

*Psychology of Sexuality*

**“Not a big deal”?: Exploring the Accounts of Adult Children of Lesbian, Gay and  
Trans Parents**

**Victoria Clarke and Eleni Demetriou**

Victoria Clarke is an Associate Professor in Sexuality Studies in the Department of Health and Social Sciences at the University of the West of England, UK.

[[Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk)]

Eleni Demetriou graduated with a BSc (Hons) in Psychology from the University of the West of England in 2011. Her project was supervised by Victoria Clarke.

Correspondence: Victoria Clarke, Department of Health and Social Sciences,  
University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16  
1QY, UK. Email: [Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk)

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**Abstract**

Most literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans families has focused on the psychological and social well-being of school aged children with lesbian, gay and trans (LGT) parents. The aim of the present study was to explore how the adult children of LGT parents make sense of their families. The study focused both on recollections of childhood and on current feelings and experiences. Thirteen women and 1 man completed either an email interview or an online qualitative survey; the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The participants' accounts were protective of their parents and often drew on the normalizing discourses evident in pro-gay rhetoric about LGT parenting to minimize the significance of their parents' sexuality/gender identity and the 'taint of difference' associated with LGT families. At the same time, the participants strongly challenged heterosexist and homophobic/transphobic assumptions about LGT families and viewed the source of any difficulties they and their parents experienced as resulting from a hetero/cisnormative social context that prevented LGT people and their families from living openly and authentically without fear of discrimination. The results highlight the continuing micro impacts of hetero/cisnormativity in the lives of LGT people and their families.

**Key words:** Email interviews, heteronormativity, heterosexism, qualitative survey, thematic analysis

## **The kids are alright**

Research on the well-being of children with lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) parents began in the 1970s in response to lesbian women losing custody of children from former heterosexual relationships because of homophobic assumptions about parental fitness (e.g., Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983; Green, 1978), and has continued to primarily focused on the children of lesbian parents. This largely quantitative and comparative body of research addressed concerns – raised in custody cases and reflected in many custody decisions – about the presumed negative impact of an LGBT parent on children’s psychosexual development and social wellbeing. From the earliest studies comparing volunteer samples of divorced lesbian and heterosexual mother families (e.g., Golombok et al., 1983), to more recent research using general population samples (e.g., Golombok, Perry, Burston, Murray, Mooney-Somers, Stevens & Golding, 2003) and comparing children *born into* LG and heterosexual families (e.g., Baiocco, Santamaria, Ioverno, Fontanesi, Baumgartner et al., 2015; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004) and adopted by LG and heterosexual parents (e.g., Farr, Forssell & Patterson, 2010; Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, Casey, Tasker et al., 2014), this literature has demonstrated that children do not suffer negative psychological and social consequences (Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002; Manning, Fetto & Lamidi, 2014). A number of professional bodies have endorsed these findings (BPS, 2012; Paige, 2005; Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown & Kane, 2007). However, this body of research has been criticized for (inadvertently) bolstering heteronormative discourses of compulsory heterosexuality (Clarke 2002a; Hicks, 2005; Hosking & Ripper, 2012; Riggs, 2006).

A number of critical scholars have argued – in relation to the literature on LG parents - that by taking concerns about children’s well-being seriously and treating them as worthy of investigation (and by allowing for the possibility that lesbians *are* unfit to parent) the homophobic assumptions underpinning such concerns remain unchallenged (Clarke, 2002a; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Furthermore, by comparing LG families to heterosexual families (with heterosexual families the ‘control’ group), the normative status of heterosexuality remains unquestioned (Clarke, 2002a; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). The assumption that a finding of ‘no differences’ between LG and heterosexual families is desirable is underpinned by neo-liberal discourses that problematize difference and overlook the ways in which a heteronormative social context privileges some groups and marginalizes others (Clarke, 2002a; see also Herek, 2010).

Public debates about LGBT parenting have also been dominated by concerns about the psychosocial well-being of children. Common concerns in such debates center on the provision and necessity of ‘suitable’ (two different-sex) role models, children’s exposure to bullying and LGBT parents prioritizing their own selfish *wants* over the psychological *needs* of their children (Clarke, 2001). LGBT parents and their allies have responded in similar ways to LGBT psychologists – emphasizing the similarities between LGBT and other (heterosexual) families. In a series of papers, Clarke (2002a, 2002b, 2006, Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, 2005, Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004; see also Riggs, 2012) has examined what she dubbed the ‘normalising’ discourses that underpin pro-gay rhetoric in public debates about LGBT parenting. She argued that LGBT parents have rarely challenged the terms of the debate (for example, that children need ‘suitable’ role models) but instead have sought to demonstrate how

their families are *just like* any other family. In television talk show debates, for instance, children's conventional gender identities and heterosexuality have been used to 'prove otherwise' about LGBT families (Stacey, 1996), and show that the 'worst fears' about LGBT families (that LGBT parents produce LGBT children) are not realized (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004).

