

# Framing Heterosexism in Lesbian Families: A Preliminary Examination of Resilient Coping<sup>1</sup>

MARIANNA L. LITOVICH\* and REGINA DAY LANGHOUT

*Department of Psychology, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT 06459, USA*

The goals of this study are to examine the kinds of difficulties children face *vis-à-vis* heterosexism, how families help their children cope with these difficulties, and how coping leads to children's resilience. The experiences of six daughters of lesbian parents, ranging in age from 7 to 16, were empirically investigated through semi-structured interviews with parents and children. Analysis included open and focused coding. Results suggest heterosexism is evident, but does not seem to negatively impact children's development. Themes include: how parents prepare their children to deal with heterosexism and how parents and children cope with incidents. Results elucidate the findings of previous studies, call for more qualitative research, and suggest future research directions. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

*Key words:* heterosexism; lesbian; children; resilience; coping

## INTRODUCTION

The experience of growing up in an American family today is not the same as it was 30 years ago. Blended-parent, step-parent, single parent, and extended families have become commonplace in American homes; increasingly, so too are households with gay or lesbian parents raising children. Indeed, studies show that 'traditional' families—those headed by heterosexual couples with children—are a minority family type in America (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1994). Although accurate demographic data are impossible to attain, it is estimated that there are between 6 and 14 million children living with gay and lesbian parents in the US, and these numbers seem to be growing (Green & Bozett, 1991; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

One of the arguments against children being raised by lesbian or gay parents is that the experience will cause undue social difficulties because of heterosexism resulting in homophobia, stigmatization, and discrimination. This argument seems ironic as sexual-minority parents are not to blame for society's prejudice and yet, their parenting abilities are

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\* Correspondence to: M. L. Litovich, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland Baltimore County, 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250, USA. E-mail: ML2@umbc.edu

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questioned on the grounds that their children will experience difficulties as a result of this prejudice (Martin, 1998).

The goals of the present research are three-fold. The first is to describe the difficulties, *vis-à-vis* heterosexism faced by lesbian-headed families, with a focus on the effects on children. The second goal is to detail how parents help their children cope with these difficulties. The final goal is to explore how coping strategies promote positive psychosocial development and resilience in these children. These goals are important given the growing number of children raised in lesbian-headed households and because studying positive outcomes in the face of adversity can inform interventions and resilience research. This study focuses primarily on lesbian-headed families. This is the largest subset of sexual-minority families, and there is the most developmental information available on the children being raised in this subset. Because of the relative lack of research on promoting children's resilience and coping with heterosexism, literature will be reviewed for children in both lesbian and gay headed households.

### *Defining terms*

Before delving into the literature, it is important to define specific constructs. 'Queer' means any sexual orientation that does not conform to dominant narratives of heterosexuality. This may include, but is not limited to, people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).<sup>2</sup> 'Heterosexism' is defined as the institutionalized practice of favouring heterosexuality, based on the assumption that heterosexuality is normal and thus other sexual orientations are abnormal (Chesir-Teran, 2003). Other researchers have used terms such as 'homonegativity' (Martin, 1998) or 'heterosexual supremacy' (Wright, 1998) to mean similar ideas. 'Homophobia' refers to the negative emotions targeted at lesbian parents, their children, or the family in general and stems from heterosexism (Sears, 1992).<sup>3</sup> Stigmatization results in disqualification from full social acceptance for anyone seen as 'other' in a negative way (Goffman, 1963). It is a negative psychological label placed on a marginalized group. In this case, that group is children of lesbian parents, and the label is placed on them by those individuals around them or by society, based on their 'deviance' from a traditional family structure. Lastly, the form of 'discrimination' referred to here relates to the behaviour carried out by individuals toward children of lesbian parents, based on their own homophobia and tendency to stigmatize these children and their families.

### *Children's outcomes in heterosexual versus lesbian or gay headed households*

The research areas examined here deal with coping and resilience, and assume normative child development. This assumption is based on the fact that studies have shown society's fear of children's development being negatively affected by heterosexism is largely unfounded. Several meta-analyses have concluded that there are few differences in the

<sup>2</sup>Although this term is disconcerting to some because of its reminders of hatred and discrimination, it is retained here in line with the more recent reclaiming by some people in LGBT communities. This reclaiming brings with it a more inclusive definition in that it allows for non-normative expressions of gender and sexual identities (Kumashiro, 2002). Additionally, the term 'queer' does not reify the gender binaries that are often assumed with the terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual.

<sup>3</sup>Although some (e.g. Chesir-Teran, 2003) prefer the term heterosexism because it moves the problem to a higher level of analysis, others (e.g. Kitzinger & Perkins, 1996) argue that both the term 'heterosexism' as well as 'homophobia' mask the hate targeted at individuals who identify as LGBT or queer.

developmental outcomes of children raised by lesbian parents and those raised by heterosexual parents (Allen & Burrell, 1996; Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytteroy, 2002; Fitzgerald, 1999; Gibbs, 1989; Laird, 1996; McNeil, 1998; Parks, 1998; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

Individual studies typically report healthy development for children of lesbian parents with respect to psychological stability, emotional well-being, and peer relationships. Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) compared 'child adjustment' of children conceived via donor insemination to both lesbian parents and heterosexual parents via several self-reported behaviour checklists, finding no significant differences. Children raised by lesbian single parents and those raised by heterosexual single parents have also been compared—by way of psychiatric evaluations—to assess overall psychological functioning (Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981). This study also found no significant differences. Flaks, Ficher, and Masterpasqua (1995) similarly evaluated 'children's overall cognitive and behavioural functioning' by collecting self-report questionnaires of children raised by lesbian parents and those raised by a matched sample of heterosexual parents; this study also failed to uncover differences. Using semi-structured interviews and self-report inventories, Tasker and Golombok (1995) compared adult children of lesbians to adult children of heterosexual parents. In comparing adult children's psychological well-being, they found no differences with respect to levels of depression, level of satisfaction with family relationships, and ability to form positive peer relationships. The evidence seems clear that children raised in lesbian-headed households are at least as well off as their peers with respect to psychosocial functioning.

Several studies have examined the types of challenges children face as a result of having lesbian parents. According to Green and Bozett (1991) and Wright (1998), when children do suffer from heterosexism, it is similar to the stigmatization suffered by children on religious, ethnic, or economic grounds and does not seem to affect their peer relationships any differently. Children of lesbian parents are faced with difficulties via having lesbian parents, but these difficulties come at no higher frequency than, and affect children in similar interpersonal ways as, the difficulties children from other family types face. Studies looking at children's psychological development and emotional well-being fail to document society's narrative that children of lesbian parents are at an inherent disadvantage compared to children of heterosexual parents.

Some studies do point to significant differences between children of lesbian parents and those raised by heterosexual parents. Children of lesbian mothers seem to have a greater appreciation and healthy respect for difference and different ways of living (Fitzgerald, 1999; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; Pennington, 1987). These children have more empathy than those raised by heterosexual women (Fitzgerald, 1999) and are more socially responsible, being aware of and concerned with inequality, oppression, and prejudice in any form (Miller, 1992; Saffron, 1998). The few differences research has uncovered point to positive moral development outcomes for children raised in lesbian-headed households.

