

DISCLOSURE PRACTICES OF ADOLESCENTS RAISED IN SAME-GENDERED FAMILIES

By

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SUMMARY

DISCLOSURE PRACTICES OF ADOLESCENTS RAISED IN SAME-GENDERED FAMILIES

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The concept of “family” has rapidly changed over the past few years. The prevalence of more and more children raised in same-gendered families has brought to mind the question of disclosure. This qualitative case study explored the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families in an attempt to understand how adolescents negotiate their unique family structure throughout their daily lives. The data in this study was analysed using thematic content analysis. It was found that both positive and negative experiences influence the adolescents raised in same-gendered families decision to disclose and that disclosure of family structure usually takes place after careful negotiation based on the grounds of either a close relationship, common ground or a perceived urgency.

KEYWORDS:

Experiences
Adolescence
Same-gendered
Disclosure
Disclosure practices
Negotiation
Homosexual
Heterosexual
Lesbian
Gay
Homophobic
Heteronormativity

DECLARATIONS

I, Liana Kruger (9802011), hereby declare that:

- All the resources that were consulted are included in the reference list.
- This study is my original work.
- Sylvia Williams Editorial Services (012 3442768) undertook the editing of the grammatical and language aspects of this dissertation.

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L Kruger

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and theoretical background to the study

“...when we fail to see the eccentricities in ourselves and to be amused by them, we become monsters of self-regard. Each in its own way, every family is as eccentric as mine. I guarantee it. Opening your eyes to this truth is to open your heart to humanity.”

– Dean Koontz

1.1 Personal prelude and rationale

Since I can remember, I have always been attracted to the things in life that the significant others around me would define as “strange, different or weird”. As a pre-schooler, I always picked a friend who one would consider “the odd one out”, the child with the red hair or big ears. In primary school, I picked a seat next to the fat kid and in high school I dated (what my parents called) the “broken-winged-birds”. Although they did not always understand it, I wanted to get closer to the people and things in life that seemed to be misunderstood by so many. I believe it is also this characteristic that led me on my journey of studying psychology and ultimately to this project, my dissertation. In my teenage years, I met one of the best friends I ever had – and as expected – he was different. He was gay.

In one of our conversations, Chris¹ explained to me how he wished he could be “normal” and how sad he felt when he thought about the idea of not getting married or having children. When I asked why he could not build onto those dreams of his, he answered, “Because society won’t let me”. I never realised how insightful he was by giving me that answer; but it stuck with me for many years as I pondered the idea of “normality”. And this is exactly where I wish to depart from in my attempt to understand the way in which not only society, but also we as individual human beings construct the idea of normalities and

¹ Not his real name.

abnormalities and how this construction influences the way we go about our daily lives. As I grew older, I met other gay² friends who came and went over the years. But, through my interaction with each of them one thing always stood out – their inevitable struggle with the “normalities” within society. I started to read about the topic of homosexual studies and developed a special interest in how gay couples created family networks for themselves. This led me to the issue of raising children within such a family and that got me thinking about how these children must experience their upbringing. I read many studies on the topic and I realised that a reasonable amount of work has been done to explore the experiences of children raised in same-gendered³ families (for example, Bos & Van Balen, 2008; Clarke, 2001; Fitzgerald, 1999; Lubbe 2005), but very little has been written about the experiences of adolescents in the same situation.

In most of the literature I have read (e.g. Clarke, Kritzinger & Potter, 2004; Fitzgerald, 1999; Patterson, 1992; Robitaille & St Jacques, 2009; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), I came across similar or at least closely related themes, such as stigmatization, bullying, disclosure practices and psychosocial development. Furthermore, Wainright, Russell and Patterson (2004) found that despite the presence of the above-mentioned themes, children raised in same-gendered families experience more or less that same “normality” as children raised by straight⁴ parents.

Considering the stages of normal child development, I can understand that the above-mentioned themes are all important aspects on which to focus, but my question is, which of these themes would still feature if we replace the target group of children with adolescents? Since adolescents are faced with many diverse developmental challenges (Steinberg, 2005), I thought it would

² The term “gay” will be used throughout this study to refer to male and female homosexual people, irrespective of their biological sex.

³ The term “same-gendered” will be used throughout this study to refer to homosexual parents. I have adopted the term “same-gendered” from the work of Lubbe (2005). Please refer to the concept clarification section for her definition of this term and a clear description of why I prefer to use this term throughout my study.

⁴ The term “straight” will be used throughout this study to refer to heterosexual people. Refer to concept clarification for the definition of “heterosexual”.

be interesting to gather information on their view of being raised in a same-gendered family. More so, it is their increased ability to reason and reflect that mainly motivates me to gain these insights from adolescent individuals. Much literature on adolescent development refer to their improved ability to reason and reflect (e.g. Jacobs & Ganzel, 1993, McDevitt & Ormrod, 2007, Piaget, 1967). Another study cautions that care should be taken not to generalise results of studies on children to adolescents (Perrin & Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2002). Other studies take cognisance of the fact that young children might find it difficult to differentiate between logical and illogical arguments (e.g. Amsterlaw, 2006). Tasker & Golombok (1998) also refer to adolescent and adult children of lesbian mothers who may have more developed definitions of family in contrast to younger children. Goldberg (2007) states that little is known about these children's experiences as adults and about how they negotiate disclosure of their parent's sexual orientation.

