

## **Lesbian and Gay Parents on Talk Shows: Resistance or Collusion in Heterosexism?**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we explore popular television talk show debates about lesbian and gay parents. We show that the heterosexist framing of these debates compels lesbian and gay parents and their supporters to produce defensive and apologetic arguments that normalise lesbian and gay families. Lesbian and gay parents end up reinforcing the legitimacy of anti-lesbian/gay fears in the very act of demonstrating that they are groundless. We identify six themes in pro-lesbian/gay discourse on talk shows: (i) 'I'm not a *lesbian/gay* parent'; (ii) 'we're just the family next door'; (iii) '*love* makes a family'; (iv) 'god made Adam and Steve'; (v) children as 'proof'; and (vi) the benefits of growing up in a lesbian/gay family. Our analysis focuses on the broad, ideological functions and effects of these themes. We conclude the paper by outlining an alternative agenda for talk show debates about lesbian and gay issues.

## **Lesbian and Gay Parents on Talk Shows: Resistance or Collusion in Heterosexism?**

### **The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Talk Shows for Lesbians and Gay Men**

Lesbians and gay men are increasingly visible in the mass media and are increasingly depicted in ways that are acceptable to some members of the lesbian/gay community (Gamson, 2001). Although there are a number of television shows which feature lesbian and gay presenters, guests, characters or story lines (and indeed specifically lesbian and gay shows), it is 'popular' or 'tabloid' talk shows that are regarded as the most significant site for lesbian and gay visibility. Gamson (1998) argues that although lesbians and gay men and other sexual and gender nonconformists are 'either unwelcome, written by somebody else, or heavily edited' almost everywhere in the media, on talk shows they are 'more than welcome' (p. 4). Greenberg et al. (1997) found that sexual orientation was addressed at least once every fortnight on the eleven top-rated US talk shows in 1994/5.

Talk shows are 'derided, but much watched' (Squire, 1997, p. 242), reaching an 'enormous' (Robinson, 1982, p. 370) number of people. Brinson and Winn (1997) argue that 'given the large audiences to whom talk shows communicate, it is important to analyze the messages contained in the programs' (p. 25). The talk show literature on lesbians and gay men is rather limited (e.g., Alwood, 1996, Bawer, 1993, Epstein and Steinberg, 1996, 1998, Gamson, 1998, 2001, Lupton, 1998, Priest, 1991, Priest and Dominick, 1994, Sanderson, 1995, Squire, 1994, Thornborrow, 1997), as is the psychological literature on talk shows (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, Squire, 1994, 1997). Talk shows should be of interests to psychologists because talk shows are a kind of popular psychology (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998, Squire, 1994). Psychologists in various guises (from the academic to the practitioner to the 'pop psych' guru) feature often as 'experts' (Robinson, 1992) and talk shows are laced with therapeutic and psychological discourses (Peck, 1995). Ironically, because of the marginalisation of lesbians and gay men in the public sphere, lesbian and gay concerns are routinely debated in the media (in recent years attention has focused on the age of consent for sex between men, Section 28, lesbian and gay parenting, the ordination of gay bishops, and same-sex marriage). Talk shows have consistently engaged with such issues, and as such are a significant site for exploring the socio-cultural meanings of homosexuality and the construction of lesbian and gay identities; both central topics in lesbian and gay psychology (see Coyle and Kitzinger, 2002).

A number of different claims have been made about talk shows that are relevant to their depiction of lesbians and gay men. Some theorists argue that talk shows provide a forum for free public debate and the articulation of marginal views, because they are framed by and produce liberal politics of democracy and equal participation (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Feminist commentators have attacked talk shows' 'traditionalism', and their 'dauntingly

conventional' (Squire, 1994, p. 65) treatment of 'race', class, gender and sexuality, and the profoundly heterosexist framing of shows about lesbian and gay issues (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998, Lupton, 1998, Squire, 1994, 1997). Finally, Gamson (1998, 2001) argues that talk shows hold both pleasures and dangers for lesbians and gay men.

Some theorists have sought to rescue talk shows from their maligned and easily dismissed position as cheap, trashy daytime television, and have made extravagant claims for talk shows as sites of cultural resistance. Because talk shows routinely privilege the views of ordinary people over those of experts, it has been argued that they contribute to a public democratic forum (Fairclough, 1995). Indeed, through their negotiation of populism, paternalism, socially responsible education, equal participation, spectacle, and their claim to be speech by and for the people, talk shows are said to epitomise the public sphere (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998). Talk shows offer innovative possibilities for heterosexual women, lesbians, gay men, people of colour, working class, disabled, bisexual and transgender people to participate in public debates about key social issues, and to resist and challenge dominant understandings of class, gender, 'race', ethnicity, disability, and sexuality. Members of oppressed groups participating in talk shows have 'invaded the Symbolic register' (Masciarotte, 1991, p. 83). Talk shows offer 'an opening for the empowerment of an alternative discursive practice' (Carpignano et al., 1990, p. 52), or 'a forum in which people can speak in their own voice... vital for the construction of a gendered or cultural identity' (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994, p. 31). Talk show participants' willingness to self-disclose on television 'situates them in the vanguard of citizens striving for social change' (Priest, 1995, p. 105).

Feminist commentators are by contrast critical of the ways in which talk shows deal with marginal voices. Epstein and Steinberg (1998) argue that, contrary to the claim that everyone gets to 'have their say' on talk shows, not everyone has a say, studio audiences frequently become abusive, and marginal voices can be remarginalised by the hostility of the studio audience and by the reestablishment of dominant common senses. They claim that on talk shows there is a 'disjunction between the apparent democracy of "free space" for saying one's piece and the oppressive reinforcement of common sense that can be produced in such contexts' (p. 80).

In addition, feminist commentators argue that lesbian and gay issues are characteristically 'ghettoised' on talk shows, dealt with in special and one-off programmes (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998). When talk shows address lesbianism/male homosexuality directly they 'tend to either problematize it or mainstream it as a human issue distanced from sex and politics' (Squire, 1994, p. 71). Talk shows are 'a distinctly uncomfortable forum, if not a silent (silencing) space for non-straight issues, perspectives, audiences and guests' (p. 276). When lesbian and gay issues are not the focus of the show, 'lesbian and gay audiences are completely excluded' (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998, p. 87). In talk shows' 'hegemonic

heterosexual gaze... all relationships will be viewed, validated, or invalidated from an assumed standpoint of (and desire for) normative heterosexuality' (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998, p. 87). Although talk shows frequently feature guests who deviate from the norm of heterosexuality, they 'rarely question the norm itself' (Lupton, 1998, p. 6). Talk shows are identifiable by their 'assumptions of heterosexuality and investments in its dominant institutions' and are routinely framed in ways that put lesbian and gay guests on the defensive (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998, p. 92). Nelson and Robinson (1994) argued that the talk show genre 'reinforces and replicates culturally normative views of gender and sexuality' (p. 51).

