

## **Men Not Included? A Critical Psychology Analysis of Lesbian Families and Male Influence in Child Rearing**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores debates about male presence and influence in lesbian families from a critical psychology standpoint. Critical psychology encompasses a variety of radical approaches to psychological research that reject traditional psychological assumptions, concepts and methods and that seek to challenge and resist normative values. To explore aspects of the discursive terrain of male influence and to demonstrate the merits of a critical psychology of lesbian families, excerpts from an interview with a lesbian couple who are members of a planned ‘two mummies and a daddy’ lesbian/gay family are analysed. These excerpts show that debates about male influence create ‘live’ dilemmas and tensions for the lesbian couple and have important consequences for how lesbian parents negotiate and do family.

**Key words:** Critical psychology, discourse analysis, fathers, lesbian families, lesbian parenting, male influence, male role models, qualitative methods

## **Men Not Included?<sup>i</sup>**

### **A Critical Psychology Analysis of Lesbian Families and Male Influence in Child Rearing**

This paper has a dual focus on debates about the importance of male presence in lesbian families and on the value of critical psychology for research on lesbian parenting and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) psychologies. I write explicitly for an audience unfamiliar with critical psychology and constructionist and discursive approaches to qualitative research. The aim of the paper is to provide an accessible introduction to critical psychology and to build on previous calls for a turn to social constructionism in research on lesbian families (e.g., Benkov, 1995; Laird, 1999). Therefore, I attempt to avoid most of the technical language associated with critical and discursive approaches. In particular, my analysis of an interview with a lesbian couple aims to provide readers with a flavour of a broad discursive approach rather than with an introduction to the fine-grained and technical aspects of discourse analysis (DA). Readers already familiar with these approaches are referred to other critical psychology and social science research on lesbian and gay parenting (e.g., Clarke, 2002a; 2002b; 2005a; 2006a; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004; 2005; Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004; Hicks, 2000; 2003; 2005a; 2005b; Malone & Cleary, 2002; Riggs, 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006).

As I discuss further below, critical psychologists place greater emphasis on the social and political context of research than do traditional psychologists. As such, this paper begins by mapping out the discursive terrain surrounding lesbian families and male influence. This is followed by an exploration of some of the ways in which psychologists have addressed concerns about the damaging effects of the supposed

‘missing’ male presence in lesbian families. Psychological research on lesbian families typically subscribes to the values, concepts and methods that define traditional approaches to psychology. Lesbian feminists and critical psychologists and sociologists have critiqued the findings and implications of this research, as well as the assumptions underlying it. I summarise their critiques and then outline key elements of critical psychologists’ rejection of mainstream psychology and of the alternative approach to research that they have developed. I use data from an interview with a lesbian couple to further explore the issue of male influence in lesbian families and to provide an example of a critical psychology of lesbian parenting.

### **Lesbian Families and Male Influence: History and Wider Context**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, child custody disputes between lesbians and their ex-husbands dragged lesbian parenting into the glare of the media spotlight in the UK and elsewhere (see Clarke, 2006b). Invariably, journalists and the wider public did not like what they saw: The Sunday Express (a national Sunday newspaper), for instance, declared that “no child should suffer this trauma” (quoted in Rights of Women [ROW], 1984, p. 22). Over three decades on, lesbian parenting remains controversial in the UK, despite a number of progressive legal changes. These changes include the passing of the Adoption Act 2002, which allows same-sex couples to adopt jointly, and the Civil Partnership Act 2004, which allows same-sex couples to enter into legally recognised relationships that offer many of the rights and responsibilities of marriage. (Indeed, civil partnership is often dubbed ‘marriage in all but name’; see Clarke, Burgoyne & Burns, 2006.) These changes have once again brought lesbian parenting into the public spotlight. Among the most recent events to prompt public

debate about lesbian parenting has been the announcement by the UK Government of its intention to revise and update the Human Fertilisation and Embryology (HFE) Act 1990, which governs, among other things, the provision of assisted conception services in the UK. One of the proposed revisions is scrapping the so-called welfare principle. This principle requires licensed assisted conception clinics to consider the best interests of any child born as a result of 'treatment', "including the need of that child for a father" (quoted in Cooper & Herman, 1995, p. 163). This principle has been viewed as a compromise between conservative and progressive viewpoints (Cooper & Herman, 1995), in that it allows individual clinics to decide whether or not to treat lesbian couples and single women. As a result access to conception services across the country is currently very uneven, with some clinics refusing to treat lesbian couples and single women.

There have been a number of indications that the inequality in the provision of conception services will be overturned. Mostly recently, the British Fertility Society (BFS) released a statement on 29 August 2006 on the 'social criteria' for National Health Service (NHS) funding for 'fertility treatment', in which they recommended that "single women and same sex couples be treated the same as heterosexual couples" (BFS, 2006). Dr Mark Hamilton, the chair of the BFS, was quoted as saying that: "Continued inequality of access to treatment is unacceptable in a state-funded health service" (BFS, 2006). He was also quoted as referring to psychological research on lesbian families: "there was no evidence that children born to lesbians and single women did any worse than those brought up by heterosexual couples" (BFS, 2006). In many ways the media coverage of the BFS statement could be characterised as positive, within a broadly liberal/pro-gay framework, with many newspapers simply reporting the proposals with little or no accompanying commentary. At the

same time, lesbians' access to conception services was clearly regarded as attention grabbing and a number of the articles presented lesbian parenting as "controversial" (Daily Mail [a national daily newspaper], 31 August 2006, p. 12) and as a matter for public debate:

"the recommendations for lesbians is going to create debate. Undoubtedly there will be people from the side of equal opportunities who will argue it's a way forward and other people with strong ethical views who will see it from the other perspective" (Dr George Rae, a spokesperson for the British Medical Association, quoted in The Evening Chronicle [a regional daily newspaper], 30 August 2006, p. 8).

Moreover, some of the coverage was decidedly negative. George Tyndale in the Sunday Mercury (a regional Sunday newspaper) dubbed the proposals as "unspeakable nonsense", "barmy" and "beyond a sick joke", arguing that "it is clear that naturally occurring reproduction must involve a male and a female" (3 September 2006, p. 18). The author of a letter published in The Times (1 September 2006, p. 18 [a national daily newspaper]) held that "society should not be allocating scarce resources to assist them [single women and lesbians] to conceive free of charge". Treatment should go to those who are "best able to benefit"—i.e., heterosexual couples. The Daily Mail (31 August 2006, p. 12) referred to "concerns expressed by family and ethical campaigners", but left readers to imagine the precise nature of these concerns.

Another recent event to prompt public scrutiny of lesbian parenting was the unsuccessful attempt by a lesbian couple to have their Canadian marriage declared

valid in the UK. The couple argued that treating same-sex couples differently from heterosexual couples is “deeply discriminatory” (see <http://www.equalmarriagerights.org/>). The judge agreed with this argument but declared that discrimination is justified to protect the traditional definition of marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman, with the primary aim of producing and raising children. The judge stated that a majority of people and governments:

“regard marriage as an age-old institution, valued and valuable, respectable and respected, as a means not only of encouraging monogamy but also the procreation of children and their development and nurture in a family unit (or ‘nuclear family’) in which both maternal and paternal influences are available in respect of their nurture and upbringing” (see <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Fam/2006/2022.html>).

The judge reasoned that to accord same-sex relationships the status of marriage would be to ignore convention and “physical reality” (see <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Fam/2006/2022.html>). This statement echoes those made by judges in lesbian custody cases reported in the 1970s and 1980s (see below) and is at odds with the legislative and social changes associated with the Adoption Act and the Civil Partnership Act, and the proposed revisions to the HFE Act, including the removal of the welfare principle.

As is apparent, a recurrent theme in public discussions of lesbian parenting in the last three decades is, as the judge in the same-sex marriage case noted, ‘paternal influences’ in rearing children. Time and again, public attention is drawn to the supposed lack of male influences in lesbian families (Clarke, 2002a; 2006a; Clarke &

Kitzinger, 2005). There has been little shift in the types of arguments deployed about male role models over the last four decades: from the earliest reports of lesbian mother custody cases to the most recent media coverage of planned lesbian parenting. The judge in the case of G v D (1980) believed that “the long term interests of the children would be better served by being brought up in an ordinary household with a father and mother (or mother-substitute) rather than living together in a household which consisted of two women” (quoted in ROW, 1984, p. 14). The children were removed from their mother’s home and placed in the care of their father and his new wife (this decision was reversed on appeal). In a case discussed by Stephens (1982), a report produced by the father’s psychiatrist noted that: “in the absence of a father or father-figure, male identification is not possible unless a substitute father is provided and this, within the setting of a homosexual environment, would not be satisfactory” (p. 94). In this case, the father and his new wife were awarded custody of the child.