Therefore, I will attempt to contribute to the field of homosexual studies by exploring the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. This will be done by investigating their experiences and identifying the themes arising from those experiences and then understanding how these experiences influence the way in which they disclose their unique family structure. I believe their cognitive and affective development play a significant role in how they will construct meaning from their experiences and subsequently negotiate their decision to disclose (or not disclose) their unique family structure.

1.2 Purpose of the study and working assumptions

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families in an attempt to understand (a) the experiences and (b) how these experiences influence the negotiation of their unique family structure throughout their daily lives. I assume that these adolescents have already faced stigmatisation because of the dominant belief in a heteronormative society. I will start with the assumption that because

adolescents possess a greater ability for reasoning and reflection than children do, I will be able to gather in-depth information and rich, meaningful descriptions of their everyday encounters in- and outside of their home environments.

By identifying the most prevalent themes that arise from our conversations, I will attempt not only to understand adolescent experiences, but also to describe how adolescents' experiences influence their negotiation of disclosure about their unique family structure. Because adolescents are in a sensitive developmental phase, I assume that they will construct different meanings and realities from their experiences than a young child would do. Based on the literature of children's experiences, it can be assumed that similar themes may arise from our conversations but that these themes may differ in intensity because adolescence are in a different developmental phase (cognitively and affectively) which might equip them to deal with these situations more effectively.

In conducting this study, I aim to contribute to the area of homosexual studies by raising awareness and creating understanding of the joys and challenges that adolescents from same-gendered families face.

1.3 Research question(s)

- How do the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families influence the way in which they negotiate disclosure of their unique family structure?

Sub-question:

- What do we know about the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families?
- How do adolescents construct meaning from their direct and indirect experiences related to their unique family structure?
- How do adolescents raised in same-gendered families disclose their unique family structure?

1.4 Concept clarification

Experience – A happening that has personally involved the individual. Experience is based on knowledge acquired by learning, exercise or participation. It can be defined as a subjective process of “being affected by” a happening that in the end constitutes our life worlds (Lubbe, 2005).

Adolescence – the developmental phase from age 11 to 21 (Louw, van Ede & Louw, 1998). As early as 1918, adolescence was referred to as the “stormy” phase in which individuals experience fluctuating emotions paired with more complex characteristic development (Louw, van Ede & Louw, 1998). The adolescent culture is often associated with progressive social and affective maturity, physical and cognitive development and an increasing need for independence from the family system. Synonymous with these changes are transformations in fashion, speech and behaviour (Chapman, 2005).

Same-gendered – According to Lubbe (2005, p19) same-gendered refers to “a family constituted by two gay parents of the same gender, who are involved in an intimate and committed relationship”. For the purpose of this study, I will refer to parents of the same sex as “same-gendered” since, as Lubbe (2005) described the term, it acknowledges the social construction of gender.

Disclosure – the wilful conveyance of information. Disclosure processes not only entail the process of revealing personal information but also involves the subsequent reactions and perceptions elicited by the disclosure as a whole. The act of disclosure inevitably forms an essential part of social relationships and therefore disclosure rarely happens without a reason (Rotenberg, 1995; Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). Broadly defined, disclosure is mostly employed for the purpose of self-clarification, gaining social control, to allow self-expression to gain social validation and to establish relationships.

Disclosure practices – for the purpose of this study, it is not only important to understand the reason for disclosure but also to understand *how* information is made known. Disclosure practices therefore refer to the specific ways in which children raised in same-gendered families go about in conveying personal information about their family structure.

Negotiation – to create pathways; to get around; to deal with certain situations, which the individual might perceive as challenging (Mohangi, 2008). Lubbe (2005, p21) also describes the term as the process of “making compatible” and “reconciling two worlds”. In this study, “negotiation” will refer to the way in which the participant in the same-gendered family confers information to others.

Homosexual – sexual orientation, preference of individuals to engage in romantic relationships with partners of the same sex

Heterosexual – people sexually attracted to other people from the opposite sex. For the purpose of this study, heterosexual people will be referred to as “straight”.

Lesbian – female sexually attracted to a partner of the same female sex

Gay – male sexually attracted to a partner of the same male sex. For the purpose of this study, all homosexual individuals will be referred to as “gay”, irrespective of their male or female sex.

Homophobic – fear of people sexually attracted to other people of the same sex

Heteronormativity – the societal, cultural belief system that adheres to the concept of heterosexuality as being the norm.

1.5 Paradigmatic perspective

The purpose of a paradigm is to guide the investigator in proposing a certain ontology and epistemology. I will ascribe to the paradigm of Constructionism when conducting this study. Social constructionism seems to encourage the person to question the traditional prescription of the world along with a critical appraisal of thoughts that are commonly accepted (Burr, 2003). It meets normality head-on as it is experienced by those living it (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Social constructionism’s underlying premise is that we, as human beings co-produce knowledge as we interact with other people in particular circumstances, contexts and cultures (Maree, 2007). The “truth” therefore is subjective and may hold multiple realities. According to Gergen (1990 in Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996), meaning does not exist in the minds of individuals but is situated in the product of interaction within the context of ongoing

relationships. Over time, knowledge and meaning are thus constructed and reconstructed within the social context (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). Social constructionism resonates with the aim of my study since the goal of my study is to understand the subjective experience of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. I will attempt to view their constructions of reality through the lense of their interactions and experiences, as it is exactly those interactions that guide their negotiations of their unique family structure in their daily lives.