### **Giving voice to the children of LGBT parents**

One thing that is missing from both comparative research and public debates is the voices and experiences of the children of LGBT parents (Paechter, 2000). In public debates, children most often feature simply to disconfirm fears about the negative effects of LGBT parenting, not to give voice to *their* experiences of life in an LGBT-parented family. To date, only a small body of qualitative, mostly US-based research has explored children's perspectives on, and experiences of, growing up in a LGBT-parented family. Most studies have focused on the children of lesbian mothers (e.g., Davies, 2008; Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, de Vaus & Pitts, 2006; van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, van Rooij & Hermanns, 2012; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; see also McGuire, 1996; Paechter, 2000). Research inclusive of or focused on the children of gay, bisexual and trans parents is less common (e.g., Bozett, 1988; Fairtlough, 2008; Goldberg, 2007a, 2007b; Joos & Broad, 2007; Kivalanka & Goldberg, 2008; Sasnett, 2015; Welsh, 2011). A few studies have focused on adolescents (van Gelderen et al., 2012; Welsh, 2011), but most have either included both adolescents and (often young) adults (Lewis, 1980; Saffron, 1998), or focused specifically on adults (e.g., Kivalanka, Leslie & Radina, 2014; Leddy, Gartrell & Bos, 2012). Even though this research has focused on differences between LGBT- and heterosexual-parented

families it frequently remains implicitly oriented to the 'proving otherwise' agenda. In addition to categorizing children's reactions to parental disclosure (Fairtlough, 2008; Goldberg, 2007b; Lewis, 1980), this literature has focused on two areas of difference: one that can be glossed as positive difference, and indeed is often explicitly presented as one of the "advantages" of LGBT-parented families (Saffron, 1998), and one that centres on the negative impacts of heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.

### ***Positive impacts of LGBT parenting***

Openness to difference has been identified as a positive impact of LGBT parenting. In a paper on the children of lesbian mothers, Saffron (1998) questioned the assumption that there are no differences between lesbian and heterosexual parenting in relation to moral and social development, and is one of a number of authors who have found that children of LGBT parents report being more tolerant and accepting of difference and diversity (Goldberg, 2007a; Lewis, 1980; Saffron, 1998; Welsh, 2011). Saffron (1998: 37) contended that children in lesbian families have the clear advantage of learning by example – lesbian parents can model pride in a stigmatized identity, "which is more powerful teacher than explanation alone". Children have reported acceptance both of homosexuality and of other forms of difference, valuing equality in relationships, and a willingness to take responsibility for challenging prejudice (Goldberg, 2007a; Saffron, 1998). Children in some studies have reported pride in their family difference and a sense of identification with, and loyalty to, the LGBT community (e.g., Goldberg, 2007b; Leddy et al., 2012). The acceptance of homosexuality also impacts positively on children's openness to

explore same-sex attractions (Davies, 2008; Goldberg, 2007a; Lewis, 1980), and the process of 'discovering' a queer identity (Kualanka & Goldberg, 2008; Saffron, 1998).

### ***Pressures to be 'poster children'***

However, Kualanka and Goldberg (2008) found that some queer-identified children experienced real or perceived pressure to be heterosexual and gender conforming, which resulted from heterosexism in their social environments and a desire not to "prove the critics of queer parenting right" (p. 911). Some of the participants in this study viewed their and their parent's homosexuality as "completely unconnected" (p. 911), echoing television talk show debates in which queer children emphasize the biological origins of their sexuality and explicitly disavow their parents' influence on the development of their sexuality (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004). Other studies have found that children also experienced pressure to be 'poster children'; to be successful or well-adjusted in order to discredit homophobic, biphobic and transphobic assumptions about the negative effects of LGBT parenting (Goldberg, 2007a; Welsh, 2011).

### ***Love makes a family***

Related to notions of openness to difference is the finding that children are accepting of a variety of family forms, and often emphasise "love and intimacy, caring and support" (Saffron, 1998: 45; see also Leddy et al., 2012; Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, de Vaus & Pitts, 2006; Welsh, 2011) as the defining characteristics of family. The notion that 'love makes a family' is also evident in pro-gay rhetoric in public debates about LGBT parenting (Clarke, 2002b). Similarly, the authors of

comparative research on LGBT parenting have emphasized the importance of family processes in child development over and above family structure (Chan et al., 1998; Flaks et al., 1995).

### ***Disclosure and stigma***

The other difference discussed in research on children's experiences relates to disclosure practices and the negotiation of the (perceived/feared) social stigma surrounding homosexuality (e.g., Goldberg, 2007b; Lewis, 1980; Kivalanka et al., 2014). Findings suggest that children value parental openness and honesty (Lewis, 1980), and a sense of differentness develops from a need for secrecy – both when the secrecy is imposed on them (by their parents) and when children keep their parent's sexuality a secret because of fears of ostracism (Lewis, 1980). Bozett (1988) was one of the first scholars to address this theme and he found that the children of gay fathers developed various 'social control strategies' to manage the perceptions of others, including avoiding disclosure altogether or being highly selective about who to tell to avoid contamination with the stigma of homosexuality. More recent research by Goldberg (2007b) suggests that children who grew up in families in which there was a sense of secrecy and shame about homosexuality experienced feelings of (intergenerational) shame and did not disclose to others (see also Lindsay et al., 2006). Others in Goldberg's study felt a need for authenticity, openness and honesty (interestingly, some of the children in Bozett's study strategically used openness as a way of pre-empting and neutralising the stigma of homosexuality, rather than openness necessarily being an expression of authentic feeling).