Twenty-five years later, The Daily Mail (15 July 2006), in an article about planned lesbian parenting, refers to the “increasing redundancy of fathers” (p. 30). Readers are welcomed to “the world of modern-day, same-sex parenting where fathers don’t even get a walk-on part in their children’s lives” (p. 30). The article centers on a lesbian couple that conceived a son via donor insemination at a clinic. Repeated reference is made to the ‘missing’ father, implicitly positioning the women as selfish for failing to give appropriate consideration to their son’s need for a father, and ultimately for denying him a father. The piece points to the ‘qualities’ that only fathers can provide their sons (“rough and tumble”, p. 30) and the developmental consequences of the absence of paternal influence: “Many child experts believe that it is vital in a boy’s development, once he reaches the age of six, to identify with a strong, male role models to learn how to become a man” (p. 30).

As Hicks (2000) noted, discussions of lesbian parenting usually rest on “a conflation of ‘sex-gender-sexuality’, so that each is assumed to flow naturally from the other” (p. 158) in heterosexuals. In these discussions, sex, gender and sexuality are assumed to be fixed and essential—sexuality involves the expression of innate desires, and gender signals the correct ways of behaving for women and men, which flow from our biologically determined sex. Heterosexuality is the normal expression of the sex drive of appropriately gendered women and men. Lesbian parents are understood as “having a distorted gender and sexual development, or as being likely to affect this development in children” (Hicks, 2000, p. 160). Assertions of the importance of male influence invoke theories of gender role modelling “which suggest that children will only fully ‘acquire gender,’ and indeed (hetero)sexuality, via interactions with, and the ability to model the behaviours of, both male and female adults” (Hicks, 2000, p. 160). Images of lesbians as masculine, man-hating separatists fuel such assertions. Lesbian mothers are thought to be “making a clear statement that there is no role within the home for the father of the child/ren, if he exists” (Chrisp, 2001, p. 203). Arguments about the importance of male influence and the assumptions on which they are built maintain the primacy of heterosexuality (Hicks, 2000).

### ***Lesbian discourse on male influence***

Male presence and influence in the lesbian family has also been a source of controversy within lesbian communities. In the 1970s and early 1980s, at the height of lesbian feminism and prior to the lesbian and gay ‘baby boom’ (Benkov, 1994), there was considerable debate about the position of men and boys in lesbian families and communities. These debates often reflected disillusionment with gay men, and men in general, among lesbian feminists. Throughout the 1970s, lesbian feminism offered



women a vision of the lesbian nation, a woman-centred, separatist utopia, “a sort of haven in a heartless (male/heterosexual) world” (Stein, 1998, p. 553). Some lesbian feminists argued that radical lesbian mothers had to take responsibility for their views on and relationships with men and to not inflict these on other lesbians. According to Copper (1987, pp. 238-239), the lesbian mother should:

“make her own determination as to which males she will allow into her life, as well as the degree of access these males will have to her home and person. However, no woman should assume that the males she trusts can be trusted by any other female, including female children, or that another woman should trust them, because she does. The presence of males in the life of her female child demands that a radical mother not only live by this maxim, but that she does so openly, with the full and early knowledge of her female child”.

Some lesbian mothers wanted their children to grow up in an “all-lesbian atmosphere” (Cruikshank, 1980, p.155). Lesbian feminist separatists encouraged other lesbians to avoid contact with all males, including male children: Alice, Gordon, Debbie and Mary (1988/1973, p. 305) wrote of lesbians “wasting energy on male children” (for further discussion of the literature on lesbians raising sons, see Clarke, 2005b). Other lesbians saw separatism as self-defeatist and based on a misguided analysis of seeing individual men as ‘the enemy’, rather than problematising the power invested in men (Wyland, 1997). Wyland (1997, p. 24), for instance, argued:

“Far from being a source of strength to lesbian mothers, the ‘Separatists’ have urged lesbian women to acquiesce in the loss of our children, saying that a

‘real’ lesbian—a woman who boycotts men all the way—does not have or want male children. With that idea of victory, who needs defeat?”

Abbitt and Bennett (1979, p. 129) wrote of the “caring and warmth” that their gay male friends showed their children: “We like men and so do our children. We feel it’s very important for men to be around for the children to interact with... We feel fortunate that the majority of men our children relate to have a feminist consciousness”. Many lesbian feminists viewed lesbian parenting as a political activity, a way of challenging and resisting the power of fathers and fatherhood, and the gender hierarchy. Copper (1987, p. 223) held that there was radical potential in the lesbian mothering of daughters, a lesbian mother “could be an alchemist of culture, vaporizing woman-hating traditions into the gold of feminist change”. Similarly, some lesbian feminists thought that lesbian mothering of sons was politically necessary:

“the male child has every opportunity to take his place with the oppressor class. Without the influence of strong lesbian, feminist parents, he will surely take the place provided for him by his oppressor cousins... we must raise our sons, or the oppressor will surely steal their souls” (Rowen, 1981, pp. 98-99).

Goodman (1980, p. 165) maintained that lesbian families destroyed the “Divine Rule of the Father” and provided children with an environment free of heterosexual male aggressive demands and behaviors. The lesbian family “provides a positive female nurturing experience based on female psychic force and power” (Goodman, 1980, p. 163). Hornstein (1984) presented donor insemination as a liberating new choice for lesbians that challenged patriarchal definitions of family and dealt a “blow to the

power of fathers” (The Feminist Self Insemination Group, quoted in Klein, 1984, p. 388).

There was little mention of parenting with men in these early discussions of lesbian parenting, other than with regard to ex-husbands. Although the social and political climate of lesbian parenting has shifted considerably, there is no doubt that such reservations about the role of men in the lesbian family linger on for some lesbians (see Clarke, 2006a). At the same time, the AIDS epidemic has had a profound impact on gay and lesbian communities and politics. The epidemic in part prompted the reconnection of lesbian and gay coalitions that existed prior to the collapse of ‘mixed’ gay liberation organisations and the emergence of lesbian feminism. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new coalitional climate developed in which it was possible for lesbian and gay men to work together, to live within the same communities, and to create families together (Green & Bozett, 1991). Thus, it has become increasingly common for lesbians and gay men to find ways to parent together (Golombok, 2002). Many lesbians view gay men as obvious choices as sperm donors or co-parents because they share a common history of oppression and understand the complexities of choosing to parent within a lesbian and gay context (Donovan, 2000; Ryan-Flood, 2005). Gay men are also thought to represent a more positive form of masculinity that counteracts dominant gender norms (Clarke, 2006a; Dunne, 2000). These views echo those expressed by psychologist Dorothy Riddle in a ground-breaking paper published in the Journal of Social Issues in 1978. Riddle argued that lesbians and gay men should be regarded as positive role models for children particularly in relation to role modelling non-traditional sex-role behavior.

The fact that lesbians conceiving through donor insemination have a higher chance of bearing a son than a daughter (Wells, 1997) has perhaps led some women to

re-evaluate their views on men and masculine influences in child rearing. There is evidence that some lesbians are concerned about providing their children with male role models (see below) and some choose a known donor or an involved father because this allows children to normalise their families (Dunne, 2000). There can be no doubt that male presence is a 'live' issue for many lesbian families.

### **Psychological Research on Lesbian Families**

How have psychologists addressed the issue of male influence in their work on lesbian families? The very first psychological studies published in the late 1970s and early 1980s sought to address fears expressed by judges in lesbian mother custody cases (e.g., Green, 1978; Kirkpatrick, 1982; Weeks, Derdeyn & Langmand, 1975). These included anxieties about the supposed missing male presence in lesbian families. Since then, until recently, psychological research has focused on responding to wider concerns about lesbian parenting (Clarke, 2006b). Whereas the earliest studies relied on case study methodology, research published from the early 1980s onwards has typically adopted a quasi-experimental model and compared divorced lesbian mothers and their children with divorced single heterosexual mothers and their children (the 'control group'). In relation to male influence, psychologists have addressed the notion that lesbians hold negative attitudes toward men, that children in lesbian families exist in all-female environments, and that such attitudes and environments lead to disturbances in children's gender and sexual identities.

