raised by both biological parents. The child's need for (biological) parents is here juxtaposed with a child's need for (social) family. In addition to emphasising the importance of (knowledge of) biological relationships, respondents also placed an emphasis on creating a family unit that is best placed to their child's needs. As pointed out by Edwards et al. (1999a), this 'children need families' discourse is bound up with a view that children need stability and security. Women stressed that these needs could be met within the family they were setting up which includes two parents, albeit that this involved one biological and one social parent, both of the same gender. The notion of 'family' is thus reinterpreted. A biological relationship was not regarded to be an essential component in developing and sustaining close parental relationships. As Denise (a social mother) puts it 'I couldn't love him more if he were my own'.

The explicit exclusion of the donor from some of these families was frequently presented as a means to maximise the possibility of providing their child with a cohesive and stable (social) family unit, and to minimise any potential disruption. For example, Emma expresses the risk of how involving a man, who was not well known to the couple, could 'mess up' their children's lives. Sara identifies a need to protect the stability and security that she felt herself and Ruth could offer, from any potential disruption from a 'third party' (i.e. the donor).

Respondents commonly identified two key risks. First, a known donor might seek more involvement or contact than has been agreed and second, that he could potentially claim legal rights in relation to the child. There are no legal safeguards to protect original SI arrangements and these risks have been further accentuated by the increased valorisation of biological fatherhood. In law, SI donors are considered as unmarried fathers and could potentially pursue contact with the child

through the courts even if this had not been agreed. These legal definitions of fatherhood differ from respondents' own understandings of who is a parent, a point I discuss in Section 4<sup>67</sup>.

While women who used SI found different ways to minimise these identified risks, all emphasised that they had taken these risks into account in some way. Often the extent of the risks posed related to how well women knew their donor prior to conception. Seven couples were able to find donors who were regarded as close friends of at least one of the couple:

There are risks of the donor making claims on the child but we felt we knew Jeremy well enough to know he'd respect our wishes (Christina - birth mother).

I'd read a book that advised setting up a written agreement with your donor, so we suggested this to Graham. But I think actually he was really upset we'd suggested it and I thought well, that's fair enough, (...) if it was going to upset Graham what's the point because I do trust him 100% (Elaine - social mother).

These statements present the belief that knowing their donor as a friend, and having trust in their friendship, reduced the risks that could arise through the involvement of a known donor. Some women also felt that by having someone whom they knew well as their donor guaranteed some knowledge of their 'innate' characteristics:

I felt it was worth knowing something about the donor, I knew his history and his family and he had qualities I admired. And given that history I also felt we could trust him completely (Stella - birth mother).

I wanted to know who the donor was, that was important for me really. I wanted to know he was someone with a good heart ... someone with all the qualities I would kind of choose in a partner, someone I would have wanted kids with I suppose, in another life ... (Rebecca - birth mother).

These respondents stressed the importance of having some detailed knowledge about their donors' characteristics and family history. By implication this knowledge can reduce the risks of any negative outcomes for the potential child. It

presents the opportunity of producing a child who will inherit 'good' qualities and can also provide some reassurance that their donor can be trusted to keep to any agreements negotiated about contact or non-contact. Rebecca also wanted to know something about their 'donor' for herself but this need is presented as compatible with the perceived needs of the child to have genetic origins information.

The processes of finding a donor can be difficult and ideals cannot always be met. Jacqueline and Joanne, for example, initially tried to conceive by SI, having found a close friend to be their donor. They account for this choice in terms of the concern to address the child's need for knowledge of biological parents:

Ideally we both thought it would be good for the child to ... to have that sense of knowledge of their roots (Jacqueline - birth mother).

However, these arrangements did not result in a viable pregnancy and proved to be unsustainable as a long-term arrangement. They were then faced with the option of finding another donor or using a clinic but decided that DI was preferable:

If we'd been able to get pregnant with our first donor, that would have been great, we trusted him implicitly to help us have a child that would've been our child not his. If we couldn't have someone we knew well we felt it was better not to know the man at all, have it anonymous than to face the risks of self inseminating with a man we only knew slightly, especially when you think that as a biological father he could go to court and get rights to see his offspring ... (Joanne - social mother).

While their ideal was for their child to have access to knowledge of the donor, they identify the risks posed by a donor challenging who the child 'belongs to'. They clearly saw themselves as the child's parents and did not perceive the donor as a parent. In their view, the two sets of needs (knowledge of biological (male) parent and cohesive two (female) parent family) can only be reconciled through knowing their donor well enough to trust that he would accept the child was their child, 'not his'. However, by opting to use DI, their acknowledgement that it is good for the child to have some knowledge of her/his roots cannot be met. Consequently, they

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<sup>67</sup> In the following chapter, I also return to questions of who constitutes a parent, particularly in relation to social mothers' claims to a parental status.

deal with the challenge that they are thus depriving their child of a basic need (to genetic origins information). They both spoke at length of their sustained efforts to try to meet their ideal (which was to have both knowledge of the donor and to create a (social) family unit for their child). DI was in effect a last resort. In taking this route, they balanced their ability to provide for a child's needs within a (social) family against involving an unknown man. While the latter option would have provided for their child's need for (at minimum) knowledge of the biological father, they present the risks to the integrity of the family they wanted to provide for their child as too great. The prioritisation of the child's needs remains a central focus within their account even though the ways in which they met those needs ultimately shifted from the use of SI to the use of DI.

Six couples found donors who were either casual acquaintances or not known at all to the couple prior to conception (seven donors, including the couple who had two children using different donors). These women were faced with making decisions about donors, based on relatively little information. They provided extensive accounts of a range of measures taken to minimise any risks:

None of us had a clue how it would be with a new baby and we didn't know him that well ... so we just had to be as clear as we could about what our expectations were. We didn't rush into anything, we had in-depth discussions over a year before we went ahead and inseminated (Vicky - birth mother).

Vicky emphasised how much care and planning had gone into setting up this arrangement. They spent 'over a year' getting to know their donor, and Vicky also spoke of attending a course for lesbians planning parenthood. She stressed how they did not 'rush' into insemination with someone they did not know. This implicitly deals with the challenge that lesbians having children are selfish individuals who put their own desires and needs before those of the child. Later in the interview, she outlined how this challenge was put to her directly by her mother. Her account displays a careful approach to planning their child over a period of time through which they approached parenthood in contrast to the idea of 'rushing' into having a child with someone they did not know, which carries implicit undertones of irresponsible behaviour.



Some women had no previous knowledge about their donor. Here the risks were perceived to be greater, and the explanations presented about their choices tend to be lengthy. Lauren and Emma were one of two couples who found a donor through advertisements in a lesbian magazine:

Lauren - birth mother: Basically we wanted a known donor so that there were 'no closed doors', we wanted our children to have some knowledge about where they came from. But we were happy that there's two parents and we could provide for the children in every way, emotionally, financially and all the rest. So the children weren't going to want for anything, there was no need for a third parent. But because we didn't know anyone to ask, we had to take the risk of well ... literally we found our donor through the paper ... I know some people wouldn't agree with that ... (Lauren continued at length to explain how this initial contact was made and their correspondence with their donor)

Emma - social mother: There was quite a bit of trust involved, I mean there aren't any guarantees, we didn't know him at all in the beginning but, well he had donated to other couples and he'd stuck to agreements of non-involvement, he said we could have contacted the others if we wanted to. So we felt he had a track record so to speak...

Lauren - birth mother: ... that really helped actually, we felt we could pretty much trust him not to want any involvement or to pursue his legal rights. He's been a donor for women in (the city where he lives) so we thought if he was going to pursue wanting contact with his offspring he'd be more likely to look up women living nearer than we do ... we were as sure as we could be that he was a safe bet (laughs).

While Lauren and Emma present the discourse of a child's need for genetic origins information as a priority, this is also juxtaposed with the provision of a child's need for a (social) family; needs which Lauren stresses they are in a position to meet, as a two (female) parent family. In order to fulfil both sets of needs, which here are in considerable tension with each other, they were prepared to deal with a potentially higher level of risk than, for example, Jacqueline and Joanne, by involving a man they did not know to help them establish their family. They acknowledge that there were no 'guarantees' that this man was a 'safe bet'. However, their emphasis on the ways in which they addressed the potential risks posed by this route implicitly counters any charge that they were acting irresponsibly i.e. to the detriment of the child. They emphasise a number of factors which minimised the risks of any

potential intrusion from the biological father, including his 'track record' and the fact that they live a considerable distance apart.

Less commonly, women also identified a secondary set of risks, which were health-related. These health risks included an awareness of HIV and AIDs but also of conditions that can be genetically inherited. Donor clinics rigorously screen sperm for HIV and certain genetic conditions. Self-help books about self-insemination (Martin, 1993, Saffron, 1994) provide an extensive health checklist related to the potential donor's use of alcohol and/or drugs, fertility status, and medical history including conditions that have a genetic component. Using fresh sperm in a self-insemination arrangement cannot be as 'risk-free' in these terms as DI.

Nevertheless, for respondents using SI, the need for knowledge of the donor outweighed the 'safety' factor of donor clinic sperm:

I think the official route (DI) has some advantages, I mean you know the sperm is tested and things but, well I just believe it's important to know and that option is not closed off (Linda – birth mother).

I did think about the ease of just going to a clinic, the sperm's available and there's no having to trust your donor's telling the truth about his HIV status and all of that but there's that thing of never being able to tell the child, just that bit of knowledge about where they came from (Helen - birth mother).

These women noted that donor clinics offered the major advantage of a ready availability of donor sperm that was rigorously screened for sexually transmitted diseases and some genetic conditions. Others, who did not necessarily use DI, presented it as a potentially easier option than the often lengthy and fraught processes of finding and negotiating 'terms' with a donor. However, for women using SI, including Linda and Helen above, the child's need to be able to access knowledge of their donor and their genetic origins outweighed any of these advantages.

Only one couple who used SI presented a different kind of account, and they had initially tried to conceive through DI treatment. Eventually they negotiated a private agreement to self-inseminate, but this was set up to replicate DI as closely as possible. The arrangements were carried out through an intermediary so that

Irene, Cheryl and the donor were not known to each other. They placed a greater emphasis on prioritising relationships over biology:

I just felt whatever your agreement with a donor you could never be 100% sure what the donor might want to do once the child was born. So that was the most important thing, we avoided any potential disruptions by going for an anonymous donor. Cheryl and I had been together for ten years and we felt we could offer love, stability, everything a child needs, we knew that of each other but there was no way we could provide that sort of guarantee, so to speak, from any man (Irene - birth mother).

In Irene's account, the 'child needs (social) family' discourse is emphasised over the 'child needs (knowledge of) biological parents. She stresses that she and Cheryl were best placed to provide a cohesive family unit for their child, given the length of time they had been together and the knowledge they had of each other, that they could both 'guarantee' to offer a child 'everything' that child would need. This is contrasted with not being able to offer '100%' surety from any man, which implicitly raises the risk of disruption to the family unit that they could provide for their child. Irene thus raises similar priorities to those that emerged in women's accounts of choosing to use DI, as I shall discuss in Section 3.5.

Respondents' accounts of SI present a diverse and contradictory range of practices in terms of processes of finding donors, levels of knowledge about donors prior to conception and so on. However, an overarching theme presented within these accounts is that all find ways to account for their (very different) practices in terms of meeting the child's best interests. Overall, the majority of accounts given by respondents using SI stressed children's need for (knowledge of) biological parents. Nevertheless there was also an acknowledgement that children need (social) families (often inter-linked with the need for those families to be cohesive and secure). While in heterosexual intact families these discourses are complementary (Edwards et al., 1999a), for lesbian couples they pose considerable tensions. SI is the only route through which respondents could have a known donor and for their child to have knowledge of their biological father. At the same time, respondents identified the risks presented by SI, in relation to the potential claims to rights by donors as biological fathers. These risks were perceived to increase if the couple

did not know their donor prior to insemination. Respondents variously addressed these risks, dealing with any explicit or implicit challenge that they contravened the second discourse, a child's need for a (social) family unit, inter-linked with the need for that family unit to be cohesive and secure.

Before I turn to the accounts of women who opted to use DI as their route to conception, I shall discuss a key issue debated in the risks of SI, that is the issue of using heterosexual or gay donors. These issues have become increasingly salient given the renewed emphasis on biological fatherhood, which can pose a threat to the integrity of the lesbian couple's family unit.

#### 3.4.a Heterosexual vs. gay donors

It is often suggested that some of the risks involved in SI can be minimised by opting to use a gay man as a donor. This is put forward by self-help lesbian parenting books (Martin, 1993, Saffron, 1994) and confirmed as a strategy adopted by lesbians, in findings of existing research (Dunne, 1999b, Donovan, 2000, Haines and Weiner, 2000). Common reasons given within this literature include the idea that gay men are less likely than heterosexual men to succeed in gaining legal rights over a child born by SI. Furthermore it is suggested that gay men's political understanding and support of lesbians may mean they are more motivated to help lesbians to have children and less likely to renege on agreements set up.

In my study however, the majority of couples who used SI had heterosexual donors. There were a total of ten arrangements with heterosexual donors made by nine couples and four arrangements with gay donors. In part, practical issues of finding a man willing to be a donor shape these outcomes. Nevertheless, respondents suggested several advantages for choosing a heterosexual donor and some explicitly rejected gay men as donors.

Several heterosexual donors were already fathers, having children in a current or past heterosexual relationship, or having been a donor for other women. This

previous knowledge about what it meant to be a father or to be a donor was interpreted as advantageous:

Our donor already has children of his own, he knew what parenting was about. He chose not to see Adam after he was born because having parented already he didn't want to feel any sense of belonging to this child, but he was very clear he wanted to stay quite separate. It seemed absolutely perfect (Sara – birth mother).

Jon already had a child and so we knew we weren't his only sort of focus with children. I had an Uncle in San Francisco who was also really insistent we should find a straight donor because he was filing lawsuits for gay men who were losing custody of their children and his philosophy was that if you're the only channel for a gay man to have a child, they'll be much more eager to be a father rather than just a donor (Rebecca - birth mother).

Sara and Rebecca indicate that they sought donors who would not have any desire to be part of their family as the child's father. Heterosexual men were perceived to be less likely to have such desires, especially when they already had children 'of their own'. This was presented as another way to address the risks and uncertainties of outcomes. Other advantages mentioned included that these donors were known to be fertile and had produced healthy offspring. Rebecca also referred to her uncle's advice that heterosexual donors were less likely to want to be involved - a point I shall return to below.

Nevertheless, in addition to the advantages presented by heterosexual donors, women were aware that there were still some risks:

He could get contact legally of course, but for him there is always the fear that if I don't work I could claim benefit and then there's the CSA involved. There has been this sort of mutual trust that he would never go for contact and I will never go for money (Sara - birth mother).

Our donor was with a woman and they had a child he had this stable family relationship. He didn't want more children but at the back of my mind I did wonder what the courts would do if he wanted access, family man versus lesbians, hmmm ... In reality though I feel he took more risks than us because he wanted it to be anonymous and there are repercussions from his point of view, the CSA and things like that. He didn't want any financial consequences, and so that reassured us he really would keep to the agreement (Irene – birth mother).

The risks primarily identified related to the legitimacy of a 'stable' heterosexual family that could potentially overrule or undermine that of the lesbian parents' family. However, Irene and Sara balanced these kinds of risks against risks for the donor, stemming from the Child Support Act 1991<sup>68</sup>. An anomaly in the law means that a child born via insemination at a clinic is legally fatherless while a donor used in a private arrangement is considered to be that child's father and would have financial responsibility for the child. Some respondents believed that their donors would be less likely to pursue unwanted contact, primarily because such actions carry with them potential financial implications.

Ironically this Act was originally designed to reinforce and maintain links between a father and his biological children. The Child Support Agency (CSA) could alternatively be constructed as a risk to the integrity of these families. For example, if the birth mother was out of work, the state would expect her to name her child's father and would not recognise the social mother as a provider. This could subject their family to interference instigated by the state and undermine the way in which women define their roles and take responsibility for their children. Instead it is interesting that all the women who referred to the CSA took the view that it worked in their favour, providing leverage to *reduce* the risks that may stem from using heterosexual donors.

Some women explicitly rejected using gay donors because of concerns that they might want more involvement than agreed or might change their minds once the child was born:

I'd always imagined I wanted a gay man and yet the amount of gay men I spoke to. They were either all flaky you know, all 'Oh I don't know what I want to do' or they wanted a lot of contact and a lot were working through

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<sup>68</sup> This Act came into force in April 1993, leading to the establishment of the Child Support Agency (CSA). This replaced the way in which maintenance payments were made through the courts for women who were separated from the children's biological father (although any lone parent, regardless of gender can apply to the CSA). However for those in receipt of certain state benefits, the law meant they had to name the father or incur penalties in a reduction of benefits unless they provided an acceptable reason if they could not do so. Self-insemination is not regarded as an acceptable reason (Donovan 1997).

issues about becoming fathers. I just used to say look there is no room for debate (...) it was very clear in my advert that we didn't want any contact, I wasn't advertising to sort of help educate gay men about what they want about being a Dad (Helen – birth mother).

Helen thus ruled out gay men who responded to their advert, some of whom wanted more involvement (as a father) than Helen and Anna were willing to consider, and some who were processing issues about fatherhood. These kinds of reports were reflected in the advice given to Sara by her uncle, relating to his experience as a lawyer of gay men's increasing desires to be fathers and remain in contact with their children.

There is some evidence that gay men are increasingly interested in the possibilities of fatherhood that go beyond being donors where no involvement is desired (Dunne, 1999b, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001, Saffron, 2002). Just as lesbian parents are now less likely to lose access to their children (Harne and ROW, 1997), parallel developments have meant that gay fathers have also made progress in challenging the view that they make unsuitable parents. This has included challenging the questionable beliefs that gay male parents are risky to children (the pervasive myth that links gay male sexuality with paedophilia).

Respondents also commonly expressed the view that given an increasing emphasis on biological fatherhood, having a gay rather than a heterosexual donor would make little difference to his ability to pursue contact or parental rights. With these prevailing trends, the notion that gay donors are less likely to present any challenge to lesbian couples who do not want any third party involvement may no longer be as the case, as it perhaps once was.

Only four couples had gay donors. Of these, three couples' main reason for using a gay man as their donor was either the availability and/or existing friendships (and thus, trust) with their donors. Only one couple expressed the view that they specifically sought a gay donor to minimise any challenges to their family unit:

We needed to go with some one we could trust because there is an element of risk in all this and we decided not to use heterosexual men because we

felt they had greater legal rights er ... it's disgraceful really, it was to our advantage, that there is still enough prejudice in the English courts not to help gay men (Tessa – social mother).

Tessa's account introduces the notion that a gay man is likely to have access to fewer legal rights than a heterosexual man might have. This is one of the 'traditional' reasons why lesbians have been known to choose gay donors (as outlined above these reasons have been documented elsewhere). Tessa and Vicky were the only couple in my study who had attended a course for lesbians planning to be parents. While it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions from this, they were the only couple whose choice was motivated specifically by factors which have formed part of the 'community knowledges' available around SI. Many women did not have any access to these kinds of knowledges.

Interestingly, donors who have negotiated involvement or court-enforced access are all gay men. I shall return to issues of donors having ongoing involvement in their children's lives in Section 4. For many women, the increased valorisation of fatherhood (whether heterosexual or gay), coupled with the potentially less secure status of the social mother, poses ongoing risks and uncertainties that had to be dealt with. As I shall discuss, many couples were concerned to set and maintain clear boundaries around their family unit, that consists of the two female parents and the child(ren), to ensure there was no unwanted involvement or claim making. Seven couples reduced these risks by using DI as their means of conception.

### **3.5 Conception at donor clinics**

As with SI arrangements, some practical constraints impacted on women's ability to access donor clinics. For example, some respondents said they could not afford the cost of treatment. The awareness that not all clinics would accept same sex couples for DI treatment also acted as a deterrent for some couples. This was either because of the potential of encountering prejudicial attitudes or, more pragmatically, because there were no clinics within travelling distance known to accept lesbian couples. Couples who used DI clinics tended to find out about



clinics that were not hostile to same sex couples by word of mouth. This gives another indication of the importance of social networks where such information may circulate. However for the seven couples who used clinics, other key factors also came into play.

Respondents displayed an awareness of the various dominant discourses that circulate around the wellbeing of children. For example, they were aware that they could be positioned as *not* meeting their child's needs, primarily because DI closes off the options for a child to access knowledge about her/his genetic parentage and/or trace the donor. Women variously responded to the fact that these needs could not be fulfilled but in general, countered this challenge by asserting that relationships were more important than biology. Thus, women using DI tended to emphasise the 'children need (social) families' discourse, over and above that of 'children need (knowledge of) biological parents'.

Respondents commonly stressed that they were setting up two-parent families:

There's two of us, if I'd been on my own maybe I'd have thought differently, maybe, cos parenting on your own is hard work. But having two parents ...well, we didn't feel a child needs more than that and we didn't want to risk a donor interfering in any way in our parenting (Deborah - birth mother).

I do believe that a two parent family is best, that's just me because I don't think I could give enough on my own - and equally some might disagree with me but I think it doesn't follow that those parents have to be of different genders (Jenny - social mother).

We were a complete family, the two of us and we didn't need anyone else and I don't think Josh does either (Suzie - birth mother).

These (social) two parent families are presented as families that could fulfil their children's needs. In the same way that respondents using SI re-interpreted the family, respondents using DI argued that to be a family did not require parents of opposite gender nor that both parents have biological connections to the child.

Most respondents addressed concerns that, at some point in the future, their child might express unmet needs arising out of their mothers' choice to use DI which means children can never access genetic origins information:

We're aware that Molly might feel angry or aggrieved about not knowing about half her genetic origins or that she can't find out ... but at the end of the day we're her parents and we'll deal with whatever comes up for her and support her through that (Paula - birth mother).

Josh might be curious about his parentage, we have bits of information to tell him but obviously he can't ever know who the donor was. That might be difficult for him, we'll have to see but we're never going to hide that from him and we realise we might have to deal with his feelings around that (Jayne - social mother).

By implication these women were responding to the potential charge that they have deprived their child of the choice to have some knowledge about their biological father. Implicitly, they resisted any notion that this meant they had acted irresponsibly by stressing their preparedness to act responsibly as parents to help and support their child overcome any problems as they grew up. Women uniformly emphasised being open rather than secretive about their child's origins. In part this could not be avoided - there was no man to take the place of the donor as there is for heterosexual couples, who may then (as noted earlier) 'pass as normal'. However, respondents commonly stated that there would be no such secrets or deception in their families. Implicitly this compares favourably with the morally questionable practices of secrecy that has characterised heterosexual families use of DI. Some went further and stated that they would be more than happy if the current regulations were changed so that their child could have the right to access genetic origin information:

To have an arrangement with a known donor well, you never know, it involves all sorts of complications. I'd really like it if I'd like it if Euan could trace his donor but that is not how the law stands (Adele - social mother).

This desire is in fact beyond their control; women can only provide for their children's needs and welfare as best they can within the regulatory framework of DI. Adele places the responsibility for denying children access to genetic origins

information with the regulators of DI. In this way she deflects any potential challenge that she and Nichola are responsible for this denial of information.

Finally, some women contrasted the use of DI with the use of SI, and argued that the consequences of SI could potentially present more difficulties than DI in terms of children's responses as they grew up:

In many ways I think having a known donor could be harder for them to deal with if say, the donor didn't want to know them or ... whereas this way there's never any possibility that it could be any different so it might make it easier to come to terms with and we can support and help them in that process (Margaret - social mother).

I think having a known donor is potentially more risky and complicated than any consequences of not being able to trace a donor (Adele - social mother).

This forms another defence of their practices of having children by DI. It presents another means to value (social) family relationships over biology, by suggesting that known donors may make a relatively small contribution or may pose risks and complications to the family unit. By implication, the ability to forge close caring relationships with children is not perceived to be dependent on biology, and furthermore a reliance on prioritising biological links could prove to be disappointing or disruptive.

Many women interpreted the risks of using a known donor to be too great:

I just didn't know any men I felt I knew well enough to ask and I'd have to know someone well to trust them ... so DI was the only option to consider really (Nichola - birth mother).

We thought about the known route ... but the risks just seemed too high in terms of ... we didn't know anyone to ask who we knew well enough to trust. The thought of involving someone else in our family who we didn't know very well ... I just found the very idea pretty horrendous, scary really (Sally - birth mother).

The risks identified were similar to those outlined above by women using SI.

Firstly, unwanted contact that might occur if the donor was known, and secondly,

the potential for a known donor to claim legal rights as the child's father. However while women using SI gave accounts of steps taken to minimise these risks, the majority of women using DI presented the potential risks of involving a man they did not know very well, if at all, in setting up their family, to be too high. Implicitly the use of DI is thus presented as a responsible route, which avoids such risks and safeguards the (social) family unit.

Some respondents also presented SI as potentially more risky health-wise than DI:

Another aspect to clinics being safer than trying to find your own donor is everything is sort of screened, so there's no health risks (Sally - birth mother).

These accounts provide further examples of the ways in which women present their choice of DI as responsible actions that take account of a wide range of issues related to children's needs, including the needs of health and security. For example, the above quote highlights how health related risks for the potential child may be reduced by going to a clinic where donor sperm is rigorously screened for sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV, and a range of genetic conditions. Earlier accounts demonstrate how having a known donor who does not want to be known to the child is presented as potentially damaging to the child's well-being. Again, there is an overarching theme within these accounts that prioritises children's needs. The complexities of the juxtaposition of this discourse against that of 'children need (knowledge of) biological parents' are more apparent in respondents' accounts of SI than in the accounts of DI. Respondents using DI placed an emphasis on meeting the best interests of the child through the (social) family unit. The key requirement is that children have two parents, albeit of the same gender. In the following section I shall discuss how these respondents respond to the further challenge that they deprive their child of a father and consequently of an important male role model.

Within the above accounts of routes to conception, there is very little talk of women's own needs. Some respondents provided glimpses of considerably fraught and stressful experiences while going through the sometimes lengthy processes of,

for example, finding a donor and inseminating. Several were let down by donors and had to renew their search to find a new donor, several experienced miscarriages and some discovered they were infertile (one woman went through IVF treatment). However, there was very little talk beyond factual descriptions of these accounts. Often these facts were provided in tandem with explanations of the work involved in setting up an arrangement that met the identified needs of the child. These silences are particularly striking if one considers discourses that surround accounts of heterosexual women's experiences of difficulties in achieving a pregnancy which include the perfectly legitimate discourses of their own needs, for example, in terms of the emotional costs and traumas endured by the women (Lasker and Borg, 1994).

Women in this study make considerable efforts to legitimise their practices in ways that heterosexual parents are not required to engage in. Heterosexual nuclear families are seen to meet children's needs for (biological) parents and (social) family in ways that are compatible (Edwards et al., 1999a), while in the use of SI or DI, these two discourses are in considerable tension. Respondents' accounts reveal the considerable moral dilemmas created by these tensions alongside the awareness that their actions may be interpreted as 'untoward'<sup>69</sup>. While they place different emphases on different aspects of children's needs, these accounts of routes to conception are placed within an overarching framework of presenting the ways in which they are able to meet the best interests of their child. These discourses are also apparent in the ways in which women present their negotiations of donor involvement (or non-involvement).

#### **4. Relationships between donors, lesbian couples and their children**

A PinkParents publication 'Negotiating a Donor Relationship' (February 2001) outlines five main types of relationships that can be negotiated with donors. These are 'Daddy'; 'Close Uncle'; 'Distant Uncle'; 'Traceable' or 'Anonymous'.

As noted in Table 1 (page 130), respondents in my study had negotiated various types of relationships with their donors, but considered in more detail, these do not all neatly fit into the above categories:

Haimes and Weiner (2000) suggest that more complex arrangements are possible, by distinguishing between the different parties to whom a donor may be anonymous or named. For example, in my study one couple know their donor but he has requested that they keep his identity totally anonymous. Within a family where there is more than one child there are also possibilities for different arrangements. For two couples in my study (Stella and Denise, Vicky and Tessa), who are planning second children, this may well be the case. Furthermore as children grow older, they may also have a greater input into defining and potentially changing these relationships.