Although children of lesbian parents do not seem to be exhibiting detrimental effects as a function of their parents' sexual identity, they are nonetheless navigating through the perils of a heterosexist world. Heterosexism is deeply rooted in our culture, involving more than overt discrimination and antipathy. As a society, we favour heterosexual monogamy and render invisible that which does not conform (Gillis, 1998). In the US, this bias is evident in practices such as hate crimes legislation, our current military policies with respect to gay individuals, and attempts to pass legislation barring recognition of same-sex marriage (Gillis, 1998). In the media, and in many families, churches, and schools, heterosexuality is implicitly exalted and often discussed as the only possible option for couples,

and the favoured arrangement in which to raise a child. In effect, individuals are bombarded with heteronormative messages, many suggesting that lesbian families are unhealthy environments in which to raise children (Wright, 1998).

### *Coping and resilience in gay and lesbian-headed households*

A small but established literature (e.g. Baker, 2002; Flammer, 2001; Martin, 1998; Weishut, 2000) has concluded that although children of lesbian parents are unlikely to suffer negative consequences as a result of their parents' identity, they must still contend with the struggles heterosexism presents, such as being the victims of oppression and discrimination. Concurrently, these children's development does not seem to be negatively affected by these struggles. With this in mind, it is possible to rephrase research questions such as 'what kinds of troubles are children having due to heterosexism?' to 'how are children and families managing to remain successful and healthy despite the heterosexism with which they are faced?' This stance has been suggested as one that allows the assessment of family strengths (Laird, 1993, 1994, 1996; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Walsh, 2003). For example, the foreknowledge that children of lesbian and gay parents will be faced with challenges allows parents to ready their children for potential hostility (Drucker, 1998; Johnson & O'Connor, 2001). It is this kind of preparation, however, that is not well established or described in existing literature. How do families prepare their children for heterosexism? The coping and resilience literature may offer some clues.

Although research in coping and resilience is vibrant and dynamic, it has generally overlooked the challenges facing sexual-minority families and the strengths they have developed for coping with those challenges. One in-depth study of six lesbian stepfamilies can shed some light in this area. Wright (1998) reports that, with respect to successfully contending with the challenges heterosexism poses, children suggest two helpful strategies: first is access to representations of lesbians and lesbian families in books and other media, and second is having other children of lesbian parents in their social circles. Another study of 76 adolescent children of lesbian mothers examined self-esteem, stigmatization, and coping skills (Gershon, Tschann, & Jemerin, 1999). This study found a significant negative correlation between perceived stigmatization and self-esteem. Additionally, a positive correlation was found between factors leading to positive coping skills (i.e. effective decision-making and social support) and self-esteem. Essentially, Gershon et al. (1999) conclude that perceived stigmatization is associated with negative self-esteem, but positive coping abilities mitigates this relationship. It seems that social support helps children cope with challenges they face as a result of having lesbian parents.

The coping and resilience literature focused on other populations may or may not be generalizable to children of lesbian parents. Studies suggest that factors leading to high resilience in adolescents are high self-worth (that is, individuals who feel good about themselves), and positive coping skills (that is, behaviour and psychological responses that decrease the negative effects of life stressors), peer and parental relationships (Davey, Eaker, & Walters, 2003; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Radke-Yarrow & Brown, 1993).

### *The current study*

Resilience is multiply determined, but given that little is known about family dynamics and coping with heterosexism, and given that the family is the support system in which children spend a great deal of their time, the questions explored in this study focus on the

family. Specifically, do children in lesbian-headed households face heterosexism? How do families prepare children for it? Finally, how do children cope with heterosexism and what strategies do parents teach their children? These questions reframe those that simply aim to describe the problems families confront and allow us to explore how families remain successful in the face of heterosexism. In other words, answers to these questions show what promotes resilience. Additionally, this framework does not rely on comparison research that tends to posit the hegemonic heterosexual family as normal while the lesbian family is rated on its approximation. Instead we begin to indicate what life in a lesbian family is like, bringing forth the voices and experiences of this marginalized population. This is an ideological stance largely lacking from research on sexual-minority families (Clarke, 2002).

To explore the role of the family, what follows is a strengths-based examination of the ways lesbian parents help their children deal with heterosexism, manifest in discrimination and homophobia, both in terms of their present lives, as well as preparation for the future. Although this article focuses on parenting, whenever possible children's voices will be brought forth in order to elucidate their experience. As this analysis provides an in-depth look at only five families, the goal is not to generalize its findings to all lesbian-headed families. Rather, the goal is to begin to understand their experiences of coping with heterosexism through being faced with societal and interpersonal homophobia, stigmatization, and discrimination.

## **METHODS**

### *A note on methods*

In this study, feminist and community psychology goals and values inform our methods. We wanted to describe the ways lesbian-headed families help their children deal with heterosexism via homophobia, stigmatization, and discrimination, and also to provide space for the voices and experiences of families, especially parents. Qualitative methods were employed, as others have argued for their appropriateness given these specific research goals of description, exploration, and bringing forth the views of marginalized groups (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Charmaz, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Rappaport, 1990).

The results reported here are part of a larger study based on five families, with each treated as a case study. All families participated through interviews of at least one parent and child. Additionally, children were observed at school, and teachers were interviewed. The broader findings of this study inform the results presented here, but this treatment focuses on how families deal with and understand heterosexism.

Treating each family as a case study allowed the examination of similarities and differences across families, thereby increasing credibility, or the believability of the results. A case study framework means that although results are preliminary and exploratory, they can be examined over multiple case studies, which tests replication over cases. It is not the intention to generalize to all lesbian households engaged in raising daughters. We do, however, argue the results are credible given our data analytic strategy, described in detail later.

### *Participants*

Five families, all headed by lesbian couples and in one case a single lesbian mother, participated in the study. Four families each had one child participating in the study. One of

these families also had a 2-year-old foster daughter, who was too young to participate. The fifth family had two children, both of sufficient age for participation. Therefore, there are six daughters, ranging in age from 7 to 16 years. Despite the desire to have a diverse participant sample, all children were girls; this was not by design. Additionally, all parents were Caucasian and from at least a middle socio-economic class; five children were Caucasian and one was Honduran and Mexican. Participation was voluntary and confidential. One family was recruited via snowball sampling (Babbi, 2001), and the other four through contacting queer organizations in southern New England. These participant demographics point to the difficulties of recruiting research participants when the topic is related to sexual orientation, and also provides data about what kinds of families feel welcome to join queer organizations in southern New England. Participant information and their family relationships can be found in Table 1.

### *Procedure*

Families were contacted either by e-mail, phone, or in person by the first author. They were provided with information about the study and asked if they would like to participate. If so, then one or two parents were interviewed. In two cases, a child was present during the parent interview. All families chose to have interviews conducted in their homes.

Child interviews were scheduled after the completion of parent interviews, and were conducted within 1 day to 3 weeks (average of 5 days) after the parent interview. All children were interviewed independently of their parents, and siblings were interviewed together.

*Interviews.* A semi-structured interview protocol, based partially on Kunin (1998) and Gartrell et al. (2000), was used to assess general child development, gender identity, sexual development, and dealing with heterosexism. The results reported here primarily deal with the section on heterosexism (see Appendix A for a portion of the interview script) though information about the effects of heterosexism was present throughout the interviews. Questions were modified after a pilot interview. Interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours.

The first author transcribed all interviews within 1 to 4 days as a first step in data analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Also, field notes taken during and directly after the interviews were added into the transcripts to help preserve indexical and referential meaning. Indeed, text alone does not communicate all the information acquired during the interview (Briggs, 1986; Emerson et al., 1995). Within the transcripts, upper case words indicate the word was stressed by the speaker. The transcription produced over 200 single spaced pages of data.

