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**'We're not living on planet lesbian':
Constructions of male role models in debates about lesbian families
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'We don't live on planet lesbian':

The construction of male role models in debates about lesbian families

Abstract

The notion that children (especially boys) need male role models has been used in the past to attack lesbian parents in custody cases and more recently in debates about donor insemination, adoption and fostering. We are interested in how lesbian parents and their supporters respond to arguments about the necessity of male role models. We analyse data from popular television talk shows and television documentaries using a discursive approach and identify common strategies used by lesbian parents to deal with the argument that their children are 'missing out' because of a deficit in their family structure. We then consider the responses of opponents of lesbian parenting to these strategies. What these responses reveal is that lesbian parents and their opponents construct and work with very different definitions of male role models. We show that the contributions both of opponents of lesbian parenting and of lesbian parents themselves to media debates attend to and sustain traditional understandings of gender and sexual development.

Key words: Lesbian parents, male role models, discourse analysis, talk shows

'We don't live on planet lesbian':

Constructions of male role models in debates about lesbian families

The necessity of male role models?

Since the early 1970s, when a significant number of women began to leave their marriages, 'come out' as lesbian, and fight for custody of their children, a key line of attack on lesbian families has been to highlight their lack of male role models. The premise of arguments about the necessity of male role models seems to be that children are 'missing out' - and are therefore at risk of experiencing 'confusion' about their gender and sexuality, and, at worst, may themselves become lesbian or gay. The courts, wrote Lewis in 1979, 'cling adamantly to the notion that... the lack of a male role model in the family will somehow a priori be harmful to the child' (p. 115). In one custody case, the court welfare officer suggested that two boys would grow up to be transvestites in their twenties in the absence of a father figure (Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group [ROWLCG], 1986: 132). In a 1990 case heard by the Louisiana Court of Appeals, it was decided that the child of a lesbian parent should spend more time with their heterosexual father because 'the child is of an age where gender identity is being formed' (Lundin v Lundin, 1990: 1277, quoted in Patterson and Redding, 1996: 38). In other cases, concern was expressed about lesbians' supposed "'anti-men" feelings' (W v W, 1976, quoted in ROWLCG, 1986: 111), and lesbian mothers were routinely put on trial for their politics and their feminism (Millbank, 1992).

Courtroom strategy prioritised countering these fears: in one custody case, the mother's psychiatrist established that her son had contact with heterosexual and male relatives with whom he could identify (Anonymous, 1976, cited in ROWLCG, 1986). In another case in the early 1990s (C v C, 1992: 217), the mother's psychiatrist confirmed that her daughter 'would have access to her

father and to other men' (p. 217).

Since the period of the late 1970s to the early 1990s – when most of these cases took place – there have been considerable shifts in the political climate for lesbian families in the UK. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 allows same-sex couples to adopt jointly and fostering guidelines make clear that sexuality is not a bar to fostering (Stonewall, 2003). A Government Bill offering recognition to same-sex couples in the form of Civil Partnership is currently under discussion in the House of Lords. The Bill recognises lesbian and gay families in a number of ways including children's right to contact with and financial support from co-parents when a partnership is dissolved. These changes can be seen as rather progressive given that many of the countries that legally recognise same-sex partnerships in some way place restrictions on parenting rights and responsibilities. Despite these positive changes, however, it would seem that the same concerns continue to be raised in debates about lesbian families, including those about the lack of male role models in lesbian families (Clarke, 2002a, Clarke, 2001, Donovan, 2000). This is in line with the general legal/policy context and the increasing importance placed on biological fathers (Smart and Neale, 1998).

In this paper we are interested in how lesbian parents (and their supporters) respond to these arguments (and in turn how *their* arguments are responded to)ⁱ. There is a growing literature analysing the arguments pro-lesbian/gay groups use to counter anti-lesbian/gay claims and the alternative constructions of lesbianism and male homosexuality they offer. Research has explored particular lesbian/gay rights controversies such as: Section 28 (e.g., Smith, 1994); the age of consent for sex between men (Ellis and Kitinger, 2002); marriage and parenting (Walters, 2000); and civil rights legislation (Brummett, 1981). Work has also sought to map out the general terrain of pro-lesbian/gay

discourse (Smith and Windes, 2000), and explore particular themes such as the aetiology of lesbianism and male homosexuality (Currah, 1995), and the compatibility of lesbianism and male homosexuality with christianity (Hill and Cheadle, 1996).