Psychological research has challenged the assumption that children in lesbian families are "cut off from all contact with men" (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983, p. 561). Researchers have typically taken pains to emphasise the mother's role in instigating and maintaining contact between her child and the child's father or other

male role models. Bryant's (1975) survey of 185 lesbian mothers revealed that most mothers "have male friends in the lives of their children" (quoted in Nungesser, 1980, p. 183) and 80% of the children of these mothers had male role models. Kirkpatrick (1982) reported that the lesbian mothers in her sample "stressed the importance of an ongoing connection for the children with the father" (p. 843). Kirkpatrick and her colleagues "were surprised to find the lesbian mothers more concerned with providing male figures for their children than the heterosexual mothers" (1982, p. 844). In a study widely regarded as one of the most important of its kind, Golombok et al. (1983) assessed children's relationships with their fathers and contact with adult friends of their mothers. They reported that children of lesbian mothers were more likely than children of heterosexual mothers to have contact with their fathers. In addition, in lesbian mother families:

"all of the children... also had contact with their mother's adult friends and in two-thirds of the cases (22/33) these included both men and women... Of the 33 children who had contact with their mother's friends, there were only four for whom the friends were mainly lesbians. In seven cases, the friends were mainly heterosexual but in the majority of instances (22) the friends comprised a mixture of homosexual and heterosexual adults" (pp. 561-562).

Psychologists have also sought to challenge stereotypes of children in lesbian families being raised in households in which "there is a negative attitude towards things masculine" (Golombok et al., 1983, p. 570). Golombok et al. (1983) assessed lesbian mother's attitudes towards men: from "definitely negative" to "sexual feelings" (p. 559). They indicated that only a very few of the lesbians in their study held "definitely

negative” (p. 570) attitudes towards men. Hare and Richards (1993) reported that the women in their study “clearly did not conform to the commonly held belief that most lesbians are separatists” (p. 254).

In research on the children of lesbian mothers, sexual identity is assumed to have three main components: gender identity (whether we think of ourselves as male or female), sex- (or gender-)role behavior (the behaviors and attitudes associated with being male and female), and sexual orientation (our choice of sexual partner) (Patterson, 1992). Children’s gender identity and sexual orientation have been examined primarily using self-report measures. Sex-role behavior has been measured by assessing whether children’s toy and activity preferences are consistent with conventional sex-typed preferences. For instance, whether boys engage in rough-and-tumble play and play with ‘masculine’ toys like trucks and guns. Golombok et al. (1983) reported that the boys in their sample showed sex-role behavior that would commonly be regarded as “characteristically masculine” (p. 362) and the girls showed feminine-type behavior. The children in Green’s (1978) groundbreaking study indicated “childhood toy, game, clothing, and peer group preferences that are typical for their sex” (p. 692), and the sexual fantasies and behaviors of the older children were all “heterosexually oriented” (p. 692). Green reported some clinical vignettes to provide some indication of the context in which the children were developing. In one family “the boy likes to play cowboy and the girl plays with dolls and paints her toenails” (p. 695). In another, “the sister, age 7, loves to play with dolls, does not like sports... She has a boyfriend. Her 5-year-old brother enjoys sports, idolises Batman, plays with airplanes, and ignores dolls” (p. 695). Hoeffler (1981, p. 542) found a “lack of significant differences between children from two groups of single-mother families

on measures of sex-role behavior. Irrespective of mothers' sexual orientation, both boys and girls preferred toys traditionally associated with their gender”.

A summary of the research findings on lesbian and gay parenting published by the American Psychological Society in 2005 (written by a key figure in the field of lesbian and gay parenting research, Charlotte Patterson) noted that:

“The picture of lesbian mother’s children that emerges is one of general engagement in social life with peers, with fathers, with grandparents, and with mother’s adult friends—both male and female, both heterosexual and homosexual. Fears about children of lesbians and gay men being... isolated in single-sex lesbian or gay communities have received no support from existing research” (p. 12).

Furthermore, it was concluded that: “children of lesbian mothers develop patterns of gender-role behavior that are much like those of other children” (p. 9). This research has been used countless times to support lesbian mothers’ petitions for custody and to counter heteronormative assumptions about lesbian parenting. See, for instance, Dr Mark Hamilton’s statement about the research evidence on lesbian parenting to justify the decision to equalise access to conception services quoted above.

Research has continued to rely on quasi-experimental methods and comparison with heterosexual families and to reassure that children in lesbian mother families exhibit similar levels of well-being as those in heterosexual families (see Wainwright, Russell & Patterson, 2004, for a recent example<sup>ii</sup>). However, since the mid-1990s, there has been a growing interest in the ever more publicly visible phenomenon of planned lesbian parenthood and in gender and sexuality ‘neutral’

family dynamics such as the organisation of domestic labour and child-care, and parent-child relationships (e.g., Patterson, 1995; Patterson, Hurt & Mason, 1998; Tasker & Golombok, 1998).

### **Critical Responses to Psychological Research on Lesbian Families**

Psychological research on lesbian families has at times generated as much controversy as lesbian parenting per se. The findings and implications of psychological research have been vigorously debated by conservative opponents of gay rights (e.g., Belcastro, Gramlich, Nicholson, Price & Wilson, 1993; Cameron, 1999; Cameron, Cameron, & Landess, 1996; Morgan, 2002; Wardle, 1997) and by supporters of lesbian parenting (e.g., Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). From the mid-1980s onwards, lesbian feminists began to publish critiques of the psychological literature on lesbian parenting in lesbian parenting anthologies and movement periodicals. Lesbian feminists argued that the literature promoted heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexuality (e.g., Harne, 1984; Pollack, 1987). They were concerned about the implications of the research for lesbian custody cases and for women's rights more generally. These early critiques led the way to academic interrogations of the literature by feminist and critical psychologists and sociologists (e.g., Alldred, 1996; Clarke, 2000; 2002a; 2002b; Hicks, 2003; 2005a; Malone & Cleary, 2002; Riggs, 2005a; 2005b).

In relation to the earliest studies of lesbian mother families, Harne (1984) argued that psychological research takes as its premise that lesbianism is abnormal and can only be defined negatively against the heterosexual family. The research denies that lesbian and feminist influences and that being brought up in an all-female environment might be beneficial for children. Harne and the Rights of Women (1997,



p. 30) identified two central assumptions of the psychological literature: that “it is preferable for children to grow up to be heterosexual rather than lesbian or gay” and that “it is better for children to conform to... gender stereotypes”. According to Pollack (1987, p. 321), “what these studies really examine is whether the children conform to acceptable societal norms”.

In an early academic critique, Alldred (1996, p. 156), a feminist sociologist, noted that psychological research creates dilemmas for feminists in that effective intervention in debates about lesbian parenting requires reinforcement of the notion that “complete, appropriate and normal outcomes require the production of ‘proper’ boys and ‘proper’ girls”. Fitzgerald (1999, p. 60), another feminist sociologist, argued that psychological studies accomplish the:

“promotion of gender hegemony [...] by judging ‘appropriate’ child development in terms of such outcomes as girls wearing dresses and being emotionally supportive, and boys playing with trucks and displaying independent, aggressive behavior”.

However, Fitzgerald’s critique falls short of the requirements of a critical psychology analysis because she suggests more ‘constructive’ measures of child development such as “self-management, adjustment, self-esteem, and how well they are equipped to manoeuvre through life” (1999, p. 61). Although self-esteem may be a less oppressive measure of child development than conformity to traditional gender norms, in advocating its use, Fitzgerald overlooks the regulatory power of psychology. She presumes that it is interesting and necessary to ask questions about the development and psychological health of children in lesbian families. But the

belief that a lesbian mother might have a detrimental effect on her child's development derives from heteronormative assumptions (Richardson, 1978). Psychologists' engagement with the question 'are lesbians fit to parent?' is therefore troubling, not least because it reinforces their role as "the arbiters of what constitutes optimal human existence" (Benkov, 1995, p. 54). The question 'are lesbians 'fit to parent'?' renders 'no, lesbians are *not* fit to parent' a plausible and intelligible answer: if their sons do not play with trucks and their daughters do not wear dresses, or if they lack self-esteem.

