

**'Kids are just cruel anyway': Lesbian and Gay Parents' Talk About Homophobic
Bullying**

Victoria Clarke, Celia Kitzinger, Jonathan Potter and Elizabeth Peel

Correspondence: Victoria Clarke, School of Psychology, University of the West of England,
St Matthias Campus, Oldbury Court Road, Fishponds, Bristol BS16 2JP.

Email: Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk.

Tel: 0117 965 6261 Fax: 0117 3284407

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Abstract

Psychologists recognise homophobic bullying as a serious problem for young lesbians and gay men; however, when it comes to children in lesbian and gay households the issue is not so clear cut. Whereas some psychologists sympathetic to lesbian and gay parenting regard it as a problem, most do not. Despite this, the inevitability and severe psychological consequences of homophobic bullying is a prevalent theme in discussions of lesbian and gay parenting in contexts ranging from custody cases to television talk shows, and is used to implicate lesbians and gay men as unfit to parent. This is the broader context in which lesbian and gay parents discuss their children's experiences of bullying. In this paper, we provide a discursive psychological analysis of lesbian and gay parents' accounts of bullying. We argue that these accounts are discursively and rhetorically designed to deal with a heterosexist social/political context. Lesbian and gay parents face a dilemma of stake and accountability: reports of no bullying risk being heard as implausible given the prevalence of the bullying theme; at the same time, reports of bullying are equally if not more risky, raising the spectre of charges of bad parenting. We explore the detail of their accounts of bullying to illustrate how they are designed to negotiate this web of accountability, and we argue for the importance of analysing the talk of socially/politically marginal/ised groups for critical social psychology.

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Bad for Children?

Homophobic bullying is recognised by psychologists as a serious problem for young lesbians and gay men (see D’Augelli, 1998, Rivers, 1995, 1996). Lesbian and gay psychologists have examined the nature, frequency, and psychological impact of homophobic bullying (D’Augelli, 1998). D’Augelli (1998) indicates that up to half of lesbians and gay men have experienced some form of bullying in school and ‘many school problems of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, such as poor academic performance, truancy, and dropping out of school, are direct or indirect results of verbal and physical abuse perpetrated by peers or others in school’ (p. 200). He argues that the problems of lesbian and gay youths should not be minimised: ‘both systematic victimization and direct attacks must be eliminated’ (p. 206).

In relation to children raised in lesbian and gay households, however, the issue of homophobic bullying is frequently used to undermine their families. Homophobic bullying has been identified as a key focus for opposition to lesbian and gay parenting (Aldred, 1996, 1998, Clarke, 2001a, 2002a, Mohr, 1988, Raymond, 1992). Clarke’s (2002a) analysis of 26 popular television talk shows about lesbian and gay families found that in the majority of the shows, homophobic bullying was repeatedly cited as a reason why lesbians and gay men should be prevented from raising children. Similarly, Ellis’ (2001) analysis of students’ talk about lesbian and gay human rights issues, revealed that in relation to parenting issues the most frequently raised concern was that children would be bullied in school. Furthermore, as Tasker and Golombok (1997; see also Falk, 1989) point out, one of the objections to granting lesbian parents custody of their children ‘that is invariably raised during custody proceedings is that the children will be teased about their mother’s sexual orientation and ostracised by their peers’ (p. 86). In *SEG v RAG* (1987), the judge justified denying custody on the grounds that he ‘wish[ed] to protect the children from peer pressure, teasing and possible ostracising they may encounter as a result of the “alternative lifestyle” their mother has chosen’ (quoted in Mohr, 1988, p. 200). A similar rationale for denying custody to a homosexual parent is evident in *Thigpen v Carpenter* (1987): ‘...homosexuality is generally socially unacceptable, and the children would be exposed to ridicule and teasing by other children’ (quoted in Falk, 1989, p. 943). In *B v B* (1991), although custody was awarded to the lesbian parent, the judge described ‘the question of stigmatisation’ (p. 406) as ‘the most worrying aspect of this case’ (p. 406). In a recent Scottish custody case between a lesbian mother and her sperm donor, the Sheriff ruled that being raised solely by lesbians could cause a child to be victimised in later life (Carolin, 2002). The Sheriff awarded full parental rights to the donor.

Is Homophobic Bullying Inevitable?

Social scientists disagree about whether children in lesbian and gay families experience poor peer relations and bullying because of their parents’ sexuality. Some researchers

sympathetic to lesbian and gay parenting contend that bullying *is* a significant problem for children in lesbian and gay households. According to Stacey and Biblarz (2001), there is 'some credible evidence that children with gay and lesbian parents, especially adolescent children, face homophobic teasing and ridicule that many find difficult to manage' (pp. 171-172). Barret and Robinson (1990), in their work on gay fathers, claim that 'interviews with children of gay parents indicate that children who do disclose often are taunted by being called "queer" and "fag"' (p. 90). For Sears (1994), 'the most commonly experienced problem or fear confronting children, most notably adolescents, from lesbian or gay households is rejection or harassment from peers or the fear that others would assume that they, too, were homosexual' (pp. 143-144). However, many others sympathetic to lesbian and gay parenting claim that children in lesbian and gay families are 'no more likely to experience teasing or bullying than are children from heterosexual single-parent or stepfamily backgrounds' (Tasker and Golombok, 1997, pp. 89-90). Huggins (1989) concluded that 'the assumption that children of lesbian mothers are socially stigmatised by their mothers' sexual choice is not born out by this study' (p. 132). An American Psychological Association (APA) (1995) resource document on lesbian and gay parenting suggests that 'fears about children of lesbians and gay men being... ostracized by peers... are unfounded' (p. 7).

In sum then, although some work on lesbian and gay families *maximises* the incidence and impact of homophobic bullying for children living in lesbian and gay households, much of the literature, including a review by the APA (1995), *minimises* homophobic bullying.