Critical assessments of the pitfalls and possibilities of pro-lesbian/gay discourse typically highlight the weaknesses of liberal and essentialist claims, and offer radical feminism and constructionism as theoretically and politically superior alternatives (e.g., Cooper and Herman, 1995, Kitzinger, 1988, Smith, 1994, Stacey, 1991). Walters (2000) argues that it is difficult to hear more radical voices in debates about lesbian and gay issues because liberals dominate discussion by directly addressing conservative themes. In this paper, we contribute to this literature by assessing both the limitations *and* the potential of pro-lesbian parenting discourse on male role models.

The analysis of pro-lesbian/gay discourse is politically and theoretically necessary (Smith and Windes, 2000, Stacey, 1991). In the interests of developing effective political strategies, we must critically analyse the content and effects of our contributions to debates about lesbian and gay issues. We should assess the limitations of our political strategies, and ask what compromises (if any) we are willing to make in order to achieve our goals. As lesbian feminists, we are interested in how we get seduced into making defensive liberal arguments, and the ideological effects and costs, *and* benefits, of these. Further, if we do not critically examine our discourse, there is the danger that we may come to wholeheartedly believe it, and invest too much passion and energy in a particular theory or argument, rather than in the achievement of social change. Finally, it is important to analyse our own rhetoric because lesbians and gay men are not, and never have been, a unified group with one collective agenda for social change.

The Data

Our analysis is based on an ad hoc collection of 27 television talk showsⁱⁱ (e.g., *Kilroy, Trisha, Ricki Lake, Leeza*) and 11 television documentaries about lesbian and gay families (see Clarke, 2002a for further details). The data were collected between April 1997 and August 2001. We collected the data (with the help of friends and colleagues) in a number of different ways. We made video and audio recordings of 28 talk shows and documentaries broadcast on British and New Zealand television; obtained videos/transcripts from the producers of two talk shows; purchased transcripts of three talk shows from a US company; purchased a video of a documentary in the US; and the transcript of a documentary was published in Alpert (1988). Sixteen of the talks and eight of the documentaries were produced in the UK, 11 of the talk shows and two of the documentaries were produced in the US, and 1 of the documentaries was produced in New Zealand.

In total we have video/audio recordings of 30 talk shows and documentaries, and transcripts of eight talk shows. The 30 video/audio recorded talk shows and documentaries constitute 16 hours and 45 minutes of data. It is important to note that the talk shows in particular are very much an adversarial context and that what lesbian parents say about male role models elsewhere (to their co-parents, to other lesbians) might be different.

The data were transcribed using the notation system developed by conversation analysts (Atkinson & Heritage, 1994). We analyse the data within a constructionist framework, synthesising different approaches to discourse analysis, including discursive psychology (Potter, 1996) and more overtly political feminist and critical approaches (see Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995). Our aim is to explore both the rhetorical design and function of arguments about

male role models and the broader ideological implications of these arguments.

Two strategies for responding to arguments about the necessity of male role models

We identify two key ways in which lesbian parents (and their supporters) respond to arguments about the necessity of male role models. These are: (i) highlighting the presence of men in the (extended) family; and (ii) emphasising that 'we're not living on planet lesbian' (and highlighting the presence of men in the world). We present two examples of each strategy, including an example that consists both of a lesbian parent's or a supporter's response to claims about male role models and of a reply from someone who supports the view that children need male role models. We include the reply in order to facilitate an exploration of the rhetorical and ideological pitfalls and possibilities of each strategy. If a question or an anti-lesbian claim about male role models immediately precedes the pro-lesbian counter, we include it to illustrate precisely the types of claims and questions that lesbian parents and their supporters participating in talk shows and in documentaries are confronted with. In fragments where there is no immediately preceding question or comment, the speaker typically voices the argument with which they are engaging (e.g., 'we're not living on planet lesbian', Brenda, lesbian parent, *Pink Parents*, 1998).

(i) Highlighting the existence of men in the (extended) family

The first strategy consists of lesbian parents and their supporters listing all the men in the (extended) family with whom children have contact. In so doing, these speakers highlight compensations for the alleged deficit in structure of lesbian families. The first example is from a documentary about Rachel and Ellen, a lesbian couple raising children together, and the second from a talk show about lesbian and gay adoption and fostering.

