"We're all very liberal in our views": Students' talk about lesbian and gay parenting

Victoria Clarke

Contact Details:

School of Psychology

Faculty of Applied Sciences

University of the West of England

Frenchay Campus

Bristol BS16 1QY

Email: Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

Tel: 0117 3282176

Author Biography: Victoria Clarke lectures in LGBT psychology and qualitative methods in the School of Psychology at the University of the West of England. She is currently conducting ESRC funded research on money management in same sex partnerships (with Carole Burgoyne and Maree Burns) and co-editing (with Elizabeth Peel) a book on LGBT psychology (*Out in Psychology*, Wiley).

Key words: Lesbian and gay parenting, discourse analysis, heterosexism, liberalism, focus groups

Word count: 6,579 (excluding references)

"We're all very liberal in our views": Students' talk about lesbian and gay parenting

Abstract

Mapping the contours of homophobia and heterosexism is a key concern for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) psychology. In this paper, I present a discursive analysis of the construction of heterosexism in student focus group discussions about lesbian and gay parenting. My analysis (empirically) develops Kitzinger's (1987) theoretical and political argument that the concept of homophobia is embedded in a liberal framework and requires people to endorse a liberal construction of homosexuality is order to be considered tolerant. The paper contributes to the growing literature on the discursive construction of heterosexism by exploring the participants' use of liberal language and assumptions and how these are complicit in the reproduction of heteronormativity. I identify three ways in which the students 'do being' liberal. In all cases, the participants' discourse fails to move beyond a heterocentric perspective. I provide examples of each of these themes and explore their rhetorical design and ideological functions.

"We're all very liberal in our views": Students' talk about lesbian and gay parenting

Introduction

In this paper, I provide a discourse analysis of student focus group discussions about lesbian and gay parenting, focusing on the participants' use of liberal language and assumptions and how this is complicit in the reproduction of heteronormativity. There is a growing body of work that draws on insights from research on the discursive construction of prejudice (e.g., Wetherell & Potter, 1992) to analyse homophobic and heterosexist talk and texts (e.g., Braun, 2000; Brickell, 2001; Ellis, 2001; Gough, 2002; McCreanor, 1996; O'Hara & Meyer, 2003; Peel, 2001; Pratt & Tuffin, 1996; Speer & Potter, 2000). Discursive approaches to prejudice focus on communicative practices deployed in conversation rather than on the psychological characteristics of individuals (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987, for an early critique of conventional psychological approaches to attitudes and prejudice). The concern is not with individual motives for what is said, but with what actions 'prejudiced' talk is designed to perform (blaming, mitigation and so on). This means that discursive approaches look at how prejudiced talk is constructed and its functionality. Some discourse analysts focus on how talk functions in the local context of interaction – at its widest this can mean the context of the interview or focus group (e.g., Braun, 2000), and at its narrowest, the immediately preceding and subsequent talk (e.g., Speer & Potter, 2000). Others explore function at the level of ideology – for instance, how particular ways of talking about lesbians and gay men shore up heteronormativity (e.g., Brickell, 2001).

As Speer and Potter (2000) note, discursive approaches to heterosexism build on earlier radical lesbian feminist critiques of homophobia (Kitzinger, 1987; Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). Kitzinger argued that both the concept of homophobia and the scales used to measure it are embedded in a liberal-humanistic framework. In order to be considered tolerant (the opposite of homophobic) respondents must endorse a liberal-humanistic construction of homosexuality that emphasises the similarities between lesbians and gay men and heterosexuals. Despite this and other critiques, homophobia remains a well-used concept in LGBT psychology.

A number of studies have examined heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbian and gay (and heterosexual) parenting (e.g., Causey and Duran-Aydintug, 1997, Crawford and Solliday, 1996, Fraser et al., 1995, King and Black, 1999, Maney and Cain, 1997, McLeod et al., 1999, McLeod and Crawford, 1998; see also Hardman, 1997). These studies typically correlate the participants' 'level' of homophobia, measured using homophobia scales, with their attitude toward the outcome of actual and – more often – contrived custody cases involving heterosexual and lesbian and gay parents. Overall, these studies tell us that participants (especially 'homophobic' ones) are more likely to disagree with a lesbian or gay parent winning custody of their children compared to a heterosexual parent. However, these studies tell us little about how participants make sense of lesbian and gay parenting. Furthermore, these studies present (liberal) tolerance of lesbian and gay parenting as desirable (and opposed to homophobic attitudes). This paper aims to highlight some of the problems inherent in research underpinned by liberal values.

I am interested in liberal discourse because of 'liberalism's complicity in reinforcing heteronormativity' (Brickell, 2001, p. 213). By liberalism I mean an ideology that emphasises lesbians' and gay men's sameness to heterosexuals (see Ellis, 2001), and constructs sexuality as a personal choice (see Gough, 2002). Liberalism focuses on the individual and eschews any analysis of power relations between groups. This is evidenced by the development of concepts like 'reverse racism', which is supposedly equivalent to [white] racism, and ignores the power and privilege of dominant social groups. Liberal tolerance of homosexuality rests upon a profound intolerance, in that it represents the dominant group (heterosexuals) 'putting up with' lesbians and gay men (Brickell, 2001; Epstein & Steinberg, 1998), thus it is wedded to heteronormativity (Kitzinger, 1987; Peel, 2001). Tolerance and intolerance are then very much the same thing – neither position requires those in power to give up power, rather these concepts reinforce power differentials by denoting who does and does not have the power to be tolerant[1].