### ***Limitations of research that gives voice to the children of LGBT parents***



A number of limitations of this small body of research have been noted, including that participants are often those who have good relationships with their parents (Goldberg, 2007b; Saffron, 1998). Lewis (1980) argued that the accounts of the children she spoke to were highly protective of their mothers, but that more ambivalent feelings underneath the “facade of acceptance” (Lewis, 1980: 201) often leaked out during the interviews. Lewis explained this with reference to both the children’s love for their mothers and their own self-image: “If they devalue their mother, then they, as her progeny, are also devalued.” (p. 201) Goldberg (2007b) also noted tensions in the accounts of some of her participants. Some described themselves as completely open and ‘out’, but then, seemingly unaware of the contradiction, reported examples of avoiding disclosure. These tensions and contradictions clearly warrant further exploration.

### **Aims of the current study**

Given the politically sensitive nature of this topic, we wish to make explicit that we do not in any way endorse the notion that LGBT people as a group are unfit to parent; rather, it would seem that a heteronormative social context creates pressures for children to not discuss ambivalent feelings or negative childhood experiences. Our view – as the child of a gay father (SA) and a queer identified woman (FA) - is that it is important to create opportunities for the children of LGBT parents to discuss their experiences of family in a context that moves beyond ‘proving otherwise’ (because such proof is neither necessary nor desirable in challenging hetero/cisnormativity). Furthermore, it is important to consider whether, and if so, how children’s accounts orient to a hetero/cisnormative social

context. The current research is one of the first British studies to explore the experiences of children (see also Saffron, 1988; Tasker & Golombok, 1997), focusing both on childhood experiences and those of adulthood. Our reading of existing research suggest some similarities between children's accounts and those of LGBT parents. For this reason, we are particularly interested in exploring whether children draw on normalizing discourses in making sense of their families, and, if they do so, with what effects.

## **Method**

### **Participants and recruitment**

Participants were recruited through online and offline social networks, support groups and community organizations (such as Bristol LGBT Forum, Gay Dads Scotland, and Mumsnet), and snowball sampling. The main criteria for participation were being aged 18 or older and having at least 1 LGBT parent. Thirteen women and 1 man participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 60 years, with most in their 20s and early 30s (mean 33). Twelve participants identified their race/ethnicity as white and 1 as Jewish (and 1 provided no data [ND]). Nine identified as middle class, 3 as working class, and 1 as both middle and working class (1 ND). Twelve self-identified as heterosexual and 2 (women) as bisexual. Thirteen were born into a heterosexual relationship in which 1 parent 'came out' as gay (8 participants), lesbian (4) or trans (1) during their adolescence. One participant was born in a LG family (with 2 lesbian mothers and a gay father). No children of bisexual parents volunteered for the study. Of the 13 participants born into heterosexual families, 7 were raised by their LGT parent until adolescence, 4 were raised by their

non-LGT parent but had frequent contact with their LGT parent (3 ND). With regard to the participants' age at parental disclosure, 4 were under 12 years old, and 7 were between 12 and 16 (3 ND).

### **Data collection and analysis**

Because children of LGT parents are a 'hidden' and geographically dispersed population, online methods were used to collect data. Participants were given the choice of participating in an email interview (Meho, 2006) or completing an online qualitative survey (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This permitted participants to choose greater (survey) or lesser (email interview) anonymity, and the amount of time they spent completing the study (more email interview, less survey). Five participants opted for an email interview, and 9 for the online survey. A schedule of questions was developed, strongly informed by Goldberg (2007a, 2007b), which invited participants to tell their story of being the child of a LGT parent(s), and to reflect on their (past and current) experiences of disclosure and the impact their LGT parent(s) has had on their relationships, gender and sexuality. This schedule formed the basis of the qualitative survey and the email interview, with some minor variations between the two formats. The qualitative survey was administered via the *Qualtrics* online survey software. Participants were given information about the study and the potential uses of their data (and SA disclosed her personal interest in the topic as the daughter of a gay father), and then asked a consent question, before being invited to complete the survey. The main survey questions were followed by a mixture of open-ended and click-box demographic questions.

The email interview participants were sent copies of the participant information sheet and the demographic form as attachments. If they consented to participate, they were asked to return the completed demographic form and cut and paste a statement of consent into the body of an email (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Following receipt of this consent statement, the participants were sent the interview questions (tailored to their family situation) (Hodgson, 2004). On receipt of the participant's responses to these questions, a number of follow-up questions were sent inviting the participants to elaborate on their accounts. In some instances, a second-round of follow-up questions was sent. Most of the email interviews were completed in two-three weeks.

In preparation for analysis the survey data was downloaded into a Microsoft Word document, and the email interviews were cut and pasted into the same document. The participants were allocated pseudonyms and any identifying information was changed or removed. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA), which involved a six stage process of coding and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aim was to explore participant's sense-making, with the understanding that this is always situated within socio-cultural discourses (Willig, 1999). As such our use of TA was underpinned by a critical realist framework (Ussher, 2000), and informed by discursive research on LG parenting (e.g., Clarke, 2002a). Ussher (2000: 221) defined critical realism as an ontological framework that:

affirms the existence of 'reality', both physical and environmental, but at the same time recognizes that its representations are characterized and mediated

by culture, language and political interests rooted in factors such as race, gender or social class.

