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Through the lens of hetero-normative assumptions: re-thinking attitudes towards gay parenting

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In this study we explored the attitudes and beliefs of nine heterosexual adults towards gay male and female couples parenting children. We conceptualised participants’ perceptions as one primary lens through which gay parenting is viewed. Based on the narratives provided, this lens comprised hetero-normative, homophobic or heterosexist assumptions and coloured the way in which participants perceived aspects of the concept of gay couples parenting children. At times, participants attempted to adjust their primary lens and adopt different views that initially suggested ambivalence and sometimes contradictory positions. Despite the range of attitudes and assumptions about same-sex parenting, consensus over the potential negative developmental impact on children raised by same-sex parents remained evident. Evidence suggests that same-sex parenting is already a reality in Westernised nations and has little or no bearing on the sexual orientation of children. However, concern that children be brought up with every opportunity to ‘become’ heterosexual, whether they are the product of same-sex or opposite-sex parents, remains evident.

Keywords: gay parenting; homophobia; Australia, hetero-normativity

Introduction

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2010) currently defines a family as ‘Two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household’. Despite the fact that same-sex couples are still not permitted to legally marry in Australia (Australian Marriage Equality [AME] 2009), recent amendments to Australian federal laws have granted these couples de facto status (Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department 2009; ABS 2010).

Gilding (1999) points out that the typical family structure has undergone significant changes over the preceding four decades. While the hetero-normative family, comprising a heterosexual couple with children, remains the most prevalent and easily recognisable type of family form, other ways of doing family have emerged and pose a challenge to traditional and legal meanings of family (Bernardes 1997). For example, the contemporary Western family configuration may include any combination of grandparents as the legal guardians of children, step, blended, single parent, de facto heterosexual and same-sex families, comprising couples with or without children (McCann and Delmonte 2005).

Hargaden and Llewellin (1996) suggest that parenting may well reflect a core human desire not exclusive to heterosexual couples but, rather, one that many gay men and
women also consider at some point in their lives. One’s motivation to become a mother or a father may occur regardless of one’s sexual orientation. In fact, research on the prevalence of same-sex headed family configurations in Western societies suggests that up to 10% of gay men and approximately 20% of gay women are already parents (Millbank 2003). However, in the majority of these cases, the parenting has occurred within the context of a heterosexual union. The reasons for this are often that the gay partner had perhaps felt the need to remain closeted about his or her sexual orientation or, alternatively, discovered it later on, as an adult (McCann and Delmonte 2005).

Hetero-normativity refers to the uncritical assumption that heterosexuality is the established mode of sexual orientation and that social and legal structures should therefore be designed and maintained to support it (Perlesz et al. 2006). Heterosexism is defined as a taken-for-granted assumption that heterosexuality is the dominant and therefore superior lifestyle or sexual orientation (Dreyer 2007), while homophobia refers to a negative feeling, anxiety or disgust towards individuals who identify as same-sex attracted (Herek 1984, Perlesz et al. 2006).

Historically, homophobia and heterosexism have acted as social structures to curtail what is actually possible for gay people to achieve (Baker 2002). It is therefore reasonable to assume that gay parenting could be considered in light of this. For example, up until 1972 in Australia, homosexuality was still considered a crime in the state of South Australia and was only decriminalised in Tasmania in 1997 (Hawkes and Scott 2005). The American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from its list of psychological disorders in 1973 (American Psychological Association 1987). Prior to this, it was not uncommon for gay people to be subject to involuntary confinement in mental asylums and treated as mentally ill, merely for not being sexually attracted to members of the opposite sex.

As a result of a change in social attitudes and the removal of discriminatory laws, gay couples seek a variety of methods to becoming parents including surrogate, fostering, adoption, donor insemination and in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) (McCann and Delmonte 2005). Nevertheless, the issue of gay couples wanting to parent remains controversial at both legal and attitudinal levels, which complicates the task of parenting for these couples (Baker 2002). As previously mentioned, gay couples are currently denied the right to legally marry in Australia (AME 2009) and commercialised adoption seems to favour heterosexuals and then individual gay men and women, but then excludes the latter when they are a couple (Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby 2009). Gay female couples also face hurdles when attempting to access IVF treatments and there is currently no legal framework or agency through which gay male couples can legally resort to commercial surrogacy in Australia (GayDadsAustralia 1993).