Whichever route is taken, women are, on the whole, intentionally choosing to have children within 'fatherless families'. Certainly there is no shared residence with a father and no sexual relationship (or no ongoing relationship) between the two biological parents. No couples had co-parenting arrangements with their donor. As I shall discuss, even where there is recognition of the donor as the child's 'Daddy', for the couple this does not necessarily denote a role as a co-parent.

*Table 2. Respondents and their 'donor types'*

<b>'Donor types':</b>	<b>Total:</b>	<b>PinkParent 'model':</b>
DI - no contact possible	7	'Anonymous'
SI anonymous	1	'Anonymous'
SI with no ongoing contact with women or children	5*	'Traceable'
SI and contact only by letters between the adult parties	1	
SI and contact as family friend	2	'Distant Uncle'?
SI and contact similar to that of an 'Uncle'	1	'Close Uncle'?
SI and contact via court order - respondents do not view donor as father but donor and	1	

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<sup>69</sup> This is a term used by Scott and Lynam (1968), who analysis the employment of accounts given to explain 'untoward' behaviour, meaning behaviour which 'falls outside the domain of expectations' (1968:46).

courts do		
SI donor known as 'Dad' to the children	3	'Daddy'
TOTAL:	21*	

\*As previously noted, one couple has two children conceived by self-insemination arrangements with two different donors, thus the total of 21 different arrangements.

All respondents demonstrated an awareness of popular and public discourses that centre on a child's need for a father. Many worked in professions such as social work or in health or education, where these kinds of discourses have informed policy and practice. At the same time they were aware that these discourses, which have contributed to a re-emergence of fathers' rights, contrast sharply with the insecure legal and social status of the social mother. As I shall discuss, these were some key factors for most couples who had used SI, in negotiating any ongoing contact with the donor and reveal further tensions within the theme of children need (knowledge of) biological parents.

In total, the children of thirteen couples had no contact with the donor. This was either ruled out while the child was growing up, or in the case of anonymous donors, never an option. In Section 4.1, I consider the ways in which women accounted for setting up 'fatherless families' through DI. In Section 4.2, I discuss issues raised about 'male role models', which these families shared in common with those who had no ongoing contact with their donor. In Section 4.3, I consider further issues raised by women whose donors have no contact with their children and finally, in Section 4.4, I examine the accounts of the seven couples whose donors have some level of ongoing involvement in their children's lives.

#### **4.1 Anonymous donors**

For lesbian couples, DI rules out the possibilities and the risks of donor involvement. Within popular discourses these families are seen to undermine the very roots of the traditional family (Radford 1991) since there is no possibility of a father presence and the child is legally fatherless. As discussed earlier, women

using DI prioritised a child's need for (social) family over any need for information on their genetic origins. These same needs were prioritised over a child's need for a father:

My immediate family is Paula, Molly and me. There isn't a father but lots of families don't have fathers and what Molly does have is, and what I think a child needs to have, is two parents and the stability of that is really important (Jenny – birth mother).

We are Josh's family and it's just the same as any other family, except there's no father involved but lots of children don't grow up with their Dads for all sorts of reasons. Jayne and I have been together for 10 years now, Josh was born into a stable relationship, he's well loved, he has a lovely life ... (Suzie – birth mother).

These respondents present themselves as no different from other families where there is no father involvement. This is coupled with their emphasis on the ways in which their families provide many of the same elements, attributed to the traditional family, that meet a child's need for commitment, stability, love and care. These accounts also carry an implicit suggestion that their children are born into families that have remained stable and secure over the long term, whereas for many children, they may not have a father because of a relationship breakdown<sup>70</sup>.

Donor clinics are required to take into account the future welfare of any child (who may be born as a result of the treatment). This explicitly includes 'the need of that child for a father'. As discussed earlier, same sex couples cannot take for granted that they will be accepted for treatment by a clinic but where they are accepted, women felt this implied some acceptance of creating families without fathers:

They interviewed us both, it wasn't just sexuality-orientated questions actually but a range of things about finances, jobs, home, just like anyone going through fertility treatment I imagine. They did ask us what we would

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<sup>70</sup> This is a prime example of the use of one kind of justification of 'untoward' behaviour, which Scott and Lynam (1968:51) identify as the 'condemnation of the condemners'. They discuss how this involves the individual owning up to the untoward nature of their behaviour, but asserting the irrelevancy of their actions through some contrast with behaviour by others that can be deemed more 'untoward'. In effect, it involves presenting an account that says 'if anyone is acting untowardly, it is not us'.



tell the child and something about men in our lives. But they were obviously happy to accept what we wanted to do (Tina - social mother).

Basically the clinic doesn't have to give you treatment does it, and yes lots still probably wouldn't but being able to go that official route, it's accepting us as a family (Sally - birth mother).

There is the suggestion here that acceptance by a clinic for treatment, given the legislation, offers some validation of women creating families where there is no father, from an 'official' source.

Women's accounts focussed in more depth on answering potential 'charges' that their child had no access to any knowledge about their paternal genetic origins than they did on the question of the child not having a father. However, in these discussions, no respondent made any reference to available counter-discourses that suggest that fathers do not necessarily match the imaginary image of the 'family man' (McIntosh, 1996). Rather, all placed some emphasis on the importance of 'male role models' in their children's lives - which in part address the absence of a father. Here there are similarities with the accounts given by women who have arrangements whereby their donor has no ongoing contact with their children.

#### **4.2. Male role models**

I've just read a book 'Raising Boys' and that stresses that male role models are important but not really until the teenage years and it works out that it doesn't have to be the father (Suzie - birth mother).

I was reading a book about bringing up boys, most of it was rubbish but it was saying you have to be careful not to erm ... dismiss men too much, as two women parents. It was saying they must have male heroes, ... The other thing is that they have a male who treats them in a very special way ... a mentor ... and we were a bit stumped thinking who could we have ... but I told my brother he had to be that person. He's a quiet person and doesn't do much but I was saying well you go fishing! (Tina - social mother).

We still haven't properly managed to have men regularly in their lives and we keep saying to ourselves we must try and foster some more relationships with men. But it's tricky cos most people we see are women only families or

women where the man doesn't include himself in the kind of doing things with the kids to meet up with other people's kids (Margaret - social mother).

Women commonly presented accounts of making conscious efforts to include men in their children's lives. These perceived needs often stem from advice given out in books and reflect popular discourses that children grow up damaged by the absence of a father as a male role model. Marshall (1991) for example, points out that the childcare manuals include advice on mothers' responsibilities to find ways to overcome the 'obstacles' to children's development where they are growing up without a father. These kinds of discourses also form part of the wider construction of mothers' responsibilities as the primary meeter of children's needs. Respondents challenged the assumption that fathers were essential, and presented male role models as an acceptable alternative.

However, respondents experienced difficulties in finding men to be part of their children's lives, as highlighted in Tina and Margaret's comments above. As Margaret notes, networks around children are commonly women-centred. Furthermore while dominant discourses present fathers as an important influence in their children's lives, they are often not involved in child-related activities including those within their own children's social networks.

While male role models were seen as important, women's views on the type of characteristics required in a man varied:

We counted on my brother for quite a significant input. Some one who would be blood related to the boys as an uncle, but he's very much sort of into motorbikes and football, a blokey bloke isn't he? (Sally - birth mother).

I have a friend, a straight bloke who has become a really good mate with Adam you know, teaching him male stuff like how to swallow air so he can belch on demand you know that's the sort of stuff that (laughs). And he will phone him up to tell him the kind of the very obvious jokes Adam is into that he's downloaded off the Net (Sara - birth mother).

Sally and Sara both have sons and wanted men in their children's lives who could add a male dimension that they felt they could not provide - again a responsibility that falls on mothers, to ensure the all round development of their child. Linda and

Helen however drew different conclusions about the kind of male role models that they wanted for their sons:

Dominic doesn't live with a man but he sees men. That's really important but I also think it's important he sees men doing all the same chores that a woman does - so when his Uncle is looking after him, he changes his nappy, cooks his tea and ... doesn't just play with him and go (Linda- birth mother).

... these are the guys I want in Oscar's life, and for Howie too. All three are gentle men, no macho male stereotypes. I want to help raise the boys to be men who know how to treat people properly, so then they have to be treated properly and spoken to properly and allowed to show their feelings ... so having the right kind of men around is part of that (Helen - birth mother).

Although they place a different type of interpretation on what is required of a 'male role model', they are still anticipating how to meet their responsibilities as mothers to raise well-adjusted individuals. As part of that project they try to find men who can compensate for the absence of a man as a father.

#### **4.3 'No contact'/'Traceable donors'**

The majority of respondents who used SI and wanted no ongoing contact with the donor did not perceive the donor to be a father. In law however, the donor is an unmarried father. As discussed in section 3.4.a, considerations of choosing a heterosexual or gay donor are influenced by these risks but in balance most women did not feel a heterosexual donor presented a greater risk than a gay donor. There were however no absolute guarantees to safeguard their initial agreement with their donor:

I know for a fact that if Oscar's Dad turned up he'd get access to Oscar, not without a fight but if it went to court he'd get it ... the court would say 'Yes, you are the biological Dad even if you've never seen him' (Helen – birth mother).

In the current climate I guess he could get access, if he rang up now and said he wanted contact even though he hasn't even seen Adam, he'd probably get contact legally (Sara – birth mother).

The potential intervention by the donor asserting his legal rights as a biological father can threaten the integrity of the families these couples are creating, consisting of two female parents and the child(ren). Women were aware of the current climate of a re-emergence of biological fatherhood and fathers' rights, and, as Helen and Sara indicate, they felt that their children's fathers would be able to assert their legal rights if they chose to do so. The prospect of court proceedings can pose a threat to the integrity of the couple's family. These risks are further enhanced by the lack of legal status accorded to the social mother:

I felt very vulnerable with the first donor, how would we feel and how would he feel, would my position be compromised by him. I felt I had no rights whereas he potentially could claim rights (Anna – social and birth mother).

A major fear was that the father would turn up going 'Oh actually I'd like to have an input into my son'. I mean that never materialised but he could have if he'd wanted to whereas I wouldn't have a leg to stand on (Denise – social mother).

Social mothers identified how their status could feel insecure in relation to the donor's status as a biological father. Legally, social mothers have few rights. Since the introduction of the Children Act 1989, it is possible for social mothers to apply for a Joint Residence Order, which provides them with some degree of parental authority and recognition. The experience of the five women in my study who have taken this step indicates that this can be a stressful process and gaining such rights for the social mother cannot be taken for granted. I shall return to these discussions about the social mother's parental status in the following chapter.

These issues do not necessarily dissipate over time. Lauren and Emma had an agreement with their donor that they would send annual letters to each other. Recently their donor wrote to ask if he could send birthday cards to their two sons. This prompted feelings of great anxiety, particularly for Emma, the social mother:

Emma: I guess it's another reason why the legal side has started to bother me because obviously I have no rights. Birthday cards to the boys is more specific. If we say 'No' then we might get the boys turning round saying 'Why didn't you let him send ...' but if we say yes ...

IV: Are you worried it might lead to more ...

Emma: It won't! If I had to go on the run with them I would rather than let him have access. He will not get recognition. The boundaries will be firmly established again and any hint of anything and that's it. I think we've decided birthday cards are OK. I mean we're probably over-reacting but ...

Emma presents her concerns to be two-fold, in safeguarding her own position as the boys' parent, a role for which she has no legal recognition, but also protecting her sons from any potential disruption in their lives. However she also raises another (moral) dimension in balancing the risks of not meeting anticipated (but unknown) needs of the children against the needs she perceives for the family as a whole and her own needs. Donors with any level of involvement can exacerbate the vulnerability of the family unit and especially that of the social mother. Given the re-emphasis on the rights of biological fathers, setting up clear boundaries around their families may well be necessitated, and presents another way to reduce risks of any potential disruptions. Thus the extent to which new family arrangements may be renegotiated is potentially constrained by the risks these changes may incur.

#### **4.4 SI families with donor contact/involvement**

Seven couples have donors who have some level of contact with their offspring. In six cases this has been mutually negotiated and in one case, the donor's access was gained via a court order<sup>71</sup>. These donors included the four gay donors. For five couples their donor was initially a close friend of one or both of the women and two couples knew the donor as a colleague or acquaintance prior to conception. These levels of knowledge may be a factor in the amount of involvement a couple is willing for a donor to have. As noted earlier, Jacqueline and Joanne had wanted a donor to have some involvement in their family - but only if they had been able to conceive using a close friend as their donor.

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<sup>71</sup> This couple did not want to discuss the details of this case but it was clear that they did not regard the donor as a father.

However, these men are not all regarded to be fathers, by respondents. The couple whose donor had gained access via a court order do not perceive this man to be a father (although the courts clearly did). Three other couples describe their donor as a family friend or an 'Uncle'. In describing their donor as an Uncle, Elaine uses the analogy of her relationship to her nieces:

I didn't sit down and work out an agreement with my sister about being her children's auntie. Over the years I've developed a close relationship with them, sometimes they come and stay with us, I've taken them on holiday but as well there have been periods of time when I've not had a lot of contact. I see Graham's role being similar. And largely it will be up to him and Frances how that develops (Elaine – social mother).

Elaine outlines Graham's role as an 'Uncle' to be similar to that of a blood related kin but not that of a father. Frances is only 6 months old so this relationship has not yet been developed, and while Graham will have an 'Uncle' role, Frances will also be told he is her biological father. The boundaries of these relationships are potentially complex and each member within this quartet may have different definitions of who belongs in the family and how.

The donors who have the most active involvement are all gay men. This is consistent with the previous discussion about gay men increasingly wishing to be involved in fatherhood. However, while they are all acknowledged as being their child's 'father', none of them are considered to be co-parents by the mothers:

I've encouraged Bronwen to call him Dad, not forced ... I just always refer to him as her Dad, and I think it is an important relationship for both of them. But I have no expectations that he do any kind of care or gives any kind of financial input, that's our job (Jan – birth mother).

My view is that Grace is our child, our responsibility, Jeremy is her Dad if this makes sense, but we're her parents. Er ... it would be like buying Grace her bike for Christmas, Chris might say Well let's talk to Jeremy and I'm like No that's not his job, that's not his role (Judith – social mother).

The idea was that Kate and I would parent and he would be peripherally involved. It's not been half and half, we've done the bulk of it, it's impacted on our lives having children far more than on his life. We've had all the sleepless nights, nappies, sick children, we're sorting out schools for the boys ... (Sandra – social mother).

All three couples made the distinction between a donor being a biological father who had a relationship with his child and as such was called 'Daddy' and being a parent involved in everyday parenting practices and all the responsibilities that entailed. Here further tensions are posed within the theme of children need (knowledge of) biological parents and 'children need (social) families. Respondents stopped short of the wider 'children need (biological) parents' discourse (Edwards et al., 1999a), not least because this could compromise the social mother's status as a non-biological parent.

The biological relationship between the father and child, coupled with involvement can provide a donor with an unquestionable status of fatherhood, which requires very little effort. Consequently the recognition and involvement of the donor as a father can threaten the role of social mother and the integrity of the female headed family unit. The distinction women make between parenting practices and fatherhood has some significance in the space it creates to allow for recognition of the role and responsibilities of the social mother. A focus on parenting practices can therefore help to legitimise her status. Donovan (2000:174) points out that a focus on caring practices can open up debates about what constitutes family relationships and I shall return to this issue in more detail in the following chapter.

Patrick is the only donor who has regular sole responsibility for his children and who engaged in all the caring practices that are required when looking after young children. Nevertheless Kate and Sandra retain overall responsibility for providing for the boys and for their care and welfare. Their arrangements have changed over time and they have experienced difficulties at times in working these out:

The logistics of parenting across two households, different values and differences about how to do that. It's not easy and obviously with two women you don't have the legal status and you don't have the social status. He's got all the status, people see him as the father, that's never questioned (Sandra – social mother).

This is a household, albeit with lesbian and gay parents, where children potentially move between different family worlds and where the everyday practices have to be

worked out, negotiated, re-negotiated and agreed. Kate and Sandra's family differs significantly in that their family was created to be across two households from the start and none of the adults had any previous experience of parenting in other relationships or family forms. Their arrangements, roles and responsibilities had to be worked out which may require even more active care and commitment, particularly in relation to the imbalance of the biological and social relationships the adults have with the children, and to the children's anticipated needs and feelings about their family:

The children can say they have a Daddy, I think that's important, it can make it a bit easier for them, I mean it's different enough for them as it is (Sandra - social mother).

Involving the father on whatever basis opens up new and varied possibilities. These possibilities also present risks and uncertainties, which respondents recognise and deal with in various ways. However, these risks may limit the extent to which women may wish to 'experiment' with parenting across households, and in acknowledging, or indeed allowing, the father to have a parental role.

## **5. Conclusion**

Respondents' routes to conception and negotiations of the role of men in their families, as donors, fathers and/or male role models represent some radical departures from the traditional conventions of heterosexual procreation and family life. To some extent these new ways of doing family life reflect discussions about the new possibilities presented by contemporary transformations of intimacy where family lives are increasingly worked out. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001:11) suggest that lesbian families are at the forefront of these changing patterns of relationships and family life and demonstrate 'an awareness of new opportunities and spaces for choosing new ways of being'.

However, for lesbian couples planning and having their children together, these possibilities are circumscribed by considerations pertaining to the moral obligations



of parenthood. In particular, these obligations relate to an ethic of care for dependent children whereby parents have a duty to prioritise the best interests and needs of their children.

The ways in which respondents responded to these obligations vary considerably, as illustrated by the diversity of practices I have discussed above in relation to routes to conception and working out of family forms. Respondents face choices and dilemmas about how best to meet the needs of the child; needs that were anticipated even prior to conception of a child. Some present a 'child's need for (knowledge of) biological parents' as a central priority while others present the discourse of a 'child's need for (social) family' as a priority over and above any needs for biological (male) parents and genetic origins information. Further complexities arose in working out the tensions presented by the juxtaposition of these two discourses in the ongoing care of children. However, respondents' accounts of the range of practices that result from these choices and dilemmas are all placed within an overarching framework of acting in the child's best interests. There are no occasions where respondents did not present such considerations as central to their accounts.

This is further highlighted by the silences within women's accounts. As I noted, discussions of women's own needs - an ethic of care for oneself - are largely absent within their accounts. Some respondents indicated they had experienced considerable difficulties while going through the processes of trying to conceive. However, any expansion on these difficulties served to highlight the priority accorded to children's needs. For example, several respondents indicated that, for themselves, DI might have been easier route to take than SI but these routes were not taken because of their considerations about what was best for the child.

As Lawler (1999:70) argues, 'whatever the exact constituents of children's needs are held to be, it is mothers who are positioned as the primary meeters of those needs'. This is an inescapable imperative. A defining feature of good (enough) mothering is how adequately mothers meet those needs. The authority of 'need' statements in relation to children's needs convey a 'considerable emotive force,

inducing a sense of responsibility and even feelings of guilt if they are not heeded' (Woodhead, 1997:66). Lesbian parents potentially face an intensified moral burden, given that the conditions under which they become mothers deviate from the dominant norms associated with the sanctioned site of motherhood i.e. within the married heterosexual unit. They demonstrate an awareness of the ways in which their practices can be perceived as untoward (Scott and Lyman, 1968) and inimical to the ideals of appropriate motherhood. Their accounts counter these charges and display ways in which they are able to support claims to good motherhood through their unwavering attention to the best interests of their child and the prioritisation given to meeting the needs of their child.

Although engaging in radical family practices, there is, however, little room for manoeuvre in relation to this moral imperative of motherhood, whereby attention to children's needs is presented as an over-arching, non-negotiable priority. Thus, my conclusions come closer to Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) than to Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001), in that the workings out of new ways of doing family are circumscribed by relationships of care for dependent children, and perhaps particularly for women entering into motherhood in same sex relationships.

## Chapter 5

### Making New Sense of Motherhood: Definitions of and Claims on Parental Status

#### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I identified ways in which respondents' families cut across dominant heterosexual and gendered norms associated with the family. However, although engaging in radical family practices, respondents also worked hard to reconcile these family practices with the dominant conventions of good motherhood, including the overarching requirement to address the best interests of their children. Within these discussions, I pointed out ways in which everyday understandings of who constitutes a parent do not necessarily accord with legal definitions of parenthood.

This highlights a further question about how parents engage with meanings of parenthood in negotiating new kinds of parenting relationships. These considerations are closely linked to the moral realm of 'the best interests of the child', discussed in the previous chapter. However, in this chapter I take a step back from these kinds of investigations and address the question, 'Who is a parent?', or more specifically, 'Who is a mother?' This involves a consideration of the meanings of motherhood in terms of examining how women use and define the term 'mother' and how these everyday understandings relate to the existing normative definitions of motherhood in contemporary Western societies. These investigations connect to more general questions about how parenthood is defined, which are increasingly relevant in the context of the shifts taking place in family lives. Households may, for example, include adults who do or do not have a biological connection to the children in the household<sup>72</sup>. Other questions about who is or is not a parent arise through reproductive technologies. As these continually develop and expand, new

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<sup>72</sup> Edwards et al. (1999a:78), for example, point out that 'unlike step-parents of previous times, today's stepparents are likely to be developing relationships with children whose non-residential 'natural' parent is still alive'.

distinctions are created between, for example, genetic and gestational motherhood (Strathern, 1992, Raymond, 1993).

Addressing the question 'Who is a mother?' raises different issues to those raised by the question 'Am I a good enough mother?' which is more frequently addressed in the extensive literature on motherhood. To some extent, separating out the two creates a false separation because the meanings of motherhood and family life have become so closely related to questions of morality. Later in this chapter, for example, I shall discuss points at which claims upon the status of motherhood are dependent upon doing it well. This is illustrative of the impossibility of entirely separating out the two. However, in my study there is a sense that concomitant to (or even before) the demands invoked by the dominant narratives of 'good enough' mothering, women parenting together face challenges in clarifying their parental status and in negotiating new meanings of motherhood. My focus in this chapter is on women's accounts of how they negotiate their parental status for themselves and within their relationship. In the following chapter I shall consider women's accounts of the challenges faced in validating their claims to a parental status within their wider social networks, in interactions with families of origin, friends, parents of other children, and so on.

Below I examine the ways in which both birth mothers and social mothers<sup>73</sup> account for their parental status, with the intention of examining what these accounts can reveal about the normative meanings of motherhood. Before I turn to this discussion, I consider the context within which these accounts are framed, including the dominant defining notions of motherhood, and the extent to which these may be taken for granted. In doing so, I also outline the wider relevance of these discussions to other forms of parental status, in particular those that may be contested rather than taken for granted.

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<sup>73</sup> See Section 3.1 for a discussion of my use of these terms.

## **2. The status of motherhood**

There is an extensive literature on motherhood that considers a range of perspectives on the experiences of motherhood. Feminists have sought to challenge essentialist interpretations of motherhood and mothering. Influential early accounts in this field were Chodorow (1999, but first published 1978) and Ruddick (1980), although their work has since been criticised for perpetuating the dominant 'universal' white model of biological motherhood (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991, Glenn, 1994). Lawler (2000:35) suggests that most, and especially feminist, analyses of motherhood now assume a level of social construction within the category 'mother'. Nevertheless, the wider dominant narratives of motherhood remain strongly linked to the notion that motherhood and mothering are biologically determined experiences and activities (Glenn, 1994, Letherby, 1999).

While much of this literature addresses the complexities, contradictions and ambivalences of the institution and the experience of motherhood, far less attention has been paid to examining how motherhood is defined. It is, for example, largely taken for granted that to be a mother involves a biological relationship to a child. This is highlighted most obviously in the relatively neglected areas of infertility and assisted reproduction (Woollett, 1991, Letherby, 1999) and in considerations of forms of social motherhood such as adoption (Wegar, 1997) and stepparenting (Smith, 1990)<sup>74</sup>. Wegar (1997) outlines how women who are not biological mothers (or who have fertility treatment) must potentially confront the narrow biological definitions of motherhood. Women who cannot call upon this defining characteristic of biology have to struggle to make claims to the status of motherhood in the face of these claims being discounted as somehow not 'real' (Woollett, 1991). Below I outline this biological dimension, as well as other key elements that form part of the dominant social constructions of the status of 'mother' in contemporary Western societies.

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<sup>74</sup> These areas also tend to highlight that while some struggle to legitimate the right to be a mother, others struggle to escape from the expectations of motherhood.

## 2.1 Defining characteristics of motherhood

I identify four key characteristics, which may be drawn upon in making claims to the status of motherhood. The first three are biological, legal and relational<sup>75</sup>. The fourth is that status of 'mother' is generally understood as a singular gendered role, a status that belongs to one woman only (usually the woman who gives birth to her child but sometimes a 'replacement' social mother). I outline each in more detail in the Sections 2.1.a to 2.1.d. No one element stands alone as a unitary phenomenon. The diagram below illustrates how these characteristics relate to each other.

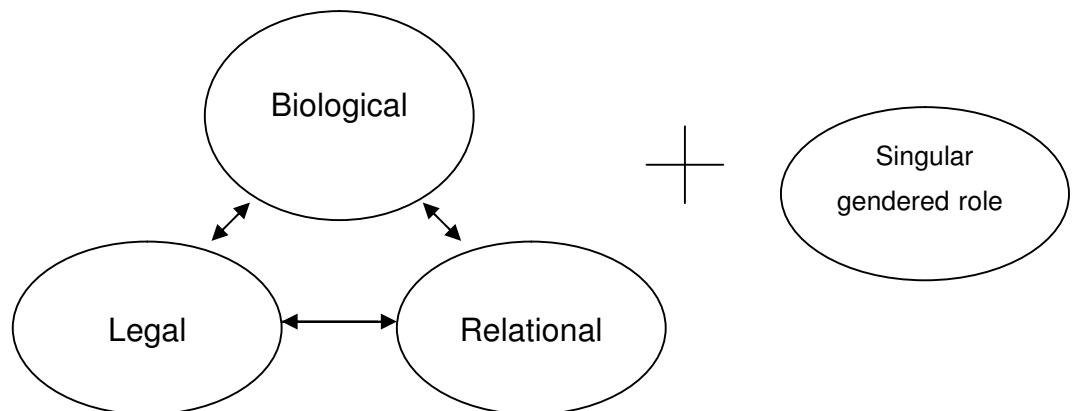


Figure 1. *Defining features of motherhood*

These four characteristics are framed within the dominant context of heterosexuality. Being outside of this conventional family framework can pose additional difficulties for lesbian mothers, in relation to the ways in which lesbian mothers are called upon to justify the validity of their motherhood and family life within the wider social sphere of their lives. I return to these issues in the next chapter. I have also left aside the accompanying normative expectations that define 'good motherhood'. However, as suggested above there are some overlaps. In defining what it means to be a mother, there is a point at which claims upon a

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<sup>75</sup> The term 'relational' is adopted from Reimann (1997) to refer to the emotional and practical everyday parental relationship between a parent and a child - the claim to a parental status based on the 'doing' of parenthood.

parental status depend upon doing it well. I address these under the heading of the 'relational' below.

In the following section I discuss these defining characteristics in more detail, and outline how these are relevant to a range of different family forms. I shall then examine how these defining characteristics impact on the everyday understandings of parental status for women parenting together.

### 2.1.a Biological definition

In Western societies the biological fact of giving birth remains a powerful determinant of what it means to be a mother. People are born from women's bodies everywhere - that is a universal truth. However, this has not and does not always 'turn women automatically into mothers' (Silva, 1996a:12). The status of 'mother' has a historic and cultural specificity that feminists have sought to uncover. What it is to be a 'mother' has taken different forms in different times and places (Moore, 1996). Feminists have drawn our attention to the practices of wet-nursing and fostering in Europe in the latter part of the eighteenth century (Glenn, 1994). Solinger (1994) uncovered evidence that in the 1950s in America for white (unmarried) girls or women, giving birth to a baby was not a sufficient basis to claim the status of mother. Without a preceding marriage, a white female could not make a fully legitimate claim to the status of mother. Other work has challenged the presentation of white Western motherhood as a universal meaning of what it is to be a mother. Hill Collins (1994), for example, outlines an Afrocentric tradition where motherhood of various types (other than biological) is recognised.