Example 1.1: John Henshaw, father of a lesbian parent, *Headliners* (1998)

1 John: Males in the family=She's got her uncle, great
2 uncle, her grandparents.
3 (0.8)
4 John: A lot of (.) Rachel and Ellen's friends (0.2) are
5 male. When we go round there's al:ways (0.2) quite a few
6 people round there.
7 (0.2)
8 Not just girls.
9 (0.4)
10 She'll make her own mind up when she gets older=I don't
11 think having (.) lesbian parents it'll make any
12 difference to how she .hhh turns out

Example 1.2: Angela Mason, lesbian parent, *Living Issues* (1998)

1 Joⁱⁱⁱ: I just wanted to ask you .hhh as far as your
2 daughter's er- are concerned (.) are there any ma:le (.)
3 role models in her life.
4 (.)
5 Jo: That she has contact with >obviously yo[u know]<
6 Angela: [Oh-]
7 Jo: the two parents are- are females [but-]
8 Angela: [Oh yes=]I mean (.)
9 there's lo(h)ts o(h)f- huh hu There (was) her
10 grandfather, there are her uncles, there all
11 her nephews, she has lots of nephews-
12 Jo: And is that [something you consciously try to do?]
13 Angela: [and we have- we have-] we have
14 male friends as- as well. .hh I think if you're going to
13 have a child (.) you have to be living in the real >world<.
14 The real world (.) has men and women of cou[rse]
17 Ingrid: [W-] but what
18 she's not seeing is the interaction in a >you know between a
19 man and a woman< which is very important for chi[ldren]
20 Angela: [mm hm]
21 Ingrid: children grow up in a family .hh and they see hh you know

22 gestures [of love and affection (the difference) between
 23 you and your partner]
 24 Angela: [Well she sees she sees the interaction of between]
 25 [er two two]
 26 Ingrid: [Sure]
 27 Angela: adults.= [And I th]ink
 28 Ingrid: [Sure]
 29 Angela: that is s- that from that she can learn all sorts of things
 30 about love support affection she can learn them
 31 [e:qually well]
 32 Ingrid: [Yes she-]
 33 Angela: from oursel- from us as she [can]
 34 Ingrid: [She can]
 35 Angela: from a man and a woman
 (11 lines omitted)
 36 Lynette: ...I mean (.) I would look no further than the fact she can't
 37 say 'my dad'.

Both of these lists cite grandfathers, uncles and male friends, which suggests that these categories are presented as legitimate examples of male role models. The use of a list structure serves to emphasise generality (Jefferson, 1990, Potter, 1996): in this instance, it serves to emphasise the large number of male role models with whom children have contact. Thus, the list format helps John and Angela to build and strengthen their argument, as does their use of extreme case formulations like 'a lot' (example 1.1, line 4) and 'lots' (example 1.2, lines 9, 11). The notion of extreme case formulations was developed by Anita Pomerantz (1986) to describe occasions when speakers select an extreme point on the relative descriptive dimension. She argued that this selection tends to occur when claims are being bolstered against disagreement. John also emphasises the extent of children's contact with men, again through the use of extreme case formulations: 'there's *a/ways* quite a few people round there' (example 1.2, lines 5-6). In so doing, John is perhaps attending to the concern voiced in example 2.2 (see below) that male role models are just 'casual

droppers in' who are not committed to the family.

Both John and Angela treat male relatives as insufficient when they add male friends to their list of male role models after completing the (initial) list: male relatives are by themselves not sufficient to demonstrate appropriate levels of concern about, and compensation for, the lack of a father, perhaps because family members 'just are'. Friends by contrast are chosen, so listing male friends indicates some degree of volition on the part of lesbian parents in seeking out male role models for their children. The pitfall of listing male friends, however, is that there appears to be an implicit acknowledgment of a deficit in the structure of lesbian families: there is a need to *go beyond* the immediate family for male role models.

This lesbian parent and father of a lesbian parent are orienting to the fear that lesbian parents live on 'planet lesbian' (see example 2.1 below), and deprive their children of contact with men, because they 'hate men' (Counsellor Frank Cooke, 'Children Need Fathers', *Central Weekend Live*, 1997). This is particularly apparent in John's comment that there are 'not just girls' (example 1.2, line 8) at his daughter's house, in that he voices precisely this anxiety. We can almost see John trying to work out what the issue is (first he produces a list of male relatives, then adds male friends, he describes the continued presence of men in Rachel's and Ellen's house, 'not just girls', and suggests that their daughter will not be pressured into being a lesbian).