In order to facilitate member checking, both parents and children received their transcript 1 to 3 weeks after their interview. Member checking allows participants to change or clarify their responses and strengthens the credibility of the results. Additionally, this process allowed for another level of authentication by providing another opportunity for families to have input. No participant asked to have her transcript altered.

### *Data analysis protocol*

Data analysis was conducted in five steps. The first was the transcription of the interviews. The second step included member checking. The third was an open line-by-line coding,

Table 1. Information about participating families

|  | Family                     |                          |  |  |                                      |
|--|----------------------------|--------------------------|--|--|--------------------------------------|
|  | #1                         | #2                       | #3                                       | #4   | #5                                   |
| Child(ren)                             | <i>Becca</i>               | <i>Meg</i>               | <i>Sabrina</i>                           | <i>Sarah and Anna</i>                                | <i>Kimmy</i>                         |
| Age                                    | 7                          | 16                       | 12                                       | 16 and 11  | 12                                   |
| Custodial parent(s)                    | <i>Tara and Eleanor</i>    | <i>Sondra and Bonnie</i> | <i>Julie</i>                             | <i>Chris</i>   | <i>Delia</i>                         |
| Other family members in household?     | <i>Alina—foster sister</i> | No                       | <i>Liz—coparent</i>                      | <i>Amy—Chris's partner; Jack and Paul—Amy's sons</i> | No                                   |
| Other parents? How brought into family | No<br>Insemination         | No<br>Insemination       | Father—in state<br>Heterosexual marriage | Wendy—mother, California<br>Adoption                 | <i>Tracey—visitation</i><br>Adoption |

*Note:* Italics indicate participation in interview.

which consisted of reading each line of the transcripts and interpreting what the speaker was attempting to communicate through their spoken words and metacommunication (Briggs, 1986). This practice resulted in an array of themes being conceptualized, with the goal being to identify as many themes as possible. Particular themes that re-occurred and were related to the general research area were then isolated in the fourth step. A theme was defined as being present when it occurred in three or more families. Once themes were constructed, these data were analyzed again using focused line-by-line coding as the fifth step. Examples that were counter to the proposed theme, or negative cases, were also examined and used to refine themes, thus leading to more credible results. Similar analysis methods have been used to explore related issues (cf. McCubbin, Hamilton, Thompson, & Thompson, 1999; Tatum, 1987; Vela, 1997) and could most easily be labelled a combination of content analysis and case study analysis.

The transcripts were ultimately read approximately 10 times each, as the data must be analyzed anew for each theme. This method resulted in numerous opportunities to identify both supporting and counter examples. Additionally, it allowed the researcher to become increasingly familiar with participants' experiences and meanings, and allowed a more accurate and genuine depiction of the lives of the families.

#### *Method and study evaluation*

Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999) provide evolving guidelines for evaluating qualitative research. For this study, one may wish to assess (1) the appropriateness of the methods given the research question; (2) if the participants have been treated in a respectful way; (3) if the analysis procedures have been adequately described; (4) if the sample has been situated; (5) if examples provide support for the conclusions drawn; (6) if the research is credible (e.g. through member checks, enlisting additional analytic 'auditors'); (7) if enough detail has been provided to create an understanding of the conditions that might lead to the results. With respect to the current study, we address these concepts toward the end of the article.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In keeping with previous research, the families in this study report that heterosexism, discrimination, homophobia and stigmatization have not resulted in negative consequences in the lives of their children. Furthermore, parents tend to explicitly argue that they have not experienced negative incidents rooted in heterosexism. Simultaneously, however, both parents and children can point to several instances in which the parents' sexuality had been the source of some social difficulty for the children. In light of this discrepancy, we argue that negative incidents rooted in heterosexism are indeed evident in the lives of these children but that incidents of homophobia, discrimination, and stigmatization are handled in such a manner that negative repercussions for children are vastly minimized. See Table 2 for an overview of results discussed.

We first present parents' beliefs that their families have not been victims of negative attitudes and behaviour rooted in heterosexism. We then discuss the discourse parents begin at children's early ages; this discourse helps prepare children to effectively handle the heterosexism they will encounter as they mature. Finally, we analyze several instances of homophobia and/or discrimination, as reported by both children and parents, describing



Table 2. Results overview

| Coping strategies   | Examples   |
|---|--|
| <i>Preparing children for heterosexism</i>                                      |  |
| Open discourse of sexual orientation  | 'Mommy, what's a lesbian again?'   |
| Warn of possibility of future incidents   | 'I hope it doesn't happen, but if it does, let's talk about it.'                 |
| <i>Coping with heterosexism</i>   |  |
| Children's pride fades to silence   | 'She always used to brag about how she had two moms cuz she was so proud of it.' |
| Children correct misinformation   | ""Why don't you have a dad?""<br>"Because I have two moms."                      |
| Parents release children from burden of defending all lesbian families          | 'Don't feel like you have to protect us.'  |
| Parents encourage tolerance   | 'That comes from their family and some people don't understand.'                 |
| Parents explain hostility as targeted at the family's demographic, not at child | 'You don't hate people at random because of something like that.'                |

coping strategies used; within these descriptions, a picture emerges of how family coping facilitates resilience.

*We haven't had a single problem': Parent (non)reports of heterosexism faced by their children*

When parents are asked whether their children have experienced any homophobia, discrimination, or other evidence of heterosexism, they overwhelmingly answer that these issues are typically not a concern for their families because they have not been faced with difficulties. Those who seem ambivalent often explain that incidents are few and far between, mild in their effect, and do not believe them noteworthy.

Tara<sup>4</sup> and Eleanor have a 7-year-old biological daughter named Becca and a 2-year-old foster child named Alina, who has been with the family for only a few months. They have lived in their current community for 3 years and report that they have not had any 'problems' with respect to being a lesbian-headed family. Tara reports:

Not one instance. Nothing. Nothing . . . People have been in this community just so incredibly accepting. It's not an issue . . . No one's ever looked at us like, 'What do you mean, this is your daughter?' No one's ever said anything. Her school's been exactly the same way.

At this point, Tara's partner, Eleanor, reminds her of a recent incident at their daughter's weekly reading group where her peers questioned her lack of a father. Tara continues her assertion as if she is almost surprised they have not had more trouble. 'That one instance, but other than that [there hasn't been a problem]. Adults, teachers, I mean you name it. There has never been any issue. Our babysitters. I mean, nobody. Nothing. That we know of . . . Who knows what people say behind our back.' Tara glosses over the incident her partner brings up, marking it as unimportant in light of the remaining daily life seemingly unmarred by heterosexism. In the same sentence, however, she acknowledges the negative discussions that could be taking place 'behind their backs.' It may be that this implies a certain level of awareness of negativity, or at least its possibility. As is shown later, Tara and Eleanor do also discuss difficulties the family has experienced.

<sup>4</sup>All proper names and specific geographic locations have been changed.

The family of Julie, Liz, and Sabrina also report dealing minimally with evidence of heterosexism. A child from Julie's previous heterosexual marriage, Sabrina is now 12 and lives with her mother and her mother's partner, Liz. The three are extremely close and comfortable with each other. Sabrina also visits with her father's family on a mostly-regular basis. Similarly to Tara and Eleanor, though less enthusiastically, Julie reports being unaware of any difficulties Sabrina has had with respect to heterosexism. 'I'm not aware of any time she's been confronted with it personally.' Julie goes on to say that Sabrina was aware of the publicized murder of hate crime victim, Mathew Shepherd and other 'examples of homophobia that she's heard about.' Julie is aware that Sabrina cannot completely extricate her experiences from the heterosexism in society, but believes Sabrina's immediate world has been, thus far, free from incidents of homophobia, stigmatization, and discrimination directed at her.