However, although the biological element is not always a central defining feature of motherhood, biological ties between women and the children they bear have commonly given rise to the status of motherhood in contemporary Western societies. The biological facts of pregnancy, birth and the ability to breastfeed are potent symbols of this status. Glenn (1994:22) discusses how 'we are reluctant to give up the idea that motherhood is special'. Her discussion refers to the 'powerful experiences of pregnancy and giving birth', implicitly calling upon the specialness

of biological motherhood. Biological motherhood also carries with it a particular legal status that has become closely inter-linked with the biological.

### 2.1.b Legal

Legal discourses outline particular definitions of parenthood. As noted in the previous discussion of fatherhood (Section 4, Chapter 4) these definitions do not necessarily accord with everyday understandings of parenthood. In this chapter I shall also discuss how, in relation to motherhood, these everyday understandings tend to be far more complex and ambivalent<sup>76</sup>.

In the UK, policy and legislation tends to place an increasing emphasis on biological parenthood. A woman who gives birth to a child automatically has a legal parental status as the child's mother. Smart (1996:44) points out this is relatively recent; before the middle of the nineteenth century, women had no legal status or standing as mothers; 'motherhood had no legal existence'.

The only other person who can currently gain an equivalent legal parental status to a biological mother is the woman's husband<sup>77</sup>. One interesting exception is found in regulations that govern donor insemination clinics (under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, 1990). If a woman's male partner gives his signed consent to the donor insemination treatment (using the sperm of an anonymous donor<sup>78</sup>) he is allowed to take the place of the biological father to all intents and purposes. He becomes the legal father of the child; he can be named on the birth certificate and has the same rights and responsibilities as a biological father<sup>79</sup>. In this sense, legal fatherhood can be constructed by signing a legal consent form (Quaid, 2002). This is an implicitly heterosexual framework. If the woman going for treatment has a female partner, the biological mother is treated as a single mother to all intents and

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<sup>76</sup> This point has also been made by Edwards et al. (1999a) in their discussion of legal and everyday understandings of parenthood in stepfamilies.

<sup>77</sup> There are proposals to extend this legal status to unmarried (biological?) fathers.

<sup>78</sup> Haines (1990) shows how the anonymity of donors serves to protect the ideal of the (heterosexual) family.

<sup>79</sup> These will differ, depending on whether the couple is married or not.



purposes. Her partner cannot sign a consent form and cannot make a similar claim on a legal parental status. Motherhood within a same sex relationship cannot be constructed in this context in the way that fatherhood can be within a heterosexual relationship.

The only legal remedy available to the female partner of the birth mother is to apply for parental responsibility under a Joint Residence Order (Children Act, 1989). Section 3(1) defines parental responsibility as 'all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property'. A clear distinction is made between being a 'parent' and having 'parental responsibility'. Parental responsibility is a legal term which can best be understood as the activity of social parenthood (Eekelaar, 1996). It can enhance the claim to a parental status but it must be applied for - in contrast to the biological mother's automatic legal status<sup>80</sup>.

Adoption is potentially another legal avenue, open to some social parents, although adults who wish to become a parent through adoption are scrutinised to assess whether they will be accepted as a potential parent in a way that does not happen for most biological parents.

A lesbian social mother cannot adopt her partner's birth child in the same way as a male partner in a stepfamily can adopt a stepchild<sup>81</sup>. Two women in a relationship cannot currently adopt a child together in any situation<sup>82</sup>, which further reinforces the normative notion that a mother is the exclusive role that belongs to one woman. Thus the legal remedies available for social lesbian mothers to draw upon in claiming a parental status are extremely limited and do not equate with the legal status attached to biological motherhood. Without a biological claim, and with

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<sup>80</sup> The only other group of parents, who has this automatic legal status, is married fathers.

<sup>81</sup> Edwards et al. (1999a) have pointed out that stepfather adoptions have also been widely disputed (in the UK Adoption Law Review, 1992), primarily because for a stepfather to adopt his partner's children under UK law, this simultaneously requires that the biological father relinquishes his legal parental status.

<sup>82</sup> At the time of writing this chapter, MPs voted in favour of an amendment to adoption law that will allow same sex couples to adopt (May 16th, 2002), although it is expected that the House of Lords will oppose this amendment.

limited legal remedies thus available, the main option for social lesbian mothers to draw upon in claiming a parental status is the 'relational' option.

### 2.1.c Relational

As noted above, this term is used to refer to an 'emotional and practical everyday parental relationship' between a parent and a child - the 'doing' of parenthood (Reimann, 1997). Edwards et al. (1999a:95) suggest that in the absence of biological or legislative claims, the *quality* of the emotional relationship between (social) parent and child, alongside the effort put in, becomes a potential symbol of a parental status. Their discussion relates to the position of stepfathers but has parallels with social parents in other family forms. For social mothers in particular, making a relational claim to a parental status raises the additional highly gendered requirement to demonstrate the quality of their mothering, given the normative expectations of good (enough) mothering<sup>83</sup>.

The importance of the quality of the mother-child relationship originated in theories of child development that emphasised the quality of the bond between mother and child as an essential requirement for the successful development of the child's self (Bowlby, 1953, Winnicott, 1957). This child-centred emphasis stressed the requirement of a 'natural' biological connection between mother and child. There is an extensive literature which highlights the socially constructed nature of these normative defining characteristics of 'good motherhood' (see for example, edited collections by Phoenix, Woollett and Lloyd, 1991 and Silva, 1996b). Here I am primarily concerned with the ways in which these expectations invoke an essentialist link between mother and child. Pervasive ideas about what it means to adequately 'mother' a child include naturalistic assumptions that have passed into general use, whereby the activities required of 'good enough mothering' are portrayed as natural and instinctual behaviours attached to biological motherhood

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<sup>83</sup> Social fathers may also need to draw upon the quality of their parenting as a legitimising symbol of their parenthood (Edwards et al., 1999a). However, Smart and Neale (1999b) suggest that although men's behaviour may be changing, fatherhood still does not necessarily involve expectations of an active involved relationship with children. There is no conceptualisation of good enough fathering equivalent to that of good enough mothering.

(Marshall, 1991, Lawler, 2000). These discourses can potentially present additional difficulties for non-biological mothers to claim the status of motherhood. They also reinforce the idea that biological motherhood is not only a unique 'natural' status but also an exclusive one.

#### 2.1.d Singular gendered identity

The naming and claiming of a parental status, where both parents are women, can present particular difficulties. The dominant defining characteristics of motherhood outlined above contain the notion that the status of motherhood is a strongly gendered identity, usually attached to the biological mother. Where it is not, this is generally speaking because there is a 'replacement' social mother not a co-mother. Motherhood is perceived to be the role of one woman, preferably the birth mother and, in our society there are practically no models for motherhood to be a jointly shared status. Lesbian couples might be one exception, where there may be two equally committed female parents claiming the same parental status. However, wherever there is more than one woman claiming to be a child's mother, there is the potential question, 'Who is the 'real' mother?' which in essence translates as 'Who is the birth mother?' A higher value is most often put upon the biological status (Letherby, 1999:366).

## **2.2 Differing claims to motherhood**

Making the fullest possible claim to motherhood in our society - such that it becomes taken for granted - requires the ability to draw upon all four characteristics outlined above in Figure 1.

Biology underpins the other three. For example, a woman who has adopted a child may have a legal status, a relational status and be the only 'mother' the child has - yet, without the biological connection she may still feel this is a secondary status (Wegar, 1997). A birth mother who gives up her child for adoption has the biological status but no legal status. This is relinquished upon the child's adoption.

Her relational status is likely to be minimal and she will not be the only woman claiming the status of mother. However, she has the biological claim to draw upon by virtue of having gone through the pregnancy and childbirth and this gives her an indelible claim upon the status of 'mother'.

For women parenting together, one woman has the claim to the biological status and her partner does not. The woman who gives birth to the child can draw upon the biological, legal and relational but potentially cannot make the fullest possible claim upon the status of mother if this is to be jointly claimed by her partner. Nevertheless her partner has less to draw upon in making her claim to a parental status and may rely upon aspects of the legal and the relational. She may face further difficulties in securing her claim given the taken for grantedness of the birth mother's status.

### **2.3 New families, new claims?**

Silva and Smart (1999a:10) have raised further questions about how to name some of the kind of parental relationships possible where families are created with the assistance of reproductive technologies. What, they ask, is the name for the relationship between a known sperm donor ('biological father') and a child, where the donor may or may not have developed an ongoing relationship with that child. Or what is the name of the relationship between a woman and a child where the woman's genetic material enabled another woman to become pregnant<sup>84</sup>? The naming of these relationships also connects to the question I am posing, which is to consider the ways in which the adults involved could potentially claim a parental status. A further issue here relates to potential disparities between the publicly ascribed and the personally ascribed definitions of parental status. The naming of relationships can be one way to reinforce individual parental roles that potentially fall outside of publicly ascribed definitions.

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<sup>84</sup> I was contacted by a lesbian couple in America who were using this technology in their attempts to have a child. (They enquired about taking part in my research but at the time of contact were still trying to conceive.)

Given the dismantling of boundaries around traditional family forms and the new forms of parenting relationships that are being created (McRae, 1999), these are relevant questions, yet little attention has been paid to how these are worked out (and named). I have outlined key defining characteristics of motherhood and the difficulties these may present to women who cannot make the fullest taken for granted claim to a female parental status. In the discussion that follows I consider the ways in which respondents variously draw upon these characteristics, in making claims to a parental status.

### **3. Women parenting together: claiming a parental status**

#### **3.1 Labels and language**

In writing this section I am confronted with the need to be able to distinguish between women who do or do not have a biological connection to their child. The fact that these distinctions become necessary is a key point in the following discussions.

Respondents adopted a proliferation of terms to talk about their own and their partner's parental status. Women who gave birth to their child refer to themselves or are referred to as the mother or as the 'birth mother', 'natural mother', 'real mother', 'biological mother'. There is however a notable consensus that women with the biological link are mothers. Women who did not give birth to their child variously call themselves or are referred to as mothers or parents. This includes terms such as 'co-mother/parent', the 'non-biological mother/parent' or 'the other mother'. Not all of these women call themselves or are referred to as mothers. These terms alone reflect some of the nuanced meanings about what it means to be a mother (or not) and to claim that status for oneself, and a diversity of aspirations to a parental status amongst the cohort of social mothers. It is notable that the parental status of women who did not give birth to their child is more likely to be defined in relation to their lack of a biological link to their child while the status of biological mothers is rarely questioned.

Respondents often adopted a variety of interchangeable terms in describing their own and their partner's status as parents. Up to this point I have also employed different terms, referring to women who gave birth to their child as a birth mother or a biological mother and to those that did not give birth to their child as a social mother/parent or a non-biological mother. I now want to de-centre the emphasis that is nearly always placed on the biological. To distinguish between respondents who did or did not give birth to their child, I shall employ the terms 'birth mother' and 'social mother'. These are my terms. Women I interviewed do not necessarily use these particular terms. My choice of 'labels' is not entirely satisfactory in that not all respondents in my study call themselves mothers. However they do all engage with the dilemmas of what it means to be a mother even if they do not claim a parental status as a mother. These terms also do not fully encompass the experiences of respondents in two families where both women had given birth to a child. In these cases, I refer to the woman who gave birth to their first child as the birth mother and the woman who gave birth to their second child as the social mother. Their particular experiences are discussed in further detail later in the chapter (see Section 4.2).

### **3.2 Introducing women's accounts of their parental status**

A birth and a social mother, who have had a child together, may both engage with the dominant meanings of parenthood in shaping and constructing their own meaningful definitions of motherhood. I have already outlined some of the potential difficulties that may be faced by social mothers claiming a parental status.

When interviewing women for this research, I did not always know prior to the interview whether I was interviewing a birth mother or a social mother, and I did not make attempts to find out<sup>85</sup>. To some extent this was a conscious attempt to not

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<sup>85</sup> In some cases I would know even though I had not asked. Some respondents or, more often, intermediaries had given this information prior to the interviews, other times there were 'clues' such as a child being breastfed.

question women's parental status. I found out during the interviews when asking questions about whether or not a biological or social relationship to the child raised any issues. My initial rationale for this question was to explore how others viewed their parental status. However it became apparent that social mothers questioned their own status as much as, or more than, others questioned their status. They highlighted particular difficulties in laying claim to a parental status and their accounts form the main focus of my discussion below. However I also consider the accounts related by the birth mothers, in part because of the contrast of these accounts alongside those of the social mothers. For example, what birth mothers do *not* say in relation to what social mothers *do* say about their parental status is revealing in itself about the extent to which women who have a biological link to their child can take their status as a mother for granted. However their talk also reveals some considerable ambivalence around these same dilemmas. For women who have the biological link to their child, their status appears to be more straightforward but potentially they may be called upon to 'share' the status of motherhood with their partner. This 'out of the ordinary' scenario can potentially cause conflict, tensions and irresolution for both parties.

#### **4. Social mothers' claims to a parental status**

In all of the interviews carried out with social mothers, the subject of claiming some parental status was discussed at some length. Not all claimed the status of being a mother. Thirteen did so but seven explicitly rejected this status and made claims to the alternative status of being a parent and/or having a unique parental role. Claiming a status as either a mother or a parent involved a significant amount of work. The focus of this section is to examine the ways in which women variously drew upon a range of factors in laying claim to some parental status.

While there are considerable differences between the accounts women produced and sometimes within individual accounts, there were also some significant areas of consensus. All of the social mothers were very clear that they regarded the child born into their relationship as their own child, their daughter or son. All regarded

themselves as jointly responsible for parenting their child with their partner, the child's birth mother. All made some claim to some parental status.

All of the social mothers called the children that their partners had given birth to, their own 'daughter' or 'son'. Some felt obliged to qualify their claim to having a daughter or a son by highlighting the absence of a biological connection between them and their child. Typically, these kinds of qualifications took the form of 'He's my son, but I didn't give birth to him' or 'She's not got my genes but she is my daughter'.

Linguistically, in our culture and language, if a woman claims a child as her daughter or son, by implication the claim maker is perceived to be the child's mother. There are other forms of social motherhood where a woman's filial relationship to their son or daughter is formed through being, for example, a stepparent or an adoptive parent. Should a stepmother or an adoptive mother feel obliged to qualify their relationship to their son or daughter as a non-biological relationship, there are the readily available prefixes used above ('step' or 'adoptive') that they can attach to son, daughter or mother. There is no similar prefix available to the lesbian social mother parenting a child from birth in the context of a same sex relationship. The need for such qualifications highlights the deeply entrenched meaning of motherhood, framed within a heterosexual context and inextricably linked with the biological fact of giving birth.

Social mothers were aware that, at best, their claims to a parental status could not be taken for granted. In making some claim to a parental status social mothers engage with all four characteristics outlined in Figure 1 (page 165). Their accounts demonstrate some considerable complexity, variability and contradictions in the ways that they engage with these factors that form part of the normative definitions of motherhood. This is evident both between the accounts of different individuals but also within individual accounts. In order to demonstrate some of these complexities I shall first consider the account of one social mother, Tessa. Tessa's account illustrates some common dilemmas raised by the thirteen social mothers who laid claim to the status of 'mother'. In the following sections, I shall examine



how other social mothers variously call upon issues raised within Tessa's account, in similar or different ways.

#### **4.1 Tessa's account**

To make a claim on the status of mother, Tessa must do so alongside her partner Vicky, who, as the child's birth mother, is generally perceived to have no need to 'claim' that status since it is already hers by virtue of her biological link with the child. Tessa struggles with what this means in claiming a status as a mother for herself:

It's more difficult to say you're a mother when you didn't give birth to your child. Vicky is easily identifiable as Rosa's mother because she's the one who was pregnant and she's breast-feeding Rosa.

Tessa's claim to the status of 'mother' is complicated by the presence of the birth mother, and by the dominant notion that 'mother' is a singular gendered identity. These struggles would not occur in the same way if she were a lone parent. For example if she were a single woman who had adopted a child, the dynamics would be very different in claiming the status of mother. She still would not have a biological link but she would have gained a legal status. The child's birth mother may still have contact with the child but she would have given up her legal status and would not have the 'full-house' status that Tessa's partner Vicky (almost) has as the child's birth mother<sup>86</sup>.

As I shall show, Tessa does not challenge Vicky's status as Rosa's mother. None of the social mothers questioned the birth mothers' claim on this status. However, as I shall also discuss, Tessa recognises the absence of the biological connection places her at a disadvantage in claiming this status alongside Vicky. She identifies key factors linked to biology that she herself cannot draw upon, but that mean Vicky's status as Rosa's mother is unquestionable.

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<sup>86</sup> Vicky has the biological, legal and relational dimensions to draw upon but not the singular gendered identity. I discuss Vicky's account in Section 5.

Tessa does not have any legal parental status. As outlined earlier, she could apply for a Joint Residence Order - which confers parental responsibility upon the applicant, for a child in her care. In Section 4.3, I discuss how, for some social mothers, this provides an additional means of laying claim upon a parental status. Although Tessa now regards the acquisition of a legal status as 'pretty insignificant' and 'not necessary', it was of some significance in the first year of Rosa's life:

In the first year, yeah, it could've been useful ... in me asserting myself as Rosa's mother and a Residency Order might have helped but it's a lot harder to get one before you've lived with the child for two years and so by the time those two years are up everything is more established anyway, so now it doesn't seem significant to get a Residency Order, it's something and nothing really ...

Tessa thus invokes the dimension of time as a significant factor in establishing her claim to a parental status. Time is a factor that features within the Children Act, 1989. One basis for applying for parental responsibility (via a Joint Residence Order - JRO) is to have lived with a child for three years prior to the date of the JRO application. The advice Tessa received was to wait two years, with (incorrect) reference to fulfilling this particular criterion. However, as this legally defined length of time has passed, Tessa felt that gaining a legal status became increasingly irrelevant in adding to her parental status. It was surpassed by the relational definition of what it means to be a mother or a parent. The length of time of the relationship between Tessa and Rosa plays an important role in establishing Tessa's parental status. As I shall show, this is a prevailing theme that was evident in all of the social mothers' accounts.

Given the absence of biological and legal connections to draw upon, Tessa finds alternative ways to lay claim upon the status of 'mother'. One such way is to call upon the symbolism of parental terms:

I want to be called Mummy but Vicky doesn't want me to be called Mummy. Er ... the compromise she had found for me is er... I call my Mum 'Ima'<sup>87</sup> so Vicky thinks I could be 'Ima' (laughs). It's like Vicky has some given right to that term but I'm a mother too so why can't I have the same parent name. I think of myself as Rosa's mother and I want to be called Mummy. It runs deeper than I've probably described, some of it is about having that terminology, owning it and living by it with Rosa.

Tessa's desire to be called Mummy is, in part, a desire to be *named* as a mother in the same way as her partner, Vicky. Tessa contests the idea that a child can only have one mother and that the associated term 'Mummy' should be the exclusive right of the birth mother. The issue of parental terms has proved to be a source of conflict between Tessa and Vicky. For Tessa, 'Ima' will not do. Even though this is the name Tessa calls her own mother, here it is a compromise 'found for her' by Vicky and possibly suggests a secondary mother status, while Vicky has a 'given right' to the term 'Mummy'. Tessa's regards the parental term 'Mummy' to be in some way symbolic of her status as a mother. To make this claim, Tessa then has to draw upon the relational aspect of what it means to be a mother. She stresses how she is as equally involved in the parenting of Rosa, as Vicky is:

It's very hard for me because I feel I take a full and active part and I love her equally and take responsibility and all those things ... There was a sense of feeling I had to do ... or be vigilant about the quality of care and ... and I suppose that tied in with feeling as though Vicky would know how to do it because she's the birth mother and I didn't have all the hormones and what have you. But as Vicky would say it didn't happen like that. She thinks I bonded more easily and earlier with Rosa than she did. I used a lactate to breastfeed Rosa, not to feed but for comfort ... and I actually enjoy it which was even more excruciating for Vicky to see I enjoyed it because it was just so painful for her, she's had a lot of difficulties breastfeeding.

Tessa invokes the normative ideals of instinctual and 'natural' (hormonal) maternal behaviours that are most strongly associated with biological motherhood and with being a good mother; naming the ideals of bonding and breastfeeding the infant. She makes reference to that fact that, unlike Vicky, she did not have the hormones that assist the 'natural' development of maternal care. Tessa substitutes 'hormones'

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<sup>87</sup> 'Ima' acts as a pseudonym for Tessa's real parental term for her mother, which is distinctive and potentially identifiable.

with vigilance and is concerned to provide a quality of care equivalent to Vicky's care of Rosa. Tessa's account of breastfeeding is in some respects unconventional. She is not able to feed Rosa through her 'breastfeeding' but it offers the means to demonstrate that she is able (and willing) to fulfil other ideals of good mothering. Her breastfeeding of Rosa provides comfort. Furthermore, while Tessa did not have the same advantages as Vicky to assist the natural development of maternal behaviours, she is able to demonstrate that she can fulfil these ideals as well as, if not better than, Vicky was able to do. Thus, in laying claim to a parental status as a mother, part of the work Tessa engages is that of demonstrating that she is a good mother, fully attentive to the needs of her daughter. The quality of her relational claim to motherhood is equivalent to the normative notions of what the (good) birth mother provides for her child. I shall return to this point in Section 4.4, in the wider discussion of the accounts of social mothers.

Throughout Tessa's account, the role that biological connections may play in what it means to be a mother are highlighted through the absence of her biological connection to her daughter. This features strongly in her account, although she rarely refers to it in an explicit way. Rather it becomes apparent through the way in which she outlines the difficulties she experiences in claiming the status of mother in contrast to the taken for grantedness of Vicky's (biological) motherhood. Tessa calls upon a range of factors that in effect *compensate* for the absence of a biological claim and thus validate her motherhood. These factors include the symbolism of being called Mummy, and replicating aspects of parenting that are strongly associated with biological motherhood such as 'bonding' and 'breastfeeding'. She also makes the additional claim that she can fulfil these acts as well as and sometimes better than the birth mother. In drawing upon the relational element of what it means to be a mother, the factor of time also comes into play as an important legitimating device. It becomes significant in terms of surpassing the biological and legal elements through establishing a relational claim to a parental status *over time*.

In the following sections I examine how these same issues are variously employed within the accounts of the other social mothers.

## 4.2 The significance of biological connections

Biology is a key theme in the majority of the social mothers' accounts but the ways in which it is interpreted and placed alongside the other aspects outlined in Figure 1 (page 165) vary. Some interpret the role of biology as a highly significant factor within the definitions of motherhood. However, within this group, some link the significance of biology to the notion that the birth mother had an exclusive claim to the status of 'mother', while others, like Tessa, challenge this exclusivity of a biological claim to motherhood and make a joint claim to the same status. Another 'sub-group' of respondents plays down the centrality of biology. They often (although not always) stress other defining features of motherhood in their claims to the status of mother.

The seven respondents who identified themselves as parents, not mothers, were amongst those who placed the greatest emphasis on the biological connection being a salient defining feature of motherhood:

I don't see myself as a mother. A mother is the person who gives birth to you (Hilary).

I think the biological role is really important, that's what makes you a mother really (Emma).

It's very significant to have a mother, the one who gave birth to you ... (Tina).

These women echo normative understandings of what it means to be a mother, namely that it is clearly defined by the biological connection above all else. This played a central role in these women's assertions that they saw their own status to be something other than that of 'mother'. Elaine attempts to explain this:

IV: ... you were saying how you see yourself as parent but not a mother. Can you explain that a bit more to me?

Elaine: Well I suppose in my mind, I didn't give birth to Frances. But I mean, well I don't know, I mean obviously if you apply to adopt then you'd be able to say ... if say a straight couple adopted there's no biological links to the child but the child would have a Mum and a Dad (...) But in our situation you've got two women and only one is the biological mother, I just

feel Pam is the natural mother, biologically, legally she is, and I'm something else ... still a parent, I mean I do all the same things ... oh I don't know really, I don't know why, but that's how I see myself, as a parent not a mother.

Elaine's explanation illustrates some of the difficulties women experienced in articulating what it means to be - or not to be - a mother. She lays out an implicit hierarchy of claims to motherhood along which she places Pam, the imaginary adoptive mother and herself:

Pam:	BIOLOGICAL + LEGAL + RELATIONAL
Adoptive (heterosexual) mother:	LEGAL + RELATIONAL <sup>88</sup>
Elaine:	RELATIONAL <sup>89</sup>

Elaine acknowledges that some women who do not have a biological connection to their child have potentially legitimate claims to the status of mother. However, she puts forward a crucial difference between her parental status and that of an adoptive mother. Both have a social rather than a biological relationship to their child, but Elaine additionally highlights the notion that 'mother' is a singular status allocated to one woman. This introduces the fourth element - the normative definition of motherhood as a singular gendered status. These elements are all inter-linked in respondents' understandings of what it means to be a mother. For all seven respondents who identify as parents not as mothers, where the birth mother is present and potentially able to draw upon the other characteristics central to definitions of motherhood, this is seen to exclude any other woman making a joint claim to the same status.

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<sup>88</sup> The birth mother who gives up her child for adoption potentially has only a biological claim to the status as a mother.

<sup>89</sup> Activities that are strongly associated with motherhood are not necessarily seen as the exclusive domain of the birth mother. Elaine states she 'does all the same things' - as a parent, that Pam does as a mother. I shall return to this aspect of the doing of parenthood in Section 4.4.

Tessa also identified biology as a dominant feature of normative understandings of motherhood but significantly, she separated this from the associated defining characteristic of motherhood as a singular gendered status. All 13 respondents who defined their parental status to be that of a mother challenged the notion that motherhood is a singular gendered identity. However, making a claim on the status of being a mother, alongside the birth mother was still difficult to achieve and especially so for those, like Tessa, who interpreted the role of biology to be highly significant to the legitimacy of claims to motherhood. For some of these thirteen respondents, the absence of a biological link to their child (coupled with the presence of the birth mother) led them to feel that their claims to the same status were potentially fraudulent. Typical expressions of this include:

I almost feel as though I'm lying ... I feel a bit of a fraud saying I'm a mother when, you know, it was Jacqueline not me, who gave birth to him (Joanne).

I feel I am his Mum, I mean I am his Mum but I feel like I'm pulling a con-trick. It's so much easier for Marie, she gave birth to him after all (Pat).

These women clearly asserted that they were mothers. Nevertheless, 'fraud' and 'con-trick' are strong expressions of some sense that their claims to being mothers are made on potentially spurious grounds, primarily because of the powerful notion that this is a singular gendered identity that they are laying claim to alongside the birth mother. Sandra sums up this ambivalence:

It's so ingrained you've really only got one mummy and that links to the blood line thing, the one who gave birth is the real mother. When Kate had Edward, I didn't have the biological authority to say 'I'm his mum too'. And you don't necessarily have the legal status ... and it all links back to the fact I didn't give birth to him.

The absence of a biological link is exacerbated by the fact that the birth mother is present, co-parenting the child. She has the additional and automatic legal parental status. Here again are the three elements combined - biological, legal and relational which the birth mother can draw upon and the social mother cannot. These are dealt with alongside the difficulties involved where two women make a joint claim upon the status of mother even if their parenting is equal.

Sandra is one of two respondents (the other respondent is Anna) I have included within this group of social mothers who are also birth mothers. Their first experience of motherhood was as a social mother. Their partners had their first child and Sandra and Anna both later conceived and gave birth to the couples' second children. Both discuss how the experience of birth motherhood made the extent of their initial struggles to claim the status of being a mother (as a social mother) even more apparent:

It was only when I had Nathan that I really felt comfortable calling myself a mother, to both boys (Sandra - social and birth mother).