Until recently, Australian federal laws did not recognise the same-sex partner of the biological parent as the co-parent, which meant that the male donor or female surrogate was awarded the title of co-parent and had more legal rights to the child than the same-sex, non-biological partner (Wise 2007). However, The Australian Government recently made overall amendments to federal laws including The Family Law Amendment Act 2008 and the Same Sex Relationships Act 2008 (Australian Government Child Support Agency [CSA] 2009a, 2009b) in order to remove many points of discrimination with regards to same-sex couples. These changes took effect from July 2009. Importantly and most relevant to the topic of gay parenting, the definition of parent(s) has been legally modified and now includes both the birth mother and her spouse or de facto (same or opposite-sex) partner, regardless of whether they are biologically related to the child “where the child is born to a woman as the result of an assisted conception procedure while that woman was...
married to (a person of the opposite sex), or was a de facto partner of another person (whether of the same or opposite sex), and the other person consented to the procedure’ or a person who legally adopts a child (CSA 2009a, 2009b).

Despite the ongoing difficulties that same-sex parents face with regards to non-altruistic adoption in Australia, the recent changes to legislation allow these couples to be recognised as parents of a child when they have managed to adopt that child. Currently, this is limited to ‘where one parent is the biological parent and the other parent adopts the child, or where both parents adopt the child together in Australia or overseas’ (CSA 2009a, 2009b). The legislation is limited in that only the states of Western Australia and The Australian Capital Territory permit same-sex couples to adopt children and these adoptions are usually where the same-sex parents already know the child or have planned to become the legal parents.

Although these changes in legislation have largely improved legal access to parenting for same-sex couples overall, this is not necessarily the case for gay male couples who wish to become legal parents. For example, a sperm donor is no longer considered to be a parent of any child conceived through an artificial insemination procedure, even though he is biologically the child’s father (Lander & Rogers Lawyers 2010). A gay male couple would therefore have to legally adopt a child from the female surrogate in order to be recognised as the legal parents of that child. Gay male couples who do not (or cannot) formalise their parental rights in this way will therefore not have the legal right to make any decisions in relation to their child and instead the law will favour the biological mother and her partner (if that is the case) who will remain the child’s legal parents (Lander & Rogers Lawyers 2010).

Herek (1984), among others, asserts that despite the plasticity of human, and indeed all primate, sexual behaviour, the concept of sexual orientation is socio-culturally constructed. Attitudes towards gay people, including the concept of gay parenting can therefore be understood in light of an individual’s particular cultural or societal reference points. While social attitudes towards homosexuality have gradually improved in Westernised nations since the advent of the 1970s gay rights movement, this increased tolerance has not necessarily extended to the issue of gay parenting (Ellis, Kitzinger, and Wilkinson 2002).

For example Ellis et al. (2002) surveyed 226 undergraduate psychology students in the UK and found an asymmetry between their attitudes towards gay men and women as a group and their human rights and freedoms, including their rights to parent. Specifically, over 93% of those surveyed did not believe that one’s sexual orientation should determine access to human rights and yet less than half of all respondents were in favour of allowing gay couples adoption rights. Given the quantitative nature of the study, no further information was given as to respondents’ justifications for holding such seemingly incompatible views.

In related research, Crawford et al. (1999) presented 388 practising American psychologists, with a mean age of 50 years, a series of vignettes involving different couples who were seeking to adopt a five-year-old child. The vignettes were identical except that the couples were presented as gay, lesbian or heterosexual and the gender of the child was either male or female. No statistically significant group differences were noted across the couples’ perceived finances, emotional stability, their ability to teach moral values or parenting quality. Results revealed statistically significant group differences across the areas of perceived levels of social support, emotional neglect and physical and sexual abuse of the child. Specifically it was in these areas that respondents believed that a child would be better off with the heterosexual couples. Although respondents’ justifications for holding these beliefs were not explored in Crawford et al.’s research, it is possible that they reflect widely held societal views about the perceived negative impact on children when raised in same-sex families.
Herek’s (1987) explanatory model of the functions of homophobia facilitates an understanding of the correlates of negatively held attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality. The model suggests that homophobic attitudes can be broken down into four distinct categories or functions: experiential-schematic, based on knowing someone who is gay; social-expressive, based on the attitudes presumably held by one’s peers, peer group or social entourage; defensive, which is related to attempts to allay personal anxieties that arise in response to thinking about homosexuals; and value-expressive, which are contingent on one’s moral beliefs. For example, family configurations founded exclusively by gay women tend to face objections from moral, religious and social conservatives on the grounds that a child’s development is compromised when the father or male figure is missing (Millbank 2003) and this is in keeping with Herek’s value-expressive function.