To sum up, in this strategy, the emphasis is on quantity: large numbers of uncles, nephews, grandfathers and male friends are presented as adequate recompense for the alleged 'missing' parental role. In producing lists of compensatory male role models, however, lesbian parents and their supporters concede that male role models are a necessity. In the very act of demonstrating

that anti-lesbian fears about fatherless lesbian families are groundless, they reinforce the legitimacy of these fears.

Example 1.2 shows some of the limitations of this strategy. The host of the talk show *Living Issues*, Jo Sheldon, indicates that the structure of Angela's family is problematic. Her question on lines 1-3 – specifically, her use of the words 'are' and 'any' (line 2) (and the emphasis on 'are') – treats as plausible the possibility that Angela's daughter might not have male role models in her life. Further, the comment that 'the two parents are- are female' (line 7) explicitly concedes that the family lacks a male parent. Angela's use of an 'oh-prefaced response' (Heritage, 1998) displays surprise that the question was even asked, as does her laughter on line 9; the answer should be self-evident. However, Angela does not simply confirm that there are male role models in her daughter's life, but provides a list of examples^{iv}.

Jo's follow-up question ('And is that something you consciously try to do?', line 12) is rather interesting. The question is designed to draw attention to Angela's responsibility for actively seeking out compensatory male role models (Angela said nothing about providing her daughter with role models simply that she has them), and to compel Angela to acknowledge a deficit in her family structure. At the same time (in overlap with Jo), Angela attends to the fact that family members 'just are', when she adds male friends to her list of male role models ('and... we have male friends as- as well, lines 13-14).

Ingrid's response to Angela's claims highlights the limitations of this strategy. Ingrid does not challenge Angela's assertion about living in the real world that has men and women, nor her list of all the male role models with whom her daughter has contact. This is conveyed by the word 'but' (line 17) which constructs a contrast between what Angela has just said and what she is about

to say. What she does take issue with is the notion that male role models are adequate compensation for the lack of a father ('what she's not seeing is the interaction between a man and a woman', lines 17-19). In turn, Angela uses gender neutral language to describe her and her partner ('two adults', lines 25, 27; see Michelle in example 2.2 below) and cites emotions and aspects of human relationships which are arguably unrelated to sexuality ('love support and affection', line 30)^v. So, whereas Angela disconnects parental sexuality and healthy child development, Ingrid's implicit suggestion is that children learn to be heterosexual and appropriately gendered by 'seeing... interaction... between a man and a woman' (lines 18-19). However, for Lynette two parents are not enough if they are both of the same sex (see also the Audience Member in example 2.2 below). Her (bottom line) claim that Angela's daughter 'can't say my dad' (lines 36-37) dismisses uncles and male friends as compelling substitutes for fathers.

(ii) Emphasising that 'we're not living on planet lesbian' (and highlighting the presence of men in the world)

Second, lesbian parents on talk shows and television documentaries respond to arguments about the necessity of male role models by emphasising that their children are not isolated in all-female (or all-lesbian) environments, and by parodying assumptions about their 'attitudes' toward, and lack of relationships with, men. The first example is from a documentary about lesbian and gay parents – Brenda's and Buzz's daughter Molly was conceived by donor insemination at a clinic (they chose an unknown donor). The second is from a talk show about lesbian and gay parenting, the speakers are the host, Robert Kilroy Silk, a lesbian parent, her daughter Michelle, and an audience member.

Example 2.1: Brenda, lesbian parent, *Pink Parents* (1998)

1 Brenda: The thing is Molly has men in her life. We've always (.)
2 gone out of our way to involve men (.) like her

3 grandfather, her uncles:, friends:.