The analytic process resulted in the identification of two themes: 'it's not all about my parent's sexuality/gender identity' and 'secrecy, authenticity and negotiating the stigma of homosexuality'. Spelling, grammatical and typographical errors in the data have been corrected to aid readability, and '[...]' signals the removal of unnecessary detail or identifying information from the quoted data

## **Results**

### **It's not all about my parent's sexuality/gender identity**

Although invited to share their experiences as the children of LGT parents, the participants often challenged the notion that their parents' sexuality/gender identity was the defining feature of their families. This theme captures the normalizing strategies the participants drew on to downplay the significance of their parents' sexuality/gender identity and minimize the 'taint' of difference associated with their family.

#### ***'I had a Mum and a Dad around'***

The participants often highlighted other aspects of their family life, such as their parents' values, personality, or the fact that they had two different-sex parents, as key (Goldberg, 2007a). For example, Mary, whose father was a transsexual (TS) woman, minimized the significance of her father's gender identity in her upbringing:

in all that I've said – especially about challenging opinion, it is important to note that I was born to two hippies who are very open minded in their attitudes towards people [...] they are both educated and intelligent [...] they

brought my sister and me up to question, to think, and to make up our own minds about things. They also taught us to stand up for what we believe in [...] I think this may have a more fundamental influence on my attitudes than having a TS father...

Here and elsewhere Mary presented herself as having “greater awareness” of issues of diversity and difference, as did most of the other participants. This echoes a key finding in existing research that one of the positive aspects of growing up with an LGT parent is leaning to be “much more accepting, tolerant and open-minded” (Julie) as an adult (Saffron, 1998; Goldberg, 2007b). However, in this data extract, Mary presents her ‘greater awareness’ as more of a product of *both* of her parents’ values than her father’s gender identity, challenging Saffron’s (1998) argument that lesbian parents are uniquely placed to educate their children about social diversity. Other participants also highlighted the role of their heterosexual parent in teaching them to “respect people and not discriminate” (Hannah): “Having a gay dad has certainly made me more open-minded, especially when it comes to valuing diversity. I’m sure though that he wasn’t the only reason that made me like this. My mum has also played a role in that” (Lilli, daughter of a gay father).

Children born into heterosexual relationships often drew attention to, and emphasized, the role of their heterosexual/cisgendered parent in their upbringing and the ways in which their families conformed to traditional norms. For example, Hannah emphasized the conventionality of her childhood experiences including the fact that she had both a male and a female role model:

Though my Dad is gay, my personal experience of childhood meant that I had a Mum and a Dad around and I'm glad of that because of the balance it gave and it was good having a parent of each gender because they had different things to offer.

This account invokes notions of complementarity between masculinity and femininity, and thus is underpinned by essentialist models of gender and sexuality that tie particular gender performatives to particular bodies (Hosking & Ripper, 2012). The implication is that two male or two female parents would provide an *imbalance* (both excess and lack) (Hicks, 2008). Aaron, like Hannah, emphasized the importance of different-sex role models and presented his gay father as an appropriate (gender conforming) male role model: "I never felt that I lacked a male figure in my life because of my father being gay, I actually consider him to be more of a man than other men. At the end of the day it's just a sexual preference to me, nothing else". Aaron downplayed the significance of his father's sexual difference – 'just a sexual preference' – framing it as a simple choice, rather than an identity, or master status (Becker, 1963), that is unrelated to his father's masculinity (thus refuting the cultural connection between homosexuality and femininity, Hayfield, 2013). Hannah similarly described her gay father as "not an 'extreme' – neither ridiculously camp nor really macho", presented him as appropriately 'gay, but not too gay', and implicitly pathologising forms of queer embodiment that do not conform to the rules of compulsory heterosexuality (Clarke & Smith, 2014). Natalie, who had grown up in a LG parented family from birth, emphasized the importance of "biological links" in defining parenthood. She dismissed as "ridiculous" the notion that a parent is anyone other than someone who has a biological relationship to the

child, thus invoking traditional biological imperatives in constituting family. Another strategy was to normalize family difference – “so few people have a conventional mum/dad set up now anyway” (Hannah); “everyone’s family is odd in some way” (Mary) – presenting LGT parented-families as one item on a long list of ‘alternative’ family types.

***‘I was affected because my dad was a mess not because he was gay’***

Even those participants who reported experiencing difficulties in childhood, minimized the role of their parents’ sexuality/gender identity in creating these difficulties:

Probably growing up I was affected, but more because my dad was such a mess, rather than just being gay [...] my circumstances were with a closeted dad. If anything, I wish he would have come out and been a proud, happy person, and been more of a family man, than the closeted and unhealthy man that he became (Molly)

Although Molly acknowledges that having a gay father had an impact on her life, she attributes this impact to her father’s unhappiness and a failure of authenticity rather than his sexuality. Similarly, Anne who experienced abuse and neglect in childhood, presented her father as a bad parent who happened to be gay, rather than linking his parenting and his sexuality: “I don’t feel gay people are bad, rather, my father was a bad parent”.