Gamson (1998) has made specific claims for talk shows as a site for lesbian and gay visibility and resistance. He cites examples of talk shows where the bigots, rather than the lesbian and gay guests, are presented as 'freaks'. In contrast to the feminist commentators quoted above, he argues that on some shows, lesbianism/male homosexuality is simply a facet of some guests and is integrated into general topics. But he does not offer a straightforward celebration of talk shows; rather he argues that the focus on sexuality in talk shows has provided an opening for lesbian and gay visibility in a way that 'simultaneously gives voice and exploits' (p. 71). He notes a tension on talk shows between liberal and conservative ideologies, between promoting diversity and upholding the nuclear family, and between "normalizing" and "freakifying" our families' (p. 71). Talk shows are, he argues, exploitative and sensationalist; moral themes tend to dominate their discussions of sex and gender nonconformity and they only extend tolerance to 'good gays' at the expense of 'the dangerous queer' (bisexual and transgender people). At the same time, however, on a certain level "queers" rule these shows' (p. 70), lesbians and gay men get to play themselves and are 'at least partially and potentially, *agents* in their own visibility' (p. 70).

We explore these competing claims about the possibilities and pitfalls of talk shows for lesbians and gay men by analysing talk show debates about lesbian and gay families. Gamson (2001) notes that family is a topic of particular interest to talk shows; families in conflict is a dominant theme, and queer families 'can usually be counted upon for a certain amount of conflict, and are thus constants' (p. 70) on the day time talk show genre. We have dealt with arguments against lesbian and gay parenting in talk show debates elsewhere (Clarke, 2001); our interest in this paper is with pro-lesbian/gay discourse on parenting. That is, with the supposedly sympathetic ways in which lesbian and gay families are portrayed on talk shows. To this end, we identify six themes in pro-lesbian/gay parenting discourse on talk shows. These are: (i) 'I'm not a *lesbian/gay* parent'; (ii) 'we're just the family next door'; (iii) '*love* makes a family'; (iv) 'god made Adam and Steve'; (v) children as 'proof'; and (vi) the benefits of growing up in a lesbian/gay family. The theme 'god made Adam and Steve' functions as a direct response to anti-lesbian/gay claims about the sinfulness of lesbian and gay parenting. The other themes are more general in focus, addressing a number of different anti-lesbian/gay claims.

As others have argued, analysing pro-lesbian/gay discourse is both politically and theoretically necessary (Smith and Windes, 2000, Stacey, 1991). In the interests of developing effective pro-lesbian/gay strategies, we must critically analyse the content and effects of our contributions to debates about lesbian and gay issues. We should assess the limitations of our political strategies, and ask what compromises (if any) we are willing to make in order to achieve our goals. As lesbian feminists, we are interested in how we get seduced into making defensive liberal arguments, and the ideological effects and costs, *and* benefits, of these.

We now discuss data collection and analysis, we then briefly outline some features of the structure and organisation of talk show debates about lesbian and gay families before moving on to a consideration of themes in pro-lesbian/gay discourse on talk shows. Finally, we conclude by outlining an alternative agenda for talk show debates about lesbian and gay issues.

### **Analysing the Data**

Our analysis is based on an ad hoc corpus of 26 talk shows collected between April 1997 and August 2001 (see table 1)<sup>1</sup>. We transcribed 22 of these ourselves based on repeated listening of the video (or in one case audio) tapes. For the remaining four talk shows, we did not have access to the original recordings, but worked from transcripts obtained from the producer or from a US transcription company. Our transcriptions are careful orthographic transcriptions which accurately reproduce the semantic content of the talk, but not details of its delivery. Our decision about transcription was that it should be adequate for the kind of analysis we were carrying out on this data – a thematic discourse analysis. Since our analysis is broadly based on the semantic content of the talk shows and is not concerned with the fine detail of talk, there was little point in transcribing features such as in-breaths, a creaky voice and so on which would serve only to render the transcript less intelligible to readers unfamiliar with Jeffersonian transcription conventions (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1994). Speakers are identified in our transcripts with reference the labels that appear on the screen when they are speaking, how they are introduced by the host or how they are invited to speak (e.g., as a lesbian parent or as someone opposed to lesbian parenting).

### **Insert table 1 about here**

As qualitative psychologists we approach talk shows rather differently than do media and communication researchers. Media and communication researchers such as Priest (1995) and Gamson (1998) analyse talk shows as text *and* product, exploring the messages in the text and/or its production and reception. In a sense our analysis flattens out talk shows and

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<sup>1</sup> Eight of the talk shows were originally broadcast before April 1997.

treats them solely as text. We analyse talk shows in the same way that we might analyse interview data, looking across the data-set for common patterns and themes in participants' talk about lesbian and gay parenting. Our analysis is sensitive to the overall structure and organisation of talk show debates; however, our primary goal is to organise what participants say about lesbian and gay parenting into thematic categories.

This analysis is part of a wider exploration of debates about lesbian and gay parenting (see Clarke, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). We read and re-read the transcripts of the talk shows and chose to organise our analysis around pro- and anti-lesbian/gay discourse, rather than organise the analysis around a particular theme (such as bullying or male role models, as we have done elsewhere, see Clarke et al., in press, Clarke and Kitzinger, under submission). For this analysis, we first isolated all the instances of pro-discourse; that is, all the instances of talk that we judged to be broadly supportive of lesbian and gay parenting (regardless of who was speaking). We then looked for patterns in this talk (as well as common features of the organisation of the shows) and constructed themes around similarities both in semantic content and in ideological function. At this stage, it became clear that a common feature and function of many of the themes from our perspective as lesbian feminists was – as we discuss below – normalisation: talking about lesbian and gay parenting in ways that seek to or have the effect of assimilating lesbian and gay parents into the mainstream. We selected themes for further analysis that were either particularly prevalent (in determining prevalence we relied on a simple count of the number of talk shows in which the themes appeared) or particularly important for understanding and illustrating how normalising works. Our primary aim is not to provide an overview of what is in the data but to analyse an aspect of the data that we as lesbian feminists think is important and interesting.

Our analysis is explicitly political: we analyse talk shows within a lesbian feminist framework. We explore the ideological effects, costs and benefits of themes in pro-lesbian/gay discourse, and how the themes relate to broad ideologies such as liberalism or radicalism. Our analysis is also social constructionist, as such we are not interested in whether the themes represent the participants' real beliefs, feelings and views about lesbian and gay parenting, but rather what the themes tell us about the socio-cultural meanings of homosexuality. We draw on insights from discursive psychology which explores the construction of talk and text through linguistic resources, rhetorical devices and interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, Potter, 1996). DP studies tend to be topic focused and made explicitly relevant to the researcher's concerns (Widdecombe and Wooffitt, 1995), as is our analysis here. Within qualitative psychology, discursive and constructionist analyses vary widely: from simple collections of themes to fine grained analyses of talk. Our approach sits somewhere between these two poles, and is a rather hybrid approach. However, our overriding concern is with producing a politically relevant analysis of talk show debates, and, as is increasingly common in feminist and critical research, we use an analytic toolkit that draws from different (and often contradictory) approaches (Wilkinson, 1997). An explicitly

political stance is often a feature of feminist constructionist and discursive psychology; although some discursive psychologists have urged researchers with a critical agenda to focus solely on talk and text and not bring their theoretical and political baggage to bear on their analyses (Speer, 2001). In this analysis, we prioritise politics, not methodology, with the aim of understanding whether talk shows constitute a site for lesbian and gay resistance or collusion in heterosexism.