Gough (2002), Pratt and Tuffin (1996), and Peel (2001) have all called for further exploration of the contours of heterosexist talk. I respond to this call in this paper, focusing in particular on how heterosexism is – as Peel (2001) notes – embedded in a

liberal framework. Peel argues that mundane heterosexism is founded on the assumption of a (false) equivalence between lesbians and gay men and heterosexuals, and so works to reinforce the heterosexual assumption. The critique of liberal humanism is a cornerstone of critical LGBT psychology – as first outlined by Kitzinger (1987). This paper will show that discursive approaches can provide useful insights into how liberalism is complicit in the reproductive of heteronormativity.

Method

The analysis is based on data from five focus groups with undergraduate students and one group with postgraduate students. These data were collected for my PhD research on lesbian and gay parenting. Each group had between six and nine participants and there were a total of 43 participants. I conducted five of the focus groups, which were recruited in or conducted as part of research methods teaching, the sixth group was recruited and conducted by an undergraduate student. The participants were mostly white, heterosexual, able-bodied and aged under 20.

The focus groups were semi-structured – the participants were asked to discuss a range of questions on the family and lesbian and gay parenting. These questions included:

- What is family? What do you understand by the word 'family'? What makes a good family?
- Is the family changing?
- What do you understand by the term 'alternative families'?
- Do children need a mother and a father?
- Should lesbians and gay men be allowed to adopt children?
- What difficulties can you imagine a lesbian/gay parent and her/his children facing?
- Can you imagine any advantages for children growing up in a lesbian/gay family?

I acted as a relatively conventional focus group moderator – I asked questions, prompted and encouraged responses and discussion, and in general did not articulate

---

[1] Thanks to Damien Riggs for drawing my attention to this point.

my own views (with the exception of a small number of the contributions I made to the postgraduate focus group). I was acquainted with and out as a lesbian to the participants of the postgraduate focus group. I did not 'out' myself as a lesbian to the undergraduate students – this was because I wanted to avoid as far as possible 'cueing' these participants into using liberal discourse. To this end, I also encouraged the students to talk openly and honestly about their views, and, when the groups were conducted in my office, I removed all of my and my office-mate's lesbian/gay posters and books. However, these strategies seemed to have little impact on the students' eagerness to appear liberal in the focus groups I conducted. The focus group conducted by an undergraduate student was significantly different. Participants in this group cited the sinfulness, immorality and unnaturalness of homosexuality and homosexual parenting. They argued that lesbian and gay parenting produces 'confused' and homosexual children, and children in lesbian and gay families lack opposite sex role models and get bullied. For example Paul argued that: '…bent parents make bent children, if not very fucked up ones at least. You can't confuse a child like that' (see Clarke, 2001).

O'Hara and Meyer (2003) used a 'self-directed focus group' technique to collect students' views about a lesbian convention being held on their university campus. They felt that participants would respond to the issues more honestly and openly if they were not there to influence the conversation. What they found was that although the students used a number of strategies that communicated heterosexism subtly, more often, they relied on strategies that communicated heterosexism in blatant ways. O'Hara and Meyer argue that the prevalence of blatant heterosexist talk in their data is due in part to the method they used to collect it. That is, the presence of the researcher increases the likelihood of participants attending to concerns about social desirability. Similarly, Dryden (1999) argues that in her research on the domestic division of labour in heterosexual marriage the interview context rendered salient concerns about social desirability for the participants. Participating in social science interviews placed Dryden's interviewees in a situation that made them publicly accountable to make sense of their relationships as equal. Thus, the preponderance of subtle heterosexism found by researchers such as Ellis (2001) – studies where the researcher *was* present – could be to some degree a methodological artefact. The fact that the undergraduate moderator was a friend/acquaintance of her participants (and like them an

undergraduate student) makes it plausible that this group experienced a reduction in concerns about 'social desirability'.

All of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim in the first instance. The groups were conducted with the intention of accessing participants discourses on lesbian and gay parenting – how they warranted both the view that lesbians and gay men should not be prevented from parenting and the view that they should be. When analysing the data to identify arguments against lesbian and gay parenting (see Clarke, 2001), I was struck by the participants' use of liberal discourse and how this appeared to be strongly wedded to heterosexism. This contrasts sharply with conventional homophobia research – such as that discussed in the introduction – which presents liberal tolerance as desirable. A corpus of extracts relevant to the use of liberal discourse was selected and transcribed in more detail. The data were read and re-read to produce the analysis presented here. The form of discourse analysis I use is thematic discourse analysis (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). This method identifies themes in a text within a constructionist framework, focusing both on the rhetorical design and on the ideological implications of the themes. This version of discourse analysis is very similar to Potter's and Wetherell's (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter et al., 1990; Wetherell and Potter, 1988) interpretative repertoire analysis – I prefer however the more straightforward concept of 'discursive themes' to (what I feel is) the unnecessarily complex conceptualisation of interpretative repertoires in Wetherell's and Potter's work (see Parker, 1990). The aim of the analysis is to highlight the increasing pervasiveness of liberal discourse for talking about LGBT issues (such as parenting), and the marginality of radical discourses.