Research justifying such claims often downplays the detrimental effects of poverty, which is more likely to occur in families headed by single female mothers without recourse to financial support (Millbank 2003). Yet, between 50 and 70% of gay female couples create their families via donor insemination with a known gay male friend and this person often has some degree of ongoing responsibility and presence in the child’s life (Millbank 2003). Moreover, a growing body of research suggests that being raised by same-sex parents does not, in and of itself, negatively impact children (Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy 1981; Patterson 1992; Golombok and Tasker 1996; Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy 2002). Rather, it is homophobia that likely poses a greater risk to the safety of children and adolescents (Baker 2002; McDermott, Roen, and Scourfield 2008).

Different psychological theories attempt to explain aspects of children’s development. For example, Bandura’s (1977) classical social learning theory explains children’s gender role behaviour with reference to modelling and reinforcement (Pervin, Cervone, and John 2005). When a child exhibits gender appropriate behaviour, he or she is praised and encouraged, thereby reinforcing it. Alternatively, the theory supports the view that a child models the gender roles of the same-sex parent. However, contemporary social learning theorists claim that modelling goes beyond the walls of the immediate family environment and includes a consideration of all gender role behaviour in the wider social world (Pervin, Cervone, and John 2005). Children are therefore active in their attempts to learn more about gender and gender role behaviour from a variety of sources (Mooney-Somers and Golombok 2000). Similarly, cognitive developmental theory (Martin 1991) proposes that it is the gender stereotypes that are on offer in the child’s social world that become the richest source of appropriate gender role information. This emphasises the importance of the wider socio-cultural context and taken-for-granted assumptions about appropriate gender behaviours, while simultaneously downplaying the significance of parents on a child’s gender role behaviours.

In an attempt to assess the impact of same-sex and heterosexual parenting on children, Allen and Burrell (1996) conducted a meta-analysis of quantitative studies published between 1971 and 1996, which included comparisons of children of both heterosexual and homosexual parents on various measures of child development including sexual orientation, gender role behaviour, satisfaction with life and cognitive ability. The studies also included teacher, parent and child self-reports. All of the studies under review included enough data to calculate effect sizes, which were then averaged across the studies for comparison. The results of the meta-analysis indicated little if any difference between both parent groups on all the variables under measure and the same was true for parent, teacher and child self-reports.
Given that gay couples continue to find ways to achieve parenthood, despite the many legal and social obstacles that they face, it is feasible that the numbers of children being raised by same-sex parents or a combination of opposite-sex and same-sex parents will become more prevalent. Parallel to this, strongly held beliefs about the ideal family configuration are often at odds with, and indeed appear to challenge hetero-normative assumptions about, the best and safest family environments for children (Baker 2002; Millbank 2003). Although quantitative studies continue to demonstrate little measured negative effects on children’s psychosocial development when raised in same-sex households (Kirkpatrick et al. 1981; Golombok and Tasker 1996; Anderssen et al. 2002), attitudes towards gay parenting are generally negative.

For example, Clarke’s (2001) analysis of data from both media representations of same-sex parenting and the attitudes of groups of university students revealed reoccurring arguments and assumptions against gay parenting that were justified on the basis of either religious rhetoric (i.e. unnatural or against the bible) or not in the best interests of the child including (a lack of appropriate opposite sex role models, an increased likelihood of ‘becoming’ gay and a greater chance of being bullied by other children).

Nevertheless, there is a dearth of contemporary qualitative research into the beliefs that individuals hold towards gay couples (either male or female) parenting children that has exposed the underlying core prejudice that perpetuates these views. Indeed, most of the prior research into this phenomenon has been quantitative and therefore cannot procure the personal reasons that a group of individuals hold, either in favour of or against gay parenting. In light of the paucity of qualitative research that specifically explores individuals’ attitudes, their justifications for holding them and then exposes the underlying thread that ties these together, the aim of this study is to better understand adults’ attitudes towards gay parenting. Where relevant, reference will be made to Herek’s (1987) model in order to highlight which particular function can best explain a participant’s attitude or perception.

Methods
Approval was sought and gained through the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study. Eight participants from metropolitan Melbourne, Australia gave their informed consent to participate in the study. The age range of the participants was 25 to 53 years.