### **The Structure and Organisation of Talk Show Debates about Lesbian and Gay Families**

We now briefly consider two aspects of the structure and organisation of talk show debates about lesbian and gay families which highlight the heterosexist framework of these debates: the opening questions and the selection of guests (for further details see Clarke, 2002a). The questions that frame shows about lesbian and gay families often clearly emerge from precisely the agenda that the show is concerned to challenge (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998). Out of the 15 talk shows for which we have complete recordings or transcripts, 13 are set up by the host either posing an antagonistic question or invoking competing perspectives on lesbian and gay parenting. These questions include: 'should gay men and women become parents?' (*Kilroy*, 1997); 'should a gay and lesbian couple have the right to legally adopt a child in this country?' (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1990); and 'are kids better off with good loving parents whatever their sexuality, or is this idea of a gay or lesbian family unit simply liberal dogma gone mad?' (*Living Issues*, 1999).

Framing the debate by highlighting two competing perspectives or by asking 'should they/should they not' type questions serves to construct lesbians' and gay men's fitness or right to parent as controversial and disputable, reinforcing their marginality. Questions like 'should gay men and women become parents?' (*Kilroy*, 1997) and 'should a gay and lesbian couple have the right to legally adopt a child in this country?' (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1990), make available the answer 'no', and indicate that an acceptable position to take might be that lesbians and gay men should *not* become parents or should *not* have the right to adopt. What this type of framing suggests is that the only discussion about lesbian and gay parenting considered plausible or intelligible revolves around whether or not lesbians and gay men should be prevented from doing it. It forces lesbians and gay parents to address an agenda not of their own making and to consider as controversial questions which should be beyond debate. This heterosexist construction of 'balance' seems to underlie many of the talk shows in our data, and it 'reinforce[s] the idea of homosexuality as something to argue about and worry about, as opposed to something to think about and learn about: it becomes a hot political issue, something with two inflexible opposing sides' (Bawer, 1993, p. 93).

Antagonistic introductions serve to 'set up the notion of lesbian and gay parenting as inherently problematic and perhaps even dangerous' (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998, p. 82).

The questions posed by the host are presented as the ones 'we the people' want answers to: 'the concern that a lot of people have...' (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1990); and 'what may



concern some people...’ (*The Time... The Place*, 1997). This further serves to construct lesbian and gay parents as ‘other’ by assuming a heterosexual audience (Epstein and Steinberg, 1996). Although some of the shows clearly assume homophobia to be an issue, it is usually dealt with not, as Gamson suggests, by putting the homophobe on trial but as we will show by demanding that lesbian and gay parents prove their normality. The tolerance of diversity in talk show debates about lesbian and gay parenting means only that lesbian and gay parents are permitted to defend themselves (Epstein and Steinberg, 1998).

As Fairclough (1995) notes, talk shows guests are typically selected to represent a range of opposing perspectives. Talk show producers seek pro-lesbian/gay experts *and* bigoted experts such as Charles Socarides (*Leeza*, 1997) and Paul Cameron (*Ricki Lake*, 1995, ‘Get it straight: I don’t want gays around my kids’, cited in Gamson, 1998a, p. 111), willing to describe homosexuality as a pathology. All of the talk shows in our corpus feature both anti *and* pro-lesbian/gay participants. The selection of guests with sharply opposing views is often incorporated into the framing of the debate: on *Living Issues* (1999), for example, the host announces that among her guests ‘are gay rights activist Peter Tatchell and family campaigner and moralist Lynette Burrows’. This combination of guests reinforces the construction of lesbian and gay parenting as controversial.

### **Pro-Lesbian/Gay Discourse on Talk Shows**

We now turn to themes in pro-lesbian and gay discourse on talk shows. Our argument is that all of these themes serve in some way to normalise lesbian and gay parenting. They operate within the liberal and the heterosexist framing of talk show debates and seek to fit lesbian and gay families into the larger society. Under each subheading we discuss a number of examples of each theme and comment on their political efficacy.

#### **(I) ‘I’M NOT A LESBIAN/GAY PARENT’**

The first theme, although explicitly developed in only 2 of the 25 talk shows, is a compelling example of what we call normalisation. The primary example of this strategy is from *Leeza* (1997), when the host introduces a new guest, Jeff, as a ‘single gay father’ who ‘adopted his daughter Jenny at birth nine years ago through a private agency’:

Leeza: You right away are going to bust me on calling you a gay father aren’t you?

Jeff: I absolutely am.

Leeza: Yeah!

Jeff: I’m not a gay father, I mean I even asked your producer ‘please not put gay father under my face’.

Leeza: Well so far we're safe okay (laughs)

Jeff: Don't worry. Yeah. 'Cos the bottom line is I'm a father. When I get up in the morning, I don't make gay breakfast, I don't do gay homework, I- I do homework, that's the bottom line.

Audience: (Applause)

Leeza: Your daughter's nine years old?

Jeff: Yup.

Leeza: Is she curious about sex? Does she ask questions about *you*?

(Leeza, 1997)

Similarly on *Kilroy* (1997), two lesbian parents identify themselves as single parents, refusing the label 'lesbian parent', in response to anti-lesbian/gay arguments. Anna says 'I'm actually a single parent' in answer to the argument that it is 'very unnatural' for a child to be brought up in a lesbian relationship. Jessica, likewise, says, that 'I'm a single parent actually' in reply to similar claims about the unnaturalness of lesbian relationships.

Like Anna and Jessica, Jeff is challenging the assumption that lesbian and gay parents are significantly different (because of their 'deviant' sexuality). In a heterosexual supremacist society, a label like 'gay' or 'homosexual' defines an individual as a particular type of person, it is a 'master status' (Becker, 1963). This means that it colours all the other statuses possessed by a person. If a person is labelled lesbian or gay, that label overrides their status as a parent, and other people tend to see and respond to them in terms of the label 'homosexual' (not 'parent'), and assume that they have all the negative characteristics associated with being 'homosexual'. Jeff ridicules this logic by selecting two mundane parenting tasks (making breakfast and helping children with homework) and juxtaposing them with homosexuality (i.e., 'gay homework', 'gay breakfast'). The idea of 'gay homework' or 'gay breakfast' is produced as laughable in part because 'gay' is understood to mean sex, and children's breakfast and homework have nothing to do with sex.

Jeff is presumably also ambivalent about the category 'gay parent' because he is being asked to speak as a representative of this category when he disclaims this category. By rejecting this category, Jeff emphasises his ordinariness and challenges the assumption that is he is gay twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Contrary to the views of the right wing, Jeff indicates that he is not living on planet gay, he in fact does all the 'normal things that everybody else does' (April, 'Sharon Bottoms' Partner', *Sally Jessy Raphael*, 1993b). Jeff's argument implies that he is not gay except of course when he is having sex: his ordinary, everyday parental non-sexual activities are not gay. This means that the host has to

then ask about sex, as this is the only arena in which he is going to admit to being gay.