Analysis

In this paper, I outline three strategies that communicate heterosexism by deploying liberal language and assumptions:

(1) Constructing the focus group as 'not-prejudiced' through comparison with prejudiced others;
(2) Minimising the social deficit of having a lesbian or gay parent by comparing it to having a (socially, physically or mentally) disabled family member;

(3) Developing the concept of heterophobia and constructing it as equivalent to homophobia.

(1) Constructing the focus group as 'not-prejudiced' through comparison with prejudiced others

Some of the participants explicitly and implicitly positioned themselves, their peers, and/or the focus group as 'not-prejudiced' or as 'liberal'. I discuss two examples of this strategy. Example 1.1 comes very shortly after one of the participants has come out as 'gay' and is embedded within a fairly long stretch of talk in which the participants take pains to display their lack of prejudice. The participants – a group of psychology undergraduates - are collaboratively producing account of being liberal and not against homosexuality or lesbian and gay parenting. Earlier in the discussion I spoke about talk show debates in which some participants argue vigorously against lesbian and gay parenting – Jenny refers to back to this. Example 1.2 is also embedded in a stretch of talk in which the participants strongly align with a pro-lesbian/gay perspective. Jennifer describes an incident at work when she encountered a van driver with 'shocking' opinions (presumably about lesbians and gay men and/or other oppressed groups) – this anecdote prompts a discussion about whether or not the members of the group hold different views about homosexuality to the majority. I have inserted comments in double round brackets to clarify the meaning of certain portions of the data.

Example 1.1: VC FGUG02 06/10/98

```
1     Jenny:   …I think we're unusual in that there's a room here of what eight
2              nine people
3     (5 lines omitted)²
4     Jenny:   ...And and that no- and that none of us are saying what so many
5              other people would say ((that lesbians and gay men should not be
6              parents)). Like you were saying if you watch a talk show
7     Sue:     Mm.
8     Jenny:   there will always be people who'll say 'no that shouldn't happen'…
9     (6 lines omitted)
10    Jenny:   …and now we're all here and we've been told that homosexuality
11             is you know not a bad thing and you shouldn't be homophobic
```

---

² I have omitted lines that are not directly relevant to my analysis, speech in inverted commas indicates when the speaker is reporting the speech of others, overlapping speech is indicated by square brackets, a dash (e.g., 'wor-') indicates cut-off speech, and round brackets with spaces in between (e.g., '(   )') indicate inaudible speech.

12		that we're all saying this. But er you know I think that we're not
13		really a a fair sample in that respect.
14	Sue:	Mm.
15	Jenny:	I think we're all very liberal in our views.
16	Sue:	Yeah I think as psychologists we tend to be anyway don't we so I
17		mean.
18	(4 lines omitted)	
19	Liz:	Yeah it's true like because we're doing this course we're obviously
20		interested in people and the way people interact and that makes
21		us all already a certain type of people.
22	Sue:	Mm mm.
23	Liz:	I'm not under any illusion that if we went outside and said 'right
24		everybody who doesn't- that who'd' ((think that homosexuality/lesbian
25		and gay parenting is wrong)) especially with men I think are much
26		more [strong]ly
27	Sue:	[Yeah]
28	Liz:	against.
29	?:	Yeah.
30	Sue:	Definitely definitely.
31	Jenny:	The thing is we wouldn't have to go far outside we could stay in in
32		the university.
33	Sue:	Yeah.
34	Liz:	Oh yes definitely.

Example 1.2: VCPGFG01 27/10/97

1	Jennifer:	Yeah but I think that as well and then I meet people for example
2		erm I went out with erm a van driver with my job just to see h- his
3		side of the job and er the opinions that he came out with were so
4		shocking that I just couldn't believe that people still exist like that
5		like you just said
6	Nicky:	Neanderthals.
7	Jennifer:	and but the majority probably do 'cos we're in a very sort of clique
8		here who have very er different opinions very I dunno whatever
9		[opinions]
10	Nicky:	[Mm] I don't know
11		[if it's the majority]
12	Jennifer:	[and a lot of people still] have very just wicked opinions you know.
13	Nicky:	I don't know how whether you'd say if it was the majority or not it's
14		hard it's easy to think it's the majority if you have a different what
15		you feel to be more enlightened or
16	Jennifer:	Mm.
17	Nicky:	normal if you are the normal people the one with the
18		[normal view]
19	Jennifer:	[Yeah but we think]
20	Nicky:	but we all think that we are norm- the one's with the normal view
21		but everyone else might
22		[think that we're the ones with the odd view. (laughs)]
23	Sarah:	[It's not it's not the majority] view though
24		is it?
25	Nicky:	I don't think so.