A third family similarly reports being generally unconcerned with the immediate effects of heterosexism in their lives. Sixteen-year-old Meg was conceived via alternate insemination to her parents, Sondra and Bonnie, who have been together for over 20 years. They have lived in an upper-middle class community for most of Meg's life, where she has created a long-lasting social network. When Sondra was asked if there have been any difficulties, *vis-à-vis* heterosexism that Meg has faced, she reports, 'There's been very, very little . . . There was a possible situation in fifth grade, although when I talked about it with her not so long ago, she wondered whether it wasn't just in her own mind. That was really it.' As will be discussed later, Sondra attributes this lack of difficulty to her geographic location and believes if they lived in a different area, they would perhaps need to cope with challenging situations on a more regular basis.

Another family is that of Tracey and Jessica. Now 12 years old, Jessica was legally adopted in Texas at the age of four by Tracey's former partner, Delia. Now that the couple has split up, Delia has made it difficult for Tracey to see Jessica. This has been facilitated by Tracey's lack of legal standing as Jessica's parent. At this point, custody proceedings have concluded and Tracey has regular visitation, though no authority to make decisions for Jessica at school, and is not allowed to take her out of state. This story itself is evidence of the heterosexism within the legal system in that Tracey could not also legally adopt Jessica and has not been awarded joint custody. Yet, Tracey contends that incidents rooted in heterosexism typically do not pose a problem for her daughter. 'Generally, I think that it's not a problem.'

Although parents contend that heterosexism is not evident in their lives on a regular basis, they did believe it was important to engage their children in discourse about sexuality and heterosexism from their children's early ages. This discourse is presented next.

### *Preparing children for heterosexism*

*Open discourse of sexual orientation.* The majority of parents describe open communication about sexual orientation with their children, often beginning early in a child's life. This discourse is important in terms of heterosexism because it enables children to begin to understand the descriptive categories of individuals discriminated against in society. The dialogue equips children with terminology about sexual orientation, thus enabling open discussions throughout children's development.

Julie, for example, discusses her daughter's early exposure to the vocabulary of sexual orientation:

... [T]hings about my own sexuality and sexual orientation have been out there since she was three. I mean, basically since she was old enough... I'd be pushing her through the health food store and she was sitting in the cart saying, 'Mommy, what's a lesbian again?'

Julie chose to begin a discourse of sexual orientation early with her daughter, familiarizing her with vocabulary about sexual orientation. At 3 years old, Sabrina used the word 'lesbian', terminology that is largely unfamiliar to other children her age.

The age at which Julie began to provide Sabrina with sexual orientation terminology may be significant. At 3 years old, Sabrina was unaware that other people in the health food store may have felt uncomfortable with her question, but was old enough to cognitively understand the word's definition. This may be an age where children are simultaneously old enough to comprehend the terminology, yet young enough that they have not learned the social unacceptability of these words. Indeed, research has suggested that children as young as 3 years old start demonstrating prejudiced attitudes (Cameron, Alvarez, & Ruble, 2001; Powlishta, Serbin, & Doyle, 1994).

Similarly, Eleanor and Tara also began discussing sexuality early with their 7-year-old daughter, Becca. Although Eleanor and Tara admit their discussions focus on biology, they assume that she understands relationships. 'Certainly she understands that there are women couples and there are men and women couples.' They note that heterosexual and lesbian relationships are over-represented in Becca's adult social world, but are sure that 'she's certainly been around male homosexuals.'

When asked whether Becca understands what homosexuality is, though, Tara says she believes Becca does not yet understand: 'No. I think she understands that there are some women who live together and some women who live with men. But I don't think she has any concept of what that means.' This last sentence of Tara's response piques Becca's curiosity and she instantly asks what we are discussing:

Tara : Homosexuality. Do you—?

Becca : What's THAT?

Tara : Do you know what being gay means?

Becca : Yeah.

Tara : What does it mean?

Becca : That means that there's either two women or two men together.

Tara : That's right.

Becca seems to understand gay relationships to the same degree that she might understand heterosexual ones. 'Two [people] together.' Exactly what she means by 'together', though, is debatable. It is likely that Becca views 'togetherness' as simply two people who live in the same house and often spend time in each other's company. At the age of seven, though, Becca seems to understand as much as she probably could about diversity in relationships, and is equipped with the language to cognitively understand the discussions around her as well as to participate in them.

Chris also describes an open climate of discussions about sexuality with her children, 16-year-old Sarah and 12-year-old Anna. Although Sarah was not adopted by her mother until she was six, Chris seems certain that Sarah was aware of what homosexuality meant when the two met. 'Sarah [understood] pretty much from the beginning when we first met her. She knew what it was. Definitely at six, she knew.' When Chris is asked what she has

discussed more recently with her children around issues of sexuality, Chris simply responds, 'Anything they want to know, I tell 'em.' During the girls' interview, Sarah animatedly comments, 'We talk about everything. I probably talk her ear off.' This further suggests an open and ongoing discourse within the family.

Chris's other daughter, Anna, 'started asking questions when she was about four [soon after she was adopted], about a mommy and a daddy.' Chris explains, 'We tried to talk to her that she has two mommies and what that meant and stuff.' Since then, Chris has talked to both of her children about broadening the definitions of sexuality so they are not bound by their own labels. 'We talk about, as far as who you fall in love with, that you don't fall in love with a sex, you fall in love with a person.' As Chris's daughters are entering ages where they are beginning to think about the dynamics of inter-personal and romantic relationships, the family's discourse has progressed to fit that need.

Similar to Anna's experience, Jessica's family began discussing and defining gay identities with Jessica as soon as they adopted her at the age of four.

Oh, we talked about it with her from the start, that Delia and I were a lesbian couple and that meant that we loved each other and we slept in the same bed together. And we also had male friends who are gay and we talked to her about how people sometimes choose someone of the same sex because that's who they want to be with . . . We've always discussed it openly since she was four. So she just accepts it.

Unlike other parents discussed previously, Tracey and Delia chose to explain their relationship to their daughter in terms of 'love' and sleeping in the same bed, or 'being together'. This begins to delve into the more abstract concepts of relationships, but provides the same terminology and begins a dynamic discourse early on.

It is by definition a parent's job to prepare their children to deal with the realities of life. Although all children will grow up in worlds infused with heterosexism, the children of queer parents will face the almost certain burden of being asked questions at best, and hostile marginalization at worst. It is in their children's best interests that parents equip them with important terminology about sexual orientation and establish an open dialogue to answer questions and explore fears and concerns (Johnson & O'Connor, 2001). It is this same talk that subsequently enables parents to begin discussing the types of heterosexism their own children may face in the future, thus facilitating their ability to cope with any future opposition.

*Warning about the possibility of future heterosexist incidents.* In almost all families, parents discuss having talked with their children about the kinds of homophobia and discrimination they may face in the future. This practice often begins at an early age and creates a situation in which, though it is hurtful and traumatic the first time it happens, teasing is not a phenomenon that comes as a complete surprise. This does not mean, however, that they are fully prepared to effectively deal with these situations. When children tell their parents about any incidents of homophobia, the dialogue had already begun, making it perhaps easier for the children to process and understand situations in which they find themselves.