4 ((cut to Brenda and Molly shopping for clothes for Molly))

5 They're just in white are they

6 Shop Ass.: Yeah (basically-)

7 Brenda: And because we're not living on planet les:bian

8 ((lisped)) (.) that means Molly meets (.) boys,

3 ((cut to Brenda and Molly watching a man walk down the

4 street from a window in their house))

5 Brenda: and men, 'n' (.) .hhh she sees (.) men in cars,

6 Buzz: huh [huh huh] ((breathily))

7 Brenda: ['n' men] on the street,

8 Buzz: [huh .hhh ((sniff))]

9 Brenda: [and the postman delivers the post, 'nd there's (0.2)

10 boy children at the child minders an', (0.2)

11 ((cut to the family at home; Molly is eating))

12 Brenda: her- her life is just (0.2) as full of men as any

15 other child's is (.) except that there doesn't happen to

16 be one living at home with her.

15 (0.2)

16 Buzz?: She doesn't

17 Brenda: She has two parents living at home with her (.) and they

18 are both women.

Example 2.2: Lesbian parent and her daughter Michelle, Kilroy (1997)

1 Kilroy: Well Michelle. Does it.

2 (.)

3 Kilroy: <D'you think she's a good mum.=Are they good pa:rents.

4 Mich.: Yea:h.

5 Kilroy: What would your wh- wol- y- what's the answer to my

6 friend then? You are missing out. Because you haven't

7 got a ro- a ma- a- a fa:ther [as- as a role]

8 LP: [>She has men in her life<]

9 Kilroy: model

10 (0.2)

11 Mich.: [How am I missing out?]

12 LP: [We do not have a] si:gn on the door that says men

13 can't come in. (.) I have men in my house. (0.2) My
 14 brother `ere.
 15 (.)
 16 LP: You know I- (0.4)
 17 AM: Th- (.) There is a vital contribution that- that da:d
 18 ma:kes in a st- in a family relationship (.) that
 19 [nothing else can repla:ce.]
 20 Mich.: [YEAH BUT YOU CAN HAVE SOMEONE] else in your family to
 21 do THAT.
 22 AM: No- no because he is not in the same way committed
 23 to- to the female mother as- as any uh sort of
 24 causal (.) droppers in

These lesbian parents do not address arguments about children's need for a mother *and* a father; rather they deal with the issue of male role models. Brenda and the lesbian parent on *Kilroy* produce an extreme and, thus, ironic version of an anti-lesbian complaint about lesbian families: they live on planet lesbian or have a sign on their door that says men can't come in. Their use of irony serves to parody and mock these complaints and to suggest that they are without foundation. This strategy is designed to address the fear that children in lesbian families are deprived of developmentally crucial contact with men. In addressing this fear, these lesbian parents display their interpretation of what drives anti-lesbian claims about the necessity of male role models.

Brenda starts by listing all the men in their wider family/support network with whom Molly has contact. Note that she presents 'her grandfather, her uncles, friends' (lines 2-3) as examples by saying 'involve men *like*' (line 2). In so doing, she suggests that there are many more men in Molly's life. By emphasising through extreme case formulations ('always' and 'out of our way', lines 1-2) the effort she and Buzz have made to find male role models for Molly, Brenda displays her concern to appear a good parent.

Brenda then shifts gear slightly to emphasising the absurdity and the impossibility of her family living on 'planet lesbian' (line 1), by pointing to the men with whom her daughter Molly unavoidably and inevitably has day-to-day contact. By using a list format and laughably^{vi} mundane categories of men in the world ('men in cars' [line 5], 'men on the street' [line 7], 'the postman' [line 9]), Brenda builds a strong case that Molly does not live on planet lesbian (see also Angela Mason's assertion in example 1.2 above that 'the real world has men and women of course'). By highlighting the inevitable presence of men in the world, Brenda deflects attention away from the alleged deficit in her family structure and absolves her and Buzz of any additional responsibility to provide Molly with male role models.

The upshot of Brenda's argument is that the relationships Molly has with men are no different from other children's relationships with men with, what she constructs as, one (small) exception: 'there doesn't happen to be one living at home with her' (lines 13-14). Brenda's use of the word 'happen' (line 13) suggests that the absence of a man in their home is a chance thing, a fluke, and not something deliberately engineered, which is arguably the case: after all, she and Buzz *chose* to have an unknown donor. This serves to minimise the importance of the absence of a man in their home. Because living with a man is rather different from having a parental relationship with a man, the phrase 'living at home with her' (line 14) contributes to this minimising account. Brenda indicates that there is only one area of Molly's life in which she does not have contact with a man. The implication is that she has contact with men in all other areas of her life, and this is adequate contact. In short, Brenda indicates that the composition of Molly's family 'just is', rather than being a calculated attempt on her mothers' part to exclude men from her life. Note also that Brenda constructs the issue for Molly as not having a *man* at home, rather than as not having a father, possibly because she can easily identify compensation for the lack of man

in their home, but not so easily compensation for the lack of a father.