More recently, critical analyses of the lesbian parenting literature have begun to move away from interrogating the ways in which it reinforces gender stereotypes and heteronormative assumptions about lesbians. Current work is more heavily influenced by theoretical traditions such as social constructionism, post-structuralism, queer theory and psychoanalysis and is focused both on the psychological literature and on reviews and reinterpretations of it. In many ways this work offers a more thorough-going 'deconstruction' of the literature (and reviews of the literature) than earlier critiques. It is important to note that most of the authors of this work do not claim to assert the truth of the literature; rather, they acknowledge that scientific evidence is always open to multiple interpretations that ultimately relate to moral or political agendas (Clarke, 2000). Hicks (2003; 2005a) does offer his own interpretation of the research, but acknowledges the dilemma of reinforcing the 'evidence game', whereby one set of interpretations is replaced with a corrective set of truths. Recent critiques have dissected the ways in which the literature constructs social 'objects' such as lesbian parenting, difference, gender and sexuality, the ways in which it is invoked in wider debates about lesbian parenting, and the discourses and rhetorical strategies that shape interpretations of the literature.

Hicks (2005a), for instance, explores the ways in which comparative studies promote particular understandings of difference, gender and sexuality. He argues that lesbian parents are constructed as ‘other’ in the psychological literature, and that the difference they are presumed to embody is viewed as an essential characteristic. The difference model relies on conceptions of gender and sexuality as things that are inherent or acquired and measurable rather than, like difference, social constructed and the effects of a range of discursive and social practices. Clarke (2006b) examines the ways in which the psychological literature in the 1980s, in concert with legal discourse, promoted a ‘good lesbian mother/bad lesbian mother’ hierarchy (see also Hicks, 2000, in relation to fostering and adoption assessments). Lesbian mothers who upheld normative values and appeared to be ‘just like’ their heterosexual counterparts were judged to be good, and were more likely to be awarded custody of their children. Mothers who expressed pride in their lesbianism, who were involved in lesbian politics and identified as feminists and who expressed scepticism about normative assumptions about gender and male influence, were judged to be bad, and were more likely to lose custody of their children. Critical researchers have also interrogated the more recent literature on planned lesbian families in which these families are presented as the realisation of the gender-neutral, post-patriarchal, post-modern family. Clarke (2006b) argues that such research simply inverts the terms of the ‘bad lesbian/good heterosexual’ binary rather than deconstructing the binary, and it ultimately retains heteronormative conceptions of family by presenting lesbian families as the most efficiently functioning family units, “the latest adaptation of the two becoming ‘one’” (Malone & Cleary, 2002, p. 277).

A number of these critiques have attempted to weigh up the ideological costs and benefits of this research. Clarke (2002a; 2002b), for instance, argues that research

that provides scientific ‘proof’ that lesbians are fit to parent and that children are not damaged by being reared in a lesbian family has clear strategic advantages. The comparative studies of the 1980s helped to radically change the climate in which lesbians sought custody of their children and other parenting rights. The ideological costs of such studies are, however, great. They draw on and reinforce heteronormative and essentialist conceptions of gender and sexuality, and presumptions about how these develop, through exposure to a heterosexual milieu, or an approximation of such a milieu. These studies also draw on and reinforce heteronormative concepts of family and the hierarchical homosexual/heterosexual binary.

### **What is Critical Psychology?**

These critiques of the psychological literature on lesbian parenting illustrate a key aspect of a critical psychology of lesbian parenting: turning the analytic gaze toward the discourses of (mainstream) psychology and assessing how they regulate and normalise particular forms of subjectivity. Critical psychologists have been concerned both to develop a thorough going critique of the discourses and practices of mainstream psychology and to develop alternative ways of doing psychology (see Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Gough & McFadden, 2001; Hepburn, 2003; Ibáñez & Íñiguez, 1997). Critical psychology is not an approach per se, but a range of radical approaches to psychology that share some key assumptions in common (although there are many discussions and debates within critical psychology). Critical psychology is increasingly popular in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, among other countries, but has yet to gain much ground in the US, even though one of the earliest landmark publications in the field was written by a US academic (Gergen, 1973; see also Russell & Gergen, 2004).

Critical psychology emerged from and is influenced by a variety of theoretical traditions, usually overlooked by mainstream psychology. These influences include feminism, Marxism, postmodernism and social constructionism. Although not all critical psychologists would describe themselves as social constructionists, many of the assumptions of social constructionism form the foundations of critical psychology. The rise of social constructionism represents a turn to language and meaning and a concern for the ways in which people create and negotiate shared realities (Berger & Luckman, 1967). Social constructionism emphasises the role of language in the creation of ‘reality’: language is not a transparent reflection of what goes on inside people’s heads or in the world-out-there, instead language is a form of social action, it has a performative role, constructing our social and psychological worlds.

Gough and McFadden (2001) outline some of the key themes of critical psychology. Critical psychologists view people as always located in social contexts—both at the level of interactions and relationships, and at the level of social norms and practices. Furthermore, these social contexts invariably reflect systems of privilege and oppression. Traditional psychology is argued to artificially remove people from these contexts. Human experience is assumed to be varied and complex, and research that seeks generalisable rules and patterns is thought to smooth out the complexity and contradiction in human experience. Language and representation (discourse) are intertwined with power. (Discourse is central concept in critical psychology, and is defined in many different ways—one common definition is a “set of statements which constructs an object”, Parker, 1992, p. 5.) As Gough and McFadden (2001) note, to “proclaim heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as alien, for example, is not to state the nature of things... but to produce one powerful version of reality within contemporary society” (p. 14). As such, some accounts of reality are more powerful

than are others. Knowledge is viewed as partial and subjective, and it is not thought possible to generate objective and complete knowledge about the world. As such, critical psychologists argue that it is important to acknowledge the personal, contextual and reflexive dimensions of research. For instance, the social location of the researcher is assumed to inescapably shape the research process and the knowledge that is generated through it. This is often viewed as a positive resource rather than simply a problem of 'researcher bias' that can be engineered away through the appropriate application of scientific tools. Critical psychologists reject the notion that psychology is a science: it is never possible to generate objective scientific knowledge about the (psychological) world; psychology is viewed as a set of discourses and practices that produce particular versions of reality, and regulate and normalise particular forms of subjectivity.

Finally, critical psychologists firmly believe that research should challenge oppression and promote social change. As the editors of a key collection (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997, p. 3) outlined, "psychology's traditional practices and norms hinder social justice, to the detriment of individuals and communities in general and of oppressed groups in particular". However, some critical psychologists have argued that there is no necessary relationship between criticality and social change. Kitzinger (1997), for instance, noted that much lesbian and gay psychology does not share the features of critical psychology. However, it could be considered critical psychology because, even though it draws on discourses of liberal individualism and of positivist empiricism, lesbian and gay psychologists have made effective interventions into discussions of lesbian and gay rights and have influenced policy makers and created social change.

***Critical psychology and queer theory: Similarities and differences***

Some readers may be more familiar with queer theory (Butler, 1990; 1993; Warner, 1993) than with critical psychology. As Clarke and Peel (2007) note, until relatively recently psychology has overlooked queer theory (see Hegarty, 1997; Hegarty & Massey, 2007; Minton, 1997; Warner, 2004). Broadly speaking, queer theory is concerned with transforming and resisting heteronormativity; whereas, critical psychology is concerned with transforming and resisting traditional psychology and oppressive social norms, which might include heteronormativity. It is possible to view queer theory and critical psychology as falling under the same broad umbrella of post-structuralist/post-modernist criticality. Indeed, many of the differences between queer theory and critical psychology are differences of degree rather than of kind and perhaps reflect the divergent disciplinary locations of the two projects. Queer theory had its roots in the humanities, whereas critical psychology is firmly founded in the social sciences. Queer theory and critical psychology share many theoretical antecedents and influences in common, including the work of Foucault (1978) and other post-structuralist thinkers (Derrida, 1978), feminism (Smith, 1990), linguistic theory (Austin, 1962), Marxism (Althusser, 1971) and psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1977). However, critical psychology is also strongly influenced by work in the sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckman, 1967) and micro-sociological traditions such as ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1967), and the turn to language within social psychology (Parker, 1992).

Queer theory is a strongly theoretical project that prioritises a cultural and textual conception of the social. By contrast, critical psychology shares traditional psychology's concern for empirically based knowledge and emphasises the textual/discursive, subjective, structural/institutional, and interactional dimensions of

the social (Jackson, 1999). An early example of social constructionist and critical psychological work on homosexuality—The Social Construction of Lesbianism (Kitzinger, 1987)—retained ‘lesbian’ as an analytic category. Although social constructionist work on sexuality presents identity categories as the effect of a range of discursive practices, they are generally retained as a basis for theorising and political action. By contrast, queer theory emphasises the limits of identity-based theorising and politics, and highlights the regulatory force of identity categories (MacBride-Stewart, 2007). Although critical psychology is firmly focused on the role of psychology in regulating subjectivity, including sexual subjectivities, it has yet to engage with queer theory. In my view much could be gained from a dialogue between critical psychologists and queer theorists.