***Normalizing bullying***

One of the common ‘concerns’ expressed about the children of LGBT parents is that they will experience teasing and bullying. Comparative psychological research has



typically downplayed experiences of bullying (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Some of our participants *did* report experiences of teasing and bullying at school, particularly during their teenage years (see also Fairclough, 2008; Joos & Broad, 2007; Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Leddy et al., 2012; van Gelderen et al., 2012; Welsh, 2011), but some – like Eva – normalized their experiences of homophobic bullying. Eva presented her mother’s lesbianism as *just* another reason for routine bullying:

When I was younger it was part of a wider set of things I got teased for. I also got teased about e.g. wearing glasses or being studious, so I was teased because I was teased, not because my mother was lesbian but because I was the kind of kid to get picked on.

Eva’s account implies that even if she did not have a lesbian mother she would still be teased for the ‘kind of kid’ she was. This ‘normalization through individualization’ account has strong echoes of the normalizing accounts identified by Clarke, Kitzinger and Potter (2004) in their research on lesbian and gay parents’ talk about homophobic bullying. They found that lesbian and gay parents “conflated homophobic and what we might call ‘everyday’ bullying to build an account of homophobic bullying as routine” (p. 542). Clarke et al. argued that normalizing accounts of bullying are strategically oriented to an aversive social context by minimizing one of the presumed negative consequences of LG parenting. The underlying assumption here is that difference is problematic rather than “just a difference” (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001: 177).

### ***Love makes a family***

Another normalizing strategy identified by Clarke (2002b) is the notion that ‘love

makes a family'; as noted above, this is a feature of the accounts of the children of LGBT parents in other qualitative studies (e.g., Saffron, 1998; Welsh, 2011). Many of the participants in the current research rejected the importance of biological relations and traditional gender roles in defining family by emphasizing instead the importance of "love and security" (Janis):

Family is a group of people who love each other; it doesn't have to do with the gender of those who head up the household. (Eva)

There are good and bad families of every kind. Working with children I've seen some of the most disastrous families of all races and backgrounds. As long as a child has love, who cares about who is raising them – be it a grandma, two men, a single mum, etc. (Kelly)

This kind of rhetoric has strong echoes of arguments made by authors of comparative psychological research about the importance of family process variables in predicting good outcomes for children, over and above those related to family structure (Chan et al., 1998; Flaks et al., 1995). Clarke and Kitinger (2004) identified 'love makes family' as a key feature of pro-gay rhetoric in media debates about LG parenting. They argued that LG parents and their allies deployed this notion to "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" (p. 205) and neutralise any negative claims about LG parents. This is a neo-liberal framing of family that emphasizes the similarities that unite all (good) families (Clarke, 2002b). In emphasizing "caring and loving" (Lilli), it is presumed that LG families "are not fundamentally different from heterosexual families because, at

the ‘end of the day’, all families are about love” (Clarke, 2002b: 102). Clarke and Kitzinger (2004) argued that ‘love makes a family’ discourse ultimately fails to challenge the heteronormative discourses that privilege some family forms (over others). As with neo-liberal rhetoric more broadly (Brickell, 2001), this discourse negates the power structures and material resources that shape outcomes for children and the effects of heteronormative discourses in the lives of LGBT families. Such neo-liberal framing also doesn’t allow for an exploration of the potential advantages of living in a family with two mothers, or two fathers (Clarke, 2002a). Our data show that both emphasizing the ways in which LGT families conform to traditional concepts of family (by highlighting the presence of two different-sex [gender conforming] role models and the importance of ‘biological ties’ between family members) *and* defining family in terms of love and security serve to normalize LGT families.

### ***Emphasizing sameness, normality and ordinariness***

In general, across the data, there was an explicit emphasis on sameness, normality, ordinariness and universality. In particular, the participants normalized the experience of difficulties during childhood (and minimized the role of their parent’s sexuality/gender identity in producing these): “I certainly don't feel like a 'damaged' adult. I have been through some difficult times (hasn't everyone?) and it's far too complex to blame it on one thing. A number of factors contributed to any difficult times” (Hannah). Hannah explicitly rejected the notion that she is ‘damaged’; she reformulated ‘damaged’ (an ontological state) to the more minimal ‘difficult times’, something external and transient, rather than a part of the self, and presented these

as a routine feature of life. Aaron, the son of a gay father, explicitly emphasized his normality and sameness: “I consider myself a normal person and I don’t consider myself to be no different from any other person because of my father’s sexual preferences”. Rachel presented ‘the issues’ between her and her lesbian mother as a normal feature of mother-daughter relationships: “It’s the same as having any other parent. My mother and I have a lot of issues between us but I don’t think it has to do with the fact that she’s a lesbian.”

One concern expressed about LGT parented families is that children will be more likely to experience confusion about their sexuality. Rachel oriented to this concern but presented sexual confusion as a normal part of growing up in any family, noting that feelings of sexual confusion have “a lot to do with growing up” in general, rather than being tied to growing up within a particular family structure. In reflecting on her childhood, Hannah commented: “I imagine they were pretty much like what most parents are like – they were just ‘Mum and Dad’ to me.” Thus, Hannah rejects the cultural formulation of homosexuality as a master status (Becker, 1963), and presents her father as a ‘Dad’ just like any other “but for the (trivial) fact of sexual orientation” (Raymond, 1992: 120). In sum, the emphasis on sameness and normality in the participants’ accounts challenged notions of ‘deviant difference’ (Clarke, 2002a), while also conforming to the rules of compulsory heterosexuality and downplaying the ways in which the lives of LGT people and their families are shaped by hetero/cisnormativity.