When there was just Oscar it was a very undefined role for me, I'd call myself his Mum but I do feel more of a Mum now I've had Howie. My maternal instincts were just as strong with Oscar but having gone through giving birth and stuff, it's just easier, cos it was hard being the non-biological parent and saying 'I'm a mum' (Anna - social and birth mother).

Their accounts focus on the difficulties of claiming the status of mother as social mothers. In contrast they said very little about their status as birth mothers. This is indicative of the strength of the discourses around biological motherhood. As noted in the earlier quote by Sandra, the combination of the dominant characteristics of motherhood pose difficulties in claiming to be a mother alongside the birth mother. Becoming a birth mother highlighted the depth of their previous ambivalence about claiming a parental status as a social mother, even when, as Anna identifies, she felt able to draw upon aspects of a maternal identity. Interestingly this did not apply in reverse for their partners (Kate and Helen), as I shall discuss in Section 5.

None of the social mothers who claimed the status of 'mother' were able to completely ignore the role that biological connections played in defining motherhood, but about half of this group (6 out of 13) played down rather than highlighted its significance. Jenny, for example, states she is 'not into biology':

... I don't see my father anymore, key relationships for me aren't necessarily about biology but about the quality of the relationship, like with my step-dad. There are other things more important than biology (Jenny).



In laying out her claim as a (social) mother, Jenny draws upon her childhood experience of living in a stepfamily to demonstrate how other features of a parental relationship may take precedence over the biological connection<sup>90</sup>. For example, she stresses her legal status and the quality of her relationship with Molly. Unlike Tessa above, she does not present these as compensatory features which make up for the absence of a biological link, rather she presents them as legitimate features in their own right which are sufficient to establish her parental status as a mother. I return to these legal and relational dimensions in the following sections.

Margaret similarly talks very little about the absence of biological connections between herself and her two children:

There are just so many degrees of where you can plot yourself on the line really, but I feel very much and am day to day very much a mother to both of them (...) we are very much two Mums, there's no greater than or lesser than mum. I mean Ali and I consistently see ourselves as equal mothers and the kids relate to us in that way and they call us both Mummy.

The main 'clue' here that Margaret is the social mother is that she says 'I feel very much and am day to day a mother'. Although biology is not salient in her account, she implicitly engages with it in the work required to explicitly lay out her status as a mother - which is not required of a birth mother in the same way. A birth mother is unlikely to say 'I feel' or 'I am' a mother; she just *is* by virtue of the biological connection. I discuss the birth mothers' accounts in more detail in Section 5.

Margaret, in common with other social mothers who play down the biological element of normative definitions of motherhood, challenges the norm that the status of mother belongs exclusively to the birth mother even where she has the biological, legal and relational status. The fact that Margaret and Ali are both called Mummy by their children is an important symbol of the jointly shared status of 'mother'. For social mothers, calling upon the use of specific parental terms such as

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<sup>90</sup> I do not wish to imply that this was the view of all respondents who were also brought up with stepparents. Some social mothers with stepparents placed more importance on biological connections. Other factors may come into play including, for example, the quality of relationships between respondents and their birth and stepparents. However, there is insufficient data on these relationships to consider the extent to which such factors may or may not be significant.

'Mummy' can form an important aspect of their claims to a parental status. As discussed earlier, this formed an important part of Tessa's account of laying claim to a parental status as a mother.

Margaret's main claim to the joint status of mother relies on her practices of parenting - the day to day 'relational' characteristic, which forms part of what it means to be a mother. In claiming some parental status, all of the social mothers call upon their involvement in the emotional and practical activities of parenting but again respondents drew upon this aspect of their experiences differently in claiming or rejecting the label 'mother' for themselves. Before I move on to discuss these elements I shall consider the legal aspect of motherhood, which is automatically linked to biological motherhood.

### **4.3 Legal status**

While the birth mother has automatic legal rights, obtaining some equivalent rights for the social mother can require a great deal of effort. The legal invisibility of social mothers can compound the difficulties faced in claiming any parental status. This invisibility of social mothers is also tied in with their parental status being recognised by the outside world<sup>91</sup>.

Only 5 out of 20 social mothers applied for and gained some legal parental status, although 4 others expressed some desire to obtain this legal status. As discussed earlier, a lesbian social mother can apply for parental responsibility (see Section 2.1.b) which is acquired through a Joint Residence Order under the Children Act, 1989. However, this provides parental responsibility only for the duration of the residence order (Children Act, 1989, s 12 [2]).

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<sup>91</sup> See Chapter 6.

Many respondents had very little awareness about parental legal rights for lesbian cohabiting social mothers<sup>92</sup>. Thus, it had not even occurred to some that there were legal avenues through which the social mother could obtain a legal parental status. Some had made enquires with solicitors but had received misleading or incorrect advice about their position or else were advised to avoid court proceedings if at all possible<sup>93</sup>. In part, this may explain why many social mothers did not call upon legal discourses in making a claim to a parental status. Those who did talk about either wanting, or having gained, a legal status, introduced this aspect of parenthood in different ways. In part, it was about gaining some additional security of their position and viewed as a potential response in anticipating challenges to the validity of their parental status<sup>94</sup>.

Where raised in relation to defining their parental status, social mothers discussed the inequality of their own legal status in contrast to that of the birth mother. Earlier quotes from Sandra and Elaine for example, made reference to this legal aspect of a parental status, which is automatically linked to biological motherhood (see Section 4.2). Sandra was one of the five social mothers who had applied for a Joint Residence Order and she draws upon this in making a claim to a parental status. All five respondents talked about gaining parental responsibility as a means to legitimate their parental status rather than being about obtaining legal rights:

Sandra: It's only a piece of paper at the end of the day ... I've got it somewhere (...). I've never actually needed to refer to it but I know I've got it and that was the important bit.

IV: Why was that important?

Sandra: Why ... Oh ... well it seems less significant now, but at the time, when Edward was born it was so important ... it was something extra I suppose to say 'Look I'm a mother too, I'm just as much Edward's Mum as Kate'.

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<sup>92</sup> There is some evidence that unmarried heterosexual couples are also unaware of the legal position of unmarried parents in relation to their children (McRae, 1993). However in this scenario, parents assume the father has a parental legal status (which he does not). Lesbian social mothers did not make this assumption - they were aware they have no automatic parental legal rights. Their lack of awareness related to assumptions that they were not able to obtain a legal parental status.

<sup>93</sup> This latter point may reflect the history of discrimination previously faced by lesbian parents in custody disputes with their children's fathers (Harne and ROW, 1997).

<sup>94</sup> See Chapter 6.

It's symbolic really ... just demonstrating I'm an equal parent, not a tag on or the nanny or whatever. I suppose it's part and parcel of what comes with being a biological mother isn't it, and ... it just gives me that extra bit to assert that I'm a mother too if you like (Ruth).

In this sense, the legal status is used as a legitimising symbol of their motherhood. It ties in with asserting their parental status in interactions with others but also in feeling more confident about their self ascribed status. Implicitly the legal status may help to equalise their claims to motherhood alongside their partner, the child's birth mother. Sandra states that the JRO now feels less significant than it did at the time she applied for it. She elaborated later in her interview how her relationship with Edward has developed and intensified over time. The everyday practices involved in being his 'Mum' has meant that over time the importance of the legal status diminished, as she was able to increasingly draw upon the emotional and practical aspects of being a mother<sup>95</sup>.

Some social mothers had not 'got around' to applying for a legal parental status through a Joint Residence Order. Others were not aware they could do so. Some had sought legal advice and - like Tessa - been advised to wait, and apply on the basis of having established a parental relationship over time. In all cases the passing of time meant that the significance of gaining or having a legal parental status was increasingly surpassed by the relational definitions of what it means to be a mother or a parent.

#### **4.4 The relational dimension**

The absence of a biological connection and, for most, the absence of any legal recognition meant that the majority of social mothers' claims to a parental status drew heavily upon this relational dimension. Whether claiming the status of mother or parent, these claims rest upon the idea that it is the emotional relationship and involvement in all the parenting activities related to caring about and for a child

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<sup>95</sup> As I discuss in the next chapter, as well as making sense of motherhood for themselves, social mothers still face further challenges over time in validating their claims in response to external perceptions.

that makes one a mother/parent. All of the social mothers made various assertions to the effect that the ability to forge a close emotional relationship and the ability to carry out the tasks involved in parenting a child were not dependent on a biological (or legal) status.

Where social mothers made claims to a parental status as a mother they were effectively challenging the exclusivity attached to this 'label' and the hierarchy of biology, legal and relational elements which combine to give the birth mother a taken for granted status. Tessa provides an example of this kind of claim when she questions why she should not be a mother as well as Vicky, given her equally full and active parenting role.

Where social mothers made claims to be a parent, not a mother, this reflected a belief that it was a singular gendered status which 'belonged' to the birth mother:

Stella is his mother whereas I'm his parent. I do all the kinds of jobs of parenting and caring and looking after but actually I'm not biologically related (Denise).

For both types of claims, as a mother or as a parent, women variously called upon the same range of maternal activities and behaviours involved in caring for and about children. However, women interpreted the normative portrayal of the innate 'naturalness' of these activities in different ways and these different interpretations did not always neatly correspond with the different claims of 'mother' or 'parent'.

For some of the thirteen social mothers, who claimed the status of 'mother', their claims were extensively based on the relational element:

It's something you have to work at to, to be a Mum, to call yourself a Mum if you didn't give birth to your child. I had the same emotional connection to Edward, all the sleepless nights, the nappies, all of it ... and I was here on a day to day basis (...) doing the mothering (Sandra - first became a social mother to Edward).

A biological mother is a mother, she just *is* by virtue of giving birth whereas I had to prove I'm qualified to call myself a mother by doing it and doing it twice as well almost (Pat, italics indicate Pat's emphasis).

Both respondents articulate a sense that they cannot take their status for granted in the same way that a birth mother can, rather it is something they have had to work towards. The tasks may be the same as those carried out by the birth mother. However, for the social mother, the work involved in parenting is additionally called upon as a legitimating symbol of a parental status. Pat also emphasises that the quality of her relational claim has to be as good as, if not better than, the birth mother's relational input. This resonates with the above discussion of Tessa's sense of being vigilant about the quality of care she provided for Rosa and her emphasis of the ways in which her parenting work was equal to or in some ways superior to that provided by Vicky, the birth mother.

A central component of the social constructions of good motherhood closely associates the activities of caring for one's young children with the essentialist categories of 'natural' behaviour. These social mothers feel in some way obliged to compensate for their perceived inability to imitate the innate quality of (good enough) mothering that a birth mother is expected to provide. They are instead called upon to 'earn' their parental status by demonstrating that the quality of their social parenting is of a sufficiently high enough quality to compensate for the absence of a 'natural' (i.e. innate) ability and adequately meets the needs of their child.

Some social mothers however, who make claims to a parental status as a parent, draw directly upon the 'natural' language of good motherhood:

I mean I couldn't love a child more than I love William, we bonded from the start. All the same things come into being a parent, all the same kind of feminine nurturing motherly kind of things I see it as mothering but I do that as his parent not as his mother (Denise).

I'm not trying to be his mother ... but I'm very maternal, I worry about him, well not so much worry but fuss around him in a mother hen sort of way ... but er ... I haven't wanted to fit into any sort of role (Tina).

While staking out a claim to being something other than a mother they may still draw upon the same formulations of activities strongly associated with biological

motherhood. Denise and Tina present the status of mother as a singular gendered identity that belongs to the birth mother. However, for them, this exclusivity does not then appear to extend to the kinds of mothering activities that are most commonly constructed and presented as innate behaviours performed by the birth mother. Rather they draw upon the doing of similar mothering activities to claim a parental status.

A number of social mothers did not attempt to compensate for, or reproduce, the full extent of mothering activities strongly associated with the role of the biological mother. Emma, for example, (in making a claim as a parent not a mother) indicates that she neither emulates being a mother nor takes an equivalent role in the same range of mothering behaviours:

I think biologically being a mother prepares you for all sorts of things, there's definitely a difference like some kind of invisible umbilical cord. There's a level I think you can only reach if you're the birth mother. I do everything for those boys and I couldn't love them more but there's just a difference. I don't think even a biological father would have any concept of what it's truly like. So I'm not their Mum, that's Lauren. I'm their Emmie and I guess we'll work out what that means over time (Emma).

There is something here that goes beyond the biological connection to something deeply intuitive and instinctual associated with the gendered experience of biological motherhood. Emma circumvents any need to make claims to being as good as or better than Lauren by calling upon the unique nature of her parenting relationship, to establish her parental status, which will be worked out over time.

In working out claims to a parental status, social mothers cannot avoid deeply ingrained naturalistic assumptions about mothering. These form part of the constraints and moralities around motherhood that they must engage with, whether claiming to be a mother or a parent. The above quote from Emma's account resonates with Winnicott's notion of a symbiotic relationship between (birth) mother and child, whereby through the mother's natural absorption with her child - her 'primary maternal preoccupation' - she is uniquely able to address her child's needs (Winnicott, 1960). The mother-child bond is required to adequately meet the

child's needs. Lawler (2000) argues that such expert representations of motherhood have been naturalised, and form part of hegemonic notions of what it means to be a mother and to mother a child. For some social mothers - including Tessa - making a parental claim to be a mother involves challenging this naturalistic presentation of motherhood by seeking to demonstrate that they can equally meet their child's needs. Others, like Emma, resist in a different way by claiming an alternative status, but these 'strategies' are also indicative of how little space there is in which to circumvent these discourses.

### **5. Birth mothers' accounts of motherhood**

Birth mothers in same sex relationships are largely able to take their parental status as mothers for granted. The biological connection – through pregnancy and childbirth (and the associated legal ties to a child) form taken for granted aspects of what being a mother means in our society. It is so taken for granted that the question posed by all the social mothers 'Have I the right to call myself a mother?' is not a question birth mothers need address. This becomes particularly evident through a comparison of the separate accounts from the birth and social mothers. For example what birth mothers *do not* say in relation to what social mothers *do* say about their status as mothers is revealing in itself about the extent to which they are able to take their claims to motherhood for granted. The silences in the birth mothers accounts are striking; for example, birth mothers do not question their status as mothers or lay claim to any alternative status. They do not talk about any difficulties in establishing that they are mothers. They have little to say about the legal aspects of a parental status. They do not discuss the limitations of language to express what they mean when they talk about their motherhood. These are all issues that are consistently present and are often dealt with at some length within the social mothers' accounts.

Nevertheless there are two key areas around the dominant meanings of motherhood that are not straightforward for birth mothers. These are first, normative ideas about motherhood being a status allocated exclusively to the biological mother (who is



also viewed as the child's primary carer) and second, powerful notions about the unique and special nature of biological motherhood.

Pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood form a package: to be pregnant and to give birth to a child automatically confers the status of mother on a woman, in contemporary Western societies. While motherhood is in many ways a devalued status in our society, there are also prevailing notions that this uniquely female experience confers a special privileged status upon the birth mother. All the birth mothers engaged to some degree with the potential contradictions posed by the meanings attached to biological motherhood. These meanings can provide the birth mother with a privileged position as well as a status as the child's mother that they can take for granted, but these same meanings can also negate their partner's claims to some parental status. These contradictions are further complicated by another dimension. While there are few (if any) models for two women entering into parenthood together as a joint venture, as discussed in Chapter 2 a dominant model for same sex relationships is an egalitarian model, based on notions of fairness and reciprocity - which potentially includes shared parenting. This model may come into conflict with the dominant meanings of motherhood that privilege biological motherhood.

While birth mothers do not need to engage in the same work of claiming the status as social mothers have to, potentially they may be called upon to negotiate a joint claim to motherhood with their partner. This can raise the dilemma of dealing with the construction of motherhood as a singular and unique status, attached to biological motherhood. Even where their partner claims a status as a parent rather than as a mother, the birth mother may still be called upon to support these different claims of female parenthood alongside their own motherhood.

## 5.1 Contradictions and tensions posed by meanings of biological motherhood

Birth mothers recognise the taken for granted status of their entry into motherhood primarily by way of contrast to the position of the social mother:

I feel validated as a mother by virtue of having a birth child, I think it's been different for me than for Sandra, she didn't feel very acknowledged (Kate).

My identity is never in question because I was the biological Mum (...) there's no 'Who are you then' that Anna had to face (Helen).

Jenny has to be more forthright about it, about being a mother because she hasn't been the birth mother ... I think, you know, if you're pregnant than people don't question the fact that you're the mother (Paula).

I'm their mother by right, by virtue of giving birth and nothing else whereas Pat is their mother by parenting and only then acknowledged by doing it well (Marie).

Kate and Helen are the partners of Sandra and Anna, who (as discussed earlier) each later gave birth to a child, at which point Kate and Helen became social mothers. However, having already had the experience of being a birth mother appears to confirm their status such that neither woman questioned their status when they later also became social mothers. This silence is striking when compared to the accounts of their partners' accounts and those of other social mothers and underlines the extent to which biological motherhood can be taken for granted.

To some extent this taken for grantedness is only exposed when parenting with another woman who has a social relationship to the child. More commonly, women do not become mothers in situations that allow such a comparison. For example, it is unlikely that a heterosexual woman having a child with her male partner would talk about her status as a mother in any of the above ways. Being the only female parent obscures the extent to which the notion that mother is a singular identity is taken for granted.

This is a key issue that birth mothers address in their shared parenting alongside their partner. While they can take their own status as mothers for granted, they are aware that the same processes which give them this unquestioned (and permanent) status can also exclude their partner. Consequently birth mothers need also to engage with the privileged status accorded to the biological motherhood. This is work of a different order from the work involved in the social mothers' negotiations of the same issues. It does not include the work of asserting 'I am a mother'. Nevertheless it can create tensions.

Vicky and Tessa, for example, are both committed to being equal in their parenting of their child. Earlier I outlined the work involved for Tessa to claim a status as a mother. Vicky faces different dilemmas:

We've done everything down the line to be equal in our parenthood but Rosa is my child in terms of, you know, I gave birth to her, but I felt that wasn't being recognised anywhere. It made me want the exclusivity of being called Mummy even more, I do feel precious about it, about being seen to be Rosa's Mummy.

She is committed to a desire to do everything equally yet at the same time she experiences the pull of a deep seated belief that her experience of giving birth to Rosa carries with it something that is uniquely hers and hers alone, something she feels 'precious' about. She believes there is something special about the parental status that relates to being a birth mother. Feeling that no one else around her has recognised quite how special it is exacerbates her experience of some possessiveness about this status. Vicky is willing to share the *doing* of the parenting equally but this also makes it more difficult to own up to her desire to maintaining some exclusivity in recognition of her biological motherhood. Alongside the belief that there is something unique to being a birth mother, she also articulates the related idea that there is something unique in the (biological) connection between herself and Rosa:

Clearly there is something between Rosa and I that Tessa doesn't have ...

Simultaneously, Vicky stresses the strength of the social link between Tessa and Rosa, to the extent that this initially felt stronger than her own 'bond' to Rosa:

... but at the same time I've realised that all that stuff about biological connections and genes and stuff just was not important because Tessa felt so much more love for Rosa than I did in the beginning.

At this disjunction she draws upon the relational dimension that social mothers also rely upon in making their claims to a parental status. Vicky states that Tessa's parenting relationship to Rosa is equal to her own and theoretically this makes nonsense of her previously articulated feelings about biological connections. Nevertheless the ambivalence about wanting to claim something special about birth motherhood and biological ties, while also wanting to negotiate a model of shared motherhood with Tessa, remains unresolved.

These kinds of tensions may be present even when the birth mother is the child's primary carer and where the social mother is not competing for an equivalent status of 'mother'. Suzie highlights another issue within the apparent contradictions of emphasising but also playing down the biological connections:

IV: When you think about your biological connection with Josh, is there anything about that that's significant or are the biological/social boundaries blurred do you think?

Suzie: I think I'm probably naturally more protective of him ... having carried him for 9 months and gone through the labour. Jayne loves him too ... I think the biological connection for me is a big thing, it means a lot. But I don't want to stress the biological importance as then it seems as though I'm saying to Jayne she's not a biological ... the downside of that is that it could undermine Jayne's role. Erm, so it's important but it's not.

Suzie is at home full-time with their son Josh and she is his primary carer. The biological connection and the relational element of being a mother inter-link and reinforce each other. These are important aspects of Suzie's motherhood and she infers that the biological link intrinsically confers something extra to the relational dimension of parenthood. Being 'naturally more protective' is suggestive of a more intense and enduring emotional relationship - connected to the bodily experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Suzie acknowledges that Jayne cannot make a similar

claim to a parental status. Jayne sees herself as a parent not a mother so she is not vying for the same status as Suzie. Nevertheless, while Suzie believes there is something special about the biological relationship she has to deal with the tensions this sets up when she also wants to support Jayne's claim to a parental status. Jayne's parental status draws mainly upon the relational dimension, including the quality of her care for and about Josh. Implicitly Suzie addresses the potential for Jayne's parental status as a female parent to be negated if she places too great an emphasis on her beliefs in the intrinsic value of her biological relationship with, and care of, Josh. While social mothers cannot take their parental status for granted and, in making claims to a parental status, must necessarily contest the meanings which confirm and privilege the birth mothers' status, so too must birth mothers, if they are to support their partners' claims.

Stella also highlights these dilemmas but in a different way. She makes explicit the link between her partner (Denise – social mother) and their son (William). In doing so she downplays her own connection, but feels this may not be somehow appropriate:

Maybe it's the wrong thing to say but I never feel like he is more mine you know, than he is Denise's. She couldn't treat William any better, any more naturally as like a mother.

For Stella, highlighting the connection between Denise and William involves playing down some elements that signify 'real' motherhood. She suggests that her feeling that William is not any more 'her' child, than he is Denise's child, is a potentially questionable feeling for a birth mother to express. The significance of the biological connection also links in to socially constructed notions of 'good' motherhood. As noted in the previous section, there are points at which the two questions 'Have I the right to call myself a mother?' and 'Am I a good mother?' overlap and certainly the second question is one addressed by birth mothers as well as by social mothers. To be a 'good'/'real' mother, a woman is expected to naturally bond with her infant and for this to be an all-consuming exclusive bond. When Stella questions whether she should say that William does not feel anymore her child than he is Denise's child, she implicitly acknowledges that this may go

against how a 'real' mother is supposed to feel. In other words she does not feel possessive of her link to William but feels that perhaps she should. This is a kind of reverse dimension to the feelings of possessiveness that Vicky struggles with.

Stella's account raises a further dimension to parental claims - who does the child 'belong to'? Stella draws attention to the ways in which 'ownership' claims can contribute to parental status. Denise treats William 'naturally as like a mother' i.e. as if he were her 'own' child. This is dependent upon the quality of her emotional relationship with William outweighing the inequities of not having the biological link to draw upon in laying claim to a parental status.

Birth mothers are not required to explicitly spell out that their child 'belongs' to them. Earlier I discussed how social mothers claim their children as their own, in answer to an implicit charge that the child is not *really* theirs i.e. there is no biological tie to call upon. This is part of the work involved in laying claim to a parental status. Their care of and for 'their' child legitimates their social parental relationship alongside the birth mother who has a 'natural' claim that the child belongs to them. Birth mothers can take their 'ownership' of their child for granted and to support the social mother's parental status they can also extend this to the social mother - for example:

They're hers as much as they are mine (Marie - birth mother).

I've always been clear they are our children but Hilary says that's easy for me to say (Sally - birth mother).

These are common examples of the way in which birth mothers can emphasise that the social mother has an equal claim to the children. No social mother makes these kinds of claims. Sally acknowledges Hilary's perception that it is easy for Sally to extend the 'ownership' of her birth children to Hilary; implicitly this cannot happen in reverse. The 'power' to extend ownership claims is exclusively attached to the biological. Some birth mothers were (initially at least) reluctant to extend 'ownership' claims to the social mother:

... I didn't want to sort of identify she was ours you know, she was *mine* and then Judith's secondly (Christina - italics indicate her emphasis).

I felt as though Rosa wasn't mine. I felt as if every-one was trying to take her away from me, I just wanted to say 'back off, she's mine' you know, but at the same time I felt guilty ... (Vicky).

Both respondents stressed that these levels of possessiveness lessened over time, perhaps indicating some sense that they felt these were inappropriate feelings which conflicted with the project of egalitarian co-parenthood. However this again demonstrates the complexities facing birth mothers, poised between the privileges conferred upon biological ties, including this natural 'ownership' claim, and the importance of supporting the legitimacy of social mothers' claims to a parental status. For some birth mothers there is a tension between an egalitarian aspiration of sharing the 'ownership' claim and valuing the exclusivity and privileges attached to biological motherhood. These can be very difficult to relinquish; they form part of what it means to be a mother.

These same dilemmas are evident in the ways in which some birth mothers talk about their legal 'ownership'. Giving birth to a child also gives the birth mother automatic legal ties to her child<sup>96</sup>. While some birth mothers acknowledged that the absence of an equivalent legal status for the social mother as an issue for them as a family, most birth mothers were not as pro-active as social mothers in researching and/or establishing any legal ties for the social mother. Some birth mothers expressed feelings of ambivalence around relinquishing sole parental responsibility:

I don't think we really need one (JRO) but I suppose it would give Emma that extra security. I'm 99.9% happy for her to get it but there is a bit of me that thinks 'Oh she'll have the same as me'. Silly really I know, I want her to have it, if that's what she wants but it wouldn't make any difference either way (Lauren).

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<sup>96</sup> The legal rights of a birth mother in relation to her child can be removed but this is an extreme sanction.

Getting the JRO was actually instigated by Judith. I didn't necessarily agree and I felt a bit sort of like held hostage ... I knew all the logical reasons that it was fair for us both to have ... it would be more equal and stuff but it raised issues for me about oh, something about Judith having that attachment as well ... (Christina).

Tensions may be present wherever aspirations to egalitarian parental roles require a birth mother to relinquish privileges attached to biological motherhood. At this juxtaposition, some birth mothers expressed ambivalence. Lauren, for example, is 99.9% happy for Emma to have a legal parental status but the 0.1% 'bit' of her still has a voice. Christina expresses her ambivalence more strongly when she says she felt she was 'held hostage'. Out of fairness she cannot refuse Judith's claim to a legal status, yet this comes into conflict with not wanting to relinquish the legal exclusivity attached to biological motherhood.

Not all of the birth mothers expressed this level of ambivalence. Paula for example felt strongly that it was important for Jenny to obtain a Joint Residence Order, to give Jenny 'added strength in terms of her link to Molly' and 'the symbolic recognition that her motherhood as valid as mine'. Paula reiterated several times that Jenny's motherhood was as valid as her own motherhood:

At the end of the day you don't have to be the biological parent to be a brilliant parent, we're both her parents.

Biology doesn't, shouldn't be the most important thing in terms of who are her parents.

Paula was however at home full-time for one year with Molly, and breastfed Molly up to her return (part-time) to work. She talks about having a 'different bond with Molly' which was 'probably stronger' than Jenny's bond with Molly during this period. At the end of this year she felt more than ready to return to work and share the care of Molly more equally with Jenny:

I was getting a bit stir crazy and beginning to feel, I suppose I wanted the status of work as well.



Possibly the dynamics at play here meant that Paula was able to relinquish the initial exclusivity of the role of Molly's primary carer in her own time. These changes appear to have evolved over time without tension, indicating that time may also play a significant role in the birth mothers' accounts. Potentially the boundaries between biology and social relationships become less distinct over time. However the period of time required for this to occur and to make a difference to the feelings and beliefs articulated by birth mothers and their partners has the potential to vary enormously. Molly for example, was just two months older than Vicky and Tessa's daughter.

Jan, like Paula, stresses how her partner, Marcia, is as much a mother as she is:

There is no way Marcia is not an equivalent real mother in every sense of the word. She's there in the middle of the night and she makes decisions about Bronwen all the time. Biology just doesn't come into it.