Jeff, Anna and Jessica strategically refuse the label 'lesbian/gay parent' and deny the possibility that their parenting might be different from, or even better than, heterosexual parenting because of their sexuality. Some lesbians and gay men have, however, fought for a politicised understanding of lesbian and gay lives that goes well beyond sex. This means that some lesbians and gay men might want to claim to make lesbian/gay breakfast and do lesbian/gay homework on the grounds that they are lesbian/gay 24 hours a day, and their being lesbian/gay informs everything that they do. Given that heteropatriarchy makes it very difficult for lesbian and gay parents to feel pride in the label 'lesbian/gay parent', it is deeply troubling that lesbian and gay parents themselves disown these labels and do not assert pride in their sexuality. This strategy renders lesbian and gay parents invisible as lesbians and gay men, and it forces them to deny solidarity with other lesbian and gay parents, and lesbian and gay politics. For these parents, gay is only good if it remains in the bedroom and is *not* talked about.

## (II) 'WE'RE JUST THE FAMILY NEXT DOOR'

The second pro-lesbian/gay theme in talk shows debates extends the argument of the previous theme by highlighting the ordinariness of lesbian and gay families. In the words of the host of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1993), lesbian and gay family life does *not* involve 'always swinging from the chandeliers'<sup>2</sup>. For example:

'He does the dishes, I do dishes... we do everything like *everybody else* does. We're just the family next door' (Don Harrelson, 'gay father', *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1990, our emphasis).

'I think we basically did the normal things that *everybody else* does. I mean, we went to the grocery store together. We went shopping together. We did everything else that, you know, a heterosexual couple, you know, would do with a child' (April, 'Sharon Bottoms' Partner', *Sally Jessy Raphael*, 1993b, our emphasis).

This strategy occurs in 6 of the 25 talk shows. Lesbian and gay parents argue that their lives strongly resemble heterosexuals, so much so that they are even 'as boring' (*You Decide*, 1997)! They signal that they too perform all of the familiar tasks that constitute everyday life in a family: doing the dishes, making breakfast, going to the grocery store, doing homework, and looking for the lost family pet. One gay man indicates that, contrary to anti-lesbian/gay claims about the 'very very exciting homosexual lifestyle' he is assumed to lead (Jeff, *Leeza*,

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<sup>2</sup> Our analysis incorporates the comments both of lesbian and gay family members and of their supporters (including some of the more 'liberal' talk show hosts like Ricki Lake and Oprah Winfrey).

1997), he and his daughter: 'get up at six in the morning... get ready for breakfast at seven, we go over spelling or math, or whatever we have to do before eight, when I take her to school...'. The use of a list structure here serves to emphasise generality (Jefferson, 1990, Potter, 1996): that this *is* the substance of daily life in lesbian and gay families. In so doing, these lesbian and gay parents bolster the persuasiveness of their claims to ordinariness. Another gay parent on the same talk show argues that his homosexual lifestyle 'consists of- last night we looked for Tiny Tim the turtle... the mock turtle who got out of his cage' (Craig, Leeza, 1997). A gay man on *Kilroy* (1997) insists that he has 'the same sort of home any heterosexual has', and that his 'walls aren't laced with darkness'. Building a contrast between anti-lesbian/gay accounts of lesbian and gay life and – what is constructed as – the 'reality' of daily life in lesbian and gay households signals the absurdity of anti-lesbian/gay accounts. Note also Don's and April's use of 'everybody'. This is an example of what the conversation analyst, Anita Pomerantz (1986), dubbed an 'extreme case formulation' (ECF); when speakers select an extreme point on the relative descriptive dimension. Pomerantz argued that this selection tends to occur when claims are being bolstered against disagreement. Don and April use this ECF to closely align themselves with normative practices and to emphasise their ordinariness.

Walters (2000) argues that because the right has used family values rhetoric in recent political debates, 'gays must fight on this turf, responding to right-wing hysteria with assurances of shared "family values"' (p. 51). From a radical perspective, emphasising lesbian and gay parents' ordinariness has limitations, the primary one being the denial of possibility that lesbian and gay families might be different from the heterosexual norm. Lesbian and gay parents avoid highlighting both positive and negative differences in their daily lives, such as liberating their children from oppressive patriarchal values (S. Pollack, 1987) and the unrelenting experience of oppression (Wright, 2001). Further, claiming that 'we are just you like' is a deeply classed political strategy, one that emphasises lesbians' and gay men's similarity to 'white people with money, education, property, and possessions... not true of all of us, and mostly untrue of the larger culture' (Boggis, 2001, p. 180). An alternative radical strategy for lesbian and gay parents on talk shows could be emphasising their distinctiveness or extraordinariness! Arnup (1997) offers a more positive assessment of this type of political strategy, arguing that as people 'realize how "ordinary" we are long-held notions of deviance and perversion are discredited' (p. 94).

### **(III) 'LOVE MAKES A FAMILY'**

The most frequently used pro-lesbian/gay strategy in defence of lesbian and gay parents emphasises the importance of 'the quality of relationships' (*Heart of the Matter*, 1993). The concern is whether relationships provide 'love' (*Sally Jessy Raphael*, 1993b), 'care' (*You Decide*, 1997), 'stability' (*Leeza*, 1999), 'security' (*Vanessa*, 1998), 'commitment' (*Living Issues*, 1999), and 'support' (*Ricki Lake*, 2000a) because 'it's love that makes a family... not

any particular family constellation' (*Donahue*, 1994<sup>3</sup>). For example:

'the important thing... is that, the ideal, well, the ideal is love, care, support. If you've got love, care, and support, whether, you know, for whatever reason, you're brought up by just the mum, and the dad's disappeared off the face of the earth, who knows. If you've got the love, the care, and the support... that's what really matters' (Reverend Mervyn Roberts, *Living Issues*, 1999).

Audience Member: I feel that the most important thing for a child is to grow up in a happy home where there is love, and as long as they show that to their child there's not a problem.

Ricki Lake: It doesn't matter if it's mummy daddy, mummy and mummy, as long as there's love surrounding this child.

(*Ricki Lake*, 1997)

This argument is used in 22 out of the 25 talk shows in relation both to parental and to parent-child relationships in lesbian and gay families. When using this strategy, people frequently designate love as 'the most important thing' (*Ricki Lake*, 1997), 'the ideal' (*Living Issues*, 1999), and 'what really matters' (*Living Issues*, 1999). These ECF formulated phrases signal the over-riding importance of what is being said and construct 'bottom line' arguments: an attempt to shut down the debate and construct love as an essence (like biology) that determines what makes a family or a good parent. Love is presented as a positive feature of lesbian and gay families to offset the negative implications of gayness.