From an early age, Julie attempted to make her daughter aware that she may face homophobia as she got older.

I definitely discussed it with her when she was younger. And, you know, said 'some people aren't okay about this. Some families aren't okay about this. You might have a friend whose PARENTS aren't okay about it. And, you know, I hope that doesn't happen, but if it does, let's talk about it.'

While Sabrina was still young, Julie explained to her that she might be faced with difficult situations as a result of having a lesbian mother. More importantly, she informed Sabrina that she is willing and eager to talk about these experiences. In so doing, Julie attempts to create a situation in which Sabrina feels less awkward about approaching her mother to discuss incidents of homophobia. By beginning this dialogue early, Julie hoped Sabrina would remember that her mother had been discussing the possibility of Sabrina being faced with homophobia, thus making it easier for her to bring it up with her family. Sabrina would not need to begin a new discussion, but rather simply continue the one started years ago.

Tracey also discusses issues of social prejudice with her daughter, Kimmy, although they are less specific both to homophobia and Kimmy's own possible experiences:

Kimmy is Mexican and Hungarian, so she's brown-skinned. . . [W]e talk about prejudice in general. So I think that she's very much aware that people are racist and homophobic and that there can be all kinds of difficulties with people because of who they are. . . [I]t's not necessarily related to sexuality, but it can have to do with anything.

Tracey and Kimmy discuss prejudice on a larger scale, and have done so since Kimmy was adopted at the age of four. As the only person of colour to participate in this project, Kimmy will face additional prejudice rooted in racism and ethnocentrism in addition to the prejudice she will likely face due to being adopted by lesbian parents. Indeed, research has considered the effect of multiple marginalized identities and suggested these bring with them increased levels of vulnerability (Greene, 2000). In light of ongoing discussions, Kimmy is likely to be more comfortable discussing prejudice with which she is confronted, as there seems to be an ongoing dialogue about the subject.

Unlike Tracey, who discusses having prepared her daughter to effectively cope with a number of marginalized identities, Sondra felt less need to discuss with her daughter the possibility of prejudice aimed at the family. Similar to Tracey and Kimmy, however, the two do have discussions around issues of prejudice related to the larger society.

We certainly talk about the religious right [for example]. So we've had discussions about that and we've had discussions about people at school who are not [understanding] about homosexuality. Even at [her current school] which, God knows, is about as progressive as you can get. But, you know . . . we live in the north-east. You really do have some advantage, or you can easily avoid certain things.

Sondra sees the area her family lives in as particularly tolerant and thus rarely felt it necessary to discuss the homophobia Meg herself may face, assuming it would not be a problem in Meg's life.

#### *Coping with heterosexism: Child and parent initiated themes*

Through discussing with children and parents the kinds of heterosexist incidents they have faced, several common themes emerged with respect to how families cope with these. As discussed earlier, parents initially begin dealing with heterosexism before it becomes apparent to children. Starting at early ages, parents teach their children a language that helps them begin to engage in intellectual understanding of sexuality and other prejudicially targeted personal characteristics. Soon thereafter, parents warn their children of the types of heterosexist attitudes they may face in the future. With these warnings, they implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—create an environment where children feel encouraged to engage in discussions of their own experiences, should those occur.

Once children do begin to encounter heterosexism, however, these strategies become insufficient on their own. The third and final research area explores ways parents and children deal with acute heterosexist incidents. Findings indicate that children become silent about their own families and correct misinformation. Parents release children from the burdens of educating society, explain prejudice as targeted at a particular demographic rather than an individual, and suggest they exhibit tolerance even in the face of intolerance.

*From pride to silence.* Unlike many individuals who are discriminated against for salient visible features, children of queer parents are able to keep their 'deviant' demographic secret if they so choose. With such dynamic discussions about the kinds of prejudice with which these children may be faced in the future, one might assume they may be fearful of disclosing their family composition. As these children report, however, they are eager to reveal this aspect of their family life when they initially reach school age. Unfortunately, they soon encounter verbal or metacommunicative information suggesting such a revelation can bring unpleasant reactions from their peers and even teachers. It is at this point that children cease to speak openly of their family and may even become secretive so as to avoid stigmatization and discrimination.

At a young age, children tend to be proud and outspoken about their families. Sixteen-year-old Meg, for example, recalls her life as a pre-schooler and explains that having two mothers was very special to her. Chris describes her daughter, Sarah's, feelings about having two mothers in a similar way. Chris says, 'She was very proud of us. You know, Sarah went to school very proud.' Likewise, Tracey says, 'When [my daughter] was in first or second grade . . . she always used to brag about how she had two moms 'cuz she was so proud of it.'

At some point, however, these children ceased to be outspokenly proud of their parents and stop volunteering information about their family makeup. This shift in attitude usually corresponded to the child's understanding that having two mothers is not particularly favourable in their peers' eyes. Tracey explains that as outspoken and proud as her daughter, Kimmy, used to be about having two mothers, it ceased once she had been confronted with teasing at school. After one of these episodes, Kimmy returned home and relayed the incident to her parents. Tracey says, '[A]t one point one of the kids said to her, "Tell your mom or your moms to marry real men" or something like that. She came home and told us and she was pretty upset about that . . . She doesn't talk about [having two moms] at school anymore.' Because of incidents like this, Kimmy learned the relationship between disclosing family information and negative backlash from her peers.

Meg had a similar experience as she entered grade school, having moved out of New York.

Well, when I was in pre-school, I wasn't faced with any homophobia . . . so I would introduce myself, I would say, 'Hi, I'm Meg. I have two mommies.' . . . And that was like a big thing for me and I definitely thought about it as something special that I was different . . . So I was very proud at that point.

Meg then describes various instances of homophobia and relays that she ceased to volunteer any information about her parents once she discovered the correlation.

I got here in first grade and for the first time I think that was when I experienced homophobia. There were two boys who made a spectacle and one of them was like . . . 'Did half of you come out of one mom and the other mom the other half?' . . . And then, I don't remember, I'm sure some things happened in between . . . There was a lot of homophobia around fourth and fifth

grade on the playground and stuff. And I think that was the time when people started saying, 'that's so gay' or 'you're so gay' and they didn't know what it meant and that made me so mad. And I used to [say] every time, 'Well, do you know any gay people? WELL, I KNOW A LOT OF GAY PEOPLE AND THEY'RE NOT BAD.'

Meg's two verbal offerings as a young person in these examples are distinctly different. As a pre-schooler, Meg would enthusiastically volunteer information about her family composition and feel special about her family's difference. As she grew to understand her peers' prejudices against her lesbian family, she became increasingly guarded. The progression of Meg's discourse regarding the level to which she discusses her family demonstrates how she was affected by homophobia.

Of Chris's two daughters, Anna is currently more socially reserved with regard to disclosing family information. Having witnessed difficulties her older sister had, Anna is aware of possible homophobic responses and, according to her mother, seems uncomfortable discussing her family with her friends.

Anna is a little bit more reserved with it . . . During a recent conversation about this], I felt like maybe she was uncomfortable with kids at school knowing, where Sarah would have blabbed it all over town. I think Anna's seen a little bit more than Sarah when she was at this age. She's a little bit more reserved with it, I think.

Chris believes that Anna's reservation stems from her awareness of the possibilities of homophobic backlash at the disclosure of her family type. She has 'seen a little more' than her sister, whom at Anna's age would brag about her parents. Her interpretation is consistent with other children who suggest the expression of pride about their family decreases with an increase of homophobic response and possible stigmatization.