### **Secrecy, authenticity and negotiating the stigma of homosexuality/trans**

In contrast to the above theme, this theme captures the ways in which the participants directly acknowledged and negotiated the stigma of difference

associated with homosexuality/trans (Kuvalanka et al., 2014). The participants reported both current and past pressures (for themselves and for their parents) to keep their (non-normative) family structure a secret (Joss & Brand, 2007). Some reported that their LGT parent(s) kept (and in some cases still keep) their sexual/gender identity a secret (even from them) and that this secrecy has created feelings of anxiety and depression for their parents and feelings of sadness for themselves.

### ***The importance of authenticity***

Emma, who was the oldest participant, described her experience of growing up with a closeted lesbian parent as deeply negative with profound consequences for herself and her siblings:

My mother never admitted to being gay, saying only that they were just friends. We knew this wasn't true. When my sibling and I were little my mother was VERY abusive. I now know that she was very angry trying to be something she was not. Unfortunately she took it out on us with verbal and physical abuse. I blame society for my horrible childhood. If she could have been herself we would not have suffered [...] I wish the world were more open and understanding so I could have had a better childhood.

Emma was born in the 1950s, at a time when homosexuality was considered by many (including many psychologists) to be a pathological disorder, and deviations from the heterosexual norm often resulted in severe discrimination (Clarke et al., 2010). Parental unhappiness (and in Emma's case, physical and emotional abuse) was understood as resulting from an inability to live authentically (to be oneself and to

express oneself to others) in a heteronormative social context. Similarly, Mary framed her father's long-term depression as the result of 'living a lie':

The main difference in upbringing for me was that Dad suffered from major long lasting depression - understandably as it was only when Mum left (when I was an adolescent) that Dad actually came out as being TS [transsexual] as opposed to TV [transvestite], so for my whole time of living at home pretty much, Dad was living a lie - trying to be a man.

The participants emphasized the importance of openness and honesty, and living authentically, without fear of discrimination, in producing mental and social well-being for themselves and their parents. They framed their parents' decision to 'come out', to leave their marriages/the family home, and, in the case of Lilli's father, to leave the country, in terms of an understandable desire to live authentically:

At that time although my dad knew he was gay he preferred to get married to please his parents and in that way cover his sexual preferences. He forced himself to stay in the marriage but that pressure only lasted for a few years [...] By pretending that they were still married he could get away with his secret [...] He then moved to [another country] with his first relationship after the break-up. He said it was the only way for him to run away.

This type of account implicitly orients to notions of selfishness and irresponsibility and the prioritising of individual *desires* over the needs and 'best interests' of children (Clarke, 2001). A number of the participants drew on a discourse of authenticity to present their parents (and by extension themselves) as 'good'. By presenting her father as overcoming obstacles to knowing (and expressing) his true

self, and thus conforming to neo-liberal imperatives of self-actualisation (Allen & Mendick, 2012), Lilli constructs an image of her father as an authentic and therefore ‘moral’ parent. Although an opponent of LG parenting might frame Lilli’s father’s choices to leave his marriage and the country as selfish and irresponsible, Lilli presents her father as pursuing the worthy goal of an authentic self.

### ***The problem is homophobia/transphobia not my parents’ sexuality/gender identity***

Whereas traditional narratives posit parents’ sexuality/gender identity as ‘the problem’, the participants framed any difficulties they have experienced in terms of a heterosexist, homophobic and transphobic social context and their parents’ responses to that, including an inability to live openly. When she was a child Hannah’s father was a prominent figure in the local community and Hannah reported that the public revelation of his homosexuality had the potential to be a “sensational tabloid scoop”. Pre-empting such a reaction, Hannah’s parents made the decision that her father’s sexuality should remain a family secret after he disclosed to Hannah and her siblings:

I guess the result was that it became this big secret for a while... Instead of Dad coming out the closet I suppose we all jumped in it with him for a bit... But it seemed like a necessary action at the time to defend ourselves from the Big Bad World that just seemed out to harm us and bring us down.

For Hannah, her father’s failure of authenticity is framed as justifiable in the face of ‘the Big Bad World’.

### ***The participants’ disclosure practices***

Notions of secrecy and honesty also featured in relation to the participants' management of their own disclosure practices. Some participants placed a strong emphasis on the importance of honesty and openness, even if indicated that they were not always able to practice this. Although most reported experiencing anxiety about 'outing' their parents to others (Leddy et al., 2012), many also described positive reactions to disclosures (although some reported negative reactions, or a mix of positive and negative reactions). Some described initially disclosing to close and trusted friends (sometimes reluctantly in response to direct questions): "When I became an adult my two closest friends approached me about it, asked the question that I really didn't want them to ask. It was really difficult at the time, my friends were great about it" (Natalie). Hannah disclosed to only one friend while her father's homosexuality remained a 'family secret' (the 'Big Bad Thing'): "I felt she could be a trusted ally".

As noted in existing research (e.g., Kivalanka et al., 2014; Lewis, 1980), fear and anxiety about other's reactions – particularly during adolescence – led some participants to avoid disclosure: "Around puberty I understood that being lesbian was not 'normal' and kept it a secret from my friends. Only at adulthood and after joining weekends for children with gay parents I felt secure enough to talk about it" (Rachel). Hannah similarly "was worried what people would think". Eva, who experienced teasing at school, reported avoiding disclosure and talking about her family because of an increasing awareness of the stigma of homosexuality:

As I became aware that some school kids would tease me for it I spoke less about it, but my mother was known as out in the community so people knew



and asked questions. Later I told people straight away [...] to get it out of the way and show that I was open about it.