1.6 Conceptual framework

The following is a brief background to the conceptual framework in which I will situate this study. Chapter 2 contains a full discussion and visual representation of the different concepts.

1.6.1 Positioning “gayness”: Queer theory

Queer theory was included in the conceptual framework in an attempt to help the reader understand the positioning of gayness within society. In my opinion, that which is different is often viewed by society as being “not-normal”. Since homosexuality is constantly acclaimed to be “not-normal” (or queer – refer to Dilley, 1999, p459 in Chapter 2, p13) in a heteronormative society, we have to ask ourselves the question of who really defines the “queerness?” In this regard constructionism resonates well with queer theory and its view that majoritism and social power determine social relations and the consequent positioning of homosexuality within society.

1.6.2 “Normality” as a social construction

I hold the assumption that there is no clear-cut or definite definition of what normality entails and therefore it can be described as socially constructed. Theories of normality have long been informed by dominant groups and/or religious powers (e.g. Foucault 1980 in Walsh, 2003). Very often this acclaimed “normality” within society is used as a framework in which normal

functioning is viewed and appraised, to the cost of those minorities that do not fit the traditional and generally assumed scope of what normality entails. Since our society constantly change and restructure itself, is it then possible to define a “normal” family and to understand the negotiation of family identity if normality is so often viewed as a constant definition with not much scope for transformation? Challenging the view of normality is the growing trend of same-gendered families and the inevitable “otherness” that accompanies it. I therefore deemed it necessary to include the concept of normality as a social construction in this document to guide the reader in understanding how a heteronormative society often dictates the traditional “normal” family life.

1.6.3 Family identity: The social context

When one creates an identity, one establishes a personal meaning making of some kind. In my opinion, meaning making is synonymous with family life since it is through the interactions with our family members that we establish meaning and create family identity. However, what constitutes a “normal” family identity? With the rapid changes within society, comes to the fore the differentiation in what was once known as the “traditional family”. Same-gendered families challenge a new view in terms of family identity and normal family processes. It is important to take cognisance of the fact that describing a family structure as “normal” or “abnormal” cannot be understood without consideration of the viewer’s construction of normality.

1.6.4 Adolescent culture

Adolescence has long been defined as a period of “storm-and-urge” and is synonymous with many physical, cognitive, social and affective changes. It is because of these changes that I find disclosure practices during this phase of specific interest. What I consider to be especially interesting in terms of adolescents, are their cognitive and affective development. I focus specifically on the concepts of cognitive and affective development as Piaget himself described these two aspects to be closely related to each other (Wadsworth, 1989). I will attempt to develop an understanding of how adolescent’s

cognitive and affective development influence their construction of reality derived from their experiences and, by implication, how this enable them to negotiate their unique family structure throughout their daily lives.

1.7 Research methodology

I have decided to conduct a qualitative study in which I employed an intrinsic case study design in order to explore and understand the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. This exploration took place through the process of in-depth data collection within a real-life context. I focused on the specific issue of same-gendered families for the purpose of better understanding its uniqueness and to make sense of the intrinsic aspects related to it (Berg, 2001). I originally planned to make use of opportunity sampling for selecting a participant who falls within the criteria of middle- to late adolescents phase, thus age 11 to 21 (Thom, Low, van Ede & Ferns, 1998), who have been raised in a same-gendered family and who is still living with the same-gendered parents in their home. However, I unexpectedly had a conversation with Lilly, and so she agreed to take part in my study. For a detailed discussion on this process please refer to Chapter 3.

Most of the data used in this study have been collected through unstructured interviews with Lilly. The unstructured interviews took place via e-mail and during one-on-one sessions. In addition to the interviews, photographs and a collage (refer to appendix for collage) were also used for the purpose of enriching the data collection. All the spontaneous information was documented as field notes. The data in this study were analysed using thematic content analysis and coding. I wrote up the final themes and presented the pattern of related themes as part of my study results (Henning, 2004).

1.8 Ethical considerations and quality criteria

I will make use of the following guidelines to ensure that my study procedures comply with the ethical standards for research of the University of Pretoria (2009):

- Participant(s) who take part in this study will do so out of their own free will. The participant(s) will be voluntary partners in my study and can, at any time, choose to withdraw from the study. The participant(s) are allowed to refuse to answer questions and will only be interviewed at times suitable for them according to a prior arrangement.
- Confidentiality and anonymity will be guaranteed at all times. The identities of participant(s) will not be made known to others and pseudonyms will be used to protect the privacy of participant(s) when publishing the dissertation.
- Participant(s) will be informed, at all times, of the purpose and process of my study. The participant(s) will be informed by dialogue and will be provided with my contact details should they need clarity on anything and at any point during the study.
- As the researcher, I will ensure the equitable treatment of the participant(s).
- I will aim to protect the participant(s) from harm and, to my best ability, promote the well-being of everyone directly or indirectly involved in my study.
- The participant(s) will be treated with respect and dignity and freedom of choice will be recognised. No discrimination against any person or group of persons will be tolerated.