### ***Critical psychology and discourse analysis***

Critical psychology has a strong, but not a necessary, relationship with qualitative, and particularly, discursive research (there are a few examples of quantitative methods being reworked and used ‘critically’ within critical psychology; e.g., Hegarty, 2001). Because of the emphasis on the central role of language in the constitution of social life, most critical psychological research involves some form of discursive or textual analysis. These forms of analysis share a concern for the meanings that people negotiate in social interaction and the ways in which everyday talk is shaped by cultural discourses (Gough & McFadden, 2001). There are many different versions of DA in circulation, including discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), interpretative repertoire analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), critical (or post-structuralist or ‘Foucauldian’) DA (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984; Parker, 1992), and thematic DA (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Most of



these, and many other, discursive approaches involve the detailed analysis of texts—ranging from traditional social science texts such as interview transcripts to newspaper articles, policy documents, counselling sessions, and television shows—and an exploration of the performative dimensions of language. The emphasis is on the functionality of discursive forms within particular contexts. Discursive studies do not aim to generate decontextualised, generalisable patterns of meaning; rather the emphasis is on situated meaning and action. As such, discursive studies typically involve small ‘samples’ of data: often a small number of interviews (e.g., Praat & Tuffin, 1996), of focus groups (e.g., Clarke, 2005; Ellis, 2001), of television programmes (e.g., Clarke et al., 2004; Speer & Potter, 2000), of ‘naturalistic’ data such as training sessions (e.g., Peel, 2001), or of newspaper articles and policy documents (e.g., Ellis & Kitzinger, 2002).

From a discursive perspective, research on lesbian parenting is typically premised on a number of problematic assumptions (see above). Data is collected in order to generate ‘facts’ about lesbian parenting and language is treated as a passive apparatus for communicating about an extra-discursive reality. For instance, in the Golombok et al. (1983) study, and in other similar studies, interviews were treated as tool for gathering information about the mothers’ feelings about men, children’s gender role behavior and so on. In discursive research, interviews are treated rather differently as a form of institutional social interaction (institutional because who gets to say and do what is constrained by the norms of social science interviewing—e.g., interviewers ask questions and interviewees provide answers). Meaning is viewed as co-constructed by the participant(s) *and* the interviewer in situ, rather than as located inside of the participant and pre-existing the interview. When excerpts are presented from interviews in lesbian parenting research (see Tasker & Golombok, 1997), the

questions asked by the interview are either discarded or reproduced but not analysed, and the ‘messiness’ of everyday speech and social interaction is edited out. By contrast, discursive approaches tend to preserve some degree of that messiness because they are interested in the fine detail of what people say, and how and why they say it. In addition, the ‘why’ is theorised in terms of the local interactional or ideological functionality of talk, rather than in terms of various psychological or sociological motivations.

### *A critical psychology of lesbian parenting*

So what would a critical psychology of lesbian parenting involve? What aspects of traditional approaches to researching lesbian parenting would it reject and what alternative assumptions, concepts, and methods would it offer researchers in this area?

Among many other things, a critical psychology of lesbian parenting: 1) rejects heteronormative assumptions about lesbians being unfit to parent or being less than ideal parents, and seeks to challenge aspects of the marginalisation of lesbian parents; 2) rejects heteronormative assumptions about and conceptions of sexuality and sex/gender (e.g., that sexuality and sex/gender are transmittable and measurable, Hicks, 2005a) and other pertinent social constructs; 3) refuses hierarchical and binary constructions of good/bad parenting, and good/bad mothering; 4) refuses research methods that remove members of lesbian families from their social context and ignore that ways in which they are positioned within systems of privilege and oppression; 5) views language as active and constructive of the ‘realities’ of lesbian parenting rather than a passive tool; 6) emphasises the variation in the experiences of lesbian mothers rather than assumes that these are uniform and homogenous (by virtue of their being lesbian mothers); 7) views knowledge about lesbian parenting as subjective and

partial and rejects the assumption that it is possible to generate objective and complete knowledge about lesbian parenting; 8) emphasises the personal, contextual and reflexive dimensions of research on lesbian parenting (reflexivity is a prominent concept in critical psychology and highlights the constructed nature of knowledge and the researcher's role in that construction); 9) seeks to deconstruct the myth that it is possible to generate scientific evidence about lesbian parenting (and to deconstruct the discursive and rhetorical practices that constitute scientific psychology); and 10) prioritises the use of qualitative and discursive techniques to explore the social construction of lesbian parenting.

How might a critical psychologist research lesbian families and male role models? It is important to keep in mind that critical psychology provides researchers with a stance, or a number of stances, on knowledge and meaning, a set of assumptions and concepts, rather than a recipe book. In addition to critiquing the presumptions and implications of psychological research on this topic, critical psychologists might map out and analyse the discourses that structure public discussions of lesbian families and male role models (see Clarke, 2001; 2002a; 2006a; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005). They might explore how the social construct 'male role model' is variously constituted, its history, the conditions of its emergence and evolution, and what purposes the various constructions serve (Clarke, 2006a; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005). Research could examine how discourses about male role models are used to constitute and warrant heteronormative accounts of lesbian parenting (Clarke, 2001; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005). Research could also examine the discursive and rhetorical strategies used by lesbian parents to counter heteronormative accounts of their parenting (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005).

**Man Included: Dilemmas and Discursive Strategies**

In the remainder of the paper, I aim to demonstrate the value of a critical psychological approach to lesbian families, and to LGBTQ psychologies more generally, and to further explore the issue of male presence and influence in lesbian families. I do so by providing a broad discursive analysis of excerpts from an interview with a lesbian couple engaged in a co-parenting arrangement with a gay male friend. This analysis will show critical psychology's concern for viewing language as active and constructive and for understanding people in their local context. The emphasis is on the couple's everyday sense making practices (rather than removing them from their social context and putting them in a research laboratory and asking them to respond to a series of decontextualised items in a questionnaire). The analysis will also demonstrate the importance of prioritising situated and variable meaning (rather than seeking generalisable and decontextualised patterns and trends) and of adopting a sceptical stance towards normative ideas about gender and sexuality (rather than, for instance, accepting that male input in child rearing is desirable). The interview will be treated as a social interaction (rather than as a tool for gathering knowledge of the world or people's experiences of it) and the analysis will attempt to map and analyse the discursive constitution and contours of social objects such as male role models.

***Analysing the interview using discourse analysis***

The discursive approach I adopt represents a synthesis of different approaches, but is most heavily influenced by the 'Loughborough school' of DA and discursive psychology (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987, Edwards & Potter, 1992, Potter, 1996a). Although, as I noted above, many different labels are applied to DA, there are

generally thought to be two broad approaches: top-down, Foucauldian or critical DA that has its roots in post-structuralist theorising, and bottom-up ‘Loughborough’ DA, some forms of which are increasingly influenced by the empirical micro-sociological tradition of conversation analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1995). Critical DA concerns itself with the ideological functionality of discourse and the ways in which it produces and regulates subjectivity. These forms of DA tend to be less concerned with the fine detail of talk and text and focus instead on mapping on the broad discursive patterns that constitute particular realities and ways of being.

The version of the Loughborough approach that I draw on in this paper is concerned primarily with the production of situated meaning and the local, interactional effects of particular discursive and rhetorical formations. This type of DA highlights the ways in which accounts of particular discursive objects, such as fathers and male role models, vary across the course of an interaction, such as an social science interview, because talk is fundamentally oriented to action (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Accounts are never just decontextualised, disinterested versions of what happened at the bank, or who said what to whom at the office party. Rather, accounts are designed to meet the moment-to-moment demands and dilemmas that arise in the course of any and all interactions (blaming, mitigating, and managing face and dilemmas of stake). Discursive psychologists are interested in how people exploit the rhetorical dimensions of language to present a particular point of view as factual or natural (Wetherell, Stiven, & Potter, 1987) and how accounts are designed to deflect criticisms of stake and interest (Potter, 1996a). Although, as I noted above, some versions of bottom-up DA are increasingly influenced by CA, DA is, in general, more topic-focused and less concerned with the micro-features that constitute particular forms and types of interaction than is CA.