Arguments about love directly address anti-lesbian/gay claims about the importance of structure in determining what makes a family – that is, the necessity of a mother and a father. Supporters of lesbian and gay parenting portray love, care, stability, and so on as the building blocks of family life, as qualities (which are not necessarily related to sex and gender) that all families should (ideally) possess. The notion that love makes a family is far from controversial: most people would agree with this sentiment. This argument portrays lesbian and gay families in ways that render them familiar and non-threatening to the heterosexual majority. At the same time, however, this argument provides a rather 'sugar coated' and romantic view of life in lesbian and gay families, and it fits lesbian and gay families into a normative framework. For many people 'love' does not represent their experience of family life, indeed, for many lesbians and gay men, family is about rejection, disappointment, and pain (Savin-Williams, 1998, Strommen, 1996). Arguing that love makes a family, makes it difficult to claim that oppression and a lack of social recognition force our families into

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<sup>3</sup> Given the larger number of short quotations presented in this section, we have chosen not to include details of the speakers in order to make the text easier to read.

difference. It steers attention away from the institutional, ideological and material validation and support that is bestowed on heterosexual families. Although it may help to extend our *rights* in the world as it is, it provides little resistance to the primacy of the nuclear family and little opportunity for instituting long-term social change. When lesbians and gay men on talk shows claim that 'love makes a family' they address an agenda not of our own making, assuaging the fears of the powerful group and not examining our own. This argument provides an example of the demands placed on lesbians and gay men to demonstrate their normality, and their similarity to heterosexuals. It stands in stark contrast to lesbian feminist and radical gay critiques of the family as a primary site of lesbian and gay oppression (e.g., Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention, 1997/1970).

Not only do pro-lesbian/gay advocates claim that love makes a family, they also draw comparisons between loving lesbian and gay families and 'the emotional coldness of a local authority children's home' (*Living Issues*, 1999) or a 'dysfunctional' (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1990) heterosexual family. As the host of *Leeza* (1997) asks: 'isn't it better to have two loving parents who get along, than heterosexual parents that don't get along?'. What this version of the 'love makes a family' argument suggests is that 'gay parents are only good in emergencies' (*Leeza*, 1997) and are 'a last resort' (*Heart of the Matter*, 1993). According to Raymond (1992), 'to argue that we must tolerate... gay parents because we have no better options', and 'to suggest that some arrangements could be much worse', is to 'damn gays and lesbians with faint praise, if it is to praise at all' (p. 127). This 'faint praise' argument does not allow for the possibility that lesbian and gay families are good for children, on a par with, or even better than, heterosexual families.

#### **(IV) 'GOD MADE ADAM AND STEVE'**

This strategy of resistance centres on pro-lesbian/gay responses to claims about the sinfulness of lesbian and gay parenting. Pro-lesbian/gay arguments about god occur in 12 out of the 26 talk shows. Supporters of lesbian and gay parenting employ strategies similar to those used by lesbian and gay christians to indicate that lesbian and gay sexuality *is* compatible with christian teaching (see Wilson, 1995). They proclaim that god *also* made lesbians and gay men, that god is love and that the bible supports their position. Consider the following examples of 'god made Adam and Steve' (in both cases the speakers are responding to earlier comments):

'I came into this world as a minister's daughter, and I am happy to hear that there are people who are concerned that God made Adam and Eve, but God also made Adam and Steve, and Ann and Eve, and we're all having children today' (Bonnie Tinker, director of Love Makes a Family Inc., *Ricki Lake*, 1997)'.

'We get people s- sort of bringing in the bible and everything else, and God created Adam and Eve, and not Adam and Steve. God created Adam and Eve, and Steve, and

Mary, and Jane, and Bob, and Sue and everything else' (Tracie, 'had to give up her children when she became a woman', *Trisha*, 1999).

Pro-lesbian/gay talk show participants construct a contrast between the 'evil and vile' (Audience Member, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1991) god of anti-lesbian/gay participants and a loving god who 'celebrates gay love, gay sex, and gay marriage' (Reverend Richard Blake, *Vanessa*, 1999). The implication is that anti-lesbian/gay participants' interpretation of christianity promotes 'hating' which 'is a sin in this world' (Audience Member, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1991). Thus, it is 'old fashioned' and 'ignorant' (Audience Member, *Leeza*, 1999) and also inaccurate.

A guest (Vicky Meyer, 'lesbian') on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1991) asks 'doesn't Christ say love everyone no matter what?... didn't Jesus die for us?'. She argues that 'He even loved a prostitute'. Like Jesus, 'good Christian[s]' 'love everyone' and do 'not judge' (Pam Meyer, 'lesbian', *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1991). Tracie on *Trisha* (1999) uses a list format to emphasise that God created and loves all. In response to an audience member's claim that 'homosexuals will not enter the kingdom of God', the host of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1990) argues that 'neither will liars- neither will people who cheat'. The concern here is perhaps to demonstrate that christ embraced diversity, to highlight flaws in christian teaching, or to suggest that many people fall into the category of those excluded from the 'kingdom of god': most people have lied or cheated at some point in their lives. Comparing lesbian and gay parents to other supposed sinners damns lesbians and gay men with faint praise and demeans them *and* the groups they are compared to. Peel's (2001) analysis mundane heterosexism shows that people often draw comparisons between lesbians and gay men and people who have some kind of, what is regarded as a, deficit or vice (e.g., a disability or alcoholism). The implication is that being lesbian or gay represents a loss or lack.

Lesbians and gay men also argue that they can see themselves in the bible, pointing to passages which they claim signal endorsement and acceptance of lesbian and gay love and commitment. Lindsey and Xav, a lesbian couple on *Trisha* (1999), describe how when they got 'married' they had a 'verse from the bible, from Naomi and Ruth<sup>4</sup>' which was 'like two women- it sounded like two women being together'. The host, Trisha, responding to anti-lesbian/gay claims about what the bible says about lesbianism/male homosexuality, argues that 'the thing about any scriptures is you can just about find what you wanna find if you look hard enough... I'd say that to everybody'. Similarly, the son of a gay parent claims that 'the bible has been used and misused all the time' (Jon Thomas Harrelson, 'adopted by a gay father' *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1990). This argument perhaps inadvertently undermines pro-lesbian/gay claims about what the bible says, as well as anti-lesbian/gay claims.

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4 Ruth's statement of commitment to Naomi (Ruth, 1:16-17) (see West, 1997).

The strategy 'god made Adam and Steve' serves to fit lesbians and gay men into christian ideology. Evidently, many lesbians and gay men do not reject christian teaching as immaterial to debates about lesbian and gay parenting, rather, by promoting a more inclusive version of it, they reinforce its relevance. Although they label anti-lesbian/gay groups' god as 'evil and vile' and a monger of hate, they rarely make explicit links between institutional religion and the perpetuation of lesbian and gay oppression. Instead, through the use of a variety of arguments that all stress inclusivity they suggest that: 'homophobia is a scandal and an offence to the gospel' (The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, 2000).