To eliminate and contain any possible bias from me, I employed *methodological empathy* (McGuire 1982 in Mouton, 2008) to ensure that I understood and acknowledged situations and happenings without necessarily agreeing with them. In some cases, data that had been analysed needed to be re-analysed or reappraised. In this study, results were discussed with my supervisor for the purpose of debriefing and eliminating any possible bias. I clarified emergent themes with Lilly to ensure that my developing conceptions were in line with the “true” experiences of those engaged in my study. I attempted to acknowledge and understand sceptical arguments that arose from conversations throughout the research process, not as a weakening of my ideas but as way of strengthening them. By acknowledging disparate

views in my research, I attempted to strengthen its credibility (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Since this study focuses on a very sensitive topic, there was a constant awareness of deep personal experiences. Therefore, searching questions in various contexts might draw the participant's attention to issues she had not considered before the research process started, and this might put her in a vulnerable position as the study progressed (Lubbe, 2005). I therefore discussed with the participant and all the family members involved, the way in which such occurrences would be addressed should they arise from the study. I did my utmost to ensure that the participant was at all times comfortable with the level of disclosure and exploration in our discussions (Lubbe, 2005). Furthermore, there was the possibility that the regular visits and the intimacy of our discussions might lead to the development of close relationships between myself and those involved in the study. Therefore, the termination of our relationship was discussed at the beginning of the study to ensure that everyone involved understood the nature of the closure process (Lubbe, 2005).

1.9 Outline of chapters

Chapter 1

This chapter provides you with an overview of the study

Chapter 2

In this chapter, you are invited to explore the literature that informed my inquiry.

Chapter 3

In this chapter, I aim to describe the various ways in which I worked to ultimately gather the information I needed to explore the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families in an attempt to create new social realities and insight.

Chapter 4

In this chapter, you are invited to explore the context of what I have found through the research in this study. This chapter aims to frame these “discoveries” in an attempt not only to enlighten but also guide the way for future research.

Chapter 5

In this chapter, conclusions are drawn, limitations highlighted and recommendations for future research are made.

In conclusion, if you are reading this, I presume that in some way, my research has caught your attention and that, in some way, my research might contribute to whatever journey you are on. By creating an understanding in you, the reader, I have potentially touched the perceptions of many more people with whom you will come into contact with. I want to encourage you to use the information you might find helpful in this document to contribute further in expanding the knowledge generated by research in this field. It is, however, important to note that this case study is based on the authenticity of one adolescent’s life story and its uniqueness should not be overlooked.

CHAPTER 2

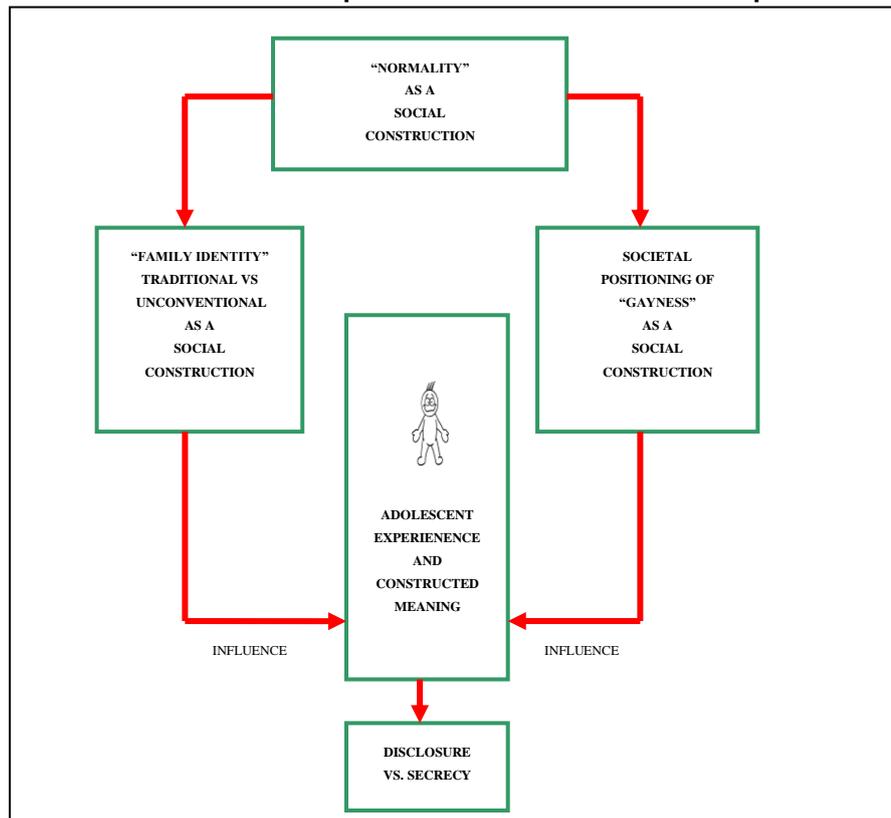
Conceptual framework and literature review

“Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart”

-Salman Rushdie

In this chapter, I invite you to explore the literature that informed my inquiry. It is true that I have chosen to situate my study within a conceptual framework. However, my conceptual framework and the literature review are so narrowly interlinked that I decided not to divide this chapter into separate sections (conceptual framework vs. literature review) but to let the literature flow from one concept to the other. I did, however, consider it a good idea to present a visual presentation of the conceptual framework and literature review since it would provide for better knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the literature that follows.