The interview format was open-ended around the topic of gay parenting to encourage participants to freely express and elaborate on any part of their attitudes towards gay (male and female) couples parenting children. The interviews were informal and conversational in nature and the researcher used follow-up questions to further probe participants’ answers as they naturally arose from the dialogue. Participants were encouraged to describe their views and also their justifications for holding them. Each interview was taped using a micro cassette recorder.

A purposive sample was chosen for this study. Participants identified as heterosexual and were either parents or had intentions of becoming parents sometime in the future. A further inclusion criterion was that participants could comprehend and speak English. No information was gathered at the outset of the interviews regarding participants’ particular moral convictions, religious beliefs or fundamental attitudes towards homosexuality and/or same-sex parenting. The majority of participants were Australian born of Anglo-Saxon decent and female. One male and two females were of European extraction and the sample had a mean age of 36 years. Participants were interviewed at a place of convenience and the
interviews ranged in length from 25 to 45 minutes. Following each interview, field notes and observations were written to record the researchers’ initial impressions. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim in preparation for coding and thematic analysis and identifying information was modified to ensure confidentiality.

The analytical approach used in this research draws on the emotionalist model (Gubrium and Holstein 1997) of qualitative research, which stresses the importance of a conversational style of interview format to encourage participants to freely express their subjective opinions about an issue. Emotionalism is founded on the belief that interviewees’ will best express their feelings and emotions to interviewers when the interview feels like a conversation. Such a context is likely to encourage interviewees to freely express their perceptions of the world. In adhering to an emotionalist model, the researcher may also actively encourage the consideration of alternative viewpoints by posing questions which invite the respondent to reflect on previously given answers and therefore draw out contradictions embedded in the narrative as it unfolds. The assumption underpinning the emotionalist model is that multiple perspectives or feelings on the same topic from the same person are not only invited, but expected (Gubrium and Holstein 1997).

The interviews were founded on the emotionalist model and hence did not follow a pre-scheduled or structured interview formats, which may hinder respondents’ spontaneous attempts to contradict or elaborate on previously held points of view or highly charged emotional issues (Silverman 2005). It is via the interview itself that both the interviewee and interviewer gain a deeper understanding of his or her perspective and the validity of the perspective is therefore considered to be authentic and captured (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). The emotionalist perspective favours the open-ended interview format to encourage respondents to express their innermost and genuine feelings. This style also suits interviews around potentially emotive topics such as the one to which this research refers.

A thematic analytical approach was also adopted, which involves clearly identified levels of analysing qualitative data (transcribing, reviewing, matching, coding and eliciting major themes and subthemes) (Silverman 2005). The transcripts were first read several times to get a general feel of the data. The text was then re-read in order to code particular strings of text that appeared to share a common meaning. From this, the major identifiable themes and emotive patterns were outlined, including any contradictions embedded in respondents’ perceptions. Once identified, the researcher re-analysed and sorted those sections of conversation that best corresponded to that particular overarching theme. The identified patterns were then expanded and related patterns of conversation were combined into subthemes.

Three other coders were employed to ensure consensus of the coding process and the subsequent organisation of major themes and subthemes. The themes were then related to the prior literature and this process also allowed inferences to be made about participants’ perceptions. Quotations have been integrated into the discussion where the principal researcher intends to allow the reader a direct glimpse into the participants’ authentic insights, which is in keeping with the goal of the emotionalist model. It is anticipated that structuring the interpretation in this manner will assist the reader to comprehend the motivation, understanding and processes of the interview, including the motives and theoretical paradigms of the researcher.

Interpretation and discussion

In analysing the data for this study, we have conceptualised the perceptions (including views, justifications, feelings, insights and beliefs) that participants held towards gay
couples parenting children as one overriding lens through which they all viewed the issue of gay parenting. The metaphor of the lens was chosen because it best describes the way in which participants tended to see gay parenting from a fixed position, while intermittently attempting to adjust it in order to portray or view their perceptions from different angles. However, in interpreting participants’ views, we have found that despite occasional intentions to justify positions (adjust lenses) there remains a core and somewhat prejudiced primary lens. In these interviews, the primary lens consisted of hetero-normative assumptions related to heterosexist, homophobic and other hetero-centric belief systems that influenced or coloured participants’ perceptions of gay parenting and, perhaps more importantly, of homosexuality as a valid and natural sexual orientation. This acted as an invisible and, at times, intentional lens through which all of the participants perceived some aspect of the topic of gay parenting and, occasionally, even of gay people themselves. The primary lens appeared to be central to the beliefs and attitudes in these interviews because it is rooted in taken-for-granted assumptions about the natural order of things, given that the majority of children are usually the product of heterosexual unions.