Jan downplays the significance of biology and highlights the relational element of a parental status. However this appears to have evolved over time. At another point in her interview she owns up to feelings of possessiveness when Bronwen was born:

When Bronwen was born, I was like, this is my baby so just back off everyone really, she's mine (laughs). I was in a mad daze really having just given birth and breastfeeding, hormones all over the place. And Marcia was like 'yeah right whatever' and doing everything in the background ... but those feelings wore off ...

Jan links her feelings of possessiveness to a (natural) post-birth hormonal 'daze' but significantly these were not challenged by anyone and 'wore off'. In Jan's account, Marcia's parental status appears to have developed and become established over time. However in playing down the biological element of her own status as Bronwen's mother, it also highlights the potential power it holds. To some extent Jan was able to be possessive because Marcia was prepared to take a 'back-seat' - initially at least. Perhaps Marcia may have challenged this had it continued but Jan says she very quickly realised that her possessiveness was 'ludicrous' leading to her

claim that biology is not significant in any way<sup>97</sup>.

In contrast to the social mothers, birth mothers are able to take their motherhood status for granted. At the same time however, they variously confront this taken for grantedness in order to support their partners' claims to some parental status. Further tensions may arise where joint claims to motherhood require the birth mother to challenge the deeply ingrained assumptions about the special status of biological motherhood. The extent of these tensions may depend on the degree to which they are challenged to do so by their partner. However, all birth mothers faced some dilemmas at the points at which shared parenthood with a female partner required the attenuation of salient features of biological motherhood. At this juncture tensions arise between challenging the strength of the discourses around the meanings of (biological) motherhood and the meanings that inhere within normative understandings of good motherhood.

## **6. Conclusion**

The extent to which respondents, and social mothers in particular, engaged with the different dimensions of motherhood reveals a great deal about the normative framework of motherhood and demonstrates the power of the expectations and obligations inherent within this framework. Respondents may, to some extent, challenge this framework through their re-interpretations of motherhood but they cannot ignore it.

Lesbian social mothers, who have had their children in the context of a relationship with the child's birth mother, are in a unique position to expose the highly gendered and heterosexual nature of the dominant framework around motherhood. There is little space for those who fall outside this framework to lay claim to a parental status. Social mothers in same sex relationships face particular difficulties in

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<sup>97</sup> Although the issue of race is not raised in Jan's account, her partner, Marcia, identifies 'power issues' around her being Black and co-parenting a white child. Marcia suggests that Jan's work to minimise her biological motherhood is informed by her sensitivity to the dimension of race.

negotiating this framework, primarily because they cannot call upon the biological dimension, which is a key defining characteristic of motherhood and one which is inextricably linked to an automatic parental legal status. These dimensions are generally taken for granted. Lesbian social mothers must also contend with the notion that motherhood is a singular gendered identity, which further exacerbates the difficulties they face in laying claim to the some parental status alongside their partners, the birth mothers. To a large extent, social mothers rely upon the relational dimension in making claims to a parental status. At this point, where this forms the main basis for a parental claim, such claims are also dependent upon some demonstration of the quality of the emotional and practical care of their children. Social mothers are called upon to demonstrate that they can make up for the absence of a biological link through compensating for or imitating the intrinsic qualities of biological motherhood.

The extent to which birth mothers can take their status as mothers for granted is revealed by the silences within their accounts. However, in co-parenting alongside their female partner, they are confronted with the essentialist assumptions that form an intrinsic part of what it means to be a (biological) mother. This can set up a great deal of ambivalence. Supporting their partners' claims to a parental status can require the birth mother to play down the inherent qualities attached to biological motherhood, and there are points at which this presents tensions when juxtaposed with the discourses that define good motherhood.

It is generally accepted that there has been some blurring of boundaries around what it means to be a family (Silva and Smart, 1999b) but there has been little corresponding blurring of boundaries around motherhood. Rather, the growing diversity of family forms has led to an increasing re-assertion of distinct boundaries around motherhood and especially the appropriate conditions within which (good) motherhood should be contained. There has been little recognition of alternative forms of motherhood as there has been of alternative family forms. In negotiating new kinds of parenting relationships, women can contest some of the normative meanings of motherhood but they cannot entirely escape them. This becomes particularly apparent at the juncture where claims to new forms of parenting

relationships clash with the moral climate surrounding motherhood. These tensions are further examined in the following chapter where I consider the ways in which respondents felt called to account for their claims to a parental and familial status within their wider social networks.

## Chapter 6

# Being Out and About: Negotiating For the Recognition and Legitimacy of a Parental and Familial Status

### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the ways in which lesbian couples negotiate their parental status within the context of their relationship. Beyond this, women are also involved in the work of negotiating recognition of their parental and familial status within the context of their wider social networks. As family and parenting arrangements become increasingly diverse, increasing numbers of parents may need to engage in some work to ensure that their parental status and family boundaries will be recognised or validated. Potentially, the more one deviates from the norms of traditional family life, the more work may be required to assert one's familial and parental status (De Vault, 1999a).

Respondents, in common with most other parents and perhaps mothers in particular, noted that their social networks extended to include a new range of mainly heterosexual networks upon having children. These included parents of other children, professionals in health networks (midwives, health visitors and doctors) and professionals in childcare (childminders, staff in nurseries and schools). In this chapter I draw upon the interview data about women's interactions with these kinds of child-related networks, and with family and friends. I do two things. First, I examine the ways in which respondents' parental and familial status may not be recognised and the extent of work that may be involved in gaining this recognition, including processes of 'coming out'<sup>98</sup>. Second, I examine the consequences of being out, which can involve negotiating social stigma and censure.

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<sup>98</sup> Meaning to disclose/be open about one's sexual orientation. 'Coming out' as a phrase became popular during the late 1960s and 1970s (Plummer 1995:57).

In this second part of the chapter I apply a framework drawn from stigma theory to develop an understanding of respondents' accounts of negotiating both the anticipation and/or the reality of stigmatising encounters in everyday social interactions. According to Goffman (1968), one might expect that when an individual experiences a negative reaction from other people, attributed to an 'undesired difference', that person may take on board these same beliefs about her/his condition and come to perceive her/himself to have a shameful attribute. Importantly, although respondents acknowledge the existence of negative social attitudes and reactions to lesbian parenthood, they actively challenge the imputed stigmatisation and associated shame. I identify ways in which respondents variously resist and challenge stigmatisation by drawing upon a range of strategies and resources.

Public and popular discourses about same sex parenting often invoke concerns about the child's best interests (see Chapter 1). These tenacious discourses frequently portray lesbian parents as selfish individuals who put their own needs above those of the child. This theme of selfishness remains powerful. It is constructed as antithetical to the ideals of good motherhood (Alldred, 1998) and it has been employed most recently in debates about same sex adoption. This forms part of the context within which respondents negotiate for the recognition and legitimacy of their parental and familial status in their interactions with others. Throughout this chapter I shall also highlight the ways in which the work of negotiating recognition and challenging stigma also involves the highly accountable work of reconciling the demands of good motherhood with being lesbian parents.

## **2. Potential in/visibility of parental and familial status**

Gaining recognition of their parental and familial status can include negotiating recognition at the inter-personal level with family, friends and others within their

social networks and at the institutional level, which offers scant means of recognition of same sex families (Bialeschki and Pearce, 1997).

## **2.1 Recognition at the inter-personal level**

What makes up your reality is often how other people, what people see as real. People's perceptions and constructs about things. Some people would see me as a new mother like my work colleagues but others would see me as just a partner of someone who had a child, not as a mother. Even though I saw myself as a mother, it wasn't always reflected around us (Sandra - social mother).

It's so unfamiliar to a lot of people. So what I was saying about feeling a bit of a fake calling myself his Mum, part of that is that other people might not, I suppose. I mean I am his Mum but obviously Jacqueline's his Mum as well and she can talk about being pregnant and I'd have to say 'No, I wasn't pregnant, my partner gave birth to him but I'm still his Mum as well' sort of thing (Joanne - social mother).

Many social mothers expressed the kinds of difficulties raised here by Sandra and Joanne, in dealing with other people's 'perceptions and constructs' about motherhood. These are indicative of the strong and powerful discourses of motherhood and what it means to be a mother. As discussed in the previous chapter, respondents engaged with these discourses themselves in making claims to a parental status. This work continues in encounters with other people who also draw upon dominant notions of what it means to be a mother as outlined in Figure 1 (page 165, in the previous chapter).

Social mothers engage with these issues at a different and often more intense level than birth mothers in order to gain recognition and validation of their claims to a parental status, and to do so alongside the birth mother. Sandra and Joanne, for example, both refer to the fact that they did not give birth to their child as one aspect of the difficulties they encounter in having their claims to motherhood recognised by others. This is coupled with the notion that a child only has one mother i.e. that it is a singular gendered identity. As Joanne indicates, it is 'unfamiliar' for a second female parent to jointly lay claim to the same status, alongside the birth mother.

However, birth mothers may also need to engage in making visible their own and their partner's parental and family status. Some report being seen as a single parent:

I've taken Rosa to this playgroup, sometimes with Tessa, and then one session the playgroup leader came up to me and asked about Rosa's father. (...) I gave her an explanation as to who he was but said I wasn't in a relationship with him. What I should have said is 'I'm not in a relationship with the father, but Tessa who you've met, is Rosa's other parent' (Vicky - birth mother).

Vicky recalls this incident as an example of how she cannot take for granted the recognition of her family and of her and Tessa as co-parents. Her answer about Rosa's father presented an image of her as a lone mother rather than as part of a same sex couple and she identifies how this negated Tessa's parental role and her family set-up. Again this ties in with the notion that a mother is a singular identity, within a heterosexual framework.

At work I often come across as a single parent. I'm really clear that Dominic hasn't got a Dad but I don't always say about Rosanna, it just depends on the situation. And my Mum says things sometimes about how well I do as a single parent although of course she knows Dominic has Ros and me as his parents (Linda - birth mother).

Being perceived to be a lone parent negates the fact that the birth mother is one of two female parents involved in a co-parenting family relationship. Linda's mother does know about Linda's relationship with Ros and Ros' parental involvement with her grandson Dominic, yet, as Linda points out she occasionally makes remarks that reveal some level at which she does not fully recognise that they are joint parents. Linda goes on to remark that her mother is highly unlikely to make similar remarks about her sister who has a male partner. These kinds of interactions further highlight how the dominant characteristics of motherhood are framed within a normative heterosexual framework, as discussed in the previous chapter.

This heterosexual framework is also apparent through the ways in which others make sense of two women seen together as equal carers of a child. Several couples told of situations where they had been 'mistaken' for sisters. As Jacqueline



commented: 'Possibly that's a way to understand two women of our age together and obviously quite intimate in our interactions with Matty'. Such stories were not uncommon. Other women gave examples of other assumptions that people made along similar lines. Deborah and Tina, who lived in a small rural village where it was common for families to have au pairs, recalled that some people in the village had been trying to work out which one of them was the mother and which the 'au pair'. Sally and Hilary, who have twins, commented that they were often assumed to be two mums, each with one child. These kinds of assumptions were common ways in which people made sense of something 'unfamiliar' or 'other' and relocated these women within more conventional (heterosexual) boundaries.

## **2.2 Institutional lack of recognition**

Various demands, made by lesbians, bisexuals and gay men for the partnership rights and same sex marriage as well as recognition of new family forms, have made small gains. Overall, however, there are still few avenues available for same-sex couples and families to gain institutional recognition (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). This is particularly apparent in contrast to the forms of institutional recognition available to heterosexual families (and especially to married parents). While there has been some recognition of an increasing diversity of family forms, marriage is still promoted as the best environment in which to raise children. Lesbigay families remain largely invisible within this rhetoric.

To date a lesbian social parent has limited means by which to obtain some legal recognition of her parental status. Furthermore the possibility of this legal recognition, obtainable through a Joint Residence Order, is a by-product of the Children Act (1989) rather than an explicit aim of the legislation. Progress in obtaining forms of institutional recognition is not universally accepted nor can it be taken for granted. Only five social mothers had sought and gained a legal parental status through the process of applying for a Joint Residence Order. While this legal status is not equivalent to the automatic legal rights of the birth mother, it can provide some official confirmation of the social mother's parental status.

Some respondents called upon alternative (limited) ways to signify some kind of formal connection between themselves and their children. For example, for three social mothers, the fact that their children had their surname was important:

Last year when we went to court about our donor wanting more access ... I think it was striking that legally I had no place, no recognition, yet this child shared my surname. Names are really important and it highlighted how we set up our family (Tessa - social mother).

It's useful ringing up school or whatever, I can say this is Margaret Connor, I'm phoning about Amy Connor or ... there's that uniformity and it signals Oh yes, Margaret Connor, Amy Connor, Theo Connor ... I suppose another thing, this was saying very clearly that this family is not something I just happen to be involved in because I'm with Ali and she's got kids. It was an equal commitment that we made together to become parents, the children having my surname is one way of demonstrating that (Margaret - social mother).

These respondents raise another dimension to validating their claims to a parental status, based on the ability to claim some form of an officially recognised link to one's children, which does not necessarily need to be about legal rights. Tessa points out that giving her child her surname was in some way symbolic and compensated for the absence of any legal recognition of her parental status as a the social mother. While carrying some symbolic power, respondents also highlighted the benefits of sharing the same surname as their children in terms of the practicalities of being able to care for their children without their authority to do so being questioned<sup>99</sup>.

Eight couples used the social mother's surname as a middle name for their child or, alternatively, both surnames as a double-barrelled surname. Many commented on the importance these naming practices held for them in signifying a link between social mothers and their children. Names can take on a powerful symbolic significance as a means of creating visible links - to the family unit and in to social

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<sup>99</sup> No respondents raised any similar issues about the birth mother's authority to care for her children. This silence further illustrates the taken for grantedness and power attributed to biological motherhood.

parents - especially where little other institutional support is available (Bond, 1998).

Couples who had used a donor clinic commented on the way in which this provided some level of official acceptance as a co-parenting couple and family. Jenny refers to this form of recognition. Her partner used a donor clinic to conceive their first child, and Jenny is planning to have their second child, using the same clinic:

Technically as two women that would be two families so the clinic wrote to the governing body and asked if they could reserve sperm for me to use from the same donor and they said 'yes' so obviously they were prepared to class us as a family (Jenny - social mother).

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990) established guidelines on accepting applicants for donor insemination and there are still many clinics that will not treat single women or lesbian couples. Thus, for a lesbian couple, an acceptance by a donor clinic can signal a degree of official recognition and acceptance of their family. However it also highlights the extent to which legal and/or other formal institutional means of recognition are extremely limited and cannot be taken for granted.

### **3. Coming out**

The above discussion highlights ways in which respondents' parental and familial status may not be recognised, accentuated by limited means to gain institutional recognition. There are points at which, in order to negotiate recognition, lesbian couples are required to come out:

... having kids involves coming out all the time. Just coming out anywhere and everywhere, it's important ... setting up a positive example to the kids of not wanting to ever make them feel bad about our family, that they should want to conceal what their family situation is, and that means things like coming out in the middle of a supermarket and on the bus or in the library, wherever, and then the obvious things like doctors and schools and stuff (Ali - birth mother).

Negotiating recognition of their familial status involves making decisions about when, where and how to come out. Part of this work involves being open and coming out in settings that directly impinge on their children's lives. Respondents frequently presented these decisions to be motivated by the overriding concern, highlighted above by Ali, to gain positive recognition of their families for their children. Implicitly this challenges negative stereotypes about the selfishness of lesbian parents and the potential negative consequences children may face as a result of being born to lesbian parents. As I shall discuss, coming out can be a fraught process but this serves to emphasise the ways in which respondents demonstrated the prioritisation of best interests of their children always came first - behaviour that they present as evidence of good motherhood.

However, it is also important to recognise that there are 'layers of outness' – a policy of being 'out' in general did not necessarily mean that respondents 'come out' at all times and in all circumstances. Donovan, Heaphy and Weeks (1999a) have usefully identified the notion of there being 'layers of outness' which lesbians, gay men and bisexuals continually negotiate and re-negotiate:

Respondents may be out to themselves and to a sexual partner but to no-one else; to some but not all of their family of origin; to some or all of their work colleagues – so they may be out to an individual colleague but not out at work; they may be out and involved in lesbian, gay and/or bisexual activities but not out to their mother, doctor or neighbours. The decision(s) to be out in whatever layer of one's life is dependent on what the perceived consequences are for the respondent's life and livelihood and those of their loved ones (1999:695/6).

Each woman I interviewed had her own 'coming out' story, although always with the recognition that this is never a one-off event, rather an ongoing process.

Women clearly identified having children as a new step in that process. Having children brought up a whole new range of situations and contacts, which involved taking new decisions about coming out. Possibly this also suggests that these decisions about disclosure take on further meanings when they involve the additional complexities of being out as parents and as a family. To date, little attention has been paid to these additional dimensions of being out.

### **3.1 Respondents' layers of outness**

The length of time since respondents had first come out varied. Usually women came out to close friends and/or family as a first step and many had taken these initial steps of coming out many years prior to having children. However, for two couples, four women, their first steps in coming out to family and friends were made at the same time as announcing their pregnancy. They recognised that having children in a co-parenting same sex relationship would make it difficult to continue to conceal their relationship if they want to negotiate recognition of their parental and familial status. Furthermore, in common with all respondents, these two couples pointed out that they did not want to convey to their children any message that they had something to hide, to their children. I shall return to this point in the consideration of the potential stigma attached to lesbian parenthood.

Thirty-nine out of the forty women I interviewed were out to immediate members within their families of origin (parents and siblings). Most had received some level of acceptance and support from family members. Several experienced ongoing difficult relationships as a result of coming out and one respondent's family had cut off all contact with her. As I shall discuss later, this was at the point of having children, which was many years after she had come out to her family. One respondent, a social mother, had not come out to her family, which meant that her parenthood was not recognised by her family of origin, and that she had no means to create social kin relations between her family of origin and her son.

About one third of respondents who were in employment were not 'out' at work or were only out to a selected few colleagues. For social mothers this could mean their parenthood was not acknowledged at work, for birth mothers that they were seen as lone parents.

At a general level, being out to other people within child-related networks varied. Some respondents were not out in any explicit way, but felt that people within these kinds of social networks 'must know' or that 'it must be obvious'. Other couples were 'mostly out'. About quarter of the couples described themselves as

'very out', meaning they could think of few, if any, areas of their life where their sexual identity was concealed.

### **3.2 Coming out as part of everyday life**

Negotiating some recognition of their parental and familial status formed part of most respondents' everyday family activities, such as being on the bus with their children or going to playgroups or to parents' evenings at school. This is another way in which everyday material practices can take on an additional symbolic significance in obtaining recognition as joint parents and as a family. These negotiations often required coming out:

You can be on the bus or in Tesco's with Molly and you end up in conversation. I mean the other day, we were all on the bus, Molly was on Jenny's lap and I was sitting next to this woman and she said 'Are you her Mum? And, you know, I just said 'well, we both are' (...) to just say 'Yes' and leave it at that would leave out Jenny (Paula – birth mother).

This small encounter is one of many similar examples. Respondents frequently face casual social interactions in which others ask commonplace questions such as 'Who is the child's (real) mother?' Other similar kinds of questions might be about the child's father, or asking a woman what her partner/husband does. These carry an implicit taken for grantedness about family set-ups which most heterosexual mothers would not have any need to navigate. For example, in response to the question 'What does your partner do?', a heterosexual mother, at the very least, would not need to hesitate before deciding to reveal the gender of her partner. As a lone mother, she may of course hesitate before revealing the absence of a father, but lone motherhood no longer carries quite the same stigma it once did.

Nevertheless, any deviation from the dominant heterosexual nuclear family model may require extra work in negotiating social interactions. This work is particularly evident in the very visible efforts involved for same sex couples parenting together.

These efforts also have some moral significance in presenting alternative (positive) messages about their families, which implicitly refute the negative portrayals and

stigmatisation of lesbian motherhood. Paula, for example, elaborated on her story of coming out on the bus:

It's very important to us that we are open and don't try and hide it because that would be awful for Molly, to not have her two mummies and her family recognised (Paula - birth mother).

Other respondents expressed similar sentiments:

I made a conscious decision, erm ... I want them to grow up with a positive image of what we're about and if I go round hiding the fact and telling lies to people in front of them then that's not very positive. So ... I don't always find it easy but you just have to be out (Sally - birth mother).

Part of the whole being 'out and proud' takes on a new meaning, as well as giving out that message to others, it gives the same message to Adam and hopefully prepares him if he later comes up against any prejudice about having two Mums (Ruth - social mother. Ruth indicated the quote marks around 'out and proud').

This emphasis on being out and proud is driven by the (usually unspoken) charge that juxtaposes lesbian motherhood with the best interests of the child. Respondents stressed that 'hiding' who they are can be potentially damaging to their children. By contrast they emphasise the need to give out messages, to others and to their children, that they have nothing to be ashamed of. Coming out can be hard, but many respondents indicated that they were prepared to do so as a positive strategy for the sake of their children. By implication they are prepared to act in the best interests of their children even, or perhaps especially, where this is not always easy. Respondents thus challenge the potential stigmatisation that may be attached to their children having 'two Mums' i.e. lesbian parents and through this work they are able to reassert their identity as responsible caring parents, reconciling the demands of good motherhood with their identity as lesbian parents.

A reverse dimension of having to engage in the work of making their parental status visible, is being 'outed' by one's children. For example:

Every time we walk out the door together and there's Bronwen shouting Mummy Mummy to both of you. So the neighbours can't think we're

lodgers or something. You'd have to be on a different planet not to figure out we're lesbian parents really ... (Jan - birth mother).

Being 'lodgers' is another common example women gave of how others might make sense of their relationship - whereby they are perceived as just friends living together. Here Jan notes that neighbours cannot mistake them as 'just friends' because they are both called Mummy by their daughter. Thus, at the same time as coming out in a variety of social interactions, there are situations where it felt impossible *not* to be visible. Jan went on to say:

Just turning up at school together, or birthday parties we've had for Bronwen, and Bronwen's calling us both Mummy so ... you're putting yourself on the line because you're both there, totally visible. We don't want to hide who we are but as well in many situations you can't even if you wanted to and you don't always know how people will take it.

Jan and her partner Marcia are confidently out in most settings and/or visible as a co-parenting couple in many social settings, as Jan describes. She also reiterates the sentiment expressed by others, that they do not in any case want to 'hide'. However at the same time Jan articulates an awareness of potential judgements that could be made by others. In the next section I expand upon the potential consequences of being out that have been referred to in this section.

### **3.3 The potential consequences of being out as lesbian parents**

Through being out and making decisions to come out in interactions with the outside world, respondents have an awareness of the potential for stigma and the presence of societal attitudes that are critical of their families. Even those who are most confidently out in most settings still have to make day to day decisions about what they wish to reveal to whom and how which involves negotiating their perceived non-conformity.

Lesbian mothers transgress the boundaries of contemporary dominant notions of motherhood and the context within which it is supposed to operate - the heterosexual married family unit:



Dominant ideologies of mothering and motherhood certainly coexist alongside subdominant ones, but those who do not or cannot conform to the dominant ideologies may pay a heavy price (Moore, 1996:59).

Moore (1996) gives the example of lone mothers in the UK and USA. While the issues debated are complex, she points out that many lone mothers have been the subject of social stigmatisation and cuts in welfare provision. The rhetoric behind these debates has involved the stereotyping of certain groups of mothers who are blamed for producing family forms that are perceived to be a threat to the general stability and moral fibre of society, as discussed earlier.

All of the women in my study had an awareness of the potential judgements that might be made by real and imaginary others about their parental and familial status, once visible. Gaining recognition necessitates being visible as lesbian parents but in turn this may involve dealing with the possibilities of social stigma.

#### **4. Stigma**

Below I outline some key aspects of Goffman's stigma theory (Goffman, 1968). This provides the background to the discussions that follow in Section 5 and 6, where I examine respondents' responses to stigma. I also refer to developments within the society over the last 30 or so years that have presented important challenges to the social stigma attached to a lesbigay identity. There have been further developments within stigma theory, and I shall draw upon some of these in Sections 5 and 6 in relation to respondents' accounts of negotiating and resisting stigma.

Stigma theory, as developed by Goffman (1968), identifies stigma as deriving from 'a conceptualisation by society as a whole of what constitutes differentness or deviance, and the application by society of rules and sanctions against the individual so labelled' (Jacoby, 1994:269). Goffman's theory of stigma was concerned with various forms of deviation that mark out an individual as being

socially 'abnormal'. He identified three different types of stigma. These are firstly, those with 'abominations of the body – various physical deformities'; secondly, those with 'blemishes of individual character' (which included those with 'a known record' of, for example, homosexuality, mental disorders or imprisonment) and thirdly, 'tribal stigma of race, nation and religion' (Goffman, 1968:14).

Goffman makes a distinction between the 'discreditable' individual whose stigma is not immediately perceivable or is not known about and the 'discredited' person whose stigma is visible or known about. While noting that a stigmatised individual may have experiences with both types of situations, this distinction is made to consider the ways in which stigmatised individuals manage social interactions.

The discreditable individual has to manage 'information about his failing' (Goffman, 1968:57). This can include decisions of who to tell, how, when and where, to display or not to display, to lie or not to lie and so on. 'Passing' is one aspect of this 'information control' whereby the individual attempts to conceal the stigmatised attribute. The impact of passing however can include the anxiety of being 'found out' and alienation from friends.

The discredited individual has to manage tension, which may be generated during social contacts with 'normals'. Goffman suggests that the tension is characterised by the awkwardness created by the stigma, that the discredited person is obliged to manage to prevent the stigma from looming large. The strategies employed here are similar to those employed in passing. Goffman (1968:126) suggests that 'what will conceal a stigma from unknowing persons may also ease matters for those in the know'. He refers to this process of covering and argues that 'many of those who rarely try to pass, routinely try to cover'.

Some parallels may immediately be noted here with the discussion above relating to 'layers of outness' – the work involved for lesbian parents with children, in making decisions about 'coming out' (who to tell, how, when and where) and in dealing with other people's reactions upon coming out. In making decisions about coming out, a key distinction is the anticipation of as well as the actualities of

being treated as a stigmatised individual. I shall return to this point in more detail in the following section.

In an everyday sense, the use of terms such as 'discredited' and 'discreditable' would imply something disreputable about a person and it is important to note that Goffman does not use these terms in this way. Rather he employs these terms in a specialised sense, to denote individuals who, in the eyes of others, are different in ways (either immediately visible or not) that may mean they are vulnerable to negative societal reactions. His interest lies not in casting aspersions on those who may be stigmatised, but to understand the ways in which society stigmatises certain individuals and how the individuals concerned then manage that stigma.

Goffman does not suggest that people who fall into any of his three categories of different types of stigma have inherently 'spoiled identities'; rather that they are socially constructed as such. Furthermore, these categories may also be historically and culturally specific. By way of example, the increasing diversity of families, including the rise of lone parent families, has in part been attributed to the declining strength of the stigma attached to divorce and to illegitimacy (Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998). It is also evident that the social climate of stigma surrounding homosexuality, which once translated into a strong sense of secrecy and shame, has undergone transformations. The stigma attached to a gay identity has been strongly challenged by the gay political movement that, for example, placed an increasing emphasis on the politics of 'coming out'. The language shifted from one of disease to one of politics and rights, and the visibility of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals increased, both at individual levels and in the proliferation of gay institutions (Plummer 1995:90).

The sexual politics of the last 30 or so years have made possible new ways of life for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals (Cant and Hemmings, 1988, Plummer, 1995). One example is the increasing potential for lesbians to have children within the context of a same sex relationship. Importantly, 'community knowledges' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001) have developed which have resulted in an expanding range of resources available to draw upon, which can help in resisting the

stigmatisation of sexualities. These include the development of local and national lesbian, gay and bisexual self help and campaign groups, a proliferation of fictional and non-fictional literature and the appearance of lesbian and gay characters in mainstream television programmes. As a result, lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals now have more resources to draw upon in being able to resist being stigmatised than was possible 30 or 40 years ago. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001:182) recognise that access to these kinds of 'community knowledges' is not universal. However, they suggest that such knowledges have been 'responsible for the growing confidence of non-heterosexuals not only to live openly non-heterosexual lives, but to do so with a sense of pride rather than apology'.