The analysis explores how the couple attends to and negotiates the wider discursive context surrounding male influence (outlined above). Discussions about male role models are treated as creating live dilemmas for the couple (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988). Discussions about male influence do not begin and end on the pages of newspapers and lesbian parenting anthologies; rather, they have important consequences for how lesbian parents do family. The analysis is informed by the discursive concepts of 'ideological dilemmas' (Billig et al., 1988) and 'practical ideologies' (Wetherell et al., 1987). Ideology is conceptualised as the contrary themes of common sense that give rise to debates and dilemmas, rather than as powerful, structural forces that individuals are (passively) subject to. Ideological dilemmas are evident in the way people orient to normativity and ideology in culture (Speer, 2005).

The couple was interviewed for a broader project on the social construction of lesbian and gay parenting (see Clarke, 2000; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2005a; 2005b; 2006a; 2006b; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004; 2005; Clarke et al., 2004). I interviewed the couple in their home and audio-tape-recorded and transcribed the interview. Pseudonyms were allocated to the participants and all of the people referred to in the interview. All excerpts relating to the father were collated for more detailed transcription and analysis. The analysis presented is my own, necessarily subjective, reading of the data developed in line with the principles and procedures of DA (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Because critical psychology emphasises the situated nature of meaning, and the role of the researcher in creating, rather than reporting, 'findings', discourse analysts reject concerns with reliability and validity. Instead, all of the data analysed are presented to readers enabling them to inspect and potentially dispute the claims made by the researcher.

The excerpts I have selected to focus on in some detail centre on the question of male input in child rearing and on the women's attempts to resist imputations of subscribing to heteronormative values. I present and analyse six excerpts of data organised in relation to the broad themes: 'subverting the nuclear family?'; and 'the importance of male input?'.

At the time of the interview, I identified and identified myself to the interviewees as a lesbian; I now prefer the label 'non-heterosexual'. In the next section, I provide some contextual information on the participants. It is of course contrary to discursive principles to treat some data analytically and other data as 'factual' background information. Discursive researchers are not unaware of this dilemma and typically view providing such information as pragmatically necessary, in keeping with the broader conventions and constraints of qualitative research and academic writing.

### ***Introducing Wilma and Betty***

Wilma and Betty had been together as a couple for over a decade and had two pre-school age children—a girl and a boy. Betty conceived the children through a privately arranged donor insemination with a gay male friend, Fred. Wilma approached Fred to be their sperm provider and he indicated that he would want to have involvement with the children and "not just be a donor that was discarded in some way" (Wilma). This is what Betty and Wilma envisaged so "the project" (Betty) began. Fred is actively involved in parenting the children and is clearly identified by all concerned as the children's father. The children live with Wilma and Betty and Fred lives nearby. Fred spends time with the children at Wilma and Betty's house, at his house and away from home, and does so almost everyday. The three parents have

committed to living close to each other until the children are in their late teens. Fred has had casual partners since the children were born; although some of his partners have spent time with the children, none have had a significant role in parenting. Betty reported that Fred “sees himself as a junior partner” (Betty) and she and Wilma are “the main carers” (Betty). Betty said that Fred:

“recognises he says he’s got a very good deal and he thinks he has and we think we have luckily (laughs) and just occasionally you know I’m sure we might think ‘oh I wish he’d do a bit more x’ and he might think ‘I wish they’d let me have a...’ ...mostly it’s worked out really well”.

Wilma and Betty emphasised that they didn’t have a “really worked out game plan” (Betty). None of them knew how they would feel about the (first) child and how much time they would want to spend with him.

One of the many interesting aspects of Wilma and Betty’s interview is that, often without prompting from the interviewer, they clearly attended to the political and social context of lesbian parenting discussed above. In doing so, they struggled with a number of dilemmas: on the one hand they sought to warrant their decision to co-parent with a man and to present their ‘unusual’ family constellation as sound. They perhaps also sought to position themselves as competent parents who have made good choices for their children. On the other hand, they attempted to avoid being positioned as heteronormative (co-parenting with a man is arguably normative), to counter the valorisation of (biological) fatherhood and the nuclear family, and to avoid being positioned as (unthinkingly) supportive of arguments about the



importance of male influence. For instance, they may have risked being heard as critical of other lesbians who choose to parent without a man involved.

Fred featured prominently in the interview, at times he was presented as a gender-neutral “third parent” (Wilma) and an extra “pair of hands” (Betty), someone with whom Wilma and Betty “literally couldn’t manage without” (Betty). Their three-parent family was presented as leaving them “a lot better off than” (Betty), and, indeed, as inspiring “a lot of envy” (Betty) in, two-parent (straight) families. For instance, Fred “covers” (Wilma) when Wilma and Betty are both away from home and has saved them from having to “have a paid child minder” (Betty) and allowed them to “maintain a relationship that’s separate from the kids” (Betty). In other moments, Fred’s role as a gendered-parent, as a father, was brought to the fore, often in concert with accounts of him being a good father. Frequent references were also made to Fred’s masculinity: he was variously portrayed as “very male emotionally” (Wilma), as “not particularly laddish” (Wilma), as “politically correct” (Wilma), and as “like most men” (Betty). His “maleness” (Wilma) was represented as “the core of our differences with him” (Wilma) and something the women “don’t always value as feminists” (Wilma), and as something that “suits us perfectly” (Wilma).

### ***Transcription***

As noted above, in discursive research the everyday ‘messiness’ of speech and interaction is preserved in order to facilitate a detailed analysis of what people say and how and why they say it. In some forms of DA, pauses, emphasis, intonation and so on are viewed as vital to the production of meaning in social interaction (Potter, 1996b). Transcription symbols refer to the interactive elements of speech and sound rather than formal grammar. For instance, commas are used to indicate continuing

intonation rather than a grammatical clause (in less detailed forms of DA transcription, such as that used here, the meaning of the data are less anchored in the choices the researcher has made in the process of transcription). The analysis I present here is only moderately fine-grained hence the level of detail provided in the transcripts is relatively minimal (see table 1). More detailed CA Jefferson (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) and DA Jefferson-lite transcription (Potter, 1996b) capture micro features of interaction (such as prosody, laughter particles, in-breaths and out-breaths, coughs, and hesitation) that are vital to such analyses.

### **Insert Table 1 About Here**

#### ***Subverting the nuclear family?***

Wilma and Betty rather deftly present their decision to co-parent with a man as “subversive” and in doing so perhaps attempt to head-off any imputation of heteronormativity. They present their decisions as subversive by foregrounding the sexuality of the children’s father and the radical nature of lesbian/gay parenting coalitions. This excerpt comes from near the start of the interview after the question: “why did you choose to have a donor and not go to a clinic?”

#### Excerpt 1

Wilma: I think I always liked the idea of gay men and lesbians having children  
just because the sort of

Betty: Subversive ((laughs))

Wilma: because it is subversive and because you know we were told that you  
know the justification for us not being allowed to exist or have any rights

is that (what are we) that we are unnatural and the proof of that is that we couldn't couldn't procreate and I thought well of course we can we're just do it with each other

What is important here is that Wilma talks about “gay men and lesbians having children” together; arguably, there is nothing radical about men and women having children together (and some would say, nothing radical about lesbians and gay men having children together or separately, see Edelman, 2004). Clarke and Kitzinger’s (2005) analysis of how participants in television talk shows and documentaries about lesbian parenting counter arguments about the importance of male influence shows how lesbian parents strategically orient to a particular construction of male influence. For instance, lesbian mothers construct male role models in a generalising fashion so as to include male relatives, male friends and all the ‘men-in-the-world’ with whom their children have daily contact. By contrast, those opposed to lesbian parenting construct a very particular notion of male role models—“a father as a role model” (Kilroy, 1997, quoted in Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005)—and one that is virtually impossible to substitute. Lesbian mothers’ generalising construction of male role models facilitates the production of a ‘positive’ response: it is relatively easy to furnish a list of male relatives, male friends and men-in-the-world. Here, according to Wilma, the denial of lesbian and gay rights is founded on the notion that lesbians and gay men cannot produce children. Note that this is subtly different from the argument that same-sex relationships are not reproductive (see the judge’s statement in the lesbian same-sex marriage case quoted above). Lesbians and gay men having children together does arguably little to challenge the view that same-sex relationships are not

reproductive; however, it does challenge the notion that lesbians per se and gay men per se do not produce children.

A few minutes later, in response to the same question, Wilma further outlines her view that lesbian and gay co-parenting arrangements are subversive:

Excerpt 2

Wilma: ...and I never liked the idea of ((pause)) trying to substitute mummy and daddy with mummy and mummy I never felt particularly comfortable with that either

Int: Why not?