Twelve-year-old Sabrina has recently moved to a new neighbourhood, which has meant attending a new school. Sabrina is hesitant to disclose her family makeup at her new school, saying:

I've had dreams about telling my friends and how they would feel . . . And it's—there's mixed dreams about it. Some dreams are positive and tell me 'go tell 'em, go tell 'em' and then other dreams, I think about different people and I'm like, 'Ummm—no. Don't tell 'em.'

Sabrina goes on to speculate that if she were to share her secret, one particular boy in her school, 'would laugh at me. Call me names. And then this other kid in my homeroom, he wouldn't even talk to me.' As this has in fact not yet happened, it is possible that Sabrina is invoking past experiences that may replay themselves if she was to disclose her mothers' sexual orientation.

Reducing the level of family information the children provide results in less social conflict with other children. Now that many of these children are older, they are less outspoken about their families, thus experiencing less homophobia and discrimination. The ages of these girls also correspond to a time in adolescence fraught with occasionally silencing aspects of one's self while managing one's identity (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). This type of silence and its developmental process, however, is itself evidence of heterosexism. Yet, hurtful comments are not always rooted in heterosexism. It is possible that young children's comments are based in ignorance rather than maliciousness.

*Children correct misinformation.* The heterosexism faced by children raised in lesbian-headed households can be based on other children's confusion rather than prejudice. This is particularly true when children are younger. Questions such as 'how can you have two moms?' may be a genuine expression of confusion on the part of a heterosexually-parented young child who has been raised in a heterosexist society, but may be heard

as an intentionally malicious insult by a child with lesbian parents. The child with lesbian parents, then, must learn to explain her family makeup to peers. This repeated task might become increasingly aggravating as children are faced with more and more ignorance.

As the youngest child in the study, 7-year-old Becca has mastered the task of educating her peers when questions about her family arise. According to her parents, there have been at least three of these situations.

Well, a couple of times kids have asked Becca about [having two moms]. The first time, when we first moved here, her friend Ellie came in and said to Becca, 'You have two moms?' and Becca said, 'Yeah.' Ellie said, 'BUT YOU CAN'T HAVE TWO MOMS.' And Becca says, 'Well, I do. I have two moms.' And Ellie said, 'But how did your mom get pregnant?' . . . [Becca] said, 'The doctor helped her.' And Ellie goes, 'Oh.' And that was the end of that . . . And then another time, another little girl who lives across the street came over . . . [and said] 'How do you have two moms? You have two moms?' and Becca goes, 'Yeah.' And she goes, 'THAT'S WEIRD.' And Becca goes, 'YEAH, ISN'T IT.' And another time . . . [a little boy in Becca's pre-school] said to Becca, 'Why don't you have a dad?' and Becca said, 'Because I have two moms' and [the boy] said, 'Oh' and the whole table just went on eating . . .

These three instances all involved children being unfamiliar with the possibility of Becca's family type. In the first instance Becca's friend could not understand that Becca's mother was able to get pregnant without a heterosexual coupling. When Becca explained, 'the doctor helped' her mother get pregnant, Ellie's confusion was resolved and the incident was over. In the second instance, Becca agreed with her friend that having two moms is 'weird', or uncommon. There was no backlash or confusion from the child. In the third instance, the two-and-a-half year old children at the lunch table seemed to accept Becca's lack of father with the explanation that she has two mothers. In all these situations, it was likely that the children asking questions are genuinely confused and did not intend to mock or be cruel to Becca. It is predictable that the children would be confused because they are coming into contact with a family that does not follow the heterosexual norms they learn in our society. Becca simply explained her situation and the conversation was over.

It seems children in heterosexual households are not raised knowing about family diversity in the same way children in lesbian families are. Indeed, the early discourse around sexuality and sexual orientation in lesbian-headed households means that these children have a broader understanding of what constitutes a family. Heterosexual parents may not understand the advantages, and perhaps necessity, of raising their children with knowledge of different family types. The children of lesbian parents, however, mature with an increasingly developed and sophisticated understanding of diversity. These children are able to engage in fairly complex cognitive tasks in order to compare and contrast their family with those of their friends.

Instances of confusion or possible homophobia on the part of children are not always so easily resolved. Recall Meg's playground experiences in the fourth and fifth grades. It is not clear if the children saying 'you're so gay' and/or 'that's so gay' fully understood the implications of their statements. Meg does attempt to discourage their discourse by telling her peers that she knows gay people and they are not bad. Recently, Becca was faced with peer questions that may have stemmed from ignorance or homophobia. She explains the incident that took place 2 weeks before her parents' interview, at her weekly reading group. 'The reading kids at, in my group said, "You have to have a dad. You can't have two moms" and that sort of hurt my feelings.' Tara subsequently explains that although similar incidents have taken place previous to this, this one 'was really the first time it hurt her feelings.'



During her own interview, Becca further explains the incident 2 weeks prior.

Well, these kids, they only thought I could have a dad and not two moms, so they were like, 'You have to have a dad' [And then we said to each other], 'No I don't. Yes you do. No I don't. Yes you do. No I don't.' . . . I just said, 'I DON'T WANT TO TALK ANYMORE ABOUT THIS.'

Though Becca does not discuss the details of the incident any further than this comment, it is clear that this one is different than the others. When the children confront Becca about her lack of a father, the children now have fixed notions about parenting and family, which are situated within heterosexism and a limited understanding of human reproduction. They believe all children 'have to have a dad.' When Becca counters this with a simple, 'No I don't,' what results is an escalating verbal conflict. Whereas before Becca was able to educate her peers that her situation is possible, she is now confronted with fixed notions of right versus wrong. In the children's eyes, Becca is simply wrong about 'not having to have a dad.' She finally gives up and says, 'I DON'T WANT TO TALK ANYMORE ABOUT THIS.' Having been unable to counter their bias, she is left, for the first time, with hurt feelings.

Although young children can at times be nefarious in their interactions with one another, when marginal family types are involved, it is quite possible that hurtful comments are based in ignorance. As children grow and mature, it would thus seem that unkind comments and interactions would cease. Unfortunately, however, as children mature, they are further embedded into the heterosexism of our society. As such, homophobia, stigmatization, and discrimination become purposeful attitudes and actions rather than unintended emotional injuries. Parents must then devise ways to help their children cope with negative experiences in such a way that these experiences do not take a toll on their psychological development while simultaneously preparing them to deal with future heterosexism; herein lies resilience.

*Parents release children from burden of defending all families.* Although attempts to educate peers can end with no peer attitude change, children often feel they must respond to prejudice and heterosexism. Perhaps the most liberating thing a parent can do for children is to explain that they can never do away with heterosexism on their own. This offers children the chance to seize the right to simply be a child rather than to feel the burden of combating the ignorance and intolerance they encounter. The parents in this study report discussing these concepts with their children.

The derogatory use of the word 'gay' is a phenomenon common in many school environments and points to the heterosexism in our culture and society Burn (2000). For 16-year-old Meg, this was particularly hurtful because of her gay parents. Her mother, Sondra, explains, 'She takes it as a personal insult. She doesn't say anything. Sometimes she doesn't say anything because you don't want to stand out.' It seems Sondra understands Meg's difficult task of responding to heterosexism, a task she herself may feel compelled to undertake. Comments expressing this kind of sentiment may make it possible for Meg to cease taking on the burden of educating everyone all the time.