The impact that same-sex parenting would apparently have on the child was a function of the primary lens. In other words, if a participant saw gay parenting through a particularly homophobic or heterosexist lens, then his or her perceptions would resonate with hetero-normative assumptions about the best interests of the child. However, ambivalence sometimes acted as either a zoom or widening lens reflecting those moments in the interviews that participants allowed either a temporary shift in perspective or tried to extend the argument in another direction. In these cases, participants’ attempted to adjust their primary lens by justifying and qualifying their positions. However, careful interpretation of these participants’ perceptions in these moments has revealed that they are all constrained in some way by the core assumptions of the primary lens.

**Looking through the lens – I believe what I want to see**

When viewed through the primary lens, the topic of gay parenting appeared somewhat controversial. This lens, by its very nature, was invariably linked to taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways parenting and family have always been done – within the context of a heterosexual union. However, embedded in this primary lens were a multitude of socially constructed assumptions and attitudes about parental roles, gay people as a homogeneous group and their ability to parent, ideas about the impact on children raised within the context of same-sex relationships and, perhaps more importantly, a preferred heterosexual orientation for children.

When initially asked about gay parenting, 53-year-old Dominique, of Greek descent, gave a categorical response that made it clear that the perceptions held were predominantly coloured by a traditional and heterosexist belief system, which seemingly had previously never been questioned:

I’m totally against it! … I just don’t think it’s normal. The child should have a male and a female as a parent. Who has the right to deny a child of having a mum and a dad? If they wanted a child then like, don’t become a lesbian!

Dominique’s primary lens consisted of tightly held assumptions about both normality and choice, which were also associated with religious convictions. This was exemplified in the following response:

If they want their pleasure then they’ve got no right to have the pleasure of a child because having a child is a unique thing … that’s why God made a woman and a man, so they can have a child.
Embedded in this response were a number of taken-for-granted assumptions: homosexuality is not normal compared to heterosexuality and therefore is somehow wrong; one has control over one’s sexual orientation; gay couples should not be accorded parenting rights because this deprives the child of a heterosexual parenting experience. These views are also compatible with both Herek’s (1987) value-expressive and defensive functions. They likely express a value system founded on a particular version of religious morality but also serve to allay any personal distress that arises in response to thoughts about gay people.

The notion that the child of gay parents would miss out on the opportunity to experience a heterosexual and therefore a presumably ‘normal’ family unit was also expressed by 25-year-old Chris, of Australian Italian origin, who attempted to disentangle personal aspects of prejudice from the primary lens of heterosexist assumptions:

I suppose I don’t have any personal issues with the concept, but I do feel that children, especially at that age where they’re vulnerable, might feel they are missing out on a nuclear family. Basically it’s how I’ve been brought up, for me it’s ideal [the nuclear family model] … my personal opinion is that it is ok [gay parenting] but I’m worried about my children … being gay.

Chris became aware of the primary lens and how it was shaping perceptions about gay parenting and even the aetiology of sexual orientation, when admitting that many of these ideas about family stemmed from childhood and peer groups, which were later described as ‘mostly homophobic’. It is clear that embedded in this discourse is a personal fear about bearing gay offspring, which seems to have become entangled in the topic of gay parenting. On the one hand, there appears to be a tolerance of same-sex parenting but this only conceals a fundamental anxiety that this may in some way lead to more gay children. The argument being that this is a less than desirable outcome by virtue of either being raised in a heterosexual or homosexual family unit.

Herek’s (1987) social-expressive function explains how an individual’s attitudes are modelled on those of his or her social entourage. If one is raised in an overtly homophobic environment, or frequents those espousing homophobic views, then it is feasible to assume that homophobic attitudes will be taken up. For example, as the interview progressed, Chris attempted to justify why gay couples should not have access to the means to create families by implying that they (gay people) send the wrong messages to society and therefore solidify (and deserve) homophobia:

It is from their own doing okay, that in general they are more careless with their sexual lives, more experimental, more silly … in a way irresponsible … so you wonder what the children will be subjected to … their parenting attitudes will be different to those of a nuclear [heterosexual] family.