Wilma: Well I didn't ((pause)) I didn't really want to kind of try and reproduce the existing model of the nuclear family 'cos I didn't think it was that great really so I thought if we're going to do something different why not have two mummies and a daddy rather than mummy and mummy and no daddy

Here Wilma presents her “two mummies and a daddy” family constellation as a departure from the heteronormative family. In this instance, two-parent lesbian families are not a radical alternative to the heteronormative family but a ‘substitution’, a lesbian “nuclear family configuration that resembles traditional forms of family life” (Malone & Cleary, 2002, p. 274). In other contexts, two-parent lesbian families are presented as a radical alternative to the nuclear family and parenting with men is presented as heteronormative (see above), but here the opposite is so.

*The importance of male input?*

The representation of their decision to co-parent with a (gay) man as subversive is immediately troubled by the interviewer:

Excerpt 3

Int: Is it important for you for your kids to have a male input is that a reason wh- one of the reasons why you chose a donor

Wilma: Well not any old male input

Betty: Yeah I think that's the point isn't it we didn't ((pause)) we wouldn't have ((pause)) if we hadn't known if cer- ...but i- if we hadn't already known someone who was keen ((pause)) erm you know we did- we wouldn't probably have sat around desperately searching for a ((pause)) a known donor who would be a father (Int: mm-hm) which I mean I know is what some women do but I think we'd have done that 'cos we have thought no if you don't know someone and they're not you know who you already sort of have a bit of a rapport with then erm you know go with what you've got which is a strong relationship and build on ((pause)) on that just the two of us ((pause)) but so male input I don't think we didn't really go on about it we didn't go on about the importance of male input particularly although increasingly you know especially having had [son] although I don't know how it'll pan out with [daughter] but [son's] our fir- first children Fred is an enormously important person in his well he is he is for both of them actually isn't he (Wilma: mmm) but [son] particularly he very strongly identifies as a boy and he is very very keen on the fact that he's got a dad you know because otherwise he'd be two women and a girl in this house and he really likes the fact that he's got a

dad who comes to see him every night (Int: mm-hm) it's been very important for him but we would never of I think if anything we were much more ((pause)) we would have been much more sceptical wouldn't we about all that the need for all that... of course it's not important you know if you haven't got a man in it doesn't matter but and I you know and I think you know there are lots of situations I've seen work where there is no man and it does seem to work incredibly well and there are other role models male role models around but... I suppose some some good male role models yes I suppose I do think that's important but it could be a it could be an uncle or a good friend or you know

Here the interviewer implicitly challenges Wilma's presentation of her choice to co-parent with a man and her family constellation as 'subversive'. The notion of the importance of "male input" is clearly aligned to a more traditional approach to parenting and family (as outlined above). Arguably, one of the dilemmas that Wilma and Betty are carefully negotiating here is presenting their choice to co-parent with Fred as positive, while avoiding being positioned as heteronormative and heard as critical of lesbian mothers who choose not to parent with a man. Wilma's delightful formulation "any old male input" takes issue with the notion of the importance of male input per se—they were concerned about the quality of the male input. Betty builds on Wilma's response by identifying this as "the point". She struggles to launch her account, finally managing to do so on the sixth attempt ("we didn't we wouldn't have if we hadn't known if cer- ...but i- if we hadn't"), which perhaps indicates both the delicacy of telling a 'we' story when Wilma is sitting next to her and the trouble engendered by the issue of male input. She presents herself and Wilma as not fixated

on the issue of male input through the formulations “not desperately searching” and “we didn’t go on about it”. Betty positions herself and Wilma as “sceptical... about the need for all that” (the meaning of “all that” is treated as not requiring explanation) prior to choosing to parent with a (gay) man. She constructs a contrast between then and now (and between abstract and unanchored assumptions and ideas and experiential reality): “we didn’t go on about the importance of male input” and “we would have been much more sceptical”, “although increasingly” Fred is proving to be important to their son. Note what is not being said here: Betty very carefully avoids presenting Fred as a (or the) producer of masculinity in their son, his male presence did not make their son “strongly identify as a boy”. Rather, it seems to be the other way around, because their son strongly identifies as a boy he likes “the fact that he’s got a dad”. Betty’s account implies that her and Wilma’s abstract (and perhaps naïve) expectations have been confounded by the realities of parenting.

Betty constructs her son’s feelings about his father and about having a father in a particular way. According to Betty, he is “very very keen on” (she places a strong emphasis on both uses of “very”) and “really likes” having a father, this has been “very important to him”, his father is “enormously important”. (Note here the gender-neutral description of Fred as a “person”, which is perhaps designed to resist the gender dynamics invoked by the interviewer’s question.) These extreme descriptors serve to build a convincing picture of the nature of her son’s feelings about having a father (and implicitly to portray their decision to co-parent with a man as having “worked well”, see excerpt 5). The son’s feelings about his father are couched in terms of preference (he “likes” and is “keen on” having a father) or—the productively vague notion—of importance (that also indexes the interviewer’s question), rather than psychological or developmental need. As Clarke and Kitzinger (2005) argue,

children's experience of the world occupies a rhetorically potent position in discussions of lesbian parenting. Arguments about 'the best interests of the children' are very often employed as bottom-line interventions in these discussions (Clarke, 2001) and children are invested with significant experiential authority. Betty is perhaps concerned to signal that she and Wilma are child-centred parents, aware of and responsive to their son's feelings and preferences. In addition, talk about experiences, feelings and preferences is generally rhetorically robust, in the sense that people are the authority on their own experiences and it is difficult to dispute that a person does feel a particular way or does like a particular thing.

The son's feelings are in turn warranted by the fact that he "very strongly identifies as a boy". This choice of words suggests perhaps either volition on the son's part (for some reason he has chosen to identify strongly as a boy) or that some (unsaid) factors have produced this outcome. This wording also suggests the potential for variation: individual boys may identify more or less strongly as masculine (see excerpt 4 below). Thus, Betty invokes the possibility that their son might not have strongly identified as a boy (at this point in time); in which case, having a "dad" could have been less important. Here we see subtle attention to avoiding presenting her choices and family constellation as ideal.

This excerpt has a 'back and forth' quality: Betty shifts from recounting their story to orienting to its implications for other women, particularly lesbians who choose not to have a known donor or an involved father. Immediately after saying "we wouldn't probably have sat around desperately searching for a known donor" she notes that this is precisely what "some women do". Later, after describing Fred as "very important" to their son, she orients to the "situations... where there is no man". At first Betty simply states a view ("it's not important ... it doesn't matter"), but then



goes on to strengthen this with experiential evidence: she has “seen” situations (and not just ‘situations’, but “lots of situations”) “where there is no man”. She initially describes these as working but then upgrades this to working “incredibly well”. One of the reasons they work well is because of the presence of “male role models”. At this point, Betty finally indexes the interviewer’s question (“yes I suppose I do think that’s important”) and supplies her view on the importance of male input. Note that her candidate male role models are “an uncle or a good friend”, ones that many lesbians have access to, and she qualifies male role model with “good” (again, resisting the notion that male input per se is important). So, fathers are not necessary but (good) men are important.

Elsewhere in the interview, Betty ‘concedes’ the possibility that her son strongly identifies as a boy because he is being raised by two women (note she avoids the word ‘lesbian’):

#### Excerpt 4

Betty: not all boys are like this I have to say I’ve seen boys who are not as boyish as [son] but he is a real boy boy at the moment (Int: mm) I dunno what he’ll be like next year or the year after or in ten years time but at the moment he’s fiercely ((pause)) fiercely identifies as a boy you know (Int: mm-hm) which some would say is in relation to in reaction to being brought up by two women but we’ve no way of knowing that but he certainly thinks it’s pretty good it’s pretty important and it’s good to be a boy basically ((laughs)) ‘cos they’re the best

In this excerpt Betty emphasises the fact that her son is extremely boyish (he is a “real boy boy”, he “fiercely fiercely identifies as a boy”, and he thinks “it’s good to be a boy”). He is boyish in comparison to other boys and also particularly boyish ““at the moment” (she repeats this phrase twice and underlines it when she notes that “I dunno what he’ll be like next year or the year after or in ten years time”). This imparts a strong sense of boyishness as a temporal, flexible phenomenon, which varies from boy to boy and from moment to moment (and not necessarily the result of particular family constellations or parenting styles). As Potter (1997) notes, uncertainly markers such as “I dunno” allow speakers to manage their accountability and investment; in this instance, it conveys a sense of powerlessness on Betty’s part, as if she has little or no influence over her son’s degree of boyishness. Although Betty works hard to present her son as boyish, the possibility is then opened up that this is not an indication of parental success, but of failure: a “reaction to being brought up by two women”. Betty cleverly anticipates and makes a point of conceding this critique (see Antaki & Wetherell, 1999). In doing so, she is able to air and to dismiss it by simply asserting that “we’ve no way of knowing” if this is the case (thus rendering speculation and anxiety about this possibility redundant) and by restating her earlier point about her son’s boyishness.