Nevertheless, there are still wider social processes to contend with that have not necessarily moved on to the same extent. For example, although homosexuality is no longer classified as a mental illness, the Royal College of Nursing states that 'there is a long legacy of an association between the two which continues to have an impact'<sup>100</sup>. Thus to be 'out' as a lesbian, bisexual or gay individual is not necessarily entirely unproblematic within social interactions; stigma is grounded in the reactions of others.

Goffman's work on stigma has been extended and modified in relation to a range of conditions. These include epilepsy (Scambler and Hopkins, 1986, Jacoby, 1994), leprosy (Gussow and Tracy, 1968), infertility (Miall, 1987, Riessman, 2000) and HIV and AIDs (Green and Sobo, 2000). In Sections 5 and 6, I shall consider two key developments in relation to respondents' accounts. These are Scambler and Hopkins' framework of 'felt' and 'enacted' stigma which allows for the consideration of anticipated and actual responses to a stigmatised identity (Scambler and Hopkins, 1986) (Section 5), and the possibilities of rejecting a stigmatised identity, as developed by Riessman (2000) (Section 6).

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<sup>100</sup> Stated in 'Issues in Nursing Health Series' (10/97), reported by Stonewall's website page Love/Sexuality/Question 'Is homosexuality a mental illness?' <<http://www.stonewall.org.uk>>. This paper points out that the American Psychiatric Association did not officially declassify homosexuality as a mental illness until 1974 and the World Health Organisation did not take this step until 1992.

## **5. Felt and enacted stigma**

Goffman (1968:23) notes that the 'very anticipation of stigmatising encounters can lead the stigmatised individual to arrange life so as to avoid them'. Scambler and Hopkins (1986) develop this point in their research into the stigma of epilepsy. They outline a framework that incorporates two types of stigma, felt and enacted stigma. For these categories to exist, individuals with epilepsy must accept that there is a social stigma attached to the condition - but not necessarily that this stigma is justified. They identified the category of enacted stigma as instances of discrimination based on the perceived unacceptability of the information being disclosed. Felt stigma relates to the fear of 'enacted stigma'. Scambler and Hopkins' main argument was that felt stigma - the fear or anticipation of a negative reaction - was the major obstacle that their respondents with epilepsy had to deal with. They suggest that it is potentially far more disruptive since the anticipation of actual discriminatory responses may lead to individuals adopting policies of secrecy and concealment.

### **5.1 Respondents' anticipation of negative responses - felt stigma**

I draw upon respondents' accounts of two aspects of their everyday lives in which they gave examples of anticipating potentially negative responses (felt stigma). First, the example of going to parent and toddler groups - a common type of activity parents (usually mothers) engage in with young children, and second, respondents' experiences in their work place.

One of my worries about going to toddler groups was going through that coming out process. I think it is better to be up-front if you can but it can be hard in new settings because you can't really be sure how people will react (Stella - birth mother).

Should I tell them straight away, or when and how? What will their response be? All those things ... (Vicky - birth mother).

It's not easy, you can never tell what people are going to be like. You can make a good guess but you never know. I'm sure some people probably wouldn't approve (Lauren - birth mother).

These are expressions of commonly felt anxieties about coming out which were articulated by many women. The above quotes were given in the context of talking about parent and toddler groups. In this very normal everyday family practice, women were faced with decisions about what to reveal, to whom and how, about their family set-up. Stella raised this as a 'worry', something that she found 'hard', and Lauren speaks of it being 'not easy'. They attempt to 'guess' or 'sense' what response they may receive. The anxieties this provokes relate to the risk that disclosing information might lead to discriminatory negative responses. This has some parallels with Scambler and Hopkins' concept of 'felt' and 'enacted' stigma. Scambler and Hopkins reported that while their respondents had not experienced discrimination from others (enacted stigma), they were still anxious about disclosing information (in their study, about being epileptic). Fear of, rather than experience of, discrimination potentially leads to the adoption of policies of concealment.

These experiences are illustrative of a general concern that centred the anticipatory possibility of negative responses (felt stigma). Women often expressed some trepidation about whether other people would accept their difference from the norm. Lauren, for example, articulates a sense that some people may disapprove even if they do not say anything. There is an underlying recognition that their non-conformity may be socially constructed as discrediting (in Goffman's sense of the word) and as such may be judged negatively by others. Overall, most women reported very positive responses upon coming out as lesbian parents in other situations. Nevertheless there were clearly anxieties attached to coming out in new situations, and the perceived risks attached to disclosing information about their sexual orientation and/or their parental status and family set-up.

Some women indicated that their main concerns about the risks of disclosure related to the possible consequences for their children. As discussed above, women

stressed the importance of being out and proud, but this did not mean that coming out was an indiscriminate process:

You know, what you said about am I confident being out ... I feel a lot more vulnerable since having the kids, being a dyke. I do worry about the day ... say if I came out to someone and they were nasty about it in front of them, I mean it might not, it hasn't happened, but it's them I worry about, about being upset if someone was being horrible to me (Helen - birth mother).

This was a particularly articulate expression of anticipatory concerns about coming out, where negative responses might impact on their children. Helen's anticipatory apprehension focuses here on concerns for her children's welfare, over and above concerns about her own welfare. Implicitly this serves to emphasise qualities of being a responsible and selfless (good) mother. As I shall discuss in Section 6.5, women further rebut charges that they are placing their children at risk of potential stigma and highlight strategies to protect their children from such encounters, including the presentation of stigma as a social problem of discrimination rather than a problem of lesbian parenthood.

The ways in which women respond to anticipatory anxieties about the risks of coming out also arose in other 'layers' of their lives such as in their place of employment. Several women, for example, were not out at work or else were only out to selected individuals. These respondents discussed their concealment of their sexual identity at work in relation to the perceived negative consequences that may be attached to 'coming out' - which once again fit closely with the concept of felt stigma.

Not being out at work meant not being able to talk about their children at work, and consequently their parental status was not recognised. At the time I interviewed Cheryl (a social mother), her daughter was just starting school and she regretted not being able to share this with some of her colleagues. She had also taken time off work when her daughter was ill but she was unable to claim this time off under her company's carer's leave entitlement which allowed parents to take up to 10 days a year to care for sick children:

Instead what I do is just say I'm working from home so ... on reflection now I wish I'd said something when I started work there like 'I share a house with a friend who has a little girl'. At least then I wouldn't have to deny Laura's existence although I still wouldn't get parental leave or been seen as her parent of course. I suppose I just felt I had to be really careful, you don't know who you can trust and some people can make life very difficult for you.

Cheryl had been out in her previous job but her new job was in such a different environment she felt unable to come out because she was not sure which of her new colleagues she could trust. She believed that some could have made life difficult for her if she came out. Scambler and Hopkins argue that felt stigma is potentially more disruptive to people's lives than enacted stigma. Here it severely disrupts Cheryl's ability to talk openly to work colleagues about a centrally important aspect of her life. This situation has changed over the years and she now feels she could comfortably come out but has become 'stuck' by her initial concealment. She doesn't know how she could now begin to start coming out – this has been noted elsewhere as a consequence of mediating a perceived stigmatised identity (Goffman 1968:84). At the same time Cheryl is very out in many settings, including with people she meets through her work outside her office based environment, indicating the fluidity and complexity of the layers of outness. While these strategies of concealment relate to 'felt stigma', they are not necessarily applied uniformly across all the different 'layers' involved in respondents' social interactions with others. As I shall discuss, a major influence is the extent to which their actions in different layers of their lives also directly impinge upon their children's lives.

Scambler and Hopkins point out very little could be drawn from their research about the 'degree of risk of enacted stigma' (1986:39) - they found very little evidence of enacted stigma. Similarly in my study, the degree of enacted stigma is hard to ascertain.



## 5.2 Respondents' experiences of negative responses upon disclosure - enacted stigma

Instances of enacted stigma were far less prevalent than instances of felt stigma. Quite often women had stories to tell of others who had encountered hostile responses, rather than stories of any direct experiences of similarly negative reactions:

I've never had one person say anything to me face to face, anything really horrible in all the years, never. Which I think is amazing, I've had a friend of mine who was beaten up, you know for being a dyke ... it can be scary and it does affect you cos you can't be natural, I'd never cuddle Anna outside the front door on this estate (Helen - birth mother).

Potentially, the knowledge of incidents that happen to others - such as the attack that had happened to Helen's friend - might feed into and justify the anticipation or fear of negative reactions. However, although Helen claims she has not had any direct experience of any 'really horrible' animosity, later in her account she does talk about the experience of drivers shouting 'dyke' at her and of having had 'hostile horrible stares' directed at her. By implication, Helen may possibly have encountered 'minor' incidents of enacted stigma that she has dismissed as nothing<sup>101</sup>.

The few accounts that were given of instances of enacted stigma all involved professionals such as midwives, health visitors and, in one case a priest, rather than 'lay' members of respondents' networks (with the exception of family members, see below discussion).

Deborah's Catholic and she really wanted Ryan to be christened in the Catholic church but the priest laid down all these conditions such as he would chose Ryan's godparents and they would have to take him to church every Sunday. Basically a very hostile and bigoted example of a priest and luckily we found another church who was very happy to christen Ryan ... (Tina - social mother).

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<sup>101</sup> See for example, a related discussion by Kelly and Radford (1996) on the invalidation of women's experiences. They highlight how a common response of 'nothing happened' is in fact merely a preface of accounts of things which did indeed happen and which constitute forms of violence and harassment which women negotiate and manage as part of their daily lives.

The first midwife was vile, really upset us and said she couldn't take us on cos she didn't approve. Well, we didn't want her either! (Emma - social mother).

The worst homophobia that I have ever experienced actually was during my pregnancy, we had a very homophobic midwife ... She was a dreadful woman, absolutely did not get the hang of us as a family at all and she had this completely undisguised disgust at the fact that we were lesbians (Sara - birth mother).

These levels of homophobic behaviour were presented as unacceptable, particularly so because it came from professionals who should know better. Sara and Emma and their partners made complaints about their midwives and indicated that their complaints had been adequately addressed. The focus of attention in these accounts<sup>102</sup> firmly locates blame (and shame) on those who expressed disapproval; respondents refused to take this on as their problem. They rejected those who, because of their homophobia, could not accept them. In doing so they call upon language and resources that have only come into existence over the past 30 years or so, including the terminology of 'homophobia' and action by the Royal College of Midwives to provide sensitive maternity care for lesbian mothers (Royal College of Midwives, 2000).

More commonly experiences of enacted stigma came from people within women's families of origin. As noted, thirty-nine out of the forty women had, at some point, come out to their families of origin. Often this had been motivated by the fact that taking evasive actions to conceal their sexual identity in their interactions with family members was difficult to sustain and ultimately not considered viable. Typically negative views from parents that respondents recalled included:

As soon as I started talking about children, my mother said 'If you ever have children I'll have them taken away and make sure you never see them' and things like that so it was awful ... (Lauren - birth mother).

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<sup>102</sup> These accounts resonate with Baruch's discussion of 'atrocious stories'. Baruch (1981) examines how such stories may be called upon to establish the moral adequacy of parents by calling into question doubts that have been cast on their competence as parents by members of the health profession.

My Mum said she couldn't be pleased I was pregnant because she wasn't, she thought it was wrong (Jan - birth mother).

My mother's reaction was one of why would we choose to do something so outside normal society (Joanne - social mother).

My mother said I had shamed her. She was absolutely disgusted to find out that we were having a child, she thought it was completely immoral (Jayne - social mother).

It was not uncommon for respondents to encounter such inimical responses from parents. Other responses included expressions such as 'very strong revulsion', 'abhorrence', and parents being 'completely and utterly horrified' 'absolutely aghast', 'totally appalled'. For some parents, there was also the issue of 'shame' – that by association they also acquired a degree of stigma from their daughters. In Goffman's terms this is 'courtesy stigma' (Goffman, 1968:43). Respondents would probably be more unlikely to tolerate this kind of prejudicial encounter in wider networks. It is also possible that relatives felt able to freely express these kinds of views while others did not.

Several said that their anticipatory anxiety of negative responses about coming out to family members (felt stigma) was borne out in the reality of enacted stigma:

My Mum's response was exactly what I'd imagined, no wonder I kept my mouth shut for so many years, far less aggravation! (Jayne - social mother).

Even though her mother has not come to terms with Jayne's sexuality and family life, Jayne however has felt very positive about finally coming out:

I mean my Mum's still not happy about the situation, she won't visit me anymore, but I don't regret it. I feel like this whole person rather than a half person sneaking around, making sure I don't say 'she' when mentioning my partner and all that kind of stuff. It's a relief not to have to do any of that anymore, I didn't realise quite how debilitating it all was.

While Jayne talked about her mother feeling 'shamed' and 'disgusted' by Jayne's sexual identity, Jayne refuses to accept any sense of shame herself<sup>103</sup>. She instead stresses that, despite her mother's reactions, coming out has had many positive benefits. The ability to be open about her life rather than having to be constantly vigilant about what she says about her personal life has, in many ways, been liberating. This illustrates how the risks involved in revealing rather than concealing a potentially stigmatised identity can have positive outcomes (increased levels of support and acceptance) in contrast to the negative outcomes (rejection, isolation, loss of status) that stigma theory tends to emphasise (Green and Sobo, 2000).

For some respondents, the realities of enacted stigma from family members can be harder to ignore or avoid. The clearest example of this came from Sandra, whose family 'disowned' her in response to the perceived stigma of lesbian motherhood. Up to this point her family had tolerated, if not accepted, her relationships with women:

There was always a level of homophobia you couldn't touch, I came out to them over 20 years ago so they weren't going to change (...) I'd really tried, I'd given them contacts for the Parents' Support Group and all kinds of leaflets and books but they didn't want to know. And when I told them Kate was pregnant that was it, it was like 'you can't ... this is a terrible thing and you can't do it'. It was the last time I ever spoke to them. My whole family, my brother and Great Aunt as well (...) they just all disowned me from that point on. I'll never understand how you can do that really (Sandra - social mother).

To be disowned by one's family is a particularly harsh enactment of being stigmatised, another form of an 'atrocious story' (Baruch, 1981. See footnote 6, page 225). Sandra refuses to take on or accept their prejudice by identifying their conduct as wrongful rather than her own. She talked about their homophobia and

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<sup>103</sup> Jayne, a Black woman, also presented her mother's response as a cultural response: 'It's more of a cultural thing with my Mum, that was the whole basis for her reaction, saying it's a Western disease, she probably thinks I've been led astray by Suzie'. This raises additional dimensions to being out as a Black lesbian and to being in a relationship with a white woman.

her attempts to change this by giving them information about support groups for the parents of lesbians and gay men, and literature that was positive about same sex relationships. Similarly to the above respondents who challenged inappropriate professional behaviour, Sandra is able to draw upon resources that now exist to challenge the stigma that surrounded homosexuality.

A strong theme emerging within the above accounts of dealing with enacted stigma is one that rejects the notion of an 'undesired difference' (Goffman, 1968). Women are aware that they cannot necessarily take for granted being treated by others as 'normals' (in Goffman's terminology), but they can refuse to accept the societal definition of stigmatisation of same sex relationships. As noted above, Sandra, for example, employs the term 'homophobia' that identifies the issue to be one of a lack of tolerance of difference. In this way the shameful behaviour is located with the person expressing prejudicial views rather than to the person being stigmatised. This resistance of stigma is not fully recognised by Goffman (1968) but at the same time many of the resources available to lesbians, bisexuals and gay men to challenge stigma have been developed since the time of Goffman's work on stigma. Here Riessman's concepts of resistance and resilience potentially offers a useful framework to address the ways in which women may resist the potential stigma, encountered or anticipated, in negotiating recognition of their parental and familial status (Riessman, 2000).

## **6. Resistance and resilience**

Riessman's research examines how women with a potentially invisible stigmatising attribute (infertility) mediate and resist stigma in these circumstances. Riessman critiqued Goffman's assumption that stigmatised individuals hold the same beliefs about his or her stigma as the rest of society and argues that 'in the empirical world, there are countless instances in which individuals disavow the dominant perspectives' (2000:114)<sup>104</sup>.

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<sup>104</sup> Gussow and Tracy (1968) provided an early critique of the assumption that the stigmatised individual holds the same beliefs about his/her 'condition' as the rest of society.

Riessman (2000:131) defines resistance to mean 'transformative actions in which women press their own claims vis-à-vis others who stigmatise them' and resilience to mean 'managing, enduring and transcending stigma'. This recognises that those stigmatised still have to find ways to live with societal perceptions of stigma even as they resist them.

Riessman develops a framework of the kinds of everyday strategies that individuals may employ in avoiding and resisting being stigmatised. These include purposefully avoiding confrontations (strategic avoidance), refusing to accept the stigmatised identity (resistant thinking), and taking a stand in an interaction (speaking up and acting out). She argues that such strategies are not necessarily public, organised or unambivalently intentional but rather, are actions that often 'informal, covert and concerned largely with immediate *de facto* gains' (2000:122). As such, she argues that strategies involved in the resistance and resilience against stigma can be complex and contradictory. To some degree, these strategies overlap with Goffman's strategies 'passing' and 'covering'. However while Goffman (1968) emphasises the defensive management of stigma, Riessman emphasises the possibilities of the transformative effects of everyday resistance.

Below I shall consider how her framework might apply to the ways in which lesbian parents deal with the potential or real social censure and stigma while negotiating for the recognition and legitimacy of their parental and familial status. Although the different strategies of resistance are separated out, in reality these boundaries are blurred and operate alongside forms of resilience, which I shall highlight in each section.

### **6.1 Respondents' use of avoidance as resistance**

Strategies of avoidance may include making decisions to not come out in certain situations. This has similarities to Goffman's strategy of 'passing'; the concealment of information about a stigmatising attribute.

Avoidance can be a fluid rather than a fixed response, used some of the time and in some circumstances. These decisions are often taken in the spur of the moment. As Goffman (1968) noted, 'contingencies' may arise which cannot be planned for and which cannot be handled by relying on past experience of handling similar situations. The majority of respondents' accounts of situations that involve avoidance strategies stressed that their avoidance resulted from weighing up the costs and benefits of coming out rather than any belief that they should 'conceal' their family set-up. One kind of avoidance displayed in women's accounts is a selective process of strategic avoidance:

Being out depends on the situation, what I might say and when. I'd never lie about how I live but erm ... I might be economical with what I'd say to people. And lots of time it's a spur of the moment thing. Just the other day I was talking to a new colleague at work, she has a son the same age as Matty and she made this comment about me being pregnant and it was one of those things, she doesn't know anything about me and I don't know anything about how she might respond. It can be a split second decision. Sometimes it's a question of can you be bothered really, can you face this huge explanation? (Joanne - social mother).

There are times like ... we all go to Tesco's, you know, we just want to do our food shopping and people coo over Molly and ask about her. Sometimes I can't be bothered ... do we have to face explaining, well actually we're lesbians, this is our daughter and da de da, but on the other hand we're not going to lie to anyone (Paula - birth mother).

In their use of avoidance, Joanne and Paula stress that that they would not *lie* about their family. In common with most respondents, avoidance of this nature is presented as a tactical strategy used some of the time, in certain situations, on the spur of the moment. Behind this, there lies a common theme, the anticipation of managing social interactions where one's non-conformity might be revealed. Respondents often balanced this against the extra work that could be involved in revealing their family set-up. Joanne and Paula, for example, indicate how coming out can potentially require lengthy explanations. In the scenario of casual encounters, revealing a great deal of information about oneself may be perceived as necessary in order to both explain and manage the disclosure, but this can also feel inappropriate. This is a feature of the management of information about stigma

identified by Goffman whereby the disclosure of the stigma can also require revealing personal facts about oneself that are 'more personal than the relationship really warrants' (Goffman, 1968: 95).

It is worth pointing up here the earlier example outlined by Paula (page 213) of a similarly casual encounter with another stranger when Paula simply responded to the question, 'Are you (Molly's) mother?' with the response, 'Well, we both are'. Here Paula did not indicate any need to follow up with any explanations while above she gives another example of a similar situation where she might avoid 'coming out' because she cannot always 'be bothered' to manage the anticipated potential tension created by her disclosure. This is another feature Goffman identified as central to the management of stigma, whereby the stigmatised individual feels obliged to take responsibility to manage the awkwardness that the disclosure of the stigma might cause.

A key factor presented as integral to strategies of avoidance involves questioning whether coming out is worth the perceived effort - 'Can I be bothered'? or 'Do I have to explain?' The questions were often raised, especially when respondents could not be sure of the response they might receive and/or where the encounter was of a casual fleeting nature. Accounts of avoidance indicate both resistance and resilience to real or imaginary scenarios of encountering negative attitudes. As I shall discuss they also overlap with forms of resistant thinking, as do instances of avoidance in the context of being out.

## **6.2 Respondents' use of avoidance in the context of being out**

Respondents were involved in managing information in the context of being out. In these circumstances women sometimes adopted strategies of avoidance:

If I'm asked a direct question, I'll answer it. Like if someone says what does your partner do, I'd talk about Christina, I'd say 'she' and all that. But I'm not prepared to go about explaining it all the time, I leave it to others to do the work, it's up to them I think, like 'get over it' (Judith - social mother).



I sort of take the view 'This is who we are'. It's no big deal, we're just going about being a family like anyone else, you can take us or leave us, learn from this or not (Ruth - social mother).

It's better to be up-front and confident, that way I think people just take it in their stride. I don't make a big thing about it. Edward and Nathan have two Mums and they have their Daddy, so that's our family, we do all the same stuff as any other family really and it becomes completely normal to people who get to know us (Kate - birth mother).

These are common examples of the ways in which women may prevent attention being focussed on the potential difference/stigma of being lesbian parents. They are 'out' but do not make a big issue of being out. Judith, for example, does not draw attention to her 'difference'. Ruth and Kate present their families to be just like anyone else's, downplaying the difference of being lesbian parents, so that it is not a 'big deal' or becomes 'completely normal' for other people. This resonates with Goffman's strategy of covering whereby stigmatised individuals engage in the work of making it easier for themselves and for others to 'withdraw covert attention from the stigma' (1968:125). However, these avoidance strategies, in the context of being out, were also about disavowals of stigma rather than a defensive management of stigma. Women were clear that it was up to other people to 'learn from them' that their difference was not necessarily a stigmatisable attribute. It was up to other people to 'take them or leave them' or to 'get over it'.

Helen articulates a sense that other people also have a responsibility to keep the stigma from looming large - by not asking intrusive questions and by learning to not stigmatise:

If someone I know asks me something about my family and it's a genuine interest then that's fine. I've got no problem with that, I'm not ashamed of it you know, there's no secret about how family, how we had our kids. But if it's done for sort of prurient reasons then no, it gets intrusive. I'm not, my family's not some kind of experiment, you know, this is my life! I won't get into those conversations like 'Oh selfish lesbians having children'; other people need to educate themselves that's not my job (Helen – birth mother).

Here, Helen asserts her pride in her family, she is happy to respond to what she perceives to be genuine enquiries about her life, and is willing to acknowledge that

her family does not conform to the traditional heterosexual family form. At the same time, she also defines some enquiries as intrusive and will avoid conversations if she perceives the enquirer's motive to be prurient rather than genuine. Her strategy of avoidance acts as a rejection of any attempt to position her as 'other' (some kind of experiment) and a rejection of negative stereotypes about her position as a lesbian mother. Helen's avoidance fits more closely with Riessman's notion of resistance than with Goffman's 'covering' where the stigmatised individual takes responsibility to adopt strategies of covering to keep the stigma from looming large.

### **6.3 Respondents' interpretations of discriminatory interactions**

For Riessman (2000), a key strategy of resistant thinking is a re-interpretation of discriminatory interactions. Some examples have already been discussed above in the ways in which women responded to instances of enacted stigma whereby they re-interpret prejudicial interactions to resist self-blame and to re-locate blame and shame on other individuals or society. Respondents provided many examples of what might be termed 'resistant thinking':

There's still this awful prejudice about lesbian parents, ... rather than an understanding it's people's prejudices that affect children's lives negatively it's not lesbian parents. If you saw some of my caseload, children in dire situations, you know it makes you think, we're raising cared-for, bright articulate children, children that accept difference. It's not just lesbianism but we point things out about all sorts of prejudices (Judith - social mother).

As I see it we're pioneers, the trouble is that most people don't know anyone who has done this before but people are becoming more aware and more open to it I think. You just have to hope that public thinking and legislation catches up with us as Josh gets older we won't seem like such pioneers and there won't be such prejudices (Suzie - birth mother).

In such accounts, women resist and reject the negative stereotypes of lesbian parents, locating the blame firmly on societal attitudes and a lack of tolerance of difference. The 'problem' is identified to lie in a society that has yet to catch up with their 'pioneering ways'. Furthermore what others may perceive as a flaw,

women turn round to being a positive attribute, here contained within the suggestion that lesbian parents may in fact not only be providing a good family environment for their children but potentially a better environment *per se* compared to some. Difference is presented as a positive attribute, one which children can benefit from as they grow up with the experience of living with parents who are modelling pride and acceptance of different family forms, and rejecting different forms of discrimination and prejudice<sup>105</sup>. This form of resistant thinking highlights rather than minimises their non-conformity, but presents it as a positive rather than a negative attribute. In some accounts this included putting forward the idea of not only being different but also being better than some other families.

At other times however, women may also present themselves as very ordinary, and in many ways no different from any other families:

Our lifestyle is as normal and natural as any other relationship that works (Judith - social mother).

We're boring really, very ordinary, you know, nothing outrageous, we lead very ordinary lives (Irene - birth mother).

Although we're very out I'd say in most settings, we actually lead very straight lives. I think we've been very conservative (Tina - social mother).

Our families are no worse and no better than any other kind of family. People need to realise we haven't got two heads. Not all lesbians have pink hair and nose rings, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that but it's not the only type of lesbian (Sara - birth mother).

In disavowing lesbian stereotypes, women may implicitly be rejecting negative associations of lesbianism while simultaneously being aware of the potential for stigma. Rejecting the negative stereotypes also requires resilience, because there is still the ongoing awareness of the possibilities for societal prejudice, even as it is resisted.

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<sup>105</sup> Goffman writes about such benefits of stigma as 'secondary gains' or a 'blessing in disguise' (1968:21-22).

Respondents also expressed the idea that they had to demonstrate they could do *better* than parents in more conventional families.

I feel we have to demonstrate to the world that we can be responsible parents and we have to be more vigilant about our parenting (Tessa - social mother).

There is this part of me that thinks we do have to try harder you know, we do need to make sure that she is more than perfect in the same way that black people have to you know, be better than other people in order to be seen to be the same (Vicky - birth mother).

You do feel under public scrutiny being parents as part of a lesbian couple, if you don't provide everything, a greater sense that people expect it to go wrong or something, that you have to do it better ... (Jenny - social mother).

This sense of vigilance extends from the previous discussion of anticipating responses to being prepared for potential negative responses and, in particular here, being prepared to counteract these kinds of judgements with the answer that their parenting is of the best quality. Vicky expresses the view that in order to be the same as other parents they must be better, which again can be seen as preparation to counteract any charges to the contrary, the potential public 'scrutiny' of their parenting.

Thus, some respondents stressed they were the same as any other parents but others also stressed ways in which their parenting could be *better* than parenting in other family forms. Some argued that lesbian parents not only *had* to be better, but also *were* better than many parents. Some respondents also moved between these different positions within their accounts; each position could be variously drawn upon under certain circumstances and in certain ways and contexts. What these positions all have in common is that they represented forms of resistance, which respondents used to reassert that they are as good as (if not better than) other parents in more conventional families. Respondents are alert to the potential of being scrutinised and of the negative stereotypes that exist and may be encountered, which question their fitness to parent. It is hard to imagine that white, middle-class, married heterosexual parents would feel any need to express the view

that they are either better than or do not need to be better than same sex couples with children. In practice, few families meet that ideal family ideal in full but many families have more chance of resembling parts if not all of the ideal than same sex couples parenting together. Lesbian parents are potentially called upon to do more and different work than most heterosexual parents, work that is particularly visible and requires an ongoing vigilance.