A Discursive Approach to Homophobic Bullying

Most studies of bullying are based on interview and/or questionnaire data collected from lesbian and gay parents, their children, and, on occasion, the children's teachers. The participants are treated as informants on children's experiences of bullying, or on a proxy measure of bullying such as the quality of children's peer relations or their levels of self-esteem (e.g., Huggins, 1989, Tasker and Golombok, 1997). Their talk is inspected for evidence of their knowledge and experience, which is then used to confirm that children do or do not experience bullying. In this paper, we treat lesbian and gay parents' talk rather differently. Our analysis is based on lesbian and gay parents' accounts of homophobic bullying in research interviews and in television documentaries. We analyse these data using discursive psychology (DP) (Potter, 1996a, Potter and Edwards, 2001, Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In DP, interviews are not treated as research instruments, tools for accessing participants' feelings, attitudes and beliefs; rather, interviews are conceptualised as 'an arena in which one can identify and explore the participants' interpretative practices' (Potter, 1996b, pp. 134-135)¹. Interviews are treated as interactions, thus, both the participant's and the researcher's contributions to the conversation are analysed. The prime concern of a

¹ One possible implication of this argument is that psychologists should abandon their attempts to gather 'facts' about bullying from interview data. However, such 'facts' can be potent political resources in support of lesbian and gay parental rights (see Clarke, 2001b).

discursive approach is not establishing 'the truth' about bullying, but how bullying is talked about, and what actions different accounts of bullying are designed to perform.

The Radical Potential of Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is increasingly synonymous with critical and feminist social psychology, so much so that it is frequently assumed that 'criticality' (Spears, 1997) and discourse analysis go hand-in-hand. This is not surprising given that much early discursive work addressed issues of concern to politically engaged researchers, such as racism, sexism, power, gender, heterosexuality, and equality (e.g., Gill, 1993, Henriques et al., 1984, Hollway, 1989, Parker, 1992, Potter and Wetherell, 1987, Wetherell and Potter, 1992, Wetherell et al., 1987).

However, some feminist and critical social psychologists have expressed reservations about the radical potential of discourse analysis (e.g., Gill, 1995). Critiques are usually directed at, what can be described as, 'strong' discursive approaches, that is, approaches located in a constructionist and/or relativist framework, such as DP. Some feminist psychologists argue that this type of approach, which is, they suggest, not anchored in any foundational ethical/moral/political/epistemological commitments, leads to political paralysis and offers no basis on which to choose one version over another (Gill, 1995, Wilkinson, 1997). Further, DP is criticised for being excessively detailed, ignoring broader social and political realities (see Speer, 2001). Some feminist psychologists have argued for a more 'synthetic' approach that draws on elements of a strong discursive perspective while also situating the data in a broader social context (e.g., Wetherell, 1998). Others, however, have questioned the need to go beyond the immediate context of the data in order to produce politically engaged analyses (e.g., Speer, 2001).

An additional layer of concern about the radical potential of discourse analysis focuses on the analysis of the talk of oppressed groups. This is thought to be a fraught business, particularly when participants reproduce discourses that help sustain their subordination (see Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997). Certainly, the focus in much early discursive work was on the talk of the oppressor and not on the talk of the oppressed. Recently, however, feminist and critical psychologists have begun to use strong discursive approaches to explore the talk of marginalised groups like lesbians and gay men and young heterosexual women (e.g., Frith, 1998, Speer and Potter, 2000). This work suggests that detailed analyses of the talk of marginalised groups can provide evidence of the everyday oppressive world under construction. In this paper, we contribute to debates about the radical potential of discourse analysis by providing an example of a detailed discursive analysis of lesbian and gay parents' talk.

To summarise our argument so far, we have shown that people who object to lesbian and gay parenting frequently cite homophobic bullying as a justification for their views. It is not unreasonable to assume that lesbian and gay parents are – on some level – 'aware' that they may encounter criticism if they acknowledge that their children face homophobic bullying.

This 'awareness' introduces a dilemma of stake (Potter, 1996a). That is, lesbian and gay parents' versions of homophobic bullying may be easily dismissed as self-serving rather than objective accounts. Potter (1996a) argues that it is a pervasive possibility that versions may be undermined on the grounds that the speaker has something to gain; as such versions are fashioned to head off such undermining. Drawing on lesbian and gay parents' accounts of bullying in research interviews and in television documentaries, in this paper, we provide evidence both of a dilemma of stake and how it is managed.

Method

Our analysis is based on 11 television documentaries about lesbian and gay families and 11 social science interviews with lesbian and gay parents. The 11 television documentaries were collected between September 1997 and July 2001 and focus on lesbian and/or gay families (see Table 1). Eighteen lesbian and gay parents took part in 11 semi-structured interviews: 3 individual interviews with lesbian parents; 1 individual interview with a gay parent; and 7 joint interviews with lesbian couples. Two lesbian researchers conducted the interviews: the first author and Elizabeth Peel (EP). The first author conducted 7 interviews between March and May 1999, and EP conducted 4 interviews in March 1995. This was a mostly homogenous and privileged sample, all of the participants were white and able-bodied, but there was some variation in education and employment (roughly half of the participants occupied 'white collar' positions and half 'blue collar', with concomitant qualifications). All but three of the participants (who were aged over 50) were aged between 31 and 50.

Insert Table 1 about here

The difficulties of recruiting 'hidden populations' such as lesbians and gay men have been well documented (Fish, 1999). The participants were recruited through personal contacts or 'friendship pyramiding', a commonly used sampling method in lesbian and gay research (e.g., Dunne, 1997, Kitzinger, 1987). Friendship sampling is limited because it can provide access only to a discrete and homogenous network of participants (Dunne, 1997). This type of sampling (especially if the researcher is white, middle class and able-bodied, as are both the first author and EP) tends to exclude less privileged lesbians and gay men. All of the participants were interviewed in their homes, which were in the Midlands and in the South East of England. The interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours (although conversation often continued beyond the end of the formal interview when the tape recorder was turned off). The interviews were collected as part of two different projects: the first author's research and EP's research. Both sets of interviewees were told that they were participating in a project conducted by a lesbian researcher about the experiences of gay and/or lesbian parents.

The first author and EP both asked their interviewees general questions about their families

and family life ('tell me about your family?'²) and about their experiences of being a lesbian/gay parent ('what is the most positive thing about raising children as a lesbian/gay man?'). Because the first author's research was on the social construction of lesbian and gay parenting, she also asked her interviewees questions about issues raised in the psychological literature, in media debates, and in lesbian and gay contexts ('What do you think about the argument that children need appropriate role models?'; 'Do you think your family challenges any stereotypes?').