During Meg's interview she shares the progression she went through from feeling responsible for confronting heterosexist language to frequently ignoring such comments.

I was trying to educate. I gave up on that later because, it really infuriated me but then I realized that I didn't really care. It didn't really matter. It's a shame, but that they would grow out of it. Or they wouldn't, and they'd be homophobic. But, you know, there's not that much you can do about that and chances are, they would eventually disappear. So I didn't take it upon myself so much,

which was a good coping mechanism because otherwise I think I would have gotten really frustrated because there were just so many people.

Meg has grown to ignore the comments she heard at school, seeing it as a useful coping mechanism.

Like Meg, Sabrina has also been witness to heterosexist language. According to her mother, Sabrina has discussed her conflict about whether or not to counter gay slurs. Julie recalls:

... [K]ids were around and they were saying, 'Oh you fag' or 'You're so queer' or something like that. She thought, 'Sometimes I don't know how to handle it. I know what to—I know that I should say something, but then I don't feel like saying anything.' ... It's a hard issue and so she said [to me], 'I feel bad because you guys are gay. It's like they're saying something about you and so I should say something.'

Julie attempts to calm Sabrina's feelings of guilt and pressure when faced with hearing homophobic language.

I just told her that that's a hard issue for adults. That, you know, you should say something if you feel like you can and you want to say something. If you can't, don't beat yourself up over that. It's a very hard issue ... Don't feel like you have to protect us [and speak out against it]. I never know that they're saying it. It doesn't hurt my feelings so you don't need to take care of that. Do whatever works for you.

It is important for Julie to convey to Sabrina that it is not Sabrina's responsibility to speak out against all heterosexism. Julie explains that Sabrina should speak out if she feels it is possible, but that it is not a failure on her part if she cannot. In this way, Julie's explicit comments are similar to Sondra's implicit comment, 'Sometimes she doesn't say anything because you don't want to stand out.' Both of these parents are releasing their children from the burden of defending lesbian families.

*Parents encourage tolerance.* Parents discuss teaching tolerance to their children, even when dealing with those who do not approve of their family. In no case does a parent ever suggest their children should view the individuals that perpetrate heterosexist behaviour or attitudes as unworthy or inherently bad people. Quite the opposite, parents often encourage their children to be tolerant of these differing opinions by positing them as one of many, describing the range of views diversity brings.

As described earlier, Tracey's daughter, Kimmy, faced harassment on the school playground when a classmate said to her, 'Tell your mom or your moms to marry real men.' When she came home and told her parents about it, Tracey chose to explain the source of heterosexism and alluded to the fact that this child was taught his views by his family. 'We just talked to her about, you know, that comes from their family and some people don't understand that some of us have different lifestyles and makes different choices.' Rather than suggest this child's views are bigoted, she chose to instil compassion in her daughter and encourage her to be tolerant of others.

Perhaps one of the most striking instances of unmistakable homophobia and discrimination that any parent or child describes is that of Sarah's third grade teacher. Although the report of the incident is somewhat lengthy, it is quoted in its entirety:

Miss Nelson would go down the line in her classroom and hug each child good morning. She would get to Sarah and skip her, go to the next child and hug each of the kids good morning. I thought that was kind of strange. I said, 'You know, don't worry about it honey. It's not—you know.' Okay. She has a problem. That's her problem. And Sarah was making straight A's. She was very well liked; a very good kid. Citizen of the year award ... Sarah's adoption was

coming up . . . The adoption day was set. We were going to Disneyland to sign the papers. That's where she wanted to go . . . So I warned [the school] a month ahead of time that Sarah would be out this particular day . . . And then, I went to pick up Sarah from school and she was crying. And I was, 'What's the matter, honey?' And she said, 'Miss Nelson said I can't go to my adoption.' I said, 'Honey, wait a minute. Calm down. It's okay. I'll go talk to Miss Nelson. I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding. I'm sure it was a misunderstanding.' . . . So I went over to talk to her and she said, 'THERE'S NO REASON WHATSOEVER FOR HER TO BE MISSING A DAY OF SCHOOL UNLESS IT'S AN ILLNESS.' And I said, 'Miss Nelson, I don't think you understand. This was an important day in her life, the most important day in her life.' And she goes, 'THERE'S NO EXCUSE.' And I said, 'You know what? YOU HAVE A REALLY BAD ATTITUDE.' I said, 'YOU NEED TO GET YOURSELF IN CHECK.' . . . So I went into the principal and he said, 'I'll try to talk to her, but unfortunately some people are homophobic and blah, blah, blah.' And I thought it was taken care of, but she was still saying things and trying her hardest to get Sarah to trip up. And I had talked to her and I said, 'If you have a problem with me and my life, that's one thing. DO NOT TAKE THIS OUT ON MY KID.' And she just let me have it. And so I went to the principal again and I said, 'She *needs* to be taken out of that class.' [He] took her out of the class, then Miss Nelson would make a point of picking her out on the playground and sitting her down, for no reason. And I said, 'You keep her away or there will be a lawsuit. YOU KEEP HER AWAY FROM MY DAUGHTER OR I WILL FILE A LAWSUIT FOR HARASSMENT. . . . Please don't make me get a lawyer.' And I had already talked to an attorney. I was furious. I was furious. Just because she hated me being a lesbian.

Chris goes on to say that 'it really affected Sarah' because of the pride she had about her family. Of all the examples of homophobia these children have faced, Sarah's is by far the most severe, and the only one perpetrated by an adult rather than a child.

Even in this difficult situation, with someone who clearly held deeply rooted hostilities toward her daughter, Chris continued to discourage animosity. She instead encouraged Sarah to understand Miss Nelson's prejudice, while limiting the teacher's access to her daughter.

[We would] talk about how it's inappropriate and some people are taught that as children. People are taught hate at young ages and you don't hate people at random because of the colour of their skin or their sexual preference or—you just don't hate people at random because of something like that. I said that she was obviously taught to hate people and to not really find what's good in that person, but just to think that.

In explaining Miss Nelson's attitudes and behaviour to her daughter, Chris maintains the teacher was taught to hate others who are different, rather than finding 'what's good in that person.' By focusing on Miss Nelson's attitude as a sort of moral weakness, Chris encourages Sarah to be understanding of this fault Miss Nelson may not be able to help, due to her own upbringing. 'All people come from different backgrounds and that's what makes this world go round.'

With this discourse, parents encourage their children to tolerate intolerance. When discussing society's possible heterosexist reactions to their families, parents encourage their children to remain tolerant even when others do not accept them. In this way, parents are raising peaceful and loving children, who are respectful of the people around them. They facilitate their children's moral development and resilience.

*Targeted at a demographic, not at you.* Being respectful of those who hold negative attitudes becomes an easier proposition when parents explain to their children that the heterosexism they encounter is not aimed at them specifically, but rather the demographic they represent: lesbian families in general.

In Julie's case, when her daughter discusses whether or not to respond to derogatory speech, she hopes to let Sabrina know that while heterosexist language is hurtful, it is

not targeted specifically at Sabrina's family and she should not feel it is a personal insult to her or to her parents. This explanation is similar to Eleanor and Tara's explanation to Becca that her classmates simply 'didn't understand,' and thus their comments were not specifically directed at Becca, but rather at the existence of lesbian families in general. Similarly, when Sarah is the victim of Miss Nelson's prejudice, her mother explains that Sarah was singled out 'at random' and was not actually personally worthy of such treatment.