26 Sarah: I mean I think you're right.
27 Jennifer: The view in here is not the majority?
28 Sarah: The view in here is different [I mean]
29 Jennifer: [Yeah] I'd say that.
30 Amanda: I think so too.
31 Sarah: and I and I think however enlightened people want to be it's
32   ignorance…

In both of these examples, the participants contrast the views of the focus group with those of prejudiced others, and (more or less equivocally) position themselves as an enlightened minority. In example 1.1, the speakers are very clear that the group share the same view about homosexuality ('*none* of us', line 4, 'we're *all* saying this', line 12, 'we're *all* very liberal', line 15, 'makes us *all*', lines 20-21), and this is juxtaposed with the view of 'so many other people' (lines 4-5), those 'outside' (line 23) of the focus group. Indeed, the focus group is 'unusual' (line 1), an island of tolerance in a sea of prejudice. They tell the moderator (VC) that they are not a 'fair sample' (line 13) - if VC wants to find out what most people really think about lesbian and gay parenting and homosexuality, she will have to look elsewhere. Participants in the postgraduate group depict the group as a 'clique' (line 7), and their views and opinions as 'different' (line 8), 'odd' (line 22), and 'not the majority' (line 23). This contrast is particularly powerful when Jennifer describes herself as shocked by the van driver's opinions – i.e., one would have to be decidedly unprejudiced to have such a strong reaction to prejudiced views. There is also a strong implicit contrast between 'Neanderthals' (line 6) and 'people… like that' (line 4) and the group.

The participants in both focus groups knew each other as a result of taking the same university course (the members of the postgraduate focus group – example 1.2 – seemed to be better acquainted than the members of the undergraduate group) and so could claimed some awareness of each other's views on homosexuality and lesbian and gay parenting. However, it is striking that the speakers in both examples assume a consensus of opinion on lesbian and gay parenting. At no point in either of these focus groups do the speakers entertain the possibility that any of the other members of the group might not share their perspective on lesbian and gay parenting.

Another interesting aspect of these two examples is the way the participants (implicitly) construct what it means to be prejudiced and not prejudiced. The

participants in example 1.1 explicitly conceptualise being not prejudiced as being liberal. In both examples the participants construct prejudice in terms of individual views and opinions.

In example 1.1, Liz makes a show of reflecting on the group's and others' views about homosexuality. When she says 'if we went outside and said 'right everybody…'' (lines 23-24) Liz positions the group as arbiters of what counts as prejudice (and of who is prejudiced), thus underscoring her and the other participants' critical faculty and the enlightened nature of their views comparative to those of 'so many other people' (lines 4-5). Jennifer and Nicky are initially definite about the nature of the van driver's and 'people like that's' views ('so shocking', lines 3-4) but then get caught in a dilemma of not being heard as endorsing prejudice versus not positioning themselves as superior. For instance, Jennifer comments that the group have 'very er different opinions very I dunno opinions' (lines 8-9). The descriptor 'different' is (morally) neutral and, as Potter (1997) notes, 'I dunno' is used to signal a lack of investment in what is being said – in this case, in commenting on others' opinions.

What is striking about this strategy is that it allows speakers to absolve themselves from acknowledging their individual responsibility for lesbian and gay oppression. In other words, if they did conceptualise anti-homosexuality in terms of the organisation of society around a heterosexual norm, they would be compelled to acknowledge their responsibility for contributing to the maintenance of that norm.

(2) Minimising the social deficit of having a lesbian or gay parent by comparing it to having a (socially, physically or mentally) disabled family member
In talking about the difficulties faced by children in lesbian and gay families, the focus groups compared having a lesbian or gay parent to having a family member who is disabled. Consider these two examples. In the first example, the speakers compare how lesbian and gay parents would talk to their child about potential bullying and social stigma with how the parents of children with a learning disability might deal with similar concerns. In the second example, the participants compare the reactions of others to, and the feelings of, children with lesbian/gay parents with the reactions of others to, and the feelings of, people who have a sibling who is disabled.

Example 2.1: VC FGUG02 06/10/98

```
1   Liz:    Yeah. And the ((lesbian and gay)) parents are more likely to sit down
2           with the child and say
3   ?:      [(                )]
4   Liz:    ['cos they know] they['ve got]
5   Sue:                          [ Yeah. ]
6   ?:                            [ Yeah. ]
7   Liz:    [a big ]
8   Sue:    [Yeah.]
9   Liz:    thing th-
10  ?:      [               ((coughs))              ]
11  Liz:    [they're more likely to sit down and say] 'yes it will be hard but yes
12          you are a good person'. Where- whereas somebody who was
13          maybe dyslexic or something like the parents wouldn't think of it as
14          because it's not so much a society pressure they may be would not
15          take the time to sit down with the child and say 'you may be teased
16          about this' 'this is gonna be hard' 'n give them a [talk about] it
17  Sue:                                                       [  Mm.   ]
18  Liz:    So I think yeah w- there's un- undoubtedly however much society
19          changes in the next ten twenty years it will be It would be hard if
20          you were a child and your parents were both gay. That would be
21          hard. But you'd like get over it. It's not the biggest failure. It's not
22          the biggest thing.
```