As discussed in relation to the previous theme, elsewhere in her narrative, Eva normalized her experiences of homophobic bullying by positioning herself as a tease-able individual; here, by contrast, she frames having a lesbian mother as something tease-able. Like participants in Bozett (1988) and Goldberg (2007b), Eva reported using disclosure in adulthood as a social control strategy to manage other's perceptions, to make *a show* of openness to disarm potential homophobes. Mary similarly noted that "the fact that I have no problems with it and am happy to discuss it means that there's nothing for people to use against me". By contrast, Irene reported using non-disclosure (another of Bozett's social control strategies) to manage other's perceptions and protect her and her father. Irene identified her cultural context as particularly conservative and this made disclosure and open discussion impossible in her view:

I have never discussed my father's sexuality with people that are not family members and will never do... it is a very 'thin' matter especially in my culture where people are not open-minded and I don't want him or anyone in the family get emotionally hurt... and since nobody knows it... it doesn't affect me or anyone in the family.

In Irene's view because her father's homosexuality is not openly acknowledged it ceases to exist and has no impact on her. For Natalie, disclosure was a more challenging prospect because of the 'complexity' of her family constellation. She reported using a strategy of managed and selective disclosure, carefully choosing

who she told: “I don't tend to tell everyone. I have to make a judgment about whether it's worth going into or not, as my family is pretty complicated. I've never had a bad reaction but that might be because I choose quite carefully who I tell”. A number of participants reported using a selective disclosure strategy – disclosing only to trusted friends (Perlesz et al., 2006). So, although most participants described themselves as open-minded and accepting of difference, they also reported being selective and cautious about who they revealed *their* difference to. A selective disclosure strategy was often combined with the use of disclosure as a ‘litmus test’ for (Goldberg, 2007b), and marker of, meaningful relationships: “it’s one of my markers for when someone has crossed into being a good friend.” (Hannah)

These participants avoided disclosure when it was “easier” (Hannah) to do so, when they judged that people – because of religious or cultural beliefs – would likely hold homophobic views, to protect their sense of ‘normality’ and to avoid homophobia. In addition, others’ *full* acceptance was experienced as liberating – “I feel that I’m completely free” (Lilli) – and necessary for an authentic relating (Joos & Broad, 2007). As in Goldberg’s (2007a) study, some participants reported difficulties trusting others (hence the high value they described placing on openness and honesty), and related this to their parent’s concealment of their ‘true self’. Julie reported that she is “wary of those who deny who they are or lie about themselves or what they want”. A number of participants reported that one of the advantages of being an adult (as opposed to a child) was having greater control over who one disclosed to.

Like some of the participants in Goldberg’s (2007b) study, a few of our participants reported a disclosure strategy underpinned by a need to be open and honest (but

this was a pragmatic rather than political need): “I have always spoken openly to people if it comes up. There's no point in hiding it because if people are going to know me then they will meet her at some point” (Mary). Goldberg (2007b: 122) noted tensions and contradictions in the accounts of some of her participants – describing themselves as very open then relating stories that contradicted this “seemingly unknowingly”. By contrast, some of the participants in this study noted a gap between the value they placed on openness, and how open they were in practice, wanting to avoid (being perceived as) flaunting their parents’ sexuality. Furthermore, a few spoke of directly challenging heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia – albeit somewhat ambivalently (“I feel no need to stand at the head and fight”, Mary) – and these challenges were not always welcomed by others (including close friends elsewhere described as fully accepting). Lilli spoke of being told that she “overreacts” when she has challenged her friends’ use of the phrase ‘...so gay’ and ‘gay jokes’. In short, the participants’ accounts suggested costs to openness.

## **Discussion**

Our findings echo those of existing research in a number of ways – for example, our participants discussed their acceptance of diversity (Goldberg, 2007a; Lewis, 1980; Saffron, 1998), their view of sexuality and gender as more fluid than is typically acknowledged (Goldberg, 2007a) and their definition of family as underpinned by notions of love and security (Saffron, 1998; Walsh, 2011), and framed the experience of having an LGT parent as ‘not a big deal’ (Kovalanka et al., 2014). However, we have interpreted our findings rather differently, emphasizing how the participants

drew on normalizing discourses to minimize the taint of difference associated with their families, and discourses of authenticity to neutralize insinuations of parental selfishness (and produce accounts that were both protective of their parents and of themselves as ‘worthy’ members of society). At the same time, the participants’ accounts strongly challenged heterosexist, homophobic and transphobic assumptions about LGT families. They framed the source of any difficulties they and their parents had experienced as resulting from a social context that prevented LGT people and their families from living openly and authentically without fear of discrimination. Thus, this research shows that the primary challenge faced by the children of LGT parents – *in their view* – is homo/transphobia, not having a non-conforming parent/family structure (Joos & Broad, 2007). For the participants, any ‘difference’ associated with their families originated from the social context and was not an inherent feature of LGT families (Clarke, 2002a). Our results echo Goldberg’s argument that (2007a: 560-561) “the stress of living in a family structure that is marginalized and denied legitimacy is perhaps the more salient distinction between” heterosexual/cisgendered and LGT families. The focus of concern for the psychological and social well-being of children in LGT-parented families should clearly shift to the damaging effects of heterosexism, homophobia and transphobia (Clarke, 2002a). For our participants then, being the child of a LGT parent was both ‘a big deal’ and ‘not a big deal’, hence the question mark in the title of this paper. The participants normalized their family and childhood experiences, at the same time as they discussed the challenges that arise from negotiating the stigma of homosexuality/trans.