Parents help their children understand that heterosexual remarks and behaviours are not directed at them because of some inherent fault, but rather because of their demographic, a characteristic that speaks nothing of their inherent worth. Thus, these parents are giving their children back the self-esteem that heterosexism takes away, and self-esteem is an important component of resilience.

## CONCLUSION

Although parents in this study tend to suggest heterosexism is not acutely evident in their daily lives, each family discusses multiple incidents of homophobia, stigmatization, and discrimination rooted in heterosexism. These examples are hardly surprising, as other researchers have described heterosexism as greatly pervasive in society and evident in many aspects of living. Perhaps this knowledge of the pervasiveness of heterosexism encourages parents to develop strategies for dealing with future incidences of heterosexism. These strategies include having an open discourse about sexual orientation and discussing with their children, early on, the kind of heterosexism they may encounter as the children get older. These discussions allow children to be open with their parents throughout their development, and specifically when they were faced with difficulties.

When children do face heterosexism, they cope with it in several ways. Although children begin their school years being proud of their families and outspoken to their peers, they become more secretive and silent over time. This change occurs as children are faced with disapproval and negativity at their revelations. It may be the case, however, that this disapproval is rooted more in young children's confusion than maliciousness. Perhaps if children from all family types were educated about family diversity, children of lesbian parents would not be faced with needing to educate their peers about their family's existence. This education can become burdensome, especially for young children.

In addition to becoming silent about their family makeup, children look to their parents for guidance. Parents discuss helping their children let go of the responsibility for defending all lesbian families. This allows children to feel less pressure in their daily lives, as they recognize they cannot single-handedly do away with heterosexism. Parents also tend to teach their children about tolerance, even when individuals seem intolerant of them. In this way parents are raising children to be caring and sensitive to others' differences, a characteristic of these children found in previous studies.

Simultaneously, however, children learn that negativity directed at them has more to do with others' upbringing and values than their own self-worth. Indeed, parents tend to describe negative incidents as being targeted at an arbitrary demographic—the lesbian family—rather than the children themselves. Parents wanted children to understand the discrimination and stigmatization they may experience as unfairly directed at them, by virtue of their family of origin and heterosexism, rather than an inherent flaw in their person.

In different ways, it is possible that each of these coping strategies advocated by parents increases resilience by maintaining the children's self-esteem. By feeling released of the burden to educate society about lesbian families, children need not feel they have personal weaknesses if they are unable to counter all the heterosexism they face. Second, by tolerating even those who are intolerant of them, children are able to feel they have social strengths and insight. Additionally, they do not involve themselves in inter-personal antagonism, but rather become caring of others—another possible source of self-esteem. Third, children are taught that negativity seemingly targeted at them is actually arbitrarily targeted at the demographic they represent, a characteristic that speaks nothing of their value or worth. This strips the power of heterosexism to erase children's self-esteem via stigmatization, discrimination, and homophobia. In other words, resilience is fostered. When taken together, these strategies create loving, caring, and supportive environments that facilitate productive coping strategies for their children (e.g. non-internalizing, insightful) in response to the heterosexism and homophobia targeted at them, their families, and families like theirs.

The few studies that examine resources for dealing with heterosexism suggest family supports and heightened self-esteem as being important components of effective coping. These children's families offer a major support system, helping them to deal with much of the pervasive heterosexism they encounter. The strategies parents employ, often from children's early ages, help their children recognize the crucial mediating resource their family represents. Additionally, the themes describing the ways in which parents deal with acute evidence of heterosexism suggest many ways in which children's self-esteem is maintained. These parents are preparing their children to deal with all types of adversity. Specifically, these children are developing impressive psychological strength and growing up to be capable of dealing with the kind of prejudice and discrimination they will likely face from our largely heterosexist society.

### *Evaluating methods*

Turning back to Elliott et al. (1999), we can now assess the rigour of this study. The method of interviewing is appropriate given that research questions dealt with personal experiences in a detailed and phenomenological way. The participants have been treated respectfully; parents and children (when appropriate) were invited to participate with regard to both content and process of their interviews (e.g. they could change or clarify any of their responses even after the interview) and the researchers adhered to the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines. The analysis procedures have been adequately described in the methods section. The sample has been situated through a description and Table 1. Though a thicker description could be presented, this is not possible due to space constraints. Examples have been given that provide support for the conclusions drawn. Member checks and enough detail to allow the reader to be an additional analytic 'auditor' address the credibility of the research. Within space constraints, enough specificity and detail have been provided so that the reader can determine under what conditions similar results might be expected.

### *Suggestions for future research*

This study adds to the small but growing literature on the lives of children raised by lesbian parents—specifically the ways parents help their children cope with the challenges facing their marginalized demographic. Nevertheless, more needs to be done.

Comparison research can provide important information as to the particular similarities and differences between different family types, but research should also explore the richness and unique qualities of lesbian families in their own right. This study examined the experience of families raising daughters; the experience of boys in lesbian families would add another dimension to the research. Additionally, this study largely relied on Caucasian, middle-class families; examinations of the ways heterosexism is dealt with in racially and economically diverse families is essential. Further emic studies will add variability to what is currently known about lesbian-headed families. Additionally, both etic and emic research has largely overlooked the children being raised by other queer parents, such as gay male, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Future studies would do well to examine the dynamics within these families as well as the experiences, and development, of children being raised in these environments.

Lesbian families do have additional challenges compared to more 'traditional' families, and yet are raising children who are healthy, stable, and poised to make significant societal contributions. Future research should aim to facilitate the empowerment of children raised by lesbian parents, thereby promoting social justice for this family type. Moreover, this research will help pinpoint useful strategies to help all families cope with challenging dominant social narratives of their demographic. Indeed, as traditional families become less commonplace, research on all types of non-traditional and marginalized families will help us learn beneficial parenting approaches, helping to engender more truly diverse and tolerant communities.

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**APPENDIX A: EXAMPLES OF ANALYZED QUESTIONS FROM THE INTERVIEW SCRIPT**

**I. Parent questions:**

(A) How do parents help their children understand the homophobia they face?

- (1) Can you think of an example of an incident where your child was confronted with homophobia?
- (2) What were your child's feelings about it and how did you deal with it?

(B) How do parents explain their family's societal marginalization?

- (1) How often do issues of homosexuality come up in conversations with your children?
- (2) Have you ever explicitly explained to your children what homosexuality is? If yes: When and how did you do that?
- (3) Do your children understand that they come from a type of family that is not so common? If so: How did you explain that to them?

(C) How do parents 'gear up' their children for dealing with homophobia?

- (1) What kinds of things do you tell your children about people who might not approve of the kind of family you have?
- (2) Do you ever discuss the type of homophobia your child might face in the world? What are some things you have talked about?
- (3) Do you ever make suggestions to them as to how they should deal with it?

**II. Child interviews:**

(A) Understanding of homophobia and 'gearing up' to deal with oppression

- (1) What kinds of things do people say to you, or tell you, about your family? What do you say to them?
- (2) How did you feel about that? Did you tell your parents about it? What did they say?
- (3) Do things like that happen a lot or just sometimes?

(B) Explanation of societal marginalization

- (1) Do you know what it means to be gay or lesbian? What does it mean? Who explained that to you? Do you ever talk about that kind of thing with your parents?
- (2) Do you know other families that are like yours?
- (3) Do you talk with your parents about people who are gay or lesbian? Can you tell me about it? What kinds of things do you talk about?