Example 2.2: VCUGFG03 07/10/98

```
1   Vivian:  people get really embarrassed by it ((having lesbian/gay parents))
2            though and they wouldn't want to mention it it's like having a a
3            brother or a sister who's who's probably Down
4   Lana:    Disabled or something.
5   Vivian:  Syndrome or something and you have to you're gonna have to get
6            used to being teased because you have
7   Lana:    Yeah.
8   Vivian:  some- something wrong with your family
9   Lana:    It's like 'oh
10  Vivian:  no matter what it is.
11  Lana:    you never said your broth- you brother was disabled' or something
12           like that
13  Vivian:  Yeah.
14  Lana?:   d'ya know 'well why should I have to say it' d'ya know
15  ?:       Yeah.
16  Vivian:  It should just be the same as 'you never said your mum er
17  Lana?:   Mm.
18  Vivian:  your your parents were gay'.
19  ?:       Yeah. (laughs)
20  Vivian:  'Why should I?'
21  ?:       I suppose that's why there is more stigma to it then.
22  Vivian:  So if you if you're saying that every child is gotta like gain parental
```

23		guidance needs counselling so does every other child in that school
24	?:	Yeah.
25	Vivian:	with any kind of problem.
26	?:	Yeah.

In both examples there is a lot of ostensibly positive talk about growing up in a lesbian/gay family. In example 2.1, Liz indicates that children with lesbian/gay parents would 'get over it. It's not the biggest failure. It's not the biggest thing' (lines 21-22). In example 2.2, Vivian normalises (that is, discursively presents as normal, Potter, 1996) supposed problems such as having gay parents by arguing that if the criteria for 'having a problem that requires counselling' are wide enough to include children with lesbian and gay parents, then they are wide enough to include children with all kinds of (trivial) issues. As such Vivian portrays the notion that children with lesbian and gay parents need counselling as ridiculous.

In these examples, the participants compare a child having a lesbian/gay parent to a child having a disability or a sibling with a disability. In example 2.1, the comparison favours lesbian and gay parents rather than the parents of dyslexic children: because of their own life experiences lesbian and gay parents are more likely to understand the difficulties their children face as a result of living in a lesbian/gay household. However, Liz's description of having gay parents as 'not the biggest failure… not the biggest thing' (line 21-22), suggests that this is a 'failure' and a 'thing' (albeit not the biggest). Vivian is somewhat less cautious and (indirectly) describes having a lesbian/gay parent as 'something wrong' (line 8) and a 'problem' (line 25). Liz repeatedly describes being the child of gay parents as 'hard' (lines 16, 19 and 21) because of teasing and social pressure. Interestingly, Liz depicts such difficulties as inevitable and impervious to social change ('however much society changes… it *would* be hard…', lines 18-19). Vivian similarly suggests that teasing is inevitable when children live in a different household ('you're gonna *have* to get used to', lines 5-6). In constructing teasing (heterosexism) as inevitable, the participants not only negate the possibility that teasing can and should be challenged, but also their responsibility for that (see Clarke, 2001; Clarke et al., 2004).

The central problematic in these examples is the comparison between having a lesbian or gay parent and having a disability or sibling with a disability. By making such

comparisons, having lesbian/gay parents is constructed as a deficit, something that children need to 'get over' (example 2.1, line 21). The comparison is doubly offensive: it reinforces the (socially constructed) deficit of disability and constructs having a lesbian or gay parent (and by proxy lesbian and gay sexualities) as a deficit.

Example 2.1 works to place the onus on parents to provide compensatory parenting, and on children to triumph over the adversity of having lesbian/gay parents. Similarly, in example 2.2, children are required to 'get used to' (lines 5-6) heterosexism. In example 2.1, there is no question of social change because it has no agent ('however much society changes', lines 18-19), and – as I noted above – no question of the participants' personal responsibility for making the world a better place for lesbian and gay families. In such comparisons, the emphasis is on sameness and on putting the person first (see Peel, 2001); this serves to minimise the uniqueness of lesbian and gay families/sexualities (see Ellis, 2001) and the salience of social categories.

(3) Developing the concept of heterophobia and constructing it as equivalent to homophobia.

Finally, the notion of 'heterophobia' was a feature of the focus group discussions. This theme provides a good example of way the participants minimised the uniqueness of lesbian and gay families by implying that they are – or should be – 'just like' heterosexual ones. In both of the examples of this strategy, the group is responding to a question about whether children in lesbian and gay families will grow up to be lesbian or gay. In the first example, Jenny argues that the group should exercise caution in describing lesbian and gay parents as more open-minded about the sexuality of their children than heterosexual parents. She flags up the possibility that lesbian and gay parents might pressure their children into homosexuality (just as heterosexual parents pressure their children into heterosexuality). In the second example, Mark endorses the view that lesbian and gay parents would be more open-minded about their children's sexuality, and Sharon speculates that children in lesbian and gay families might think about sexuality in a more 'level headed' way because of the example of their parents.