Lesbian and gay researchers who conduct interview studies with lesbians and gay men often report that many of their participants only agreed to participate because the interviewers were also lesbian or gay (Dunne, 1997, Kitzinger, 1987). Lesbian and gay participants sometimes request that their data is handled and analysed by a lesbian or gay researcher who is *accountable* to the lesbian and gay community (Virginia Braun, personal communication, 2002). This was the case both for the first author and for EP. This is perhaps unsurprising given that psychology has a record of doing research *against* lesbians and gay men: prior to the 1970s, most research on homosexuality supported a pathological model, and much of this research relied exclusively on interviews (Shively et al., 1984). Both lesbian and gay participants and researchers frequently assume that a shared sexual identity and shared membership of a marginal group will facilitate a level of understanding that it is not possible for heterosexuals and lesbians/gay men to achieve. They can skip over detailed explanations about issues relating to lesbian/gay sexuality and get on with the business in hand. Although this may often be the case, this approach to interviewing ignores the ways in which our classed, 'racial'/ethnic and political identities intersect with our sexual identities, alongside the power relations of researcher and researched. Certainly, I (VC) felt that the interviewees primarily positioned and spoke to me as a researcher and not as 'just another' lesbian.

We have information about the sexual identity of only five of the documentary producers/interviewers (2 are heterosexual and 3 are lesbians/gay men). The fact that both the interview and the documentary participants designed their talk for an audience other than lesbians and gay men (television viewers and social science researchers), perhaps explains some of the similarities we identify in their accounts (see Clarke, 2002a, for further details).

The interview and documentary data were initially transcribed orthographically. All the data pertaining to the issue of homophobic bullying were collected together and transcribed in more detail, using a simplified version of the Jeffersonian system (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). These data were subjected to further analysis and different types of accounts of bullying were identified. In this paper, we present an analysis of two types of account. Thus, our analysis is divided into two sections.

² All of the examples of interview questions are taken from the first author's interview schedule.

In the first section, we consider instances where lesbian and gay parents report that their children have *not* been victims of bullying. In the second section, we examine lesbian and gay parents' reports of bullying that serve to, what we call, 'normalise' homophobic bullying. By this we mean, discursively presenting bullying as normal and regular (Potter, 1996a). The ways in which lesbian and gay parents construct accounts both of no bullying and of bullying minimise the incidence and the effects of homophobic bullying. It is possible to take this minimisation as evidence simply that lesbian and gay parents are unaware of homophobic bullying; that as far as they are concerned their children do not face homophobic bullying. Alternatively, this minimisation could be taken as evidence that they are colluding in their own oppression; that they are, in other words, falsely conscious. We could interpret our data to mean that these lesbian and gay parents need their consciousnesses raising because they – and their children – really are oppressed. As Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1997) point out, this is a recognisable strategy in feminist research when the views of the researcher and the participants are at odds. However, our argument is that their accounts of bullying attend to a very real dilemma: on the one hand, they will be held accountable and punished for making homophobia visible, on the other, denying bullying will be dismissed as implausible. In the analysis that follows, we show how lesbian and gay parents construct their versions of bullying to manage this dilemma.

Reporting No Homophobic Bullying

In this section, we focus on two examples of accounts of no homophobic bullying, exploring the discursive construction of these accounts.

Sonja and Lori

The first fragment of data is from an interview with a lesbian couple, Sonja and Lori, who together parent three school-age children from Sonja's previous marriage. Sonja has been talking about the impact of 'coming out' as lesbian on her children. In this fragment, Lori initially reports no bullying, and then (minimally) acknowledges bullying (in response to a question from the interviewer). Sonja challenges this account, vigorously claiming that her children are not bullied. Lori ultimately concedes to Sonja and relinquishes her earlier acknowledgement of bullying. Thus, this fragment provides evidence of flux in the degree to which homophobic bullying is minimised as the salience of stake varies.

Example 1: Sonja and Lori (VC LM04, 17/03/99)³

- 1 Sonja: They don't seem to bother about it
- 2 Lori: (°They're not. It's true°)
- 3 Int: °Aren't they?°
- 4 Lori: Wel- we've not experienced that=I mean we're

³ The heading indicates the initials of the interviewer (VC indicates Victoria Clarke, EP indicates Elizabeth Peel), the interview code, and the date the interview was conducted.

5 aware that (0.2) there's probably friends saying
6 stuff 'n (0.2) I mean we've 'eard it haven't we in
7 the back la:ne
8 Sonja: But we've not heard nega[tive things]
9 Lori: [>But- No that's wh]at I'm
10 saying<=
11 Sonja: =We've never heard anything negative [from chil-]
12 Int: [mm hm]
13 Sonja: other children talking. When we've overheard
14 stuff it's always been positive,
15 Int: mm hm
16 (0.2)
17 Sonja: as if it's trendy or something
18 [or as if it's] really,
19 Int: [huhuhuh]
20 (0.2)
21 Lori: (And) the only thing we 'eard from the back
22 lane was that (0.2) 'oh their mum's a lesbian'
23 (.)
24 Lori: Wasn't it?
25 Sonja: No [they're]
26 Lori: [>Someone wa-<]
27 Sonja: throwing apples [Ye:ah]
28 Lori: [A kid] was just ride- going by on a
29 bi:ke
30 Int: mm [hm]
31 Lori: [The]re weren't nobody responded to that or
32 anything it was though they was all like (0.2)
33 'oh right yeah (.) we kn(h)ow'

On line 3, the interviewer challenges ('Aren't they?') Lori's claim of no difficulties ('They're not. It's true', line 2). In response, Lori at first recycles her claim ('we've not *experienced* that', line 4) using the authority of her experience to validate this claim⁴. In so doing, she implicitly challenges the view that children in lesbian families inevitably suffer bullying. Then, in the absence of uptake, Lori repairs this account to offer a hedged and minimising account of possible on-going bullying ('friends saying stuff', lines 5-6). Referring to 'friends' (rather than say other children) and 'saying stuff' (rather than say ridiculing or abusing) mitigates any

⁴ This also deals with the issue of awareness (i.e., that lesbian and gay parents only say that their children have not experience bullying because they are unaware of their children's experiences of bullying) – Lori *does* have direct experience of their children's lives.

suggestion of overt and aggressive anti-lesbian motivated bullying. Lori then upgrades this account from the realm of possibility ('there's probably friends saying stuff', lines 5-6) to experiential certainty ('I mean we've 'eard it haven't we', line 6), appealing to Sonja's own experience and selecting her as the next speaker.