For Chris, the lens of ambivalence quickly gave way to the primary lens in order to accept taken-for-granted heterosexist and homophobic assumptions by suggesting that it was gay couples who should be held responsible for their own lack of legal access to parenting methods and not a homophobic or heterosexist society.

However, even in the absence of views that did not endorse overt hetero-sexism or homophobia, the implication was sometimes that gay parenting was only acceptable to a point and with particular cautions about the child’s best interests. As Kerry, a 26-year-old Australian of Anglo-Saxon decent, put it:

Personally I don’t have a problem with anyone having children … in the context of a gay relationship that’s fine, as long as the child really is the centre of that union, and that it’s not being brought into the union for any other purpose other than they [the couple], really want to love a child.
Clarifying a gay couple’s rationale for wanting to parent was also embedded in this participant’s primary lens. It became clear that despite Kerry’s acceptance of gay parenting on one level, the implication was that gay parenting may be rather self-serving: ‘… As long as they’re doing it for the right reasons and not just for a trophy child or something’ … ‘It depends on whether they’re thinking about their needs or the kid’s needs’. At this point, it seemed that Kerry was suggesting that heterosexual couples systematically have the child’s interests at heart and that homosexual couples would somehow have to prove this to be believed. Yet, an attempt was made to later adjust the primary lens as references were made to outside forces and prejudices, which were justified in the context of actually strengthening the gay family unit and therefore creating a tighter knit one, founded on commonality: ‘… there’s probably going to be a lot more pressure on the [gay] family, so it might make them a closer unit as well’. Although Kerry appears to have adjusted the primary lens, the reframing has actually exposed an acceptance of societal homophobia and then defined this as assisting gay families to unite against an outside and invisible force. In doing so, she has also distanced herself from being a part of this externalised threat by highlighting the potential positive outcome it could have on the gay family.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the notion that being raised by same-sex parents necessarily negatively impacts on a child’s development is one that most of these participants articulated. One of these assumptions concerned the lack of opposite gender role models and contact with opposite gendered adults, potentially leading to the child’s gender role confusion (McCann and Delmont 2005). These same concerns were reflected by Jaylin, a 40-year-old Australian of Anglo-Saxon decent, whose initial perceptions seen from behind the primary lens were later shifted to ambivalence at the realisation of the irrationality of those beliefs:

… and they’d be confused as they grew up about what roles to take on … which is absolutely, you know … I think it’s stupid because they would be even more mature …

When asked if she believed that a boy would not know how to behave as a boy if he were raised by a gay female couple, Jaylin initially agreed and responded: ‘Yeah, but it sounds so stupid because it is usually one parent who does most of the mothering anyway’. Later on she attempted to justify her position and adjust her primary lens by stating: ‘I think there are so many other opportunities or other role models – not just within the home …’. On the surface it appears that Jaylin was not espousing homophobic or heterosexist views and has in fact modified her position. Nevertheless, there remains embedded in her primary lens a subtle yet obvious prejudice – that the child raised by a same-sex family would (hopefully) be exposed to other role models lest he or she become confused or overwhelmed by the influence of his or her same-sex parents’ gender and therefore ‘become’ gay or at least, run the risk of not being heterosexual.

For Alexis, a 28-year-old Australian of Anglo-Saxon decent, the issue was not about modelling gender roles, but about having a parent of the same-sex with whom the child could confide during developmental milestones such as puberty: ‘maybe for a girl growing up and going through puberty, if she had two fathers, she might need someone to talk to, to help her …’. Later in the interview, Alexis extended the argument to include the potential for problems in the future relationships of the child, thereby highlighting her primary concern and heterosexist assumption: ‘… even you know, for a girl with both her parents who were women, it would be good for her to have a male figure so she knows what men are like … knows how to relate to men’. Alexis’ primary lens contains a number of heterosexist assumptions that actually reveal a subtle level of homophobic prejudice.
First, that children raised by heterosexual couples, rather than same-sex couples are more likely to know how to socialise with and relate to someone of the opposite gender. Second, this is highly desirable because it could simultaneously foster heterosexuality – the taken-for-granted and presumably preferred sexual orientation for all, while attenuating the potential for homosexuality.