Just as the accounts of LG parents in media debates (e.g., Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, 2005) and in qualitative research (Clarke, 2006, 2007) are underpinned by normalizing discourses, so are the accounts of the children of LGT parents. How can we make sense of this? Lewis (1980) described the 'façade of acceptance' in the accounts of the children she interviewed. She argued that children avoided acknowledging their ambivalent feelings both to protect their parent and protect their sense of self; that children had an understandable desire to feel 'normal' and valued. Such an interpretation could apply equally to our data, however, as critical LGBT psychologists, we emphasise the ways in which the use of normalizing and authenticity discourses orient to a hetero/cisnormative social context and provide a way of negotiating and neutralizing the stigma of difference associated with homosexuality and trans, and conforming to the rules of compulsory heterosexuality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the participants' accounts of their and their parents' difference, minimize that difference and locate it externally, in the larger social context. These children did not (and could not?) express pride in a distinctly *queer* difference.

### ***Limitations***

We now consider some of the limitations (and strengths) of this study. Most existing research has been less successful in recruiting male than female participants (e.g., Goldberg, 2007a, 2007b); this was also the case with the present study (we recruited only 1 male participant). Goldberg (2007a, 2007b) suggested that politically active adults and those with more positive views may be more likely to participate in such research, particularly given the reliance on recruiting through networks for LG

parents and their children, and that women are more likely to fall into both of these categories. Her findings indicate that it is more acceptable to be the daughter of a gay parent than a son, and that men are less likely to engage with LGBT organisations. Furthermore, homophobia and transphobia research consistently shows that men are less tolerant and accepting of homosexuality/trans than women (Clarke et al., 2010). We did succeed in recruiting participants with more negative childhood experiences, and these participants, like those with more positive experiences, located the source of their childhood difficulties in the wider social context.

In Goldberg's study (and in most other studies), most participants had lesbian mothers, in ours most had gay fathers (this may reflect that fact that the second author identified herself as a daughter of a gay father in the recruitment materials). We recruited only one child of a trans parent (even though we approached a number of trans organisations), and although the recruitment materials advertised for children of 'LGBT' parents, no children of bisexual parents volunteered. In general, little is known about the experiences of trans and bisexual parents and their children (Clarke et al., 2010), so further research in these areas is warranted. As with most existing research, our participants were largely white and middle class, so their narratives are likely to reflect class and race privilege (Joos & Broad, 2007). Future research should consider how children's experiences of LGBT-parented families intersect with other axes of privilege and marginalization.

Because email interviews and, particularly, qualitative surveys are relatively novel methods, we now reflect on our use of these techniques. There were some distinct

differences between the survey and email interview data. On the whole, the email interviews generated richer and a larger volume of data than the survey, and some interview participants made more intimate disclosures. Furthermore, the flexibility of email interviews permitted the use of follow-up questions and most participants were willing to respond to these. Providing potential participants with the option of completing an email interview (larger time commitment, less anonymous) or a survey (potentially shorter time commitment, more anonymous), may have resulted in some people participating that otherwise wouldn't have. Researchers need to reflect on whether the benefits of people participating (in a limited way), that otherwise would not, outweighs the limitations of thinner/shorter (but in this instance, focused and relevant) responses.

The survey instructions included the following statement: "please answer questions openly and honestly and you can write as much as you like". If participants did not read (carefully) the page of participant information before completing the survey they would not have been aware of these instructions. Highlighting and repeating completion instructions could be one way of encouraging more detailed responses. The main body of the survey included 14 questions (plus a final optional 'clean up' question) and the later questions responses were generally shorter than the earlier question responses; it may be that the survey was too long and induced participant 'fatigue'. Shorter surveys could be more effective in generating detailed responses. A few participants ignored instructions to 'please explain your answer', simply answering 'yes' or 'no' to one or two questions. A few participants expressed confusion about the meaning of one or two questions (particularly those about 'conventional understandings of gender and sexuality'), and a few indicated that

they thought they had addressed some questions in previous responses, instructing us to 'see above'. To some extent, the inflexibility of surveys means that such responses are inevitable, but careful survey design is crucial (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Further exploration of qualitative survey methods is clearly warranted.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, much concern has been expressed in the past few decades about the psychological and social well-being of children in LGT-parented families. Our results show that adult children of LGT parents clearly reject the notion that they have been 'damaged' by their LGT parents' sexuality/gender identity, and by being a member of a non-normative family. The participants oriented to a hetero/cisnormative social context by drawing on normalizing discourses to present their families as 'just like' other families and to downplay the significance of their parents' sexuality/gender identity. Furthermore, the participants located the source of any difficulties they and their parents had experienced in a heterosexist, homophobic and transphobic social context.

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