Sonja does not align with Lori's claim about 'friends saying stuff' ('we've not heard negative things', line 8, 'we've never heard anything negative', line 11, 'when we've overheard stuff it's always been positive, as if it's trendy or something', lines 13-17). In response, Lori backs down retrieving just one instance, an exception to the benign state of affairs described by Sonja ('the *only* thing we 'eard', line 19), from what she earlier presented as a continuing and multiple problem. Her repetition of 'back lane' signals that this is a new version of events designed to replace what she said earlier. The exception is safely located in the past ('the only thing we 'eard', line 19) and is minimised in 3 main ways. First, by repairing the description of the person involved from 'someone' (line 26), which possibly indexes adulthood, to 'a kid' (line 28), a young and, therefore, less threatening person. Second, by minimising the significance of this 'kid's' actions ('a kid was just ride- going by on a bike', lines 28-29) through the construction of an image evocative of children playing and 'hanging out' in their neighbourhood. The use of 'just' further emphasises the insignificance of what the 'kid' was doing. Third, by the description of how the news that 'oh their mum's a lesbian' (line 22) was received at the time, presumably by the other children in the back lane. Lori claims that this information was treated as non-newsworthy by the others ('nobody responded to that or anything', lines 31-32), because they already knew ('oh right yeah we know', line 33). Ironically, Lori now minimises any suggestion of homophobic bullying, and her account of what she and Sonja have overheard in the back lane aligns with Sonja's claims about bullying.

As the children's biological parent (note that 'mum' in line 22 is singular and would normatively be heard as referring to Sonja, the biological mother), there is perhaps more at stake for Sonja if bullying is an issue for their children. In retreating from her early admission of bullying in the face of Sonja's claims of no bullying, Lori is perhaps acceding to Sonja's maternal right to define whether or not *her* children are bullied, a right apparently not equally shared with Lori. Lori's retreat from her claim and her affiliation with Sonja possibly reflects and reconstitutes the primacy of Sonja's relationship with their children.

The fragment continues with the interviewer asking another question about the children's experiences of bullying at school. In response, Sonja offers a robust report of no bullying.

Example 1a: Sonja and Lori

34 Int: mm hm (0.2) mm hm (.) So have er:m (0.2) the kids
35 had any problems at (0.2) at school or anything
36 like that,
37 (0.8)
38 Sonja: Nothing that I know of.

39 (0.2)

40 Sonja: >°What so ever°< >[I've] ↑asked them now and again

41 Lori: [°No°]

42 Sonja: if [peop]le ask or say anything and they just

43 Int: [mm]

44 Sonja: say no,

45 Int: mm hm

46 Sonja: And I don't- I often wonder if they're just

47 being kind but I genuinely don't think (.) the

48 kids around here seem to ↑notice or,

49 Int: mm [hm]

50 Sonja: [>I] don't know=What is it< What do you think?

The interviewer pursues the topic of problems suffered by children as a result of their parents' lesbianism, now shifting the focus of concern to school (indicating perhaps her scepticism about Sonja's report of no bullying). Sonja does not just say 'no' to the interviewer's question, but provides an account, and in so doing treats the answer 'no' as accountable, as requiring justification and explanation, and possibly as non-normative. The claim of no bullying is again justified with reference to experiential authority ('Nothing that I know of', line 38). Using the extreme point on the relevant descriptive dimension ('Nothing'), what Pomerantz (1986) called an 'extreme case formulation', works to strengthen Sonja's claim. Pomerantz noted that extreme case formulations tend to occur when claims are being bolstered against disagreement.

Sonja attends to possible scepticism, and to the absence of uptake after her initial response to the interviewer's question, by upgrading and further extremising her claim of no bullying ('what so ever', line 40), a claim with which Lori aligns ('No', line 41). Sonja also attends to possible scepticism by providing evidence for the adequacy of her knowledge. She reports having asked her children on several occasions whether or not they experience bullying. The children 'just say no' (lines 42 and 44), which suggests that no elaboration or justification is necessary because there is nothing to conceal. Sonja additionally attends to the interviewer's scepticism by speculating aloud about her children's motivation for denying bullying ('I often wonder if they're just being kind', lines 46-47). She makes a show of dismissing this theory because, as she contends (in a hedged fashion – 'seem', line 48), her lesbianism is not noteworthy ('I genuinely don't think the kids around here seem to notice', line 47-48).

To summarise then, in this example when the interviewer – an 'expert' – challenges Lori's claim of no bullying, Lori initially adheres to her initial claim and then contradicts it by offering a mitigated account of bullying and so manages the dilemma of being heard as implausible versus the risk of being held accountable. Lori also varies her version of events in deference to Sonia, who has more entitlement to define her children's experiences and more at stake as

their biological mother. Through the use of various devices such as extreme case formulations and experiential authority, Sonja constructs an account of no bullying that forestalls charges of implausibility and manages her accountability. In response to the interviewer's second question, which for Sonja raises the spectre of accusations of implausibility, she shifts into a higher gear and constructs an even more elaborate account of no bullying.

Benjamin

The second fragment is from an interview with a gay father, Benjamin, who has 5 adult children. As the fragment opens Benjamin is talking about how his children responded when he 'came out' as a gay man in his thirties. He then (spontaneously) reports that his children were *not* bullied as a result of his coming out as gay. The interviewer challenges this account, and, in response, Benjamin recycles his initial claim of no bullying.

Example 2: Benjamin (VC GF01, 30/5/99)

1 Ben: I mean I couldn't have wanted them to be more
2 positive,

3 Int: mm hm

4 Ben: than, in-in their support (0.2) than they are,

5 Int: mm::

6 Ben: And I don't (.) certainly don't fee- .hh >None of
7 them as far as I know< have ever been tea:sed or,
8 (0.6) bullied >or anything like that< because of it.
9 And (in the-) 'n 'n certainly Todd .hhh erm: >who was
10 quite up front about it 'parently< was- .hhh Was er:m
11 (0.2) was certainly laying himself open to that.