In example 2.2, a lesbian parent responds to a question directed to her daughter that she is 'missing out' (line 6) because she does not have 'a father as a role model' (lines 7, 9). The fact that she responds to a question directed to her daughter and does so in overlap with Robert Kilroy Silk, the host of *Kilroy*, shows that she is eager to engage with the issue. Her answer evades the issue of fathers as role models, however. Instead, she parodies assumptions about lesbians' attitude towards men, and asserts simply that her daughter 'has men in her life' (line 8). She points to her brother sitting near her as proof of this claim. The rhetorical limitation of her argument in this context (that is, her failure to address the issue that *really* concerns opponents of lesbian parenting) is exposed by the audience member's response. He firmly rejects the notion that any man will suffice as a male role model ('there is a vital contribution that dad makes... that *nothing* else can replace', lines 17-19), this is conveyed by the words 'vital' and, the bottom line/extreme case formulated, 'nothing'. His use of 'dad' (line 17) serves to strengthen the contrast between a father and an uncle.

Michelle's response is far less defensive: she challenges the premise of Kilroy's question. Michelle does not treat the notion that she is 'missing out' as self-evident, but asks Kilroy to explain what he means. On lines 20-21 she uses non-gendered language to argue that fathers are replaceable, the 'vital contribution' that the audience member refers to could be made by someone who is not a father and, indeed, by someone who is not a man (perhaps her mother's lover).

The audience member genders Michelle's argument that 'you can have someone else in your family to do that' (lines 20-21) on line 22 ('he is not...'). He rejects the argument that any man will do and constructs a further contrast between 'dad', who is committed to the mother, and 'casual droppers in' (line 24), which

neatly encapsulates the rhetorical deficiencies of claims about the presence of men in the extended family and in the world. Whereas Michelle argues that fathers *are* replaceable, the audience member argues that fathers are a necessity. His use of productively vague notions like dad's 'vital contribution' (line 17), and dad's 'commit[ment]' (line 22) to his wife and child, suggests that the importance of fathers is not something that requires a detailed explanation, it is simply taken-for-granted.

Although 'emphasising that "we're not living on planet lesbian"' cleverly mocks prejudicial assumptions about lesbian families, it does not address the core concern of opponents of lesbian parenting: that children need, or have a right to, a mother *and* a father. It is also rather defensive: Brenda and the lesbian parent on *Kilroy* implicitly accept that a lack of male role models is a deficit, and they illustrate how their children will be compensated by the inevitable presence of men in the world. Moreover, they do *not* reject men as suitable role models (cf Goodman, 1980). They also do not suggest that it is beneficial for children to live in a lesbian community (that is, on planet lesbian), or in a separatist environment (with signs indicating that men are not welcome). This strategy indirectly silences radical and separatist lesbian voices by constructing them as extreme and unreasonable. These lesbian parents implicitly position themselves as 'good gays' (Millbank, 1992, Smith, 1994), and in so doing reinforce the 'good gay/bad gay' distinction and the marginality and illegitimacy of the politics of 'bad gays'.

Discussion: Constructions of male role models

The lesbian parents and supporters in these data are willing to concede that lesbian families need male role models. They defend lesbian families by emphasising that they do not live on 'planet lesbian' and by highlighting the presence of men in the world and in their wider family/support network. They

challenge the man hating lesbian stereotype, but not the assumption that male role models are a necessity, as illustrated by their lists of compensatory male role models.

The ways in which the speakers accept and work with the concept of male role models provide evidence for its cultural currency. Lesbian parents and their opponents construct male role models very differently. For opponents of lesbian parenting 'a father as... a role model' (*Kilroy, 1997*) is the norm. By contrast, for lesbian parents (and their supporters) male role models are uncles, grandfathers and male friends, or males 'in the world' like the postman and boys at the child minder's house. Lesbian parents' construction of male role models is similar to the common sense understanding of role models as individuals who we can look up to and learn from because they 'model' positive behaviour and attitudes. By constructing the category 'male role model' in this way, it is easy for lesbians and their supporters to defend lesbian families. In general, *the issue* in debates about male role models is constructed in ways that allow the speaker to defend lesbian families. The focus is mainly on lesbians' attitudes towards men, depicting the view that 'lesbians hate men' as ridiculous and extreme.