#### **(V) CHILDREN AS 'PROOF'**

On 14 out of the 25 talk shows, children of lesbians and gay men are invited to 'prove otherwise' (Judith Stacey, 1996) about lesbian and gay families: to refute fears about the effects on children of growing up in a lesbian and gay family, especially fears about psychosexual development. On 5 out of the 14 shows in which this theme features, the experiences of the lesbian and gay and homophobic children of lesbians and gay men are carefully contained and managed within the liberal framing of talk show debates. The following two examples provide evidence of the ways in which children's conventional gender identities and heterosexuality are used to prove otherwise about the effects of lesbian and gay parenting:

Leeza: I think, I think you should see the kids, just to see what we're talking about.

Audience: (Applause)

Leeza: Umm and not to bring them out to play on your sympathies and make you feel one way or the other, but to show you, forget that they're gay... and wait until you see how joyful they are. Adam and Madison, and Uncle Keith.

Audience: ('Oohs' and 'Ahhs')

Leeza: Hi you guys. Hello darling, sweetie. How are you?

...

Leeza: Oh honey. Now this little girl has no issues with her femininity.

Michael: No.

Jon: No.

Leeza: Look at the little frilly socks and everything. Hi shug.

Jon: No, she definitely is the dominant female personality in our house.



Michael: Yeah.

Leeza: Is she?

Jon: Oh yeah.

Leeza: Adam, how are you doing big guy, everything good? Everything's good.

(*Leeza*, 1999)

Ricki: Hi Josh.

Audience: (Applause)

Josh: How you doing?

Ricki: The audience likes what they see!

Josh: Thank you. Huh.

Audience: (Applause, cheering)

Ricki: And for the record, you were raised in a two mom household?

Josh: That's correct.

Ricki: And you are one hundred percent heterosexual?

Josh: Very much so, and- and very much single.

Audience: (Applause, cheering)

Ricki: Not that we would not be applauding if he was homosexual, but just for the record.

(*Ricki Lake*, 1997).

On *Leeza* (1999), Jon and Michael Gallucio's children Madison and Adam are carried onto the stage by 'Uncle Keith'. Madison is wearing a flowery print dress with a matching hair band, white shoes and socks with ruffles. Madison's appearance moves the host to exclaim 'now this little girl has no issues with her femininity' (as we might fear little girls in gay families would). Leeza calls Madison 'honey' and 'shug' (an abbreviated version of 'sugar'), and Adam 'big guy', and in so doing clearly underlines their conformity to gender norms. On *Ricki Lake*, Josh's heterosexuality is used in a similar way to disprove fears about children in lesbian and

gay families growing up lesbian/gay. The host asks Josh an ECF formulated question about his heterosexuality. When Josh confirms his heterosexuality, the audience responds with rapturous applause. Both Leeza and Ricki attend to the ways in which this strategy may be perceived (Ricki orients to the possibility that the audience only applauded because Josh is heterosexual) by explicitly denying that they are trying to prove a point. This strategy does however clearly function to prove a point: it serves to reinforce the legitimacy of mainstream fears in the very act of demonstrating that – in these cases at least – they are groundless.

This strategy presents children as, in the words of the host of *Kilroy*, 'the experts' (2001) and 'the most important pe[ople]' (1997). It serves to reinforce the notion that heterosexuality and conventional gender identities are signs of healthy child development, and are criteria by which the fitness of lesbians and gay men to parent should be judged. The concern is to fit lesbian parents into the mainstream by demonstrating that they too can raise 'normal' children. Children's experiences are rarely used to highlight the oppression they suffer or to celebrate the special qualities of lesbian and gay families. Rather, the emphasis is on showing that children are just like everyone else, in spite of their 'unusual' upbringing.

When children are first introduced, the host will frequently seek reassurance (if they are adults) that they are 'not gay' (Oprah Winfrey, host, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 1990). Just as the host of *Ricki Lake* (1997) asks Josh to confirm his heterosexuality, so the host of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1990) asks Jon (who was adopted by a gay father) the question 'as far as you know, you're not gay?'. To which he replies 'yes, definitely, as far as I know, I'm not gay... I know what I like'. On an earlier *Leeza* (1997), the host asks Trevor whether he is 'gay or straight'. When he answers that he is 'straight', she asks (the audience and the anti-lesbian/gay expert on the show, Charles Socarides) 'does this answer any questions for you?'.

On three of the shows in which this strategy is employed, the lesbian and/or gay children of lesbian and gay parents feature as guests. Obviously aware in advance of the answer their question will produce, the hosts avoid seeking confirmation of these children's heterosexuality, and instead seek immediate reassurance that growing up in a lesbian or gay family did not *make* them that way. On *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1993) when the host introduces a lesbian couple and four of their six children, she announces that one of the children is gay: 'welcome the two moms... and four of their six children. If you all stand up, Robert and Joyce and James, who are now all married. And Tom, who's gay'. She then asks Tom the question: 'So do you think living in the house made you gay?'. Tom's response is impeccable: 'Oh, no, not at all. Not at all'.

The children of lesbian and gay parents use the 'born that way' (or the 'might as well have been born that way') theory of the aetiology of lesbianism/male homosexuality to explain and account for their sexuality. Although there is the possibility that they inherited a 'gay gene' from their lesbian/gay parents, in claiming they were 'born that way', these children elude

anxieties about seduction and conversion by a lesbian/gay parent; which is precisely what concerns the right wing. On *Leeza* (1999), the host asks Emily whether being brought up by a lesbian parent effected her sexuality. To which Emily responds:

‘er I actually feel very lucky because I do identify as a lesbian, and I feel very fortunate that umm I happen to coincidentally have a lesbian mum, and for- statistically speaking I am the exception not the rule... most children who are raised by gay parents are straight, just as most gay people have straight parents, erm, so I just feel very fortunate to have had that coincidence’.

Emily indicates that her lesbianism is a chance occurrence by her repeated use of the words ‘coincidence’, ‘fortunate’, ‘lucky’ and ‘exception’. The ways in which these children are introduced and what they are compelled to say (and the fact that they appear on only 3 out of the 14 shows in which the strategy ‘children as proof’ is used) strongly mitigates against a radical treatment of the issue of intergenerational lesbianism/male homosexuality. The heterosexuality of straight children is flaunted and celebrated as proof of lesbian’s and gay men’s fitness to parent, and is not presented as a chance occurrence. By contrast, the framing of lesbian and gay children’s sexuality is orchestrated both to avoid confirming the worst fears of anti-lesbian/gay groups, and to prevent the articulation of radical claims about the potential for lesbian and gay parents to raise lesbian and gay children (and how great that is!).

On 2 of the talk shows in which the strategy ‘children as proof’ features, children produce negative accounts of growing up in a lesbian family. Suzanne on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1990) wrote a letter to the host to say that her mother ‘makes me uncomfortable by constantly mentioning being gay, making jokes about it’ and ‘flaunting it’. John on *Sally Jessy Raphael* (1993b) also wrote a letter to the host describing negative experiences of life in a lesbian family: ‘I didn’t have a very good understanding of what men were like. I mean she just bashed men’. What is interesting is that these negative accounts focus on the mother’s bad (lesbian) behaviour (i.e., hating men and flaunting their sexuality), and are immediately countered with positive accounts of growing up in a lesbian or gay family. On *Sally Jessy Raphael* (1993b), John’s account is contrasted with Jesse’s, whose mother was ‘not at all, not at all’ a man-basher. On *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1990), the host immediately introduces Jon Thomas Harrelson, who she reports ‘says that hav[ing] a father who is gay has opened his eyes to many different types of people’. The liberal framing of talk show debates dictates that only good lesbian and gay parents can be tolerated.