12 Int: mm:

13 Ben: Erm but er (0.8) .hhhh Not as far as I know has it
14 ever been a problem for them. hhhhh

15 Int: °mm°
16 (0.8)

17 Int: That's interesting=A lot of (.) people that I've
18 spoken to have said that it (0.6) that

19 Ben: (>mm<)

20 Int: not only has it been a problem for their kids in
21 terms of their kids' sort of reaction to it,

22 Ben: [mm]

23 Int: [.hhh] Kids have responded quite negatively when
24 parents have come out after being in a, .hhh
25 st[raight relationship]

26 Ben: [Go:d No:]

27 Int: and also the kids themselves have experienced lots

28 of problems that they've found it quite difficult
 29 (0.4) to,
 30 Ben: Yeah?
 31 Int: to manage.
 32 Ben: Go:d. °Well°, .hh >I mean< .hhh You know you sh-
 33 Y- I- It would be er:m (0.2) t- You know >if you
 34 were<=If you were t- k- (0.2) .hhh er:m (.) It
 35 would be interesting to (0.8) Y- you really have
 36 t- (.) ask them.
 37 Int: mm
 38 Ben: I would say=If you want to .hhhh erm get er >real
 39 arns< But my impression is (.) certainly
 40 not.=That there was a (0.2) .hhhh (.) er:m (0.2)
 41 there was a problem.

In this fragment, Benjamin reports no bullying ('*none* of them... have *ever* been teased or, bullied', lines 6-8). His use of extreme case formulations strengthens his claim and indicates that he is perhaps speaking as someone who cannot assume a sympathetic hearing. This is to say, Benjamin designs his claim to be robust and persuasive to head off potential questions and challenges from the interviewer. He further orients to possible scepticism by providing evidence for his claim. First, by invoking his experiential authority: 'as far as I know' (line 7), 'not as far as I know' (line 13), and, later, 'my impression is' (line 40). Second, by reporting his son Todd's attitude toward his sexuality: he was 'quite up front about' (line 10) having a gay father. By constructing a situation where bullying was likely to, but did *not*, occur ('up front about it' has echoes of 'flaunting it'), Benjamin indirectly challenges the inevitability of homophobic bullying. Benjamin also anticipates possible speculation about his children being forced to live a life of secrecy and shame: the *only* reason why other children did not taunt them was because his gayness was kept a well-guarded secret. In describing Todd as 'up front about it', Benjamin implies that his children were not forced to keep his sexuality a secret, as so many children are. In so doing, Benjamin displays that he is a good parent and not one who, in order to protect himself, forces his children to keep secrets and tell lies.

Benjamin's attempts to ward off possible negative uptake are thwarted when the interviewer indirectly questions his account, and compels Benjamin to explain his divergence from what she constructs as the 'normative' state of affairs ('a lot of people... lots of problems', lines 17-31). In response, Benjamin recycles his earlier claim of no bullying backed up by his experiential authority ('my impression is certainly not', lines 39-40). He only does this, however, after indicating surprise at the interviewer's comments ('God', lines 26 and 32, 'Yeah?', line 30), and taking quite a few attempts to launch his reply (lines 32-35), suggesting difficulty with the interviewer's question. His use of 'well' indicates that he is launching a dispreferred response (Pomerantz, 1984). That is, one that departs from the interviewer's

assessment of what is normal for children in lesbian and gay families. Research has demonstrated a preference for agreement (in relation to assessments), and that disagreements tend to be hedged and warranted, and, thus, attend to a norm for agreement. Benjamin's suggestion that the interviewer would 'really have to ask them [his children]... to... get er real arns' (lines 35-39), indicates that *he* interprets the interviewer's comments as a challenge to the status of his knowledge and to the legitimacy of his claim of no bullying.

To summarise, as in the previous example, Benjamin's version is challenged by the interviewer. Benjamin cannot plausibly retreat from his claim nor strengthen it to any great degree given the very strong case he built for no bullying in lines 6-14. He deals with this dilemma by referring the interviewer to the 'horses' mouth' – his children – for a final answer. His further reference to his experience ('my impression is', line 39) again deals with the issue of awareness. It allows him to show awareness and yet concedes the possibility that there may be aspects of his children's experiences of which he is not fully aware.

Reporting Homophobic Bullying

We shift now from focusing on talk about children not suffering bullying to accounts that concede that bullying *is* a concern and are attentive to its causes and nature.

Glyn and Scott

The following passage is taken from a documentary entitled 'My Parents Are Gay'. This part of the documentary is about a gay family: Glyn and his partner, Richard, and Glyn's two sons, Craig and Scott. The fragment constitutes the start of a sequence about the 'difficulties' for children of growing up in a gay family (other 'issues' covered include nudity in the home and Craig's and Scott's fears about paedophilia when Richard first moved into their family home). Our primary concern is with Glyn's depiction of bullying, however, the narration, the editing and Scott's talk about bullying, provide the context for interpreting this, and they also allow the documentary makers to do some subtle anti-gay work. The speakers are the narrator of the documentary, Scott, a waiter working at a restaurant that Glyn and Richard are filmed in, Richard, and Glyn. This fragment cuts from Scott and his brother in a leisure centre swimming pool to Glyn and Richard in a restaurant (Glyn talking about bullying is prefaced by shots of him and Richard ordering their meal), and then back to Scott in the swimming pool.

Example 4: Glyn and Scott (*My Parents are Gay*, 1998)

- 1 ((swimming pool))
2 Narrator: For Craig and Scott (.) the day to day reality
3 of living with two gay dads (.) hasn't been easy.
4 ((cut to Scott and Craig in the swimming
5 pool))
6 Scott: In the end I ended up changing schools becos
7 I was getting bullied so much,
8 (1.0) 'n (0.8) I- kept getting in fights,

9 ((cut to Richard and Glyn in a restaurant))

10 Waiter: Would you like to choose your starter?

11 Richard: mm[m]

12 Waiter: [Th]ere's cream of watercress soup, (0.2) gratin

13 of beetroot,

14 Richard: Yeah I'll have that please.

15 Glyn: Kids get bullied because they're fat, because

16 they've got sticky out ears, because they've got

17 ginger 'ai:r, 'cos they've got spots, because

18 they've got a peculiar (.) eye:, or a walk, or-

19 >You know< (0.2) Kids are just cruel anyway.