#### **6.4 Further challenges to stigma: speaking up and acting out**

Within their everyday lives, women gave many examples of the ways in which they challenged stigma by positively affirming their difference:

What I have found is being a lesbian parent is so inherently bloody political, every day of your life is political you know, just turning up at school together or birthday parties we've had. You're putting yourself on the line because you're both there, totally visible (Jan - birth mother).

I forget this is a blind spot for lots of people and it's sort of like every time I open my mouth and say something I think you have to class it as education. It's a form of political activism, you know we're part of the fabric of this community and if we're completely open and talking then hopefully in the future it won't be such a big deal (Rebecca - birth mother).

Jan and Rebecca identify the ways in which just going about their everyday lives, being visible as lesbian parents in interactions with others becomes a form of political activism, challenging the implicit social judgements that prevail and asserting the validity of their families. Sara identified some of the ways in which everyday kind of activities can take on new meanings:

Sometimes they're quite funny ways, like being in the local Neighbourhood Watch which might sound a bit ... all our friends were in stitches but what it did mean was that we were as a couple and as a family offering something to the local community that said 'This is Sara and Ruth and they live in this neighbourhood', this is who we are. And things like I'm the Chair of Adam's school PTA and it's the same thing, and we go to the PTA social as a couple and dance together ... it doesn't have to be huge big actions (Sara - birth mother).

In this sense everyday actions are turned into political actions. This is another form of extra work that women do in order to negotiate recognition and challenge stigma. For a heterosexual couple to attend PTA social functions or to pick up their child together from school does not require 'putting yourself on the line' or publicly presenting themselves as a family, in the same (political) sense.

Three couples had taken part in making video documentaries, aimed at presenting lesbian families as 'ordinary' families and challenging discriminatory behaviour. One of these was a mainstream documentary made for television and the other two were at a local level, and had been used as tools of education, for example they had been shown as part of equal opportunity training sessions. All three couples noted that they had assessed the risks of taking part in these kinds of documentaries stemming from the awareness of potentially negative responses. One of the women who had taken part in a mainstream television programme said:

We did sort of think are we putting ourselves on the line too much publicly especially with the sort of freelance work we were doing then, but we were prepared to take that chance. It was a chance to say look, here we are triumphing against adversity sort of thing, to celebrate our family<sup>106</sup>.

Here the potential risk was weighed against the opportunity to provide a positive reflection of their family in the context of the wider culture that offers few reflections of same sex families. Families resembling the norms can see themselves reflected in many cultural representations but this can require an extra effort for lesbian parents. It again highlights the silences within the taken for granted family forms that same sex couples cannot take for granted.

Women's involvement in different types of action to positively affirm the existence of difference frequently required time and resources. Many, for example, became actively involved in their children's nurseries or schools. Respondents commented

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<sup>106</sup> While this couple is happy to be identified, in keeping with my confidentiality statement I have intentionally not identified this quote, as there are few documentaries about lesbian parenting, and few women who have taken part.

on encouraging nurseries and schools to use materials that represented different families like their own in positive ways or in getting teachers to address specific taken for granted activities such as making cards for Mother's Day and Father's Day. These actions also addressed the potential stigma that children may face. In the next section I discuss how this kind of work is implicitly connected to creating a positive environment for their children.

## **6.5 Children and stigma**

For most women, much of the work of speaking up and acting out was linked to addressing concerns that the discrimination and stigma they anticipated or encountered should not impact upon their children. Typical examples of these kinds of concerns include:

My major reservation was not about could we be good parents but you know, it's the outside world imposing their views, and things like how is this child going to cope with the situation that they've unknowingly been put in (Denise - social mother).

I do worry that potentially I might have put Rosa in the position of being bullied at school, you know having lesbian parents (Vicky - birth mother).

Denise and Vicky express a common theme in women's accounts. While women have made decisions about living openly as a same sex couple, they recognise that their children may have to cope with this difference that marks them out and which is not of the child's own making. Furthermore women are aware that this extension of stigma upon their children is something on which they may be called upon to account for.

While women still negotiated 'layers of outness' in other areas of their lives, when it came to the areas that directly impinged on their children's lives women felt it was crucial to be open about their family set up. This was identified as necessary so that they could negotiate recognition of their family and present a positive image of their family, for and on behalf of their children:

With children you're dredged in domesticity. If you're not at the park you're in someone else's house or they're at your house and I didn't want anyone in this house without them knowing the set-up, I just didn't want that, I didn't want the children interacting with anyone who didn't know their family set-up (Rebecca - birth mother).

Avoidance is not an option, hiding who we are would not present a very positive image for them (Lauren - birth mother).

I think it's very important for them that they see that you know that we're fine with it, we're out and we're proud (Lucy - social mother).

Respondents identified 'being out' around their children as an integral part of their negotiations of difference. A primary motivation for this work was to present positive images of their family for their children to witness in order to counteract any negative views that the children may encounter about their families.

Respondents actively sought ways in which to project openness rather than concealment, honesty rather than secrecy, being proud as opposed to being ashamed in any way of who they are. At the same time, this 'outness' presented some potential risks. Women talked about being prepared for these eventualities and about equipping their children with the tools to develop their own strategies in the future:

I think if you can help them to be confident, that they're confident within themselves and confident about their family then it helps them. If you don't send them out equipped you're looking for trouble I think (Lauren - birth mother).

It's different enough for Ryan as it is. He's got two mummies, you know he's happy with that and it would be lovely to wrap him up in cotton wool and keep it that way but I'm sure the day will come when he's at school and someone will say 'You shouldn't have two mummies', and he'll have to resolve that with our help. We'll equip him to deal with that (Deborah - birth mother).

We've always done a lot of explaining to Adam about everything so he can start understanding the world around him and what might be difficult so that hopefully he will have enough confidence and self-esteem to be able to explain the situation to other children. Any sort of bullying or any issues that come up he can talk to us about them or he can actually start to deal with them for himself (Ruth - social mother).



Respondents demonstrated ways in which they were alert to and had already equipped their children to deal with stigma ('stigma coaching' in Goffman's terms). In doing so they address the implicit charge of potential harm caused to children being raised by lesbian parents. They stress the opposite whereby they are consistently acting in the best interests of their child. They demonstrate a sensitivity to issues that may arise for their children, and many offered comparisons to difficulties that other children may come up against, such as racism or physical attributes that may cause teasing such as being overweight. While their instincts (as good mothers) may be to protect their children ('wrap them up in cotton wool') they emphasise the work of equipping their children with the means to cope with the outside world, including ongoing support from their parents. This is entirely consistent with the ideals of good mothering whereby mothers are attuned to and meet children's needs. Lawler (2000:125) notes that these needs include attention, unconditional love, communication and freedom that the good mother provides, in contrast to 'bad mothers' (who) either fail to give their children these things, or give them too much of them. Too much protection ('wrapping up in cotton wool') might be one such example.

Riessman (2000) raises the question from her research about whether stigma and women's responses may vary over the life course, and this question needs also to be raised in terms of children being raised in non-traditional families. This relates in particular to children's responses and changing needs that must be addressed as they grow up.

Having children was also a point at which women's networks could change. It has been noted by other studies (Dunne, 1998a) that women in same sex relationships often come into more contact with the heterosexual world, through contact with heterosexual mothers after having children. This was true for women in my sample – but these were not seen to compensate for the perceived need for links within their own community:

We need to find other lesbian families ... to reduce the isolation, to build up a wider range of connections so William doesn't feel different (Denise - social mother).

If we could meet up with some more lesbian parents that would be great. I think it would make life easier for Molly's sake to know we're not unique, there are other people in families the same, and that can be affirming in itself (Jenny - social mother).

I want the children to know other families like ours, I think it would be good for the kids to socialise with children of similar families. If they come across any prejudices in their life, you know it helps them that little bit to know there are other families like their own (Sally - birth mother).

Many women noted this motivation to develop or maintain networks with other lesbian parents as a strategy to minimise difference for their children. Socialising with other families like their own could allow their children to feel that having two female parents in a same sex relationship was relatively ordinary. This resonates with Goffman's argument that 'the relationship of the stigmatised individual to the informal community and formal organisation of his own kind is, then, crucial' (Goffman, 1968:52). However, while women try to create an environment for their children where their difference is not always significant, women also work to equip their children with strategies of resistance and resilience to deal with the potential stigmatisation they may come across, as discussed above.

## **7. Conclusion**

I have identified the ways in which women were aware that they could not take for granted that their parental and familial status would be recognised by others. The boundaries within which others make sense of lesbian motherhood are similar to those which women draw upon themselves, as outlined in Figure 1 (page 165, in the previous chapter). Gaining some means of recognition and validation from others requires a great deal of ongoing work but also requires the negotiation of 'layers of outness'. Furthermore women are aware that this recognition, once gained, may also be accompanied by value judgements. Women remain vigilant to the potential anticipated or real stigmatisation that can occur within social interactions with others and variously employ a number of strategies to avoid, deflect, resist and/or reject the potential stigma perceived to be attached to lesbian

parents and families. Importantly women present these more often as positive rather than defensive strategies.

However while women engage in this work they do so in the context of normative social and cultural frameworks of family life and motherhood, even while challenging these frameworks. While they may transgress the boundaries of the traditional family form, they cannot entirely ignore them. Notably all respondents presented themselves as being a fairly conventional, if different, family form; a two parent stable family unit, where their children were planned, loved, well cared for and secure. None, for example, sought any particularly alternative lifestyle (such as communal living). Paradoxically this rhetoric may also leave women open to criticisms of assimilation into a heterosexual culture by some sections of the lesbian community (Sullivan, 1997), although the reality is far more complex.

The boundaries of 'family' have been challenged to some extent, to incorporate lesbian parent and other same-sex 'families of choice' (Weston, 1997, Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). The boundaries around motherhood however remain obdurate and prescriptive. Women can and do negotiate for the recognition and legitimacy of their familial and parental status but do so within the moral domain where mothers are defined as meeters of their children's needs. The constraints and moralities around motherhood, alongside the awareness of the potential of social censure and stigma that their families may face, mean that as women seek to negotiate recognition, they are constrained by the need to reconcile lesbian parenting with the demands of good motherhood. It is difficult to oppose or transgress this ideal of 'good' motherhood.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusions

In this study I have examined women's experiences of family life and being a parent within the context of having planned and had their children in a cohabiting same sex relationship. In particular, I have considered their understandings and experiences of motherhood and family within their own household and within the wider societal context of their lives. In doing so, I also address the wider question of how this analysis contributes to theoretical debates around the changing nature of family life.

The ways in which respondents have become parents and established their families represent a radical departure from the conventions of the 'traditional' family, in particular the heterosexual and biological imperatives of reproduction, parenting and family life. In doing so, they are making decisions about how to proceed and what to do, in the relative absence of any social guidelines to follow. Concurrent to working out new family practices, they are also making new sense of motherhood. Significantly, at this juncture, while both their entry point into motherhood, and the context within which they mother, are different to the traditional norms, they are operating within a deeply conventional framework. In this context, they seek to demonstrate that lesbian parenthood can be compatible with demands of good motherhood. These demands include taking primary responsibility to ensure that the 'best interests' and 'needs' of the child are met. Thus, even while 'fashioning' new ways of doing family, respondents endeavour to establish that these practices are not in conflict with the needs of children, in an unspoken acknowledgement that they could be perceived as such.

In the following sections of this chapter I discuss key issues arising from my study. In Section 1, I consider questions relating to my study's sample criteria, which have relevance to the discussions that follow. I also suggest future lines of enquiry. In Section 2, I highlight ways in which respondents offer re-interpretations of various

aspects of family structures and practices, akin to Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan's 'narratives of self-invention' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001:43). I discuss respondents' re-interpretations of 'family', and also of parenthood. In Section 3, I highlight the ways in which these accounts of their family practices, and of parenthood, are nevertheless located within, and underpinned by, conventional moralities of motherhood, which leave little space within which to offer up new stories of doing family.

### **7.1 Research: sample criteria and (future) questions**

My sample criteria required couples to be in a co-habiting relationship and to have had their first child together. Consequently, I recruited couples who were perhaps more likely to be conforming to conventional notions of stability and commitment<sup>107</sup>.

In many respects, respondents present their families as conventional 'ordinary' families, which adhere to core 'traditional' values of love, stability and commitment. All live in households which consist of two adults and one or two children. I did not, for example, find any communal living arrangements or any households that also included the donor. One couple spoke of being in a non-monogamous relationship, but stressed that their relationship was a priority alongside their co-parenting of their child.

Some couples who wanted to take part in my research did not fit my sample criteria. This was generally because of factors such as having children from previous relationships or having older children. However, any couples living what might be termed more 'unconventional' lifestyles did not come forward. A study which is designed to focus on lesbian couples having children together who are living lifestyles that might be regarded as more experimental may offer further

insights into the debates about the changing nature of family lives and the moralities of motherhood.

Respondents in my study were predominantly middle-class, or had moved from working class to middle class, and the majority were living in relative affluence. It is also important to find ways to research the potentially different experiences of Black and working class lesbian couples having children together, although such couples may be harder to access. It may be the case that couples in my sample are best placed to challenge negative societal attitudes. They may form the largest group of same sex couples planning and having their first child together but, to date, there is no way of knowing that with any certainty. However, respondents in my study did have access to a range of resources, which may alleviate some of the difficulties and challenges that lesbian parents may face. These resources include high levels of educational attainment, the benefits of which can include developing the ability to adopt a questioning perspective on the 'givens' of life, and to be articulate and assertive, as well as the opening up of employment opportunities. Most respondents also have reasonable access to economical resources and to decent housing. This means, for example, they are able to live in areas where they feel relatively safe and at ease living openly as lesbians.

There are further questions to be asked. For example, it would be interesting to design a longitudinal study, which identifies couples planning to have children and which follows their experiences over a number of years. While I gathered data about family formation, these were based on retrospective accounts. These can reveal a great deal, as I discuss, but the relationship between these accounts and what respondents may have thought and done at the time of planning and attempting conception is indeterminate. Finally, my study focussed on respondents with young children, which inevitably limits what can be determined about the ways in which the (moral) boundaries between the biological and social relationships work out over time. Furthermore, children's needs and the ways in

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<sup>107</sup> A number of respondents noted that it had been important to them that they were able to fulfil these same criteria prior to entering into parenthood. Other criteria raised included having good jobs and a secure home.

which these are addressed can change over time. These points suggest that a further line of enquiry would be to research the experiences of lesbian parents of older children and the experiences of children themselves.

As I observe above, and in Chapter 3, there is no way of knowing whether my sample is representative of lesbian parents having their first child together. This is a relatively new field of sociological research, and more empirical work is required to build up a more detailed picture of same sex family forms, alongside other changing family forms. However, in building up a more detailed picture, I suggest that a focus on researching the particular experiences of different groups of lesbian parents is important. My focus on a very specific group of lesbian parents reveals interesting insights, some of which may have been obscured had my sample criteria encompassed a more generic group of lesbian parents. As such, this study makes a significant contribution to the existing theoretical and empirical debates about motherhood and the changing nature of family lives, as I discuss below.

## **7.2 Re-interpretations of 'family' and of parenthood**

Respondents re-interpret 'family' to include significant intimate connections, which challenge the traditional primacy of meanings of family that involve blood or marital relationships. Here they can be seen to exercise choices made possible by broader changes in society, which have disrupted traditional ways of living and of having children.

There are limits to these choices. For example, some respondents faced barriers in accessing donor insemination treatment either because they cannot afford it or they did not live near enough to a clinic that accepts lesbian couples for treatment. These 'choices' are also made in a society that offers little institutional recognition to their families, and respondents experience a whole range of challenges in forging out new ways of being, within a culture that is often hostile to same sex relationships. However, while not always approved of, respondents do have choices to live openly as lesbian couples that were not possible for past generations. They

have been able to make use of reproductive technologies in order to have children, and to negotiate men's roles within these families. It is not taken for granted that these families involve fathers in any shape or form, and all involve two female parents. In these ways, respondents' families cut across the biological imperatives of reproduction and across the heterosexual and gendered norms of family life.

Respondents are faced with making decisions in the relative absence of social guidelines or models to draw upon. These range from working out which woman will be the biological mother, which route to conception will be taken, what involvement the donor may have (if any), through to what parental terms to use for the child to refer to her/his parents. Through the negotiations involved in making these decisions, it is possible to distinguish ways in which respondents display narratives of self-invention. These have been identified as a powerful indication of the emergence of new ways of conceptualising what it means to be a family (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001:43-45).

Respondents also find ways to re-interpret fatherhood. Some respondents dispense with a 'father' altogether by opting to use donor insemination (DI). By definition, a child born to a lesbian couple by DI is legally fatherless. Other respondents, who used self-insemination, question legal definitions of 'father' which have re-emphasised biological fatherhood. Their understandings of fatherhood are based on what fathers *do*, in terms of the caring practices involved in parenting, rather than the fact of biological fatherhood. Respondents suggest that a man had to 'earn' the right to be called a father through the development of a social relationship with 'his' child. They resist the assumption that fatherhood is automatically conferred by the donation of sperm. Thus their everyday understandings of fatherhood challenge legal definitions, which have increasingly re-emphasised the rights and responsibilities of biological fatherhood. The traditional role of fathers as (economic) providers for their children is also subverted. By law, SI donors are defined as unmarried fathers who have financial responsibilities to provide for their child(ren). However, none of the respondents' donors in SI arrangements make any financial contribution towards the support of their children. Even those who are



known as 'Daddy' to their child and who are involved (to some degree) in caring practices, do not make financial provisions for their child(ren).

Respondents using SI are aware of the re-emphasis on rights and responsibilities of biological fatherhood. Gay donors have traditionally been perceived to present fewer risks to the lesbian parent family, in terms of being less likely to pursue, or be successful, in taking legal action to gain access to the child. However, as I discuss in Chapter 4, this perception may be changing as more gay men express desires to be involved in parenthood. It was notable in my study that the majority of couples opted for heterosexual donors. Any donor may pose some risks to the stability and integrity of the lesbian parent family, if he decides to pursue his rights as a biological father. To some extent, respondents call upon this discourse of risk to further justify the (unconventional) boundaries they place around their family unit of two female parents and child(ren), which most often exclude men as fathers.

Respondents also engage in making new sense of motherhood, in particular social mothers, who challenge the defining characteristics of motherhood (see Chapter 5) in order to lay claim to a parental status. For example, some social mothers reject the term 'mother' altogether and call themselves parents. Others successfully challenge the notion that 'mother' is a singular gendered identity. Nevertheless, while their families may subsequently look and be different and while dominant definitions of parenthood are, to some extent, challenged, this work is underpinned by a concern to be seen to fulfil the requirements of responsible parenting. Thus, while there are choices and dilemmas to be negotiated, there are no choices about placing their children as not in need of their responsibility. They already face challenges of being seen to neglect their child's needs in pursuit of their own needs and this intensifies the moral work to demonstrate otherwise.

### **7.3 Moralities of motherhood**

Throughout their accounts, respondents display ways in which they approach the decision making centred around having children and 'doing' family, within the

same conventional moralities of motherhood as any other (good) mother. This is a dominant preoccupation within their accounts of working out routes to conception and negotiating the role and status of the donor; of making new sense of motherhood (to themselves and to others), and of negotiating and resisting social stigma.

It is not so long ago that the term 'lesbian mother' presented an oxymoron, insofar as the characterisation of lesbians as non-procreative beings contradicted the dominant image of the (procreative) heterosexual, biological mother (Weston, 1997). This has, to some extent, been challenged by the increased visibility of lesbian mothers and respondents clearly contribute to this challenge. However, public and popular discourses still present lesbian parenthood in a largely negative light, questioning lesbians' 'fitness to parent' and raising concerns about the risks to children.

It is important to state that, as the interviewer, I held no such assumptions. Indeed, some respondents 'checked out' my 'political' stance prior to agreeing to take part in my research. Thus respondents' accounts were not formed in the context of any overt challenges, rather in the face of unstated questions, present in the wider societal and cultural context, about the ability of lesbians to be good mothers. These questions connect to issues about meeting the child's best interests. Within the dominant framework, a good mother aims to ensure her child has a father figure and the best possible start in life. Lesbians, on the other hand, are setting up families without fathers and are perceived to put their children at risk of social stigma, as well as placing them at a higher risk for a variety of other detrimental outcomes. As discussed in Chapter 2, these questions have been addressed and challenged by psychological research into lesbian parenting but they are still drawn upon by opponents of lesbian parenthood.

Thus, while respondents reinterpret the meanings of 'family' 'fatherhood' and 'motherhood', they face a series of challenges in doing so. For example, the conscious choice of many respondents to raise children without a father is made in a societal context where the child's need for a father has increasingly been

reinforced as essential to the child's welfare. Respondents using DI are further imputed to neglect the child's need to access genetic origins information about both her/his parents. Their decisions about routes to conception and subsequent levels of involvement from their donor (if using SI) thus hold the potential to jeopardise their moral status as mothers, since certain needs defined as central to the child's well-being cannot be met. As I discuss in Chapter 4, respondents thus seek to defend their decisions against the implicit charges that they are putting their own interests above those of the child. While this involves some re-interpretation of how best to meet a child's needs, respondents establish that however different their entry point into motherhood and subsequent families are, the needs of the child are nevertheless an over-arching priority.

No respondent presents any challenge to the basic assumption that, as mothers, they are primarily responsible for meeting their child's emotional and practical needs. They instead seek other ways to establish that these needs can be met within an alternative framework. In particular, I identify two moral discourses at play, which I summarise as a child's need for (knowledge of) biological parents and a child's need for (social) family relationships, which take precedence over biology. These pose considerable tensions but respondents were all able to demonstrate ways in which they drew upon one or both of these discourses in meeting the child's needs.

In making sense of motherhood to themselves, respondents engage with the normative definitions and expectations of motherhood. In Chapter 4, I identify four key characteristics (biological, legal, relational and the singular gendered identity) that define the dominant meanings of motherhood. These characteristics are framed within a broader context of heterosexuality and the moralities of (good) motherhood. To some extent, I separate the questions of 'Have I the right to call myself a mother?' from 'Am I a good mother?' In doing so, I demonstrate that the ways in which respondents engage with the first question reveals a great deal about the normative conventions of what it means to be a mother. Social mothers, in particular, experience difficulties in making claims to a parental status, given that they have little to draw upon from the dominant characteristics that define

motherhood. These difficulties are further highlighted when placed alongside the accounts of birth mothers, who can take their claims to motherhood for granted.

However, in making (new) sense of motherhood, respondents are also engaging in the work of making sense of *good* motherhood. Reconciling different claims to a parental status with these underpinning moralities of motherhood presents dilemmas for both birth and social mothers. Social mothers rely on a relational claim to a parental status and are further obliged to shore up these claims by demonstrating the quality of their relational claims. For many, this involves stressing that not only are they fully involved in the caring responsibilities of their child, but that they provide an equivalent (or, in some cases, better) quality of care to that provided by the birth mothers.

Birth mothers engage with these same issues but in a different way. Many feel obliged to find ways to play down their biological claim to motherhood in order to support their partners' claims to a parental status. This however presents tensions for those who do not want to relinquish claims to the Winnicottian ideals that there is no real substitute for the natural mother-child bond and the instinctive ability to meet the child's needs. Thus, for both birth and social mothers, their renegotiations of meanings of motherhood are bound up in presentations of *good* motherhood, which are non-negotiable.

Respondents also engage in the work of making sense of motherhood in their interactions with other people. This involves the work of negotiating for the recognition and legitimacy of their parental and familial status. Respondents confront particular difficulties, as two women parenting together, when faced with the ways in which others also draw upon the conventional framework of motherhood in making sense of two women co-parenting the same child(ren). In Chapter 6, I discuss how respondents often negotiate recognition through the processes of coming out. I highlight how these processes take on additional meanings, given the complexities involved in coming out as parents and as a family, rather than as an individual. Throughout these processes, respondents are aware of the potential for social stigma that they or their children may face.

Importantly, respondents find ways to avoid or re-interpret the stigma, presenting it as a problem of society rather than a problem of lesbian parenting; if anything is causing harm to their children, it is societal attitudes, not their parenting that is at fault. This is one illustration of the ways in which respondents seek to establish that the moralities of motherhood are compatible with lesbian motherhood. They present a whole range of strategies aimed at protecting their children from societal discrimination and/or working to equip their children to deal with any such encounters. Implicitly this is the work of saying 'our families may be different, but our parenting is good enough' (and sometimes better than more conventional forms of parenting). This work demands an ongoing vigilance and a level of moral activity that goes above and beyond conforming to conventional moralities of motherhood.

Respondents' accounts were thus deeply imbued with moral discourses around duties and responsibilities to children. These appear to intensify the more one deviates from the 'norm'. Respondents may transgress the boundaries of the family - as evidenced by the increasing diversity of family lives including the so-called 'lesbian baby boom'. However, the juxtaposition of the radical project of lesbian parent families and accounts of the project of motherhood reveal a picture whereby the working out of same sex family lives are circumscribed by considerations of moral dilemmas, particularly those related to the parenting of dependent children.

These accounts offer a new perspective to existing sociological debates about the pursuit of more individualistic forms of family life and transformations of intimacy. The rapid family change that is occurring, and the attendant erosion of prescriptive mores, does not mean, as some argue, the end to moral responsibility (Dennis and Erdos, 1993, Phillips, 1999). As part of these arguments, lesbian parents have been portrayed as selfish individuals who put their own needs and desires above those of their children. However, at the same time, the alternative view that lesbian parent families are a 'prime' example of the post-modern pluralities of lifestyle choices and moralities, developing as a consequence of wider changes within society (Giddens, 1992), may be over-stated.

Reviews of these theoretical perspectives (Jamieson, 1998, 1999) and existing empirical work on both heterosexual and same sex families have already offered more nuanced interpretations about the nature of family change occurring. Jamieson (1999), for example, critiques the 'tantalising optimism' of Giddens' account and calls for more empirical work to develop a detailed picture of contemporary transformations of intimacy. In Chapter 2, I discuss examples of research that contribute to this aim. These include innovative work into the lives of lesbian families (Dunne, 1998a, 2000a, Haines and Weiner, 2000, and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001) and studies of heterosexual divorced parents (Smart and Neale, 1999a) and stepfamilies (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2000). Nevertheless, the moral character of contemporary familial forms remains contested, ambivalent and undecided. For example, as I discuss in Chapter 2, Smart and Neale (1999a) emphasise a post-modern plurality of moral orientations while Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000:38) suggest that, where dependent children are involved, 'we still appear to be living in a modernist, morally absolute society'. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) are largely in agreement with Giddens' thesis that same sex families are 'prime everyday experimenters' (Giddens, 1992:135) who display 'narratives of self-invention', suggestive of a post-modern moral fluency. Nevertheless, there is some agreement amongst all these studies that the presence of dependent children, and thus parenting, raise key issues of accountability, and these issues are also central to my research.

However, I had not expected to find such a strong adherence to conventional moralities of motherhood. The sociological literature on lesbian families presents these 'families of choice' to be at the forefront of changes to family forms. I started my research with the expectation of finding similarly radical projects of motherhood, although I had not thought out what these might look like. However, in part, I also resisted the possibility that there was little space for these to develop.

As I flagged up in the methodology chapter, researchers bring their own values and beliefs to their research (Skeggs, 1997, Lawler, 2000) and these inform the research undertaken and the account produced. However, some values and beliefs can also be overturned by our research (Lawler, 2000). Throughout my research

project, as a mother, I found myself resisting the notion of a moral imperative suggested by Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000), in an attempt to adhere to my original expectation that mothers within families of choice were best placed to re-negotiate and re-define motherhood. Indeed there are spaces in which to make and act out different choices. Respondents' accounts, for example, demonstrate a wide range of different family practices. Ultimately, however, I could not reject the presence of a moral imperative that ran throughout these accounts. In particular, given the socially constructed nature of children's needs, there is little moral space to radicalise motherhood, even within radical family forms.