Figure 1: Visual representation of conceptual framework



The concept of normality as a social construction was put as the central departure point for the visual representation (figure 1) since I am of the opinion that it is within (and because) of this construction that “gayness” and unconventional family structures (and subsequent family identity) are positioned and defined as “other”. I believe that in the bigger picture, this construction of normality, the positioning of gayness and related unconventional family identity will simultaneously interplay and contribute to the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. Furthermore, I assume that it is exactly these experiences that would influence the decision of adolescents raised in same-gendered families to disclose or withhold information on their family structure.

2.1 “Normality” as a social construction

In contrast to the field of medical sciences, which relies on clear definitions and diagnoses, psychology does not provide us with a clear, definite and generally accepted definition of what normality is (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). The meaning of normality is not a scientific construct, but a metaphysical, superstitious and philosophical supposition. One has to recognise that individualistic explanations of meaning are grounded in the common field of constructions created by our language and cultural systems (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). Therefore, the definition of normality can be described as socially constructed, thus influenced by subjective worldviews and the larger culture (Walsh, 2003). Foucault (1980, cited in Walsh, 2003, p4) criticises that theories of “normality” have often been constructed by dominant groups, reified by religion or science, and used to oppress (or pathologise) those who do not fit into the ideal standards. Is it then possible to define a “normal” family and to understand the negotiation of family identity?

Goffman (1963, cited in Walsh 2003, p177) described “normality” as the “absence of stigma”. Since gay and lesbian individuals are certainly one of the most stigmatized groups in society, would this then mean that they cannot be described as normal? It is evident when we look at research that same-gendered families are healthy, fully functioning units. This again emphasises

my opinion that “normality” is a social construction, defined by compliance to socially created norms. Walsh (2003) makes reference to the sad reality that until very recently, the concepts of “family”, “gay” and “lesbian” were mutually exclusive. “Normality” in terms of the traditional definition of “family” seems to be constantly questioned when it is termed with same-gendered-families. It is because of this belief in the traditional discourse of normality in our heteronormative society that gay and lesbian individuals are still frowned upon by the greater society. Being aware of this discourse, the construction and negotiation of a “normal” family identity is clearly not always an easy task for same-gendered families.

2.2 Positioning “gayness”: Queer theory

In general, “queer” is commonly used as an adjective pertaining to the notion that something is “not normal” or more specifically, not heterosexual (Dilley, 1999). It has been used increasingly as a replacement when referring to “gay and lesbian” individuals, anyone whose gender places them outside of society’s construction of “normal” and anyone who is included in the “marginalised” group. However, “queers” prefer to say and believe that they are both present and centred and that they do not experience their own subjectivity as marginalised. Queer critics state insistently that queers are not interested in “assimilating seamlessly into an unchanged mainstream” (Seidman [1993] and Tierney [1993] in Slagle, 2003, p137). Morris (1998, in Shlasko, 2005) categorizes the meaning of queer according to two main ideas: queer as a subject position and queer as a politic position. A queered position thus, “requires an ontological shift comprehensively resistant in its exceptions to dominant normativity” (Dilley, 1999, p458). Queer theory can thus be described as an approach to an area of gay and lesbian inquiry (Kirsch, 2007). Queer criticism confronts the heteronormative supposition in the mainstream (Kirsch, 2007; Slagle, 2003; 2007) and proposes to deconstruct fixed categories and beliefs that denote boundaries of any kind (Kirsch, 2007). Queer theory, therefore, defines queer as an attribute, thus a construction placed onto an individual as a product of social relations in a continuous process of change. According to Dilley (1999, p459),

constructionism serves as the obvious framework for queer theory. The question is thus not “*who* is queer” but rather, “why are we saying they are queer”. Queer theory discards the idea of permanent sexual identities (Zimmerman, 2007), and argues that queers and sexual differences are noteworthy, but that this uniqueness does not justify oppression (Slagle, 2003).

An interesting example of how society positions “gayness” was brought forth by the film *Brokeback Mountain*. Block (2009, p254) comments that “almost every time we see Jack and Ennis together, the following scene concerns life on the heterosexual front where girlfriends, wives, children and in-laws both protect and threaten the closet”. He further states that this binary distinction serves as an indication of the film’s awareness of homosexuality as “pure inversion”; always standing in a reverse relationship to the heterosexual marriage which presides over the core of all sexuality. He continues to say that “inversion”, as it is used here, suggests that “homosexuality is a subcategory of sexuality in general and that it only exists in relation to or over and against heterosexuality”. This again refers to society’s belief in heteronormativity. Queer theory, therefore, attempts to understand society at large but concurrently acknowledges the impossibility of unbiased explanation (Shlasko, 2005). It aims to acknowledge sexuality and gender as subjects worthy in their own right – as opposed to branching from general cultural theory or gay and lesbian studies (Kirsch, 2007). Queer theorists discard the concept of sexuality as a personal affair and state that sexuality, as part of identity, significantly shapes our understanding of the world and our interactions with one another. Sexuality is thus far more than sexual behaviour (Slagle, 2007).