Example 3.1: VC FGUG02 06/10/98

1   Jenny: I think we should be careful in saying that they'll definitely be more

```
2                  open minded though 'cos there's no reason why erm er ah
3                  homosexual couple can't do what heterosexual couples have done
4                  only in the opposite way
5                  [I mean] like
6    Dave:         [ Yeah ]
7    Jenny:        whatever.
8    ?:            [      Mm.      ]
9    Jenny:        [(                )]
10   Liz:          [ You  (can't)  say  ] it's [bad not to be gay.]
11   Jenny:        [The alternative to ]     [   homophobia    ] is heterophobia.
```

Example 3.2: VC FGUG04 13/10/98

```
1    Sharon:       Well children in heterosexual families grow up to be gay so
2    Mark:         (laughs)
3    ?:            Yeah.
4    Mod.:         Mm hm.
5    Sharon:       there's [no reason why]
6    ?:                    [  (inaudible)  ]
7    Sharon:       the reverse shouldn't happen so.
8    Mark:         Because of the battle that homosexuals have gone through to get
9                  to get equal rights I would have thought that there'd be very few
10                 homosexuals who are heterophobic as it were so I would have
11                 thought they'd be a lot more open minded about it.
12   Mod.:         Mm hm.
13   ?:            Yeah.
14   Sharon:       You make the I dunno the children would probably make a concer-
15                 you know would think about it properly I dunno I don't know how
16                 to really put it but not as a considered choice 'cos obviously it's not
17                 a choice but they they would think about it in a I don't know more
18                 sort of level headed way.
19   Mod.:         Mm hm.
20   Susan:        Because that they're aware of the issues of both sides.
```

Example 3.1 provides a particularly good example of how participants construct homophobia and heterophobia as equivalent: heterophobia is an 'alternative' (line 11) to homophobia and homosexual couples can do what heterosexuals have done 'in the opposite way' (line 4). That is, pressuring their children into being lesbian or gay and ignoring heterosexuality as a valid sexual identity. Whereas the participants in example 3.1 argue there is no reason why homosexuals might not be heterophobic, Mark in example 3.2 suggests that is unlikely. This comparison is a 'false' equivalence, in that it ignores the social practices that privilege heterosexuality. 'Heterophobia' is constructed as illegitimate – 'you can't say it's bad not to be gay' (example 3.1, line 10) – and is contrasted with being 'open-minded' (example 3.1, line 2; example 3.2, line 11) about the issue of sexuality, which is constructed as

legitimate. What this use of 'heterophobia' implies is that lesbian and gay families should be just like liberal heterosexual families.

The concept of 'heterophobia' provides a way of pathologising lesbian feminists and radical gays. Although this account is ostensibly positive, ideologically it serves to police and control lesbian and gay men by requiring that they speak and act in certain ways in order to be considered acceptable (see Pratt & Tuffin, 1996). The comparison reinforces a 'good homosexual/dangerous queer' binary (Smith, 1992), and the idea that good gays are tolerant and liberal. A similar construction of heterophobia is evident in the work of some LGBT psychologists. For example, White and Franzini (1999) argue that 'heterophobia, like homophobia, hurts everyone' (p. 66). They reworded a homophobia scale to assess lesbians' and gay men's attitudes toward heterosexuals. The assumption that homophobia and heterophobia are in many ways equivalent is evident in the following quote from their paper:

> 'individuals are socialized to believe that heterosexuals and homosexuals are relatively homogenous groups at odds with each other: the media present gay-related news features which center on themselves of conflict between heterosexuals and homosexuals' (p. 68).

The notion of homosexuals and heterosexuals being 'at odds' and 'in conflict' suggests a level playing field, rather than a political struggle that requires heterosexuals to give up their privilege.

The participants in both examples construct what counts as being prejudiced/not prejudiced – being not prejudiced means being 'open minded' (example 3.1, line 2, example 3.2, line 11) and 'aware of the issues of both sides' (example 3.2, line 20), so a premium is placed on balance, openness, being broadminded and tolerant, all of which are classic features of liberalism. Note also that in example 3.2 Mark's use of the past tense ('gone through', line 8) suggests that lesbians and gay have already achieved equal rights. Brickell (2001, p. 213) calls this the 'egalitarian myth'. Mark's argument is that lesbians and gay men are unlikely to be intolerant because of their own experiences. This is a hypothesis shared by some LGBT psychologists. White

and Franzini in the study discussed above found that lesbians and gay men are more likely 'to develop rational attitudes toward heterosexuals' (p. 69).

Discussion

I have identified three themes in the construction of heterosexism in student focus group discussions about lesbian and gay parenting. These portray the group as 'not-prejudiced' through comparison with prejudiced others, compare having a lesbian and gay parent to having a family member with a (social, physical or mental) disability, and introduce the concept of 'heterophobia' – the supposed reverse of homophobia. I have focused on how (from a radical perspective) liberal discourse supports a world-view that ignores the power and privilege of heterosexuals and does not recognise lesbians and gay men *as* lesbians and gay men - as potentially different from the norm. It also allows the participants to avoid personal responsibility for anti-homosexuality.