20 (.)

21 Glyn: It's just another lever to use.

22 (0.2)

23 Glyn: hhh So basically (.) I mean (0.2) Scott gets bullied

24 'cos he's fat and he's ginger.

25 (0.6)

26 Glyn: I mean despite the fact that I'm gay

27 (0.4)

28 Glyn: So I mean (.) >does it matter?<

29 ((cut back to Scott in the swimming pool))

30 Scott: They said things li:ke, (0.8) 'o:h (.) like father

31 like son,'

32 (0.2)

33 Scott: 'n (.) 'if your dad's gay you are:',

34 (.) 'your entire family's queer'='n

35 (0.2)

36 Scott: It made me feel like, (1.6) I never had a friend in

37 the world.

38 (0.4)

39 Scott: I jus-

40 (1.2)

41 Scott: Nobody, (0.6) liked me anymore::,=(>It was<) (1.0) I

42 'ad no meaning.

In this fragment, Glyn conflates homophobic, and, what we might call, everyday, bullying to build an account of homophobic bullying as routine. He does this in a number of ways, but primarily through the use of listing. Glyn lists six reasons why 'kids get bullied' ('because they're fat, because they've got sticky out ears, because they've got ginger 'air, 'cos they've got spots, because they've got a peculiar eye, or a walk, or-', lines 15-18). Three-part lists are typically treated as sufficient to convey generality (Jefferson, 1990). The fact that Glyn

constructs a six-part list indicates that he is perhaps speaking as someone who cannot assume a sympathetic hearing.

Glyn's use of 'you know' (line 19) serves as an invocation of common knowledge: something we *all* know by virtue of our status as cultural members (Edwards, 1997). This suggests that Glyn's account of bullying is neither novel nor controversial, but is something with which we – Glyn, the interviewer, the audience – are all well acquainted. Appealing to common knowledge serves as well to build affiliation between Glyn and the interviewer/audience by drawing the interviewer/audience into Glyn's account, and provides evidence of Glyn's orientation to possible attack. Glyn also builds his account of bullying as routine through the use of the iterative present tense ('kids get', line 15), which constructs bullying as an enduring feature of childhood. The reasons he cites for bullying (being fat, and having sticky out ears, ginger hair, spots, a peculiar eye, and a peculiar walk) further minimise and generalise bullying through their ordinariness and familiarity.

In this example, children's 'cruelty' ('kids are just cruel anyway', line 19) is used to explain the endemic nature of bullying, and, correspondingly, the endemic nature of bullying makes inferentially available claims about the character or disposition of children who perpetrate bullying (Edwards, 1995). Normalising bullying and constructing children as inherently cruel renders bullying 'non-accountable' and without an obvious instigator: after all, children cannot be held accountable for their behaviour, especially when they are constitutionally cruel.

Glyn indicates that homophobic bullying is similar to everyday bullying ('it's just another lever to use', line 21). The use of the word 'just' helps build equivalence by minimising the significance of his sexuality. Although Glyn concedes that Scott is bullied, he denies that Scott is the victim of homophobic bullying ('Scott gets bullied 'cos he's fat and he's ginger. I mean despite the fact that I'm gay', lines 23-24, 26). In so doing, he implicitly challenges assumptions about the inevitability of children in lesbian and gay families suffering homophobic bullying.

It is clear that we (the interviewer/audience) are supposed to answer 'no' to Glyn's rhetorical question about whether his sexuality holds any relevance for the issue of bullying ('does it matter?', line 28). However, Glyn's attempt to normalise bullying, and to deny that his son is bullied because he is gay, ultimately comes undone through the use of editing (see Pomerantz, 1988/9). This segment of the documentary has, for the sake of analysis, three main parts. First, there is an initial claim about difficulties of gay family life for children ('the day to day reality of living with two gay dads hasn't been easy', lines 2-3), a gloss for which what follows is set up as offering an instantiation. The juxtaposition of this narrative with Scott's account of suffering bullying ('I ended up changing schools becous I was getting bullied so much', lines 6-7), even though he does not indicate why he was bullied, serves to suggest that homophobic bullying is one the difficulties children in gay families experience. Second, we shift to Glyn's conflation of homophobic and everyday bullying, his minimisation of the gravity of bullying and his denial that Scott is bullied because he is gay. Third, and finally, we

shift back to Scott and his extremised and generalised account of his experiences of homophobic bullying ('They said things like, 'oh like father like son'...', lines 30-42). Clearly, Glyn's sexuality does matter (according to Scott and to the documentary makers who use Scott's experiential authority to undermine Glyn), and the validity of the initial understanding engendered by the editing is reinforced.

This editing does some subtle (any assaults on Glyn's fitness to parent are only implicit) but effective anti-gay work. Glyn deals with the issue of his awareness by making a clear, non-hedged, statement about why Scott is bullied ('I mean (0.2) Scott gets bullied 'cos he's fat and he's ginger', lines 23-24). He also deals with his accountability and interest by producing a carefully normalised account of homophobic bullying. The juxtaposition of Glyn's and Scott's versions of events shows Glyn both to be unaware and to be self-interested, dodging his accountability for his children's experiences of bullying.

Susie and Anna

The second example of normalising homophobic bullying is from an interview with a lesbian couple, Susie and Anna (Susie is the co-parent and Anna the biological mother of two teenage children). We join the interview at a point when Susie and Anna have just described the difficulties ('quite a bit of heckling') experienced by Anna's son, Simon, and his friend, Trevor (who also has lesbian parents), when they were at school in their early teens. At the start of this example, Susie refers back to an earlier comment she made to the interviewer about including the children of lesbian and gay parents in her research, 'because erm they're the ones that have actually to go through it'. Susie then describes one of the views she and Anna took about Simon's experiences of homophobic bullying.