It is not surprising that many people refused to watch the film *Brokeback Mountain* since they had “nothing to identify with” because they are “not gay”, completely neglecting the fact that there is actually a storyline besides the “gayness”. Roger Ebert (2005, cited in Block, 2009, p253) also supports this notion by saying, “...it applies to everyone. I can imagine someone weeping at this film, identifying with it, because he always wanted to stay in the marines,

or be an artist or a cabinetmaker”. I am of the opinion that as a society, we construct and position “gayness” as an inversion of “normal sexuality” causing the binary distinctions to exist. Queer theory, however, acclaims the notion that the outsider gives voice to the insider and rejects binary distinctions as arbitrarily determined and defined by those with social power (Dilley, 1999).

Queer theory, according to Dilley (1999, p461) is thus not purely about studying, “people who’s sex lives are not heterosexual, or even the positionalities of those people - at its core, it is about questioning the presumptions, values and viewpoints from those positions, especially those that normally go unquestioned”. Queer theorists specifically confront notions that (a) the reason behind activism is the assimilation of LGBT⁵ individuals into an unchanged mainstream, (b) these individuals share an essential identity and (c) that sexuality is synonymous with privacy and has no relevance to the public eye (Slagle, 2007). Sexuality is thus an essential part of everything we do in our lives, it is omnipresent and influential in our decision making and communication (Slagle, 2003).

2.3 Family identity: The social context

Bennet, Wolin and McAvity (1988, cited in Epp & Price, 2008, p52) provide a comprehensive definition of family identity by stating that it is, “the family’s subjective sense of its own continuity over time, its present situation and its character”. Identity can be defined as generating private or personal meaning that is created over the course of the individual’s interaction with the world and is structured primarily in narrative form (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). Meaning making also occurs through mutually negotiated meanings, between two or more people, and this meaning is embedded in the fundamental nature of communication and interaction. It is through these interactions that our conceptions of our family identity are established. According to Epp and Price (2008), family identity is co-constructed through action and cannot be viewed as a mere construct that resides in the minds of individuals. Epp and Price

⁵ LGBT is a term used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals

(2008, p50) contend that “being a family” is a “collective enterprise that is central to many consumption experiences and replete with challenges in contemporary society”.

Walsh (2003, p4) takes cognisance of the fact that conceptualisations of normal family processes must consider the “changing views of changing families in a changing society”. She continues to state (p4) that what is considered normal, varies and poses a challenge for both continuity and change over the family life cycle. It is important not to misinterpret the term “normal” for “functional”, as many family structures can be viewed as “abnormal” (depending on the viewers construction of normality) but can still be equally functional in society. In the modern world, families face competing demands and interests, increasingly elective and fluid interpersonal relationships, and mixed family structures that differ from the traditional view of what constitutes a family (Epp & Price, 2008).

Despite the rising number of same-gendered families, negotiating their family identity still seems to be a constant process. In their article on the negotiation of lesbian family identity, Suter, Daas and Bergen (2008) refer to evidence that lesbian families’ interaction with others challenge their sense of family identity. It was found that through symbolic interactionism (the use of family symbols and rituals) these families’ identity was always negotiated and never simply claimed. As their children grew older, lesbian mothers found that they became more secretive about their family structure and thus advocated coping strategies for their children to deal with heterosexual interaction (Suter, Daas & Bergen, 2008).

Social constructionists take cognisance of the fact that family identity can be changed. These changes are related to the actual people who live in families and contribute to the co-construction of the family life story (Bitter, 2009). In my opinion, this also highlights the essential contribution by each family member in creating their family identity, besides fundamental differences between the individuals themselves. When we explore the experiences, and subsequent disclosure practises, of adolescents raised by same-gendered

parents, it is interesting to see how gayness inevitably forms part of who they (the adolescents) are – regardless of their own sexual orientation – as it is a core component of their family identity, an identity they helped to construct and establish.

2.4 Adolescent culture

Adolescence has long been defined and described by various authors. A. Freud (1968, cited in Papini, Farmer, Clark, Micka and Barnett, 1990, p959) describes adolescence as a “period of considerable emotional upheaval” and as early as 1918, G.S Hall (in Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998, p390) defined adolescence as a period of “storm and urge”. Hall (1918) explained that changing emotions and attitudes during adolescence are characteristic of this “storm-and-urge” phase. However, not all authors agree on characterising adolescence as a “stormy” developmental phase. A. Bandura (1964, cited in Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998) is of the opinion that “stormy behaviour” during adolescence is a result of a self-fulfilling prophecy set by the expectations of society that a teenager will act in a rebellious and daring way. However we choose to view adolescence, we cannot deny the positive changes that also accompany this unique developmental phase, such as independence and progressive emotional and physical maturity.

The work of Chapman (2005) reflects on the interesting history of adolescence. Before the 1940’s, adolescents were not known as “adolescents”, but were seen as mere kids, growing up while working on farms and in factories to earn a living. Without much choice in the matter, children aged thirteen to nineteen had helped their parents care for their younger siblings and continued their contribution to their family of origin until they were old enough to get married (Chapman, 2005). It is only after the social and industrial changes, following World War II, that transformation took place and the “teenager/adolescent” appeared. During the great depression in the 1930’s, the “adolescent” youth struggled to find jobs and this resulted in them spending time begging on the streets and sleeping in the parks. With more and more youth turning to the streets, US President Franklin D.