My analysis of students' use of liberal discourse in focus group discussions about lesbian and gay parenting gels with previous analyses of heterosexist talk. There is growing evidence that 'othering' out-group members by positioning them as prejudiced compared to in-group members is a commonplace in such talk (as in examples 1.1 and 1.2). Speer and Potter (2000) note that, 'an ideal way to portray oneself as non-prejudiced… is to refer to the prejudicial assumptions of others' (p. 553). Pratt and Tuffin (1996) found that police officers justified the barring of gay men from the police force by suggesting that their peers and senior officers would harass gay officers. They constructed themselves as not prejudiced by excluding themselves from 'the heterosexist mass' (p. 66) – their colleagues – and portraying themselves as victims of an overwhelming pressure to conform to the anti-gay ethos of the force (see also Ellis, 2001; O'Hara & Meyer, 2003). The participants' (in example 1.1 and 1.2) display of knowledge about others' prejudice coheres with Speer's and Potter's observation that another element of the contrast between the self and prejudiced others is 'being knowledgeable about the contours of other people's prejudice' (2000, p. 553). Discursive work on racism and sexism has identified similar devices (e.g., Gill, 1993; Wetherell et al., 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), suggesting that this is a common strategy for managing a non-prejudiced identity. It is noteworthy that the participants do not consider (and they were not specifically

directed to consider) how 'race'/ethnicity might impact on lesbian and gay parents and the children of lesbian and gay parents. The participants arguably implicit present lesbian and gay families as all white because they do not engage with issues of race and sexuality. An issue for future research is how participants discursively negotiate multiple and intersecting oppressions.

The likelihood (or inevitability) of children living in lesbian and gay households being bullied is raised in the data presented here (see examples 2.1 and 2.2). Elsewhere, I have highlighted the pervasiveness of arguments about homophobic bullying in debates about lesbian and gay parenting (Clarke, 2001; Clark et al., 2004), and the way in which the spectre of bullying is used to warrant the view that lesbians and gay men should be prevented from parenting. Such arguments use prejudice to justify prejudice and require lesbians and gay men to adapt to heterosexism by not parenting.

There is some evidence to suggest that comparisons between homosexuality and disability might be a recurrent discursive strategy in heterosexist talk. Peel's (2001) analysis of lesbian and gay awareness training sessions identified 'nonheterosexuality as a deficit' as a type of mundane heterosexism. She argues that this devalues lesbian and gay sexualities by comparing them to some form of 'deficit'. The comparison is built on the assumption that heterosexuals are 'complete, fully functioning and 'normal'' (p. 547), whereas lesbians and gay men are not. Finally, the participants' use of the concept of heterophobia is similar to Ellis' (2001) strategy 'asserting 'no difference' between lesbians/gay men and heterosexuals' (p. 46). Ellis argues that this reinforces heterosexism 'by assuming a level playing field and failing to recognise the imbalance of power between lesbians/gay men and heterosexuals in a fundamentally heteropatriarchal society' (p. 47; see also Peel, 2001).

As outlined in the introduction, conventional homophobia research presents liberal tolerance of lesbian and gay parenting as desirable (e.g., Causey and Duran-Aydintug, 1997, Crawford and Solliday, 1996, Fraser et al., 1995, King and Black, 1999, Maney and Cain, 1997, McLeod et al., 1999, McLeod and Crawford, 1998). By contrast, my analysis problematises liberal discourse and explores the role it plays in upholding heterosexist assumptions. There have been repeated calls for LGBT psychologists to abandon the concept of homophobia because of its location within and promotion of a

liberal construction of homosexuality (e.g., Kitzinger, 1987; Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993). My analysis leads me to endorse these calls and to invite LGBT psychologists to adopt concepts (such as heterosexism) that enable them to get to the root of LGBT oppression. Moreover, liberalism is not an adequate philosophical heuristic for LGBT psychology – this means that, LGBT psychologists should engage with and explore the possibilities offered by radical, feminist and other critical frameworks (e.g., Kitzinger, 1987).

Peel (2001) argues that it is 'essential that we know more about… the way heterosexism is manifest' (p. 552) (see also Gough, 2002, Pratt & Tuffin, 1996; Speer & Potter, 2000). She calls for more and detailed consideration of how mundane heterosexism is constructed 'to envision clear strategies for its eradication' (p. 552). Gough (2002) similarly argues that discourse analytic studies could 'usefully feed into initiatives to combat homophobia and other forms of prejudice' (p. 236). However, Peel (2001) is one of only a handful of authors to explore how we might begin to challenge mundane heterosexism (see also Braun, 2000; Speer & Potter, 2000). She suggests two levels for this challenge – interactional challenges and social activism, and focuses on the former. She explores how in lesbian and gay awareness training sessions, trainers challenge incidents of mundane heterosexism, noting that interactional challenges do not always work and indeed often provide speakers with further opportunities to engage in mundane heterosexism (see also Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004). There is also the issue of what counts as a successful (or unsuccessful) challenge: How do we know when this has happened interactionally? Despite these complications, Peel suggests that lesbian and gay awareness training can be a site for positive social change by equipping participants with alternative discourses of homosexuality. Of course we cannot begin to challenge heterosexist discourse without first mapping its terrain and this project has only just begun.

References

Braun, V. (2000). Heterosexism in focus group research: Collusion and challenge. *Feminism & Psychology*, *10*(1): 133-40.

Brickell, C. (2001). Whose 'special treatment'? Heterosexism and the problems with liberalism. *Sexualities*, *4*(2): 211-235.

Causey, K. A. & Duran-Aydintug, C. (1997). Tendency to stigmatize lesbian mothers in custody cases. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, *28*(1/2): 171-182.