Example 5: Susie and Anna (VC LM03, 05/03/99)

1 Susie: Yeah=>so I think it< (.) That's why I said (0.2) it
2 might be quite useful to actually interview the
3 chil[dren]=
4 Int: [mm]
5 Susie: =because (0.2) erm (.) they're the ones that have
6 actually had to go through it (.) because (0.2)
7 there's nothing more cruel than other children,
8 Int: m[m]
9 Susie: [>cal]ling you names<
10 (.)
11 .hh And I mean one of the views we took (0.2) about
12 the whole thing was well (0.2) if they weren't
13 calling him names because his parents were lesbians,
14 they'd be calling him names because he's got big
15 ea:rs, or little ea::rs, or: a big nose, or
16 >whatever<,
17 Anna: Or his dad [(was) fat]

18 Susie: [So chil-]
 19 Anna: or his mum looked old [or you know]
 20 Susie: [>Yeah so children<] I mean we
 21 had to be careful not to blow it out of all
 22 proportion and think 'oh god we're awful we're
 23 causing our children all these problem:s'
 24 Int: mm
 25 Susie: er because children get picked on for all sorts of
 26 reasons,
 27 Int: mm
 28 Susie: and (.) erm (0.2) that was just another reason.

Susie and Anna, like Glyn above, generalise bullying by each producing a list of reasons why children might call Simon names. Susie's list is made up of three items ('big ears, or little ears, or a big nose', lines 14-15) and a generalised list completer (GLC) (Jefferson, 1990). According to Jefferson, GLCs indicate that there are "many more" relevant nameables which will not, and need not, be specified' (p. 68). This means that, including a GLC in a list is an especially robust way of indicating generality. Anna's list is made up of three items including a GLC ('or his dad was fat or his mum looked old or you know', lines 16-18). The specific list items Susie and Anna produce warrant brief examination. Selecting mundane reasons for name-calling (big ears, little ears, big nose, fat father, old looking mother) helps build the normalising account. Further, the use of both 'big ears' *and* 'little ears' suggests that bullying is rarely systematic or driven by particular prejudices; rather, it is indiscriminate and every child can fall prey to it, regardless of the size of their ears and, by implication, the (homo)sexuality of their parents. Anna also normalises features of parents as a cause for bullying ('or his dad was fat or his mum looked old', lines 16-18). She is perhaps attending to the suggestion that bullying motivated by features of the parent is qualitatively different from bullying motivated by features of the child (she and Susie are burdening their child with an *extra* difficulty). Susie, like Glyn, also obscures any differences between homophobic and everyday bullying ('children get picked on for all sorts of reasons, and erm that was just another reason', lines 24-27), and invokes children's cruelty as a cause of bullying ('because there's nothing more cruel than other children', lines 6-7).

Susie, perhaps attentive to the danger of appearing to trivialise bullying, and to she and Anna appearing callous, packages their normalising account as only 'one of the views' (line 12) they took on the issue. This would allow her to marshal another view if this one were to be challenged by the interviewer. Susie explicitly attends to possible criticisms of their parenting, when she voices a potential complaint about she and Anna as parents ('oh god we're awful we're causing our children all these problems', lines 21-22). By producing the complaint in such a way that she can easily dismiss it, she heads-off any attempt to use this complaint to criticise her and Anna's parenting. By extremising the complaint ('oh god', 'we're awful', and

'all these problems'), Susie constructs it as irrational and hysterical, blowing things out of all proportion. Through an implicit contrast between the normalising and the extreme view, she sustains the validity and reasonableness of the normalising account of bullying.

To summarise this section then, these lesbian and gay parents deal with the dilemma of implausibility versus self-interest by acknowledging but normalising homophobic bullying. However, normalising bullying is far from a neat solution; indeed, these parents risk becoming trapped in a web of accountability (and Glyn *is* trapped by the editors of the documentary). This highlights the complexity of talking about homophobic bullying for lesbian and gay parents.

Discussion

To summarise our argument in this paper, claims about homophobic bullying are frequently used to undermine lesbian and gay parents, and it is not unreasonable to assume that lesbian and gay parents, and specifically the parents in our data corpus, are 'aware' of this. One possibility is that the lesbian and gay parents in our corpus report no bullying or minimise the incidence and effects of bullying simply because they are unaware – unaware that their children are (or were) bullied, unaware of the psychological impact of the bullying on their children. However, the details of these parents' accounts show careful attention to the issue of their awareness: Sonja and Lori make eight references to what they've experienced, overheard and know about their children's experiences of bullying, and Benjamin three references to what he knows about his children's experiences. It could also be argued that these parents are falsely conscious and refuse to acknowledge the reality of their and their children's oppression. An alternative explanation – and the one we favour in this paper – is that these lesbian and gay parents produce accounts of bullying which attend to and manage a dilemma of stake and accountability. Reports of no bullying risk being heard as implausible both by opponents and by supporters of lesbian and gay parenting. Given the frequency of references to the inevitability and damaging effects of homophobic bullying in debates about lesbian and gay parenting, opponents of lesbian and gay parenting are unlikely to be a responsive audience to reports of no bullying. To paraphrase Mandy Rice-Davies' famous phrase, well they would say that, wouldn't they! Equally, lesbian researchers such as VC and EP like the lesbian and gay parents can claim authority of lesbian and gay experience (including the experience of oppression) and thus have grounds on which to question the plausibility of accounts of no bullying – which, as examples 1 and 2 show, VC does. At the same time, reporting bullying is equally if not more risky, given – again – the frequency with which it is used to undermine lesbian and gay parents. There is a danger then, that these lesbian and gay parents' accounts of bullying may be exposed and undermined as self-interested; our argument is that their accounts are rhetorically and discursively designed to head off such undermining.

There is some evidence of variability in our corpus, which highlights the discursive and rhetoric design of the accounts of bullying. In example 1, Lori varies her account in deference

to Sonja who has more entitlement and more at stake as the children's biological mother. And, both Lori's and Sonja's, and Benjamin's – in example 2 – warranting of their accounts of no bullying go into a higher gear when the interviewer, positioned as 'the expert', challenges their account. Unfortunately, we have not come across any contrasting maximising accounts of bullying – this would be an interesting issue for future research. In general, in accounting for something, that thing is treated as accountable (that is, requiring further explanation and justification). This suggests some trouble with reporting no bullying. In the two examples of accounts of bullying, bullying, in general, and homophobic bullying, in particular, is normalised – presented as normal – and minimised – softened and made to seem acceptable (Potter, 1996a)⁵. Potter (1996a) describes normalising and minimising as key resources in constructing factual accounts. These resources are used to present accounts of bullying as factual and disinterested descriptions. Normalising accounts construct bullying as part of the landscape of childhood, as, indeed, non-accountable.