Roosevelt designed the National Youth Administration to provide training opportunities for disillusioned youth (Chapman, 2005). This led to an emphasis on attendance of high school by youth. The movement of young people from the work industry to the school setting created a space for interaction amongst the youth and the consequent development of a “teenage/adolescent” culture where interest in music, fashion and dancing was shared. Marketers in the retail sector noted potential in this free-spirited group of young people, whose main aim was to have fun and enjoy life. They referred to this group of youngsters as “teeners” then “teensters” and later “teenagers”. It was clear that teenagers/adolescents had developed their own culture (Chapman, 2005). This so-called “culture” is embedded in patterns of physical, cognitive, social and affective changes characterised not only by biological changes, but also changes in fashion, speech and behaviour.

Since adolescent development is categorised by many of these physical, cognitive, social and affective changes, it is not uncommon for adolescents to distance themselves from the family during this phase. It is through their interaction and increased dedication towards their peers that adolescents develop a new identity of “self” (Steinberg, 1988 cited in Papini, Farmer, Clark, Micka & Barnett, 1990). It is also through these interactions that adolescents create their interpretations of meaning (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). During adolescence, “best friendships” becomes a progressively more significant source of trust (see also Jackson & Rodriguez-Tomè, 1993; Sherif & Sherif, 1964). Adolescents describe these close bonds as ones of mutual acceptance, understanding, mutual advice and self-disclosure (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). Research has shown that there is mostly an increase in conflict between adolescents and their parents which is accompanied by a decline in the closeness of their relationship (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Not only does the adolescent have to adapt to their own changes, but the parents also go through a process of adaptation to their adolescent’s new emergent needs. Pubertal maturation leads to more egalitarian relationships between the adolescents and their parents thus providing adolescents with more freedom of choice and autonomy in family decision making (Crosnoe & Needham, 2004; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

As individuals grow up, they develop reflective and metacognitive ability. It is also during this time that individuals revise and review their families and cultural narratives (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). Adolescence is characterized as the time in which individuals begin to explore their own psychological characteristics. It is a time in which they try to ascertain who they really are and how they fit into the social world which they live in (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The ideal of this differentiation of the self is an independent individual, guided by his thoughts rather than his feelings. Undifferentiated individuals often fuse with the dominant emotional patterns in the family and struggle to detach themselves from their family members (Bitter, 2009). However, research has shown that it is not uncommon for adolescents to engage in false self behaviour. This occurs often amongst classmates and when engaging with romantic interests. The impact of this false behaviour on the adolescent's mental state depends on the reason for the behaviour (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). False behaviour linked to the devaluation of the true self often leads to depression and despair.

Adolescents' socialisation experiences as part of their family leads to the development of qualities that they bring into their peer relationships. The peer culture influences adolescents in both negative and positive ways (Crosnoe & Needham, 2004; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Within the peer culture, subcultures are created through sharing in mutual noteworthy events, appearance and behaviours. Language is one of the most important aspects in the development of subcultures among peers since it is through language that shared interpretations develop. Unfortunately, language activities in which adolescents engage also includes teasing, story-telling and gossip (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). Because adolescence is such a sensitive developmental phase, false behaviour often serves the function of avoiding being the target of ridicule. However, provision of support and self-disclosure, and consequently the quality of friendships in peer relationships, increase as young adolescents mature. Research done by Shulman et al (1997, cited in Steinberg & Morris, 2001) indicates that acceptance of individualism between close friends increases with age as conformity decreases. Socially, adolescents also

develop moral autonomy, thus establishing guidelines for their own behaviour in accordance to their own value system (Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998). It is usually during this phase that cognitive-moral conflict occurs since adolescents are introduced, through their peer group, to behaviour that differs from their own moral values and thus they need to take important moral decisions. By making these decisions, adolescents face cognitive stress but at the same time, they develop morally (Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998) and differentiate to create their own personal identity, apart from the peer group and family. In this sense, adolescents do not necessarily reconstitute the parent-child relationship, but the relationship between the parent and child is transformed to some extent (Steinberg, 1990).

Jacobs and Klaczynski (2002) make reference to traditional theories (e.g. Piaget) that describe cognitive development as moving from initially intuitive to logical and from inefficient to greater efficiency. The emphasis on reasoning competence as the basis for decision making is supported by many studies (see Jacobs & Ganzel, 1993). Some of these studies indicated the difference between younger and older adolescents in decisions that involved making deductions, perceiving risk, considering consequences and planning (Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002). A study by Walker (2002) supported the notion that frontal brain activity is enhanced during adolescence and this contributes to advances in higher cognitive processes. Walker (2002) states that abstract reasoning capacities improve following puberty into young adulthood.