Clarke, V. (2001). What about the children? Arguments against lesbian and gay parenting. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24(5): 555-570.

Clarke, V. & Kitzinger, C. (2004). Lesbian and gay parents on talk shows: resistance or collusion in heterosexism? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1: 195-217.

Clarke, V., Kitzinger, C. & Potter, J. (2004). 'Kids are just cruel anyway': Lesbian and gay parents' talk about homophobic bullying. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43: 531-550.

Crawford, I. & Solliday, E. (1996). The attitudes of undergraduate college students toward gay parenting. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *30*(4): 63-77.

Dryden, C. (1999). *Being married, doing gender: A critical analysis of gender relationships in marriage*. London: Routledge.

Ellis, S. E. (2001). Doing being liberal: Implicit prejudice in focus group talk about lesbian and gay human rights issues. *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, 2(2): 43-9.

Epstein, D. & Steinberg, D. L. (1998). American dreamin': Discoursing liberally on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *21*(1): 77-94.

Fraser, I. H., Fish, T. A. & MacKenzie, T. M. (1995). Reactions to child custody decisions involving homosexual and heterosexual parents. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Sciences*, *27*(1): 52-63.

Gill, R. (1993). Justifying injustice: Broadcasters' accounts of inequality in radio. In E. Burman & Ian P. (eds), *Discourse analytic research: Repertoires and readings of texts in action* (pp. 75-93). London: Routledge.

Gough, B. (2002). 'I've always tolerated it but…': Heterosexual masculinity and the discursive reproduction of homophobia. In A. Coyle & C. Kitzinger (eds), *Lesbian and gay psychology: New perspectives* (pp. 219-238). Oxford: BPS Blackwell.

Hardman, K. L. J. (1997). Social workers' attitudes to lesbian clients. *British Journal of Social Work, 27*: 545-563.

King, B. R. & Black, K. N. (1999). Extent of relational stigmatisation of lesbians and their children by heterosexual college students. *Journal of Homosexuality, 37*(2): 65-81.

Kitzinger, C. (1987). *The social construction of lesbianism*. London: Sage.

Kitzinger, C. & Perkins, R. (1993). *Changing our minds: Lesbian feminism and psychology*. London: Onlywomen Press.

Maney, D. W. & Cain, R. E. (1997). Preservice elementary teachers' attitudes toward gay and lesbian parenting. *Journal of School Health, 67*(6): 236-241.

McCreanor, T. (1996). 'Why strengthen the city wall when the enemy has poisoned the well?': An assay of anti-homosexual discourse in New Zealand. *Journal of Homosexuality, 31*(4): 75-105.

McLeod, A. & Crawford, I. (1998). The postmodern family: An examination of the psychosocial and legal perspectives of gay and lesbian parenting. In G. M. Herek (ed.), *Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals* (pp. 211-222). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McLeod, A., Andrew C., Crawford, I. and Zechmeister, J. (1999). Heterosexuals' attitudes toward gay fathers and their children. *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality, 11*(1): 43-62.

O'Hara, L.L.S., & Meyer, M. (2003). 'I never felt more uncomfortable in my life': University students' discursive constructions of 'The Lesbian Convention'. *Communication Studies*, 54 (2).

Parker, Ian (1990). Discourse: Definitions and contradictions. *Philosophical psychology, 3*(2): 189-204.

Peel, E. (2001). Mundane heterosexism: Understanding incidents of the everyday. *Women's Studies International Forum, 24*(5): 541-554.

Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London: Sage.

Potter, J. (1997). Discourse analysis as a way of analysing naturally occurring talk. In D. Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (pp. 144-160). London: Sage.

Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.

Potter, J., Wetherell, M., Gill, R. and Edwards, D. (1990). Discourse: Noun, verb or social practice? *Philosophical Psychology*, *3*(2): 205-217.

Praat, A. C. & Tuffin, K. F. (1996). Police discourses of homosexual men in New Zealand. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *31*(4): 57-73.

Smith, A. M. (1992). Resisting the erasure of lesbian sexuality: A challenge for queer activism. In K. Plummer (ed.), *Modern homosexualities: Fragments of lesbian and gay experience* (pp. 200-213). London: Routledge.

Speer, S. A. & Potter, J. (2000). The management of heterosexist talk: Conversational resources and prejudiced claims. *Discourse & Society*, *11*(4): 543-572.

Taylor, G. W. & Ussher, J. M. (2001). Making sense of S&M: A discourse analytic account. *Sexualities*, *4*(3): 293-314.

Wetherell, M. & Potter, J. (1992). *Mapping the language of racism: Discourse and the legitimation of exploitation*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Wetherell, M. and Potter, J. (1988). Discourse analysis and the identification of interpretative repertoires. In Charles Antaki (ed), *Analysing everyday explanation: A casebook of methods* (pp. 168-183). London: Sage.

Wetherell M., Stiven, H. and Potter, J. (1987). Unequal egalitarianism: A preliminary study of discourses concerning gender and employment opportunities. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *26*: 59-72.

White, S. M. & Franzini, L. R. (1999). Heteronegativism? The attitudes of gay men and lesbians toward heterosexuals. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *37*(1): 65-79.