Research continues to suggest that children who are raised in same-sex households are provided with opportunities to interact with other family members including grandparents, other relatives and male and female friends of the same-sex parents (Patterson 1992; Millbank 2003). Moreover, children are no more likely to be gay when raised in same-sex households (Golombok and Tasker 1996) or to be confused about gender role behaviours than those children raised by heterosexual couples (Kirkpatrick et al. 1981; Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy 2002). However, the question of whether the children of same-sex families may be subject to homophobia when their parents’ sexual orientation is apparent is an assumption that may actually be reflected in these children’s experiences (Millbank 2003; Perlesz et al. 2006; Goldberg 2007).

Almost all the participants in this study implied that children of same-sex parents would be ostracised, bullied or otherwise not fit in when raised by two parents of the same-sex. As 37-year-old Taylor, an Australian of Anglo-Saxon decent, astutely stated: ‘Children can be quite cruel … they pick up on things that are different between themselves and other kids …’. Homophobic bullying is a serious concern for young lesbians and gay men (Smith 1998; Thurlow 2001) and this social reality is often used as a justification for not legally allowing gay couples to parent. The argument, albeit silent being that if these children are going to be subject to homophobic bullying as a result of their parents’ sexual orientation, then the parents should refrain from parenting altogether.

In Perlesz et al.’s (2006) interviews of same-sex families, the researchers discovered that despite the perceived quality and commitment of their parents’ relationships, traditional and hetero-normative assumptions about family influenced the ways in which these children presented their parents and their parents’ partners to the external world. This included not talking about their parents’ sexual orientation or downplaying and re-defining their relationships in terms of ‘just close friends’. In fact, for the majority of children interviewed, there was a conscious attempt to conceal their parents’ relationships for fear of not fitting in at school or, worse, being stigmatised and bullied. Yet, for some of the adult children of same-sex parents in Goldberg’s (2007) study, the combination of growing up in a gay family and also being ostracised because of their parents’ sexual orientation had also led to more tolerant, accepting and open-minded attitudes towards gay people and indeed difference in general. For most of these adults, their experience of growing up in loving same-sex families had forced them to reconsider negative societal perceptions of gay parenting that continue to make up the primary lens of homophobic and heterosexist assumptions. Conversely, Bos and Van Balen (2008) found that children in family units headed by lesbian couples did not report experiencing prejudice at levels that caused them any particular problems. In fact, stigmatization was generally perceived as being quite low. The authors found that a protective influencing factor on psychological adjustment was the social interaction that these children experienced with other children in similar family structures.

Summary and conclusions
The original aims of this study were to explore a purposive sample of heterosexual adults’ perceptions and beliefs about gay or lesbian couples parenting children. Despite the
existence of qualitative and quantitative studies on the subject, there is a lack of up-to-date empirical research that specifically explores the attitudes and beliefs that adults hold towards this issue and whether these are held together by a particular core assumption. Although the intentions of this research were not to make generalisations about the attitudes of all heterosexual adults towards the issue of same-sex parenting, the interviews gave these participants a unique opportunity to voice their views on a topic that continues to attract controversy and ambivalence and yet is still relatively unexplored, despite the existence of same-sex parents.

Participants’ interviews gave rise to a series of assumptions that were conceptualised in terms of a primary lens through which they all saw the issue of gay parenting in varying degrees of prejudice. Participants’ beliefs were therefore contingent on the extent to which their primary lens was founded on homophobic or hetero-normative assumptions. Although these primary lenses expressed varying degrees of hetero-normative assumptions, the majority of participants expressed a concern for the potential impact on the wellbeing of children raised in same-sex families. Even when individuals did not express hostile or overtly homophobic or heterosexist beliefs, there remained the belief that children would somehow miss out on valuable developmental learning and, specifically, how to behave in gender appropriate ways. The assumption being that a child growing up in a same-sex household would not be subject to the same degree of gender role modelling and therefore be confused about how to behave in accordance with socially prescribed (heterosexist) gender roles, or relations with opposite gendered persons.

Nevertheless, prior research suggests that children do not in fact grow up to display gender role confusion by virtue of being raised in same-sex families (Golombok et al. 2003), nor do they grow up to be gay in ratios that exceed those children raised by heterosexuals (Allen and Burrell 1996; Golombok and Tasker 1996). This is also in keeping with the view espoused by contemporary social learning theorists who emphasise the role of the wider social world on children’s behaviour, including gender roles (Martin 1991).