Our data do not reveal much about why male role models and fathers are necessary, it would seem that the mere presence of a man is what is important. The obliqueness of discourse on male role models suggests that this category is so well embedded in our cultural common sense, that arguments about the necessity of male role models require little explanation or justification.

Although lesbian parents do challenge anti-lesbian stereotypes, for the most part the strategies employed to defend lesbian families function ideologically to mainstream lesbian families. Politically, these strategies are assimilationist. Loosely defined, assimilation involves 'the structuring of lesbian and gay

resistance around... the oppressor's discourse' (Smith, 1994: 235). Assimilation is achieved by minimising the 'disability' (i.e., lesbianism/male homosexuality) that stands in the way of full participation and is founded on an implicit contract with society: lesbian and gay identity will be disavowed or concealed in return for equal treatment (Adam, 1995). Mainstreaming politics require that we stress our common humanity and keep our sexuality private: thus, it is argued that lesbians and gay men are just the same as heterosexuals except for what we do in bed. Assimilationist politics require disavowal of lesbians' and gay men's (cultural) difference and pride in that difference.

In addition to this ideological cost, the strategies are limited rhetorically. The core concern of opponents of lesbian parenting is the fundamental difference between (say) an uncle and a father. Lesbian parents can only challenge this bottom-line argument by taking issue with its premise: children need a father in order to develop 'normal' gender and sexual identities. In the data analysed here, it is only Michelle, the daughter of a lesbian parent who makes this challenge. Children occupy an interesting (and rhetorically strong) position in these debates – they are often the focus of the debate and of people's concerns and fears about lesbian and gay parenting, thus they speak from a position of significant experiential authority (see Clarke and Kitzinger, in press). Having said all this, it is clear that the lesbian parents (and their supporters) who appear on documentaries and talk shows are compelled to defend their families rather than set the terms of the debate. Under such circumstances, the strategies they employ can be seen as rather creative responses to anti-lesbian concerns.

In this paper, we have emphasised the cross-national similarities between US and UK (and New Zealand) produced talk shows and documentaries. Future work in this area might consider the wider cultural context in which these programmes are produced and how this impacts the rhetorical strategies and styles used in

the shows. For instance, the more religious and politically polarised climate in the US might lead to the adoption of rhetorical styles and strategies that differ markedly from those used in UK talk shows and documentaries.

In conclusion, lesbian parents accept and work with the notion of male role models and orient to normative definitions of who counts as a (good) male role model. Pro-lesbian discourse on male role models consists largely of defensive responses to anti-lesbian claims about the lack of a male role in lesbian families. In discussing the importance of male role models, lesbian parents and their supports and opponents of lesbian parents alike orient to and sustain oppressive understandings of gender and sexual development. Thus, debates about male role models are profoundly conservative and divert attention from the important issue of social change for lesbian families.

ⁱ Elsewhere, we have explored arguments against lesbian and gay parenting (Clarke, 2001), how lesbian and gay parents deal with arguments about homophobic bullying (Clarke et al., in press), and the different arguments that have been made about the pitfalls and possibilities of talk shows for lesbians and gay men (Clarke and Kitzinger, in press).

ⁱⁱ This includes one interview with a lesbian couple on the now defunct breakfast show *The Big Breakfast*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jo Sheldon is the host, Ingrid Miller is a journalist with *The Star* newspaper, and Lynette Burrows is a 'family campaigner'. Angela Mason at the time this show was broadcast was the director of Stonewall – the UK's most prominent lesbian and gay political organisation. Interestingly, she was not asked to speak in this capacity; only as a lesbian parent.

^{iv} On lines 8-9, Angela launches an answer that she does not complete (we can guess that she is going to say something like 'there's lots of male role models in her life...' or 'there's lots of men in her life...').

^v We have dubbed this type of argument 'love makes a family' (see Clarke,

2002b, Clarke and Kitzinger, in press).

^{vi} Brenda's partner Buzz does laugh at these examples (line 8). The ordinariness of these examples further emphasises the absurdity of the notion that Brenda's family lives in isolation from men.