## **(VI) THE BENEFITS OF GROWING UP IN A LESBIAN/GAY FAMILY**

The final pro-lesbian/gay argument emphasises the benefits for children of growing up in a lesbian or gay family, and it is used in 10 out of the 25 talk shows. Pro-lesbian/gay groups highlight two main benefits for children: being planned for, chosen and wanted, and the

opportunity to develop firsthand an understanding of, and openness to, diversity. For example:

‘Well what is real is most same sex couples certainly don’t have children by accident... They are planned, they are wanted, they are sought after, and it’s not haphazard and careless’ (Leeza Gibbons, host, *Leeza*, 1997).

‘if anything, they’re more sensitive to the differences in people because they’ve had a chance to experience a little of that... first hand... a little more sensitive to people who are different’ (Patricia Adams, lesbian parent, *Donahue*, 1994).

Bonnie Tinker, the pro-lesbian/gay expert on *Ricki Lake* (1997), claims that: ‘we don’t accidentally have children... which means we have to consider what’s going to happen to our kids’. Lesbian psychologist and lesbian parent, April Martin, the expert on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1993), argues that her wish ‘for all the children of the world, every baby in the world, is that they should be as planned for and as wanted as the children lesbians and gay men are choosing’. Leeza Gibbons (*Leeza*, 1997) uses a list format to hammer this point home. This is a rather clever argument, as it turns lesbian and gay couples’, much decried and heralded as a sign that they should not be parents, inability to conceive ‘naturally’ into a virtue. It suggests that lesbian and gay parents who choose children are (morally) superior to heterosexuals (and even lesbians and gay men) who have children ‘by accident’. It emphasises their responsibility as parents, and the consideration and effort invested in their decision to raise a child. For Boggis (2001), the argument that children in lesbian and gay families are planned and wanted is a middle class argument which ‘the public and self-appointed representatives of LGBT parenting’ (p. 175) who are themselves predominantly white and middle class have presented as true of all lesbian and gay families. Boggis argues that ‘contrary to the popular truism in the gay parenting community, not all of our families are planned, not all of our children are wanted, not every pregnancy is a carefully planned life transition’ (p. 177). To ignore this fact, is to ignore the experiences of some of the least privileged members of the lesbian and gay community.

The other pro-lesbian/gay ‘benefits’ argument that children will learn not to ‘not have ‘isms’ like so many people do’ (Susan, lesbian parent, *Leeza*, 1997) also appears to be rather positive (indeed, it is difficult to challenge the view that children should be raised to be open-minded and tolerant). But it stops short of claiming any substantial or specific benefits for lesbian and gay parenting. Heterosexual parents can also raise their children to be tolerant and open minded. What is being hinted at, but is not explicitly stated (the claims are rather vague and opaque), is that lesbian and gay parents have a unique perspective on reality and a firsthand experience of marginality because of their position in the larger society (Brown, 1989). Some authors have claimed that this perspective enables lesbians and gay men to liberate their children from oppressive patriarchal values and to act as role models for unconventional gender identities (Riddle, 1978). Lesbian and gay parents on talk shows do

not claim that they will raise their children in ways that challenge compulsory heterosexuality and conventional constructions of gender. They opt instead for bland and apolitical language, avoiding any discussion of overtly political concepts such as power and oppression, and of feminist and lesbian/gay values. They are also careful to not claim that their parenting is different from, or better than, conventional parenting.

Pro-lesbian/gay participants sometimes also claim specific benefits for lesbian and gay children growing up in lesbian and gay families: 'if they have the feeling that they might possib[ly]... be homosexual, they're more likely to accept it, rather than fight against it... ruin their lives and... commit suicide' (Chris, 'mother is a lesbian', *Central Weekend Live*, 1997). One young lesbian cites her father's homosexuality as the reason she 'was able to come out with ease' (Ally, daughter of a gay parent, *Leeza*, 1997). Thus, children in lesbian and gay families who 'might possibly' be lesbian or gay may avoid some of the difficulties many lesbian and gay youth endure, such as rejection, feelings of shame and self-hatred, and suicide attempts (Remafedi, 1987, Robertson, 1981). In many ways, this is again a positive pro-lesbian/gay parenting argument, and the participation of lesbian and gay children in talk show debates indicates that some lesbian and gay families do not feel compelled to hide their lesbian and gay children. However, as I noted above, children conspicuously avoid claiming any links between their and their parents' sexuality: they do not argue that growing up in a lesbian or gay family 'made' them lesbian/gay and isn't that great?! The promotion of lesbianism/male homosexuality and unconventional gender identities in lesbian and gay families is not celebrated on talk shows.

### **Discussion: Constructing an Alternative Agenda**

In this paper, we have outlined and analysed six themes in pro-lesbian/gay parenting discourse on talk show debates about lesbian and gay families. Lesbian and gay parents emphasise the importance of love, the ordinariness of their family lives, that god made them also, that they are not *lesbian/gay* parents, just parents who happen to be lesbian/gay, and the benefits of lesbian and gay families, and their children are used to disprove fears about the negative psychological impact of their parenting. We have illustrated how these themes are informed by the liberal and the heterosexist politics that frame and are produced within talk shows debates. Although talk shows do allow lesbians and gay men to 'speak for themselves', they are forced to do so within a framework that is ultimately hostile to a lesbian/gay (radical) agenda and which activity promotes heterosexual supremacy. From a pragmatic political perspective, we are, like Gamson (1998) cautiously optimistic about the possibilities for visibility and resistance that talk shows afford lesbians and gay men. However, from a lesbian feminist perspective, we are, like other feminist commentators such as Epstein and Steinberg (1998) critical of the ways in which these debates reinforce heterosexism. We suggest that the arguments produced in talk show debates by pro-lesbian/gay groups are problematic for three main reasons: first, they normalise lesbian and

gay parenting, second, they are not even locally effective, and third, they are based on a heterosexist set of assumptions. We now consider each of these points in turn.

The six themes we have outlined all emphasise inclusiveness, generality, sameness, fitting lesbians and gay men into existing understandings of family, parenting and christianity, and denying their (sexual) difference. Normalising is a predominant pro-lesbian/gay strategy for representing lesbian and gay parents (Clarke, 2002a, 2002b). Politically, it is located within the assimilationist tactics that have dominated the lesbian and gay movement from its early beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century. Loosely defined, assimilation involves 'the structuring of lesbian and gay resistance around... the oppressor's discourse' (Smith, 1994, p. 235). Assimilation is achieved by minimising the 'disability' (i.e., lesbianism/male homosexuality) that stands in the way of full participation and is founded on an implicit contract with society: lesbian and gay identity will be disavowed or concealed in return for equal treatment (Adam, 1995). Mainstreaming politics require that we stress our common humanity and keep our sexuality private: thus, it is argued that lesbians and gay men are just the same as heterosexuals except for what they do in bed. The message is that *we want into* heteronormative structures and institutions, and, as we have demonstrated, this is the message that is vigorously promoted on talk shows debates about lesbian and gay parenting.