The impact of the social world on children of same-sex parents was also reflected in participants’ concerns. Children might be exposed to homophobic bullying and teasing as a result of their parent’s sexual orientation. Unlike some of the other assumptions articulated, homophobic bullying is a widely documented reality for many children, including those raised by same-sex parents (Baker 2002). Many children who are same-sex attracted and live with heterosexual parents or heterosexual and raised by same-sex parents continue to be subject to discrimination and prejudice (Baker 2002). Parallel to this, objections to gay parenting are often premised on the notion that same-sex parenting is unfair to children in light of homophobic attitudes (Cramer 1986; Wise 2007).

The overarching assumptions and justifications expressed in the current study have been reflected elsewhere (e.g. Clarke 2001) and seem to indicate that little has changed in nearly a decade on this subject. However, through analysing the data metaphorically, we have discovered that contained in these primary lenses about gay parenting was an underlying and sometimes unspoken homophobic prejudice. Namely, that it is preferable to have a heterosexually oriented child and that in light of this, same-sex parents should do whatever they can to foster this child’s heterosexual development – as this is presumably less problematic for those who espouse this view, for society and also for the child. In other words despite this study’s objectives to procure a group of adult participants’ views about same-sex parenting, the data has revealed that concealed by a concern for the child who grows up in a same-sex family is an unspoken desire for the promulgation of heterosexuality at any cost. Accepting the reality of same-sex parenting apparently equals
an acceptance of homosexuality because these notions are inextricably and yet erroneously entwined.

It remains uncertain from interviews the reasons participants hold for preferring heterosexuality to homosexuality, especially when it pertains to children, regardless of whether they are raised by same-sex or opposite-sex parents. In other words, if same-sex parenting is already a social reality and that the children of these families are not same-sex attracted in ratios that exceed those raised by heterosexual couples, then this leaves homophobia as the main influence on participants’ attitudes towards same-sex parenting. We therefore suggest that it is the continued acceptance of hetero-normative and homophobic assumptions that pose a greater risk to children’s wellbeing than being raised by, or born into, same-sex families.

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References


Résumé
Cette étude avait pour objectif d’explorer les attitudes et les croyances de neuf adultes hétérosexuels concernant des couples gays masculins ou féminins élévant des enfants. Nous avons conceptualisé les perceptions de ces participants comme une lentille primaire à travers laquelle la parentalité gay était observée. À partir des récits exprimés, cette lentille a pris en compte les hypothèses hétéro-normatives, homophobes ou hétéro-sexistes et a caractérisé la manière selon laquelle les participants percevaient le concept, dans son ensemble, de parentalité chez les couples gays. Il est arrivé que des participants tentent d’ajuster leur lentille primaire et d’adopter des points de vue différents, ce qui a eu pour effet initial de suggérer une ambivalence et quelquefois des positions contradictoires. Malgré
la diversité des attitudes et des hypothèses concernant la parentalité des couples de même sexe, un consensus sur l’impact potentiellement négatif sur le développement des enfants élevés par ces parents reste évident. Des recherches suggèrent que la parentalité de même sexe est déjà une réalité dans les pays occidentaux et a peu ou n’a aucun rapport avec l’orientation sexuelle des enfants. Cependant, le souci que les enfants soient élevés avec toutes les chances de «devenir» hétérosexuels, qu’ils soient la progéniture de parents de même sexe ou de sexes opposés, demeure évident.

Resumen
En este estudio analizamos qué actitudes y creencias tienen nueve adultos heterosexuales hacia las parejas de homosexuales y lesbianas que crían a niños. Conceptualizamos las percepciones de los participantes como un prisma por el que se ve a los padres homosexuales. Basándonos en los relatos proporcionados, este prisma contenía suposiciones heteronormativas, homofóbicas y heterosexistas y daba color al modo en que los participantes percibían los aspectos del concepto de parejas homosexuales que crían niños. A veces, los participantes intentaban ajustar su prisma y adoptar diferentes perspectivas que, al principio, indicaron ambivalencia y, a veces, posiciones contradictorias. Pese a la gama de actitudes y suposiciones sobre padres del mismo sexo, fue palpable el consenso sobre el posible impacto de desarrollo negativo en los niños criados por padres del mismo sexo. Las evidencias indican que los padres del mismo sexo son ya una realidad en países occidentales y que tiene poco o nada que ver con la orientación sexual de los niños. Sin embargo, es evidente que preocupa que los niños sean criados con todas las oportunidades para que sean heterosexuales, ya sean de padres del mismo sexo o de sexo opuesto.