There has been much written about the ways in which notions of family are subjected to processes of negotiation and re-definition (Morgan, 1999:18). However, within the studies I examine (with the exception of Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000), the emphasis is on individuals making increasingly autonomous and fluid personal choices. This emphasis on post-modern ways of being attempts to capture the apparent flux and fluidity of changing family forms while challenging ideas that the family is in crisis, with attendant concerns for society as a whole. These themes of flux, fluidity and change are central to the development of Morgan's concept of family practices (Morgan, 1996, 1999). This idea of family practices has been important in that it directs the focus away from what families *ought* to be towards addressing the issues of what families *do*.

Overall, it has been suggested that there is a significant degree of stability in family relationships, even if the form is changing (McRae, 1999). Silva and Smart (1999a:4) argue that it may be changes in attitude, an 'ideological slippage', rather than changes in household composition that have caused the alarmist 'family in crisis' concerns. However, while these latter views have been challenged, they have proved tenacious. Furthermore, the rhetoric that the family is in crisis has re-focused attention on motherhood as key to the rehabilitation of the traditional family and concomitant stability and morality of society. As such, motherhood is subject to intense scrutiny, and 'valorised or policed accordingly' (Wright and Jagger, 1999:29). Within this rhetoric, the appropriate site for motherhood, held to meet the needs of the child, is identified as the heterosexual conjugal relationship.

Women, as mothers, who fall outside this structure are deemed to be putting the future for children, men and society at risk (Murray, 1990, 1996).

Motherhood is thus at the heart of concerns about changes to family forms and, as such, requires closer attention. Anxieties aroused by changes to family forms have served to reinforce the boundaries around 'good' motherhood, within which women are positioned as primary meeters of their children's needs. This positioning forms the basis of the moral imperative, identified by Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000), and which I also identify as central to the accounts produced by respondents in my study.

In my study, tensions are revealed between radical family practices and motherhood. Since respondents' families do not fit the family structure regarded as the best place to meet children's needs, questions (implicit and sometimes explicit) are raised about their fitness to parent. Respondents refute these judgements, but these processes of refutation are also bound up with a self-imposed vigilance to meet the prescriptive requirements of (good) motherhood. They cannot meet these demands in any conventional sense. This subsequently intensifies the level of moral activity necessary in order to demonstrate the fulfilment of the responsibilities and obligations that inhere within meanings of motherhood. This includes re-interpretations of how best to meet the needs of the child in alternative forms, rather than any rejection of these requirements. Respondents in my study can and do find spaces within which to challenge and re-negotiate the dominant norms and mores of family life and motherhood, but the extent to which they do so is bound by the morality of caring for children. This is not negotiable. To argue against this morality would oppose the notion of being a good mother. The power and immutability of the discourse of good motherhood is such, that to argue against it is synonymous with 'arguing against virtue' (Lawler, 2000:172).



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## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1: Leaflet aimed at potential respondents**
- Appendix 2: Map of routes taken to find respondents**
- Appendix 3: Mapping of successful routes to respondents**
- Appendix 4: Sample profile**
- Appendix 5: Background questionnaire**
- Appendix 6: Linking research questions to methods**
- Appendix 7: The Household Portrait: prompts and list of tasks**
- Appendix 8: Questions and guidelines for mapping out social networks**
- Appendix 9: Interview schedule**
- Appendix 10: Statement of confidentiality and consent**

## **Appendix 1: Leaflet aimed at potential respondents**

### **Back cover**

#### **Aims of research**

To examine the everyday parenting experiences within female same sex relationships. My aim is to explore the positive aspects of becoming mothers in same sex relationships and to consider the significance of these emerging forms of family life and mothering. This work is for a PhD thesis but I also intend to write summaries of my work, which I hope will be of use to individuals and the wider community of women parenting in same sex relationships. In doing this I will first send a summary of my findings to all the women who take part in my study and will consider any feedback or comments women may wish to make.

#### **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:**

Kathy Almack  
School of Sociology and Social Policy  
University of Nottingham  
Nottingham  
NG7 2RD

Email: [lqkma@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:lqkma@nottingham.ac.uk)

Telephone: xxxx xxxxxx (on a secure answerphone)

**To minimise costs I will always be happy to phone you back**

### **Front cover**

**WOMEN PARENTING TOGETHER:**

**Mothering and family life in  
same sex relationships**

**PhD RESEARCH PROJECT**

**Kathy Almack  
School of Sociology and Social Policy  
University of Nottingham**

## Inside, side 1

### Focus of my project

My focus is on one 'group' of families although I recognise the diversity of same sex families and parenting arrangements. I want to look at the mothering/parenting relationships and the work of caring for young children from the perspective of families where two women are in a cohabiting relationship, and have planned and had their first child together, using donor or self insemination. The main focus of my work will be around these areas:

- The day to day practices of mothering and family life, both in and outside the home
- Your experiences and thoughts about being mothers/parents
- Issues around gaining recognition and support outside the home - from family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and so on
- The extent of the involvement (if any) of your donor in your family

### Your participation: what this will entail

Your involvement would entail:

- One joint interview with you both
  - One separate interview with each of you
- I anticipate each interview will take approximately 1 hour.

## Inside, side 2

### **Joint interview:**

This interview will cover issues about how you work out your current arrangements in terms of who does what around the house, and the 'work' of childcare. The second part of this interview will be to consider and map out your family 'social networks' i.e. the wider relationships you may have as a family with your own families, friends and so on.

### **Separate interviews:**

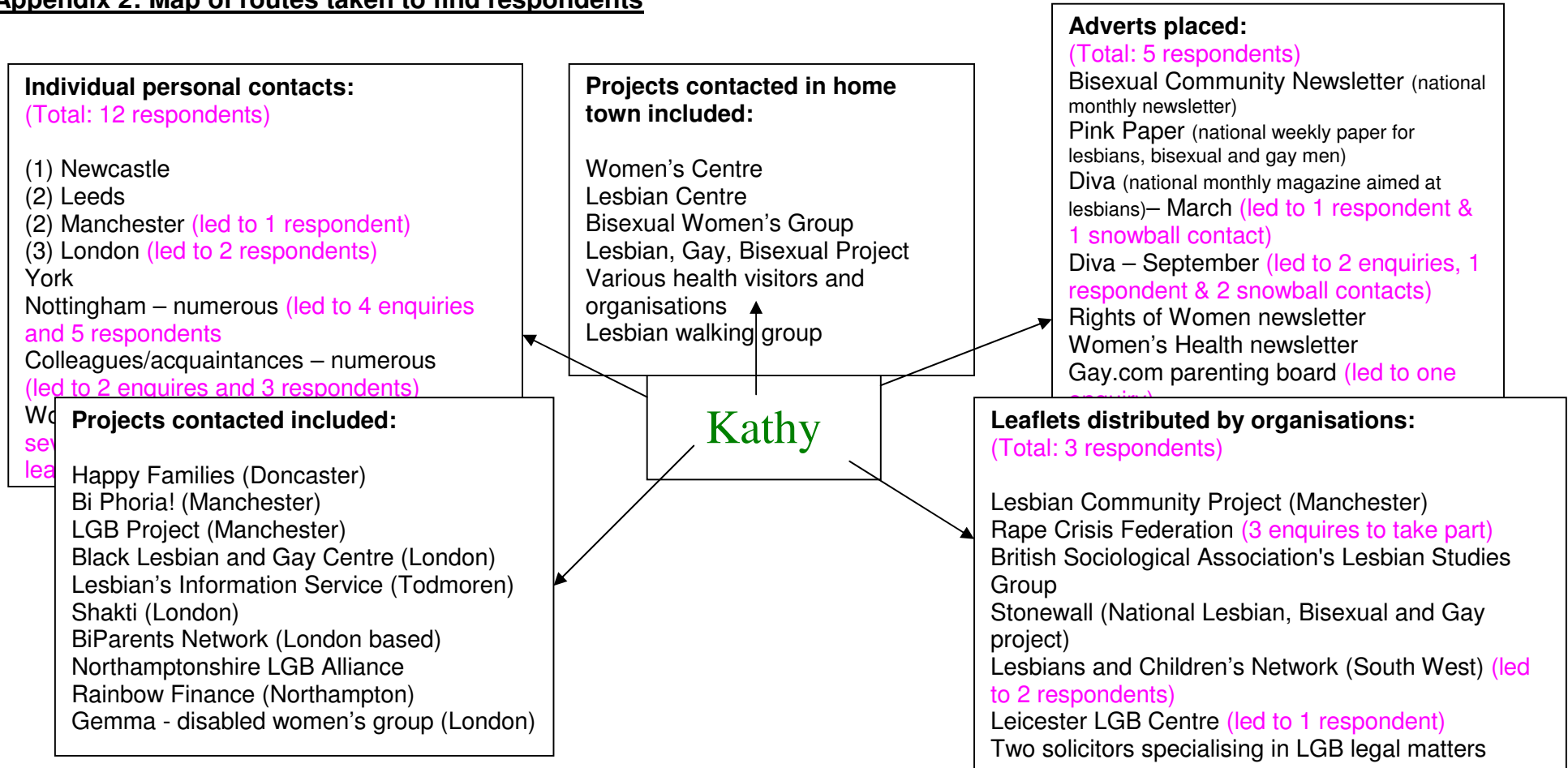
While this interview may pick up on issues discussed in the joint interview, on the whole I envisage covering different topics. These will include your feelings about being a mother; how being a mother has impacted on your life and what you see as both the advantages and disadvantages of your family arrangements.

### **Finding out more about taking part**

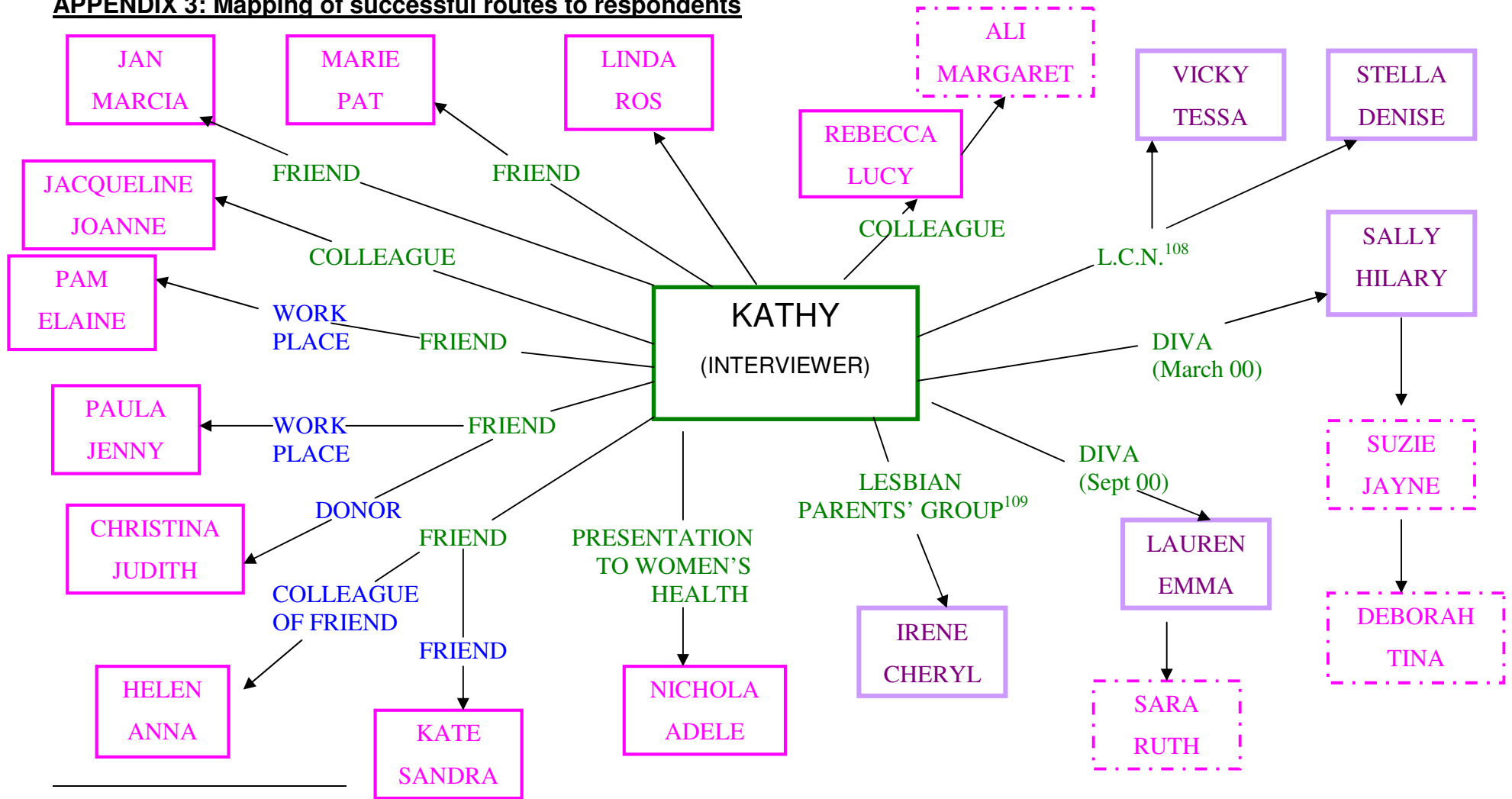
**If you might be interested in the possibility of taking part in my research, I would be pleased to hear from you. Details of how you can contact me are on the back of this leaflet. I can then provide some more information about my work and I would be happy to tell you more about myself and my personal interest in this project.**

**I will keep all contact confidential. More details will be provided about this before any participation.**

**Appendix 2: Map of routes taken to find respondents**



**APPENDIX 3: Mapping of successful routes to respondents**



<sup>108</sup> Lesbians and Children's Network - mail out of leaflet via Lisa Saffron

<sup>109</sup> Mail out of leaflet

See also below 'key' to this map



**Key to the map in Appendix 3:**

**Lines indicate interview links:**

- Source of primary links between interviewer and interviewee are written in green.
- Source of secondary links are written in blue.

**Boxes indicate word of mouth contact, snowball contact or indirect contact as follows (total 20 couples):**

1. Word of mouth contact:  
Total: 11 couples

Word of mouth  
contact  
(Respondents'  
names)

2. Snowball contact:  
Total: 4 couples

Snowball contact  
(Respondents'  
names)

3. Indirect contact:  
Total: 5 couples

Indirect contact  
(Respondents'  
names)

## **Appendix 4: Sample profile**

*Table 1. Sexual identity*

Lesbian	30
Gay, female	6
No definition	4
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>40</b>

*Table 2. Age*

20s	2
30s	26
40s	12
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>40</b>
Ages between 28 and 47. Median age 38	

*Table 3. Length of relationship*

1-5 years	3
6-10 years	11
11 years and over	6
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>20 (couples)</b>
Median length of relationship: 10 years	

Table 4. Ages of children

Under one year old	3
One up to one and 11 months	6
Two up to two and 11 months	5
Three up to three and 11 months	2
Four up to four and 11 months	6
Five up to five and 11 months	4
Six	1
<b>Total number of children</b>	<b>27</b>
13 couples have one child; 1 couple had twins; 6 couples had 2 children. Median age of children: 2½ years	

Table 5. Class

Working Class	6
Working Class to Middle Class	6
Middle Class	23
Classless	1
No definition given	4
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>40</b>

Table 4. Race/ethnicity

White	30
Jewish (white)	5
Irish (white)	2
Black (African Caribbean)	3
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>40</b>

Table 5. Education

Educated to O/A levels	13
Educated to degree level	8
Educated to post-graduate level	17
Working towards degree	2
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>40</b>
Number who also have work related qualifications	23

Table 6. Employment

Full-time (37 hours/week and over) <sup>110</sup>	18 (includes one self-employed)
Part-time (up to 30 hours/week)	15
At home with children full-time	6 (includes 2 women in same family)
Student, full-time	1
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>40</b>

Table 7: Employment patterns of couples

Both work full-time	3
One works full-time, one part-time	7
One works full-time, one at home full-time	4
Both work part-time	5
Both at home full-time	1
One works part-time, one full-time student	1
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>20</b>

---

<sup>110</sup> 5 of the women now in full-time employment took one to two years out of paid employment when their children were very young. (This includes 4 birth mothers and 1 social mother.)

Table 8: Median of Couple's Joint Income

Under £9,999	2
£10,000 to £19,999	2
£20,000 to £29,999	5
£30,000 to £39,999	4
£40,000 to £49,999	4
Over £50,000	3
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>20 couples</b>

Table 9. Geographical location of respondents

North England	3
Midlands	5
London	6
South-West	3
South-East	3
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>20 couples</b>
8 couples living in rural areas and/or small towns. 12 couples in cities	

**Appendix 5: Background questionnaire**

**Sheet 1: General information – to be completed together**

**Names of child(ren):**

---

---

**Ages of child(ren):**

---

---

**Any legal arrangements between parents– related to child:**

---

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---

**Any choice of pseudonyms:**

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**Individual information: woman A:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**Educational qualifications:**

O levels/GCSEs/A levels  Degree

Post graduate qualification  Work related qualification

Details/other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Employment:**

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Hours worked/week (average) \_\_\_\_\_

Income:

Under £7,499  £7,500 - £9,999

£10,000 - £14,999  £15,000 - £19,999

£20,000 - £29,000  £30,000 - £49,999

£50,000 and over

**Employment history since birth of first child:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Self Identity:** Could you please indicate factors which are important to you with regard to, for example:

Sexual identity \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity/race/nationality \_\_\_\_\_

Class (of origin and/or now?) \_\_\_\_\_

Disability \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any other aspects of self-identity that are important to you:

\_\_\_\_\_

Individual information: woman B:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

**Educational qualifications:**

O levels/GCSEs/A levels  Degree

Post graduate qualification  Work related qualification

Details/other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Employment:**

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Hours worked/week (average) \_\_\_\_\_

Income:

Under £7,499  £7,500 - £9,999

£10,000 - £14,999  £15,000 - £19,999

£20,000 - £29,000  £30,000 - £49,999

£50,000 and over

**Employment history since birth of first child:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Self Identity:** Could you please indicate factors which are important to you with regard to, for example:

Sexual identity \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity/race/nationality \_\_\_\_\_

Class (of origin and/or now?) \_\_\_\_\_

Disability \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any other aspects of self-identity that are important to you:

\_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix 6: Research questions linked to methods**

### **Question**

1. What are the day to day practices involved in mothering, in the home?

### **Sub-questions**

1a) Who does what and how are current arrangements negotiated?

1b) Is mothering viewed as a shared project? If so, what strategies are employed to facilitate this? What factors enable and/or constrain shared mothering? If mothering is not shared, is that a conscious decision? What are the factors involved?

- 
2. How significant is the fact of a biological or a social relationship?

---

2a. Are there different issues that arise within the family unit and in interactions with the outside world

2b. Are there differences in how both women perceive the significance of the biological and social relationships

### **Sources of data generation**

Household portrait – joint interview

Joint interview – issues also followed up in separate interviews

Explore in separate interviews

---

Part of discussion in mapping out social networks

Explore through separate interviews

### **Main question**

3. What is involved in gaining public recognition, support and validation for the parenting relationship and the family?

- 
4. What issues arise around donor involvement?

### **Sub-questions**

- 3a) Who is important as part of the family's social networks and why?
- 3b) How are the social relationships recognised? What work does this involve?
- 3c) Has the family encountered homophobic attitudes?
- 3d) What legal or formal strategies are considered/adopted in order to gain recognition of the family?

- 
- 4a) What factors played a role in finding and deciding upon a donor?
  - 4b) What is the donor's role/involvement in the family?

### **Sources of data generation**

Map out social networks in joint interview

Follow up issues in separate interviews for more personal individual views of birth and social mother

Part of discussion in mapping out social networks/separate interviews

Separate interviews

---

Explore through separate interviews

## **Appendix 7: The Household Portrait. prompts and list of tasks**

I used a series of 'prompts' adopted from Doucet (1995) to help facilitate the couple's discussions while completing the Household Portrait. These included:

- Dividing up the work in the household: On what basis; who does what; is there outside help (cleaner, childcare, DIY)
- Roles: Are roles interchangeable; what do both partners like or dislike doing; are there things one person has an expertise in doing; in relation to children what are the roles regarding discipline, play, nurturing
- Time: What time do both partners have available and how is it used
- Responsibility: Who takes it; what does it entail; what are individual feelings about it
- Differences in individual standards?
- Variations: Holidays, weekends
- What would they like to change?
- Roles with children: do the children treat their parents differently; do the parents treat the children differently (letting them cry, worrying about them etc.); views on childcare
- Finances: who earns most; joint or separate accounts; how is money spent
- Overall picture

**Tasks included under each category of the Household Portrait:**

HOUSEWORK	CHILDCARE	FINANCES	HOUSEHOLD SERVICE WORK	HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITY	MISC.
Vacuuming	Sorting/buying child's clothes	Paying bills		Overall budgeting	Feeding pets
Dusting	Organising childcare arrangements	Checking bank balances	Writing letters (personal and/or official)	Planning meals	Car maintenance
Washing kitchen floor	Carry out childcare arrangements	Handling insurance	Phoning family	Planning holidays	DIY
Cleaning bathroom	Supervision and discipline of child		Phoning friends	Deciding what needs doing around the house	Gardening
Cleaning toilet	Helping child dress		Contact with parents of child's friends	Organising repairs	
Laundry: Clothes laundry Bed linens/towels	Bathtime		Sending cards	Buying major household items	
Ironing	Putting child to bed		Buying presents		
Meal preparation	Clearing up toys etc.				
Food shopping	Playing				
Washing dishes	Reading				
Putting dishes away	Caring for sick child				
Wiping down counters	Taking child to doctor/health visitor				
Emptying bins	Visiting relatives with child				
Cleaning windows	Arranging babysitters				
Watering plants	Planning activities				

**Appendix 8: Questions/guidelines for mapping out social networks**

**SOCIAL NETWORKS**

- Who is important/significant to your family?

For example:

FAMILY (OF ORIGIN)	FRIENDS (OTHERS)
FRIENDS (AS FAMILY?)	NEIGHBOURS

Or other links such as:

WORK	HEALTH CARE PEOPLE
COMMUNITY LINKS	CHILDCARE/SCHOOL

- **What are the links in terms of regular day to day contact/ irregular contact?**
- Have you formed any new links since having your child (e.g. pre-school networks; parents of child's friends, links at school etc.)?
- Who are the most supportive people around you? In what ways are they supportive (practical help, emotional support etc.)?
- Are there relationships you've had to work at in order to maintain?
- Are there any people you'd like to be in your life who are not (e.g. family members who 'disapprove' or links with other families like your own)?

## **Appendix 9: Interview schedule**

### **Research Questions:**

---

**1. What are the day to day practices involved in mothering, in the home?**

- a. *Who does what and how are current arrangements negotiated?*
- b. *Is mothering viewed as a shared project? If so, what strategies are employed to facilitate this? What factors enable and/or constrain shared mothering? If mothering is not shared is that a conscious decision? What are the factors involved?*

### **Interview Questions:**

---

#### **Joint interview:**

- Mapping out of Household Portrait
- Who does what/how current arrangements are negotiated
- What factors influence division of labour? (Time availability etc)
- Feelings about current arrangements
- Any aspects they would like to change

(See separate pages on Household Portrait)

#### **Separate interviews (with both mothers)**

What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of your family arrangements?

What does being a mother mean to you/what are your feelings about being a mother? How has your life changed since having a child? (In terms of employment, division of labour in the home etc.)

What does your child usually call you and how did this come about?

Was having a child a joint decision?

Have you considered or taken any formal or legal measures related to your family arrangements? (Wills, parental responsibility, agreements with donor)

2. How significant is the fact of the biological or social relationship with the child?
  - a. *Are the different issues that arise within the family unit and in interactions with the outside worked?*
  - b. *Are there differences in how both women perceive the significance of the biological and social relationships?*

### **Joint interview questions:**

Part of the discussion in mapping out social networks: remain alert to issues arising here to follow up in separate interviews.

### **Separate interview questions:**

Could you talk about your feelings/thoughts around the physical connection of pregnancy/labour (and breastfeeding, if this was chosen)? Do you think this connection makes any significant difference - to how you feel and to your relationship with your child? If so, in what ways is this difference felt or perceived? Have you needed to work out ways to balance or equalise your mothering roles (stemming from the physical connection one of you has with your child)? If so, what sorts of strategies have you adopted? Did one of you want a child more? What factors were involved in deciding who would go through the pregnancy? Would you have another child? What factors might be involved in this decision? Are there issues about how others respond to your connection to your child, as the 'birth' mother or as the 'social' mother?

**3. What is involved in gaining public recognition, support and validation for the parenting relationship and the family?**

- a. *Who is important as part of the family's social networks and why?*
- b. *How are the social relationships recognised? What work does this involve?*
- c. *Has the family encountered homophobic attitudes?*
- d. *What legal or formal strategies are considered/adopted in order to gain recognition of the family?*

**Joint interview questions:**

- Mapping out and discussion of social networks
- Who is important?
- Is there anyone 'missing' i.e. anyone you have cut off contact with or who has cut off contact with you linked to your sexuality and your family?

**Separate interview questions:**

Relationships with kin and friends:

Who knows in your family; what are your experiences of rejection/ acceptance; what reactions have you experienced about having a child. What names does your child use for other kin? What are the relationships between your parents, siblings and your child like? How close are the relationships your family has with your family of origin? Who else do you consider as family? Who else is important in your child's life and to you as a family?

Dealing with other people (Neighbours; schools; nurseries; health professionals)

Have you experienced problems getting people to accept your family situation? What issues have arisen? How have you dealt with them? Who does this work? Where have you found support? Have you worked at getting support? What has been your experience of any legal procedures you have used? In what settings are you out as a 'family'? What decisions have you made about what you reveal and to who and how?



**4. What issues arise around donor involvement?**

- a. *What factors played a role in finding and deciding upon a donor?*
- b. *What is the donor's role/involvement in the family?*

**Joint interview questions:**

- Discussion as part of the social network mapping exercise

**Separate interview questions:**

Views on donor insemination: Did you feel strongly about using a known/anonymous donor? Why?  
Finding a donor: How did you go about finding your donor (or using a clinic)? Was this done jointly by both of you or did one of you take on the main responsibility?  
What was involved in the negotiation of the donor's role/potential involvement?  
Current relationships (if any) with the donor: Do you have different relationships with him individually, as a couple and as a family? How would you describe these?  
Have the relationships and arrangements changed over time? How and why?

Final questions to all respondents:

1. *Can you tell me why you were interested in taking part in this study?*
2. *Is there any feedback you'd like to give on the experience of taking part/of being interviewed?*

## **Appendix 10: Statement of confidentiality and consent**

I will do my utmost to ensure that your participation in the study is confidential. If I have any doubts about particular details given which may identify you or your family, I will discuss these with you and change them as necessary.

After doing all the interviews, the resulting information gathered will form a central part of my PhD, which is a public document. This may include quoting from your interview. I may also want to use the material in writing and publishing articles. In order to keep all participants' identities anonymous; I will use pseudonyms for you, and all other family members. Your false name will be used on the tape and the interview transcripts, and your contact details will be kept separately and locked away. I may need to discuss material with my supervisors (technically my examiners can also ask to see the data). In these circumstances, I would also use your false name to avoid identification. I will be interviewing families from different areas and I will not make any links between the place you live in and information from your interviews.

I am aware that I am asking you for information about your personal and private life. During the interviews please feel free to ask me to stop the tape (if you have agreed to the interview being taped) or to stop the interview if you feel in any way uncomfortable. I will contact you for feedback on the interviews and you can withdraw or change anything you have said to me at any time (My contact details are given below so you can also contact me at any time). You can also withdraw your agreement to be interviewed at any time.

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