Normalising strategies have obvious political benefits, often cleverly challenging anti-lesbian/gay assumptions about deviant-difference and lesbianism/male homosexuality as a master identity. However, from a radical perspective, they have significant political costs. They permit only defensive and apologetic responses to diversionary anti-lesbian/gay claims, and they do not allow lesbians and gay men to assert pride in their sexuality, nor to highlight and celebrate their differences.

These arguments also frequently fail to be persuasive and are easily rebuffed. The examples of anti-lesbian/gay responses to pro-lesbian/gay claims in our data conform to a similar structure: they dismiss the relevance of (say) loving relationships, and refocus on lesbian and gay parents' difference and deviancy, and their failure to conform to conventional expectations about what makes a family:

'I'm certainly not saying that you don't have a lot of love for your children, and that you don't bring them up in a stable relationship, and give them an awful lot of security and love, that isn't the issue with me. What we're saying is that, you know, if we've been made male and female, then surely it's important for males and females to have involvement in bringing up their children' (Sally Nash, 'Teacher', *Central Weekend Live*, 1997).

'I'd recognise that er these women are giving stability to this child, but more important than that is the consistent input that a father can bring, and I know from my own boys that a father brings er an input a consistent input to a child' (Audience Member, *Central*

*Weekend Live*, 1997).

These speakers de-politicise pro-lesbian/gay arguments about love by focusing not on whether love makes a family but on whether individual parents love (or offer stability to) their children. They then simply recycle their earlier claims about the importance of structure.

The problem with talk shows about lesbian and gay parenting is not simply that, as Carpignano et al. (1990) point out, talk shows are designed to provide no conclusions. We could imagine a radical and resistant discussion about heterosexism which explored but provided no resolution to the difficulties faced by lesbians and gay men. The problem is that they are produced within a fundamentally heterosexist framework. If talk shows were truly lesbian/gay centred, definitions of interesting questions, intelligible controversies, and of what constitutes 'balance' across different viewpoints would be constructed very differently. Reading the lesbian feminist literature on parenting, we are struck by the different questions and issues addressed. If, for example, the question 'should gay men and women become parents?' (Kilroy, 1997) was the focus of debate, the concern would not be to explore whether or not lesbians and gay men should be prevented from having children, but to examine the political implications of lesbian and gay parenting. Guests could include: lesbians who refuse motherhood as a primary site of women's oppression (Alice et al., 1973/1988); gay men who think that gay fathers are guilty of 'de-gaying gayness' (Bersani, 1995, quoted in Faderman, 1997, p. 63); lesbians who think that lesbians should not become mothers because 'women who choose pregnancy are simply not Lesbians' (Jo et al., 1990, p. 207); lesbians' angry about being told that 'being a mother was my own problem and politically un-right-on' (Allen and Harne, 1987, p. 189); and lesbians who believe that lesbian mothers 'very existence challenges society's assumption about the proper function of a woman and motherhood' (Goodman, 1980, p. 157). What we seek to highlight by contrast is the limitations of the normalising approach, and the extent to which regular talk shows are premised on heterosexist assumptions and arguments. Our intention is not to attack individual lesbians and gay men who chose to participate in talk show debates, but to highlight the constraints placed on them by the ways the debates are structured. Additionally, we analyse these debates from an explicitly lesbian feminist perspective, these debates might look rather different viewed from other political perspectives.

In conclusion, we have shown that talk shows preach liberal tolerance and promote heterosexism. The heterosexist framing of talk show debates about lesbian and gay families means that lesbian and gay parents are forced on to the defensive. Although their contributions to these debates often cleverly challenge anti-lesbian/gay assumptions, they ultimately collude in heterosexism.

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**TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF TALK SHOW DATA COLLECTED**

<b>Talk Show</b>	<b>Title/Topic of Show</b>	<b>Production</b>	<b>Length of Rec.</b>	<b>Transcript</b>
Kilroy	'Gay parenting'	2001, BBC, UK	40 minutes	VC
Trisha	'Let's start over...'	2001, Anglia Television Production, UK	35 minutes	VC
Ricki Lake	'My gay mate doesn't want kids! Today they'll agree, or I'm gone'	2000b, Columbia Television, Inc., USA	18 minutes	VC
Ricki Lake	'My lesbian 'ex' can't raise our child!'	2000a, Columbia Television, Inc., USA	28 minutes	VC
The Wright Stuff	'Equal rights for gays?'	2000, Anglia Television Limited, UK	30 minutes	VC
Esther	'Gay husbands'	1999, BBC, UK	20 minutes	VC
Leeza	'What makes a family?'	1999, Paramount Pictures Corporation, USA	32 minutes	VC
Trisha	'And YOU Want to be a Parent?!'	1999, Anglia Television Ltd., Universal Television Inc., UK	37 minutes	VC
Vanessa	'Gay Marriage: 'Should it be legal?''	1999, BBC, UK	23 minutes	VC
Living Issues	'Gay Adoption'	1999, Flextech Rights Ltd., UK	26 minutes	VC
Living Issues	'Should gays be allowed to marry legally?'	1998, Flextech Rights Ltd., UK	27 minutes	VC
Vanessa	'Gay mums and dads'	1998, Anglia Television Ltd., UK	36 minutes	VC
Ricki Lake	'You shouldn't be a parent because you're gay'	1997, Columbia Television, Inc., USA	25 minutes	VC
Leeza	Gay parents	1997, Paramount Pictures Corporation, USA	36 minutes	VC
Kilroy	'Should gay men and women have children?'	1997, BBC, UK	38 minutes	VC
Central Weekend Live	'Lesbian mums'	1997, Carlton Television, UK	27 minutes	VC
You Decide	'Should homosexuals have the same rights as Heterosexuals?'	1997, BBC News, UK	49 minutes	VC
The Time... The Place	'Should lesbian couples have children?'	1997, Anglia, UK	15 minutes	VC
Heart of the Matter	'Zoe and Phyllis Get Married'	1996, BBC, UK	39 minutes	VC
Donahue	'Where do gays and lesbians get babies to start a family?'	1994, Multimedia Entertainment, Inc., USA	N/A	800-All News
Sally Jessy Raphael	'She had to give up her child'	1993b, Multimedia Entertainment, Inc., USA	N/A	800-All News
Heart of the Matter	'Fostering Prejudice'	1993, BBC, UK	N/A	BBC
Sally Jessy Raphael	'Gay interracial adoption'	1993a, Multimedia Entertainment, Inc., USA	N/A	800-All News
The Oprah Winfrey Show	'Lesbian and gay baby boom'	1993, Harpo Productions, Inc.	N/A	VC
The Oprah Winfrey Show	'All the family is gay'	1991, Harpo Productions, Inc.	N/A	VC
The Oprah Winfrey Show	'Gay adoption'	1990, Harpo Productions, Inc.	N/A	VC