Extracts 3 and 4 convey a sense of powerlessness on the part of Betty and Wilma, it is as if Betty is shrugging her shoulders and saying ‘boys will be boys—what can you do?’ Her son just happens to be, “at the moment”, a boyish boy.

When asked why they chose a known-donor-father rather than use a conception clinic and an anonymous donor, Betty presents their choice as “partly circumstantial”:

## Excerpt 5

Int: Wh- huh why did you choose to have a donor and not go to a clinic

Betty: ...<sup>iii</sup>I think it was partly circumstantial it was partly that we ((pause)) we were in- we knew that there was someone who wanted to do it who we felt comfortable with (Int: mm) we thought it would be one less ((pause)) problem in inverted commas that you know in the sense that there would be no unknown quantity the kids wouldn't be ((pause)) sort of endlessly searching for some idealised father figure in the sense (is like) this is him you know (Int: mm-hm) he's as imperfect as we all are and that we thought that would be sort of quite quite a good way of dealing with that one... and that worked well in our situation

In presenting their choice as “partly circumstantial” it is construed as not being motivated by any particular assumptions about male influences in parenting. Such a construction allows Betty to distance herself and Wilma from heteronormative assumptions about male role models. When Betty refers to “one less problem” she is perhaps indicating the complexities of lesbian parenting (created in part by heteronormative ideas about parenting, including the pre-eminence of biological parenthood and fatherhood). She presents co-parenting with a man as providing a practical way for them to negotiate this ‘real-world’ dilemma, so their children do not have to. The formulation “endlessly searching” serves to emphasise how much of a problem this might have been for the children. There is a delightful contrast between the “idealised father figure” and the “imperfect” reality. Again, we can see careful attention to the implications of this account for lesbian mothers who have not chosen known donors or involved fathers (families where children are perhaps “endlessly

searching for some idealised father figure”). Betty portrays the arrangement as having “worked well in our situation” (and she places a strong emphasis on “our”), which indicates that this is not a solution for all situations. Rather ironically, Betty’s account implies that having an involved father reduces the significance of ‘fathers’ in the lives of children.

Throughout the interview, Wilma and Betty are critical of the notion of the importance of male input per se. In response to the question about the importance of male input, shortly after excerpt 3 quoted above, Wilma introduces the concept of “ready made role models”.

#### Excerpt 6

Wilma: But we didn’t have any ready made role models ‘cos neither of us have got any blokes in our family that we think are great role models...

Betty: I’m not close to one [of my brothers] in particular and your brother isn’t really a suitable

Wilma: Well he’s [disgusting he’s disgusting so erm

Betty: [candidate ((laughs)) you know there’s nothing different about him I mean what we liked about the fact that Fred is not only gay but the fact that he tut he lives men I mean he lives with shares with he’s always shared with men you know in sort of shared houses and things like that and he ((pause)) he cares for himself and caters for himself and you know that’s that is the role model bit that’s good with boys for boys I think you know that they can see ‘oh manages to cook himself a meal and clean his house and it can be done’ ((laughs)) you know (Int: mm-hm) whereas of course a boy growing up with two women could easily get the impression that

just women do that sort of thing so there is there is an importance is that sense I think

Wilma and Betty reject the notion of the importance of male input per se by constructing a contrast between good and bad male role models. It is important for them to be close to the man and there should be something “different about him”. None of their family members (the “ready made role models”)—the uncles and grandfathers who are usually cited as alternatives to fathers in lesbian families (see Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005)—fulfilled their criteria. Thus, Fred is presented as filling a gap created by the lack of suitable male role models in both of their families (but not necessarily the gap created by the lack of a father). Fred is also presented as modelling a version of masculinity of which they approve. In another of my interviews with lesbian couples (see Clarke, 2006a), one of the women presented gay men as positive role models for children because they flout normative expectations around masculinity by embodying campness and effeminacy. For Betty, “the role model that’s good with boys” is the domestically independent man. Thus, having a man in their family may challenge rather than reinforce normative conceptions of gender. Two-parent (or solo parent) lesbian families may leave children (particularly boys) with the “impression that just women do that sort of thing (domestic labour)” (as in traditional heterosexual families). “Two mummies and a daddy” (Wilma) may model gender equity more effectively than a “mummy and mummy” (Wilma) lesbian family. Note also that Betty describes Fred as “not only gay”, which highlights the non-normativity of gayness in relation to standard criterion for good or appropriate male role models.

## **Conclusion**

This brief analysis of excerpts from an interview with a lesbian couple co-parenting with a gay man hopefully demonstrates the everyday import of debates about male influence for lesbian families. Perhaps because a lesbian feminist researcher conducted the interview, the couple oriented primarily to feminist critiques of assumptions about the importance of male influence. The couple was attentive to any possible imputation of heteronormativity and sought to position their choice of family constellation as subversive and unmotivated by a standard philosophy on male influence. Debates about male influence clearly have implications for how lesbian couples negotiate their family identity. Critical psychological, qualitative and discursive approaches to research open up the possibility of viewing these debates from the standpoint of lesbian families.

Although the last few years have witnessed a lessening of homophobia (overt prejudice and discrimination) towards lesbian families, heterosexist and heteronormative ideas about motherhood and family continue to structure public discourse on lesbian parenting. Similarly, although there is increasing acceptance of a variety of family constellations, the nuclear family (a married heterosexual couple and their child/ren) is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, upheld as the 'gold standard' for doing family. It comes as no surprise then, that male presence and influence is routinely positioned as a producer of normative gender and sexual identities, and of normative subjects more generally.

This paper has had a dual purpose: to explore discourse around lesbian families and male influence and to outline the possible contours of a critical psychology of lesbian families. Critical psychology rejects the assumptions, concepts and methods of mainstream psychology and provides an alternative programme for

psychological research centred on local and subjective meanings and practices. From a critical psychology perspective, traditional psychological research on lesbian parenting is both politically useful and politically problematic, and is so for exactly the same reason: the desire to counter homophobic assumptions about lesbian and gay parenting. Because this research ‘proves otherwise’ (Stacey, 1996) about lesbian parenting it is a rhetorically powerful tool; at the same time, it further strengthens precisely the notions that it seeks to unravel. In seeking to challenge the idea that lesbians are in some way different (or queer), this very idea is reinforced. Critical psychology allows us to free ourselves from this bind, to reject homophobic and heteronormative assumptions and concepts and to ‘look inside’ the lesbian family. In relation to male influence, traditional psychological research examines whether lesbian families conform to normative notions of gender role modelling and the acquisition of gendered heterosexuality. In this research, lesbian parenting is viewed through the lens of external expectations. Critical psychology shifts our starting point away from external demands towards the everyday dilemmas that regulatory discourses on male influence (that emanate from both wider and lesbian contexts) create for lesbian couples and families. External demands are viewed and explored from the standpoint of lesbians and the conflation of ‘sex-gender-sexuality’ is rejected.

Critical psychological and discursive approaches hold enormous potential for research on lesbian parenting and for LGBTQ psychologies more generally. Similar to queer theory, critical psychology is centrally concerned with the deconstruction of social norms and with generating emancipatory knowledge. It is important to note that I am not advocating a wholesale rejection of traditional psychological approaches;

rather it seems productive both to use and to discard the 'master's tools' in the service of social change for lesbian families.



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**Table 1: Transcription Notation**

...	Indicates editing of the transcript (for length and to exclude identifying information)
(what are we)	Indicates transcription doubt
((laughs))	Transcriber's description of an aspect of the interaction
Wor-	Cut-off speech or sound
[Word	Overlapping speech
<u>Word</u>	Emphasis
[son]	The removal of identifying information

<sup>i</sup> The title refers to a controversial UK web-based company that sells sperm to lesbian couples and to single women (see <http://www.mannotincluded.com>).

<sup>ii</sup> The Wainwright et al. (2004) study also focuses on gender and sexuality 'neutral' process variables such as 'parental warmth'. The authors concluded that "it was the qualities of adolescent-parent relationships rather than the structural features of families... that were significantly associated with adolescent adjustment" (p. 1895).

<sup>iii</sup> A short turn by Wilma that includes identifying information has been removed.