We now consider wider discourse on lesbian and gay parenting in order to develop our understanding of these data. 'Lesbian/gay parent' is a non-normative identity, thus the issue of how lesbians' and gay men's parenting is viewed by the larger society and whether their parenting is judged good or bad is more pronounced for them than for heterosexual parents. In these data, we can possibly see evidence of the fragility and non-normativity of the identity 'lesbian/gay parent'. As we noted in the introduction, many psychologists sympathetic to lesbian and gay parenting are keen to emphasise that for most children in lesbian and gay families homophobic bullying – *if it does occur* – is of little (psychological) consequence. Clarke (2002b, 2002c) argues that lesbian and gay families are 'normalised', that is, positioned as 'just like' heterosexual families in a variety of contexts, because acknowledging difference (including the difference associated with oppression) concedes too much to the opposition. Historically, claims of difference and pathology have been used to justify 'treating' homosexuality as an illness and incarcerating lesbians and gay men in psychiatric institutions (Kitzinger, 1987). Thus, in psychological research and elsewhere, lesbian and gay parents are defensively and apologetically normalised, their sameness is maximised, and their difference (including their sexual difference) is minimised: the emphasis is on assimilation – that is, enfolding lesbian and gay parents into the mainstream. There are perhaps broad similarities between (some) psychologists' and lesbian and gay parents' minimising accounts of bullying. This we feel supports our argument that normalising accounts of bullying are designed to deal with issues of stake and accountability. Like some psychologists, the lesbian and gay parents in our corpus may be concerned that acknowledging (and maximising) bullying concedes too much to the opposition, leaving them vulnerable to undermining.

⁵ It is interesting to compare our analysis with the conclusion of Hepburn's (2000b; see also 1997a, 1997b) studies of teachers' management of accusations they had bullied pupils. In that material, too, bullying was normalised and trivialised, although there was an effort to present it as an unfortunate requirement in the face of threats to classroom order. In Hepburn's data the effect of this accounting is to settle rather than challenge existing social arrangements.

Constructing bullying as *extraordinary*, rather than ordinary, may render bullying (and them) accountable.

What is perhaps crucial here is the issue of choice. Choice is a prominent theme in anti-lesbian/gay discourse: lesbians and gay men are, it is argued, not 'born that way', rather, they *choose* to be that way (see Smith and Windes, 2000). This means that lesbians and gay men are often held accountable by opponents of lesbian and gay rights for, what is seen as, their moral depravity. The identity 'lesbian/gay parent' is arguably a chosen identity: lesbians and gay men who have children after 'coming out' as lesbian/gay choose to be a lesbian/gay parent, similarly, mothers and fathers who 'come out' as lesbian/gay and leave their marriages or heterosexual relationships also make choices. These choices raise the spectre of accountability – lesbian and gay parents are (morally) responsible for the consequences of their choices for their children, and this obviously includes homophobic bullying. By designing accounts that minimise bullying, these lesbian and gay parents attend to and manage their stake and accountability. By taking account of wider discourse on lesbian and gay parenting, it is possible to appreciate the dilemma faced by lesbian and gay parents: damned if they report bullying and damned if they do not.

Our argument is only tentative and we are interested in analyses of similar data that support or challenge our conclusions. As we noted above, we are yet to come across sympathetic 'maximising' accounts of homophobic bullying – that is, accounts that emphasise the severity of the bullying and of children's suffering from a pro-lesbian/gay perspective. Maximising accounts are plentiful in anti-lesbian/gay discourse. It would be interesting to see in what contexts and under what circumstances sympathetic maximising accounts were produced (and who produced them), what interactional business they were designed to achieve, and how this differs from or not the minimising accounts we have analysed here. We had hoped such maximising accounts would emerge from our interviews with lesbian and gay parents, especially when conducted by an obviously sympathetic lesbian researcher. Indeed, having collected a large corpus of normalising accounts from the media, our decision to collect interview data was – partly – motivated by a search for more varied accounts. However, as we noted in the methodology section, the interviewees positioned the interviewers as 'experts' rather than as peers. We imagine sympathetic maximising accounts could be found in more radical contexts, produced by lesbian feminists and radical gays who share a long history of emphasising lesbian and gay oppression. The analysis of the talk of lesbian and gay parents, and lesbians and gay men more generally, and indeed of any number of politically/socially marginal/ised groups is we think crucial to the development of critical social psychology. Until recently, the analysis of lesbian and gay discourse has been confined to broad brush approaches (e.g., Alldred, 1996, 1998, Smith and Windes, 2000); however, we think much can be gained from more fine grained analyses and we encourage any future developments in this direction. As Kitzinger (2000) argues, fine grained approaches allow us to see, and have concrete evidence of, the heterosexist world under construction.

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TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY DATA COLLECTED

Title of Programme and/or Series	Production	Length of recording	Transcript
Inside New Zealand: 'Dads Wanted'	2001, Screen Time	58 minutes	VC
Hidden Love: 'My Gay Husband'	2000, United Productions and Channel Four Television Corporation, UK	56 minutes	VC
'When A Wife Loves a Woman'	2000, Channel Four Television Corporation, UK	57 minutes	VC
Real life: 'The Gay Dads'	2000, Meridian Broadcasting, UK	56 minutes	VC
We are family: 'My Parents are Gay'	1998, Channel 5, Broadcasting Ltd., UK	23 minutes	VC
Modern Times: 'Pink Parents'	1998, BBC, UK	49 minutes	VC
Headliners: 'Anne Diamond interviews a lesbian couple "who advertised for a man to father a child for them"'	1998, Central Programme, UK	25 minutes	VC
Dyke TV: 'Child of Mine'	1996, Fresh Film and Television for Channel Four Corporation	38 minutes	VC
'Our Mom's a Dyke'	1995, Jewels Productions, USA	24 minutes	VC
Out on Tuesday: 'Let's Not Pretend'	1990, Not Known, UK	35 minutes	VC
'We are Family'	1987, WGBH/Boston, USA	Not Known	Secondary: Kim and Carolyn in Harriet Alpert (ed.), (1988) <i>We are everywhere</i> (pp. 44-51).