In his theory of cognitive development, Piaget refers to the close link between cognitive and affective development (Wadsworth, 1989). Affective development includes aspects such as judging and moral reasoning. I also consider these aspects to be of importance in exploring how adolescents construct meaning from their experiences. In moral socialisation theories, the bulk of studies emphasise the important role of the parent as socialising agent, however, in adolescence one has to acknowledge the many other agents of change (Hart & Carlo, 2005). According to Hart and Carlo (2005), puberty indicates the recurrence of biologically based processes that might impact upon moral development during adolescence and therefore

adolescents tend to become more agentic in their social roles and responsibilities. They further state that adolescents face “role-taking” opportunities provided by their peers. Moral reasoning in adolescents seems to be a dynamic interplay between their beliefs, norms and perceptions embedded in their cultures and thus there may be multiple cultures of morality in adolescence (Hart & Carlo, 2005). These multiple moral cultures (e.g. school, neighbourhood, work) and their social agents of change (e.g. parents, media, peers) are important influences on the compromises that adolescents make on their family demands and the demands placed on them by the broader community (Hart & Carlo, 2005).

A study done by Kennedy, Felner, Cauce and Primavera (1988), also found significant correlations between interpersonal cognitive problem solving and the individual’s level of moral development. These sources cited above are just a few of the studies conducted on cognitive development which supports my assumption on the ability of adolescence to reason and reflect better and therefore fuelled my interest in exploring the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families.

2.5. Exploring the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families

“Ladies and gentlemen, step right up! Look closely at the child of a gay dad. No horns! No tail! In fact, she could pass for anybody’s child” (Adapted from: *Families like mine*, Garner, 2005, p13).

It is obvious that being part of a same-gendered family comes with a unique set of challenges. Gilbert (as cited in Garner, 2005, p13) contributes to this notion by exclaiming, “it’s hard growing up under a microscope. As kids, we are expected to talk about very adult issues – sex, civil rights, legal and political issues. What other situations are there where people talk to kids and legislate from there?” According to various authors (e.g. Fitzgerald, 1999; Garner, 2005; Meezan & Rauch, 2005; Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004) almost any article about gay parenting makes

reference to the fact that the children of gay parents do not “turn out” to be different from children raised by straight parents. However, it is Gilbert’s opinion that the result of these studies are over simplified for the mainstream audience and that through generalities, subtlety is lost. She positively acclaims a study done by Stacey and Biblarz (2001), on how they acknowledge the fact that some differences exist between children raised in straight families versus those raised in same-gendered families.

The argument on child-rearing by homosexual couples has long been prominent in the field of homosexual studies and has brought with it an assimilation debate, thus, for every positive effect highlighted in studies done on children from same-gendered families, negatives have also been identified. In the literature to date (e.g. Clarke, Kritzinger & Pottter, 2004; Fitzgerald, 1999; Patterson, 1992; Robitaille & St Jacques, 2009; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001) reference is made to the “different” experiences of children raised in same-gendered families. The most prevalent themes were those of stigmatization, homophobic bullying, psychosocial adjustment and disclosure. Stigmatization and homophobic bullying were mostly reported by studies done on younger children (Robitaille & St Jacques, 2009) and interesting enough, some parents considered this to be a normal occurrence, “because kid’s are cruel anyway” (Clarke, Kritzinger & Potter, 2004, p531).

However, Wainright, Russell and Patterson (2004) found that adolescents raised in same-gendered families did not differ from adolescents raised in straight families in terms of their personal, family and school adjustment. They state that research done on adolescent offspring of gay parents is still sparse and based on small samples, which influence its representativeness. Another study by Tasker and Golombok (1995) found that adults raised in same-gendered families functioned well in terms of their psychosocial well-being and relationships. Meezan and Rauch (2005) found that the development, adjustment and well-being of children from same-gendered parents do not differ markedly from children with heterosexual parents. In the same sense, Garner (2005) claims that the constant focus on how kids will be affected by their parent’s sexual orientation becomes confused with issues that could be

unrelated. Furthermore, Goldberg (2007) states that children's feelings towards their parent's sexual orientation unavoidably change during the course of their lives. He found that participants in his study felt relief in high school after they received a neutral reaction from their peers in terms of the disclosure of their parents' sexual orientation. This finding by Goldberg (2007) fuelled my interest in how adolescents experience being raised in same-gendered families.

With the assimilation debate comes the inevitable interlinked reference to legal, medical and religious domains. These domains are continuously informed by each other and stay in a constant reciprocal relationship, continuously shaping each other's development. This also creates a clearer picture of why legally, homosexual parenting, (especially in countries other than South Africa), has been such a controversial issue (Fairtlough, 2008) articulated through the interlinked moral, religious, legal and political discourses. From a legal perspective, many people believe that children should not be raised by same-gendered parents. Arguments such as it being abnormal; or that children will turn out to be deviant; or they will be forced into homosexuality because they will be confused about their own sexuality are commonly held as defensive mechanisms towards many inquiries on the topic. It is exactly these commonly held beliefs that hinder same-gendered parents from attaining parental rights equal to those held by straight parents (Garner, 2005). The perplexity in many legal decisions over parental rights can be explained partly because of the existence of non-traditional family forms and partly because of the legal paradigm in which those rights and responsibilities are interpreted (Skinner & Kohler, 2002). Case law has been ambivalent concerning the rights of gay and lesbian parents. This can be ascribed to the fact that lesbian and gay couples with children do not fit the traditional concept of a "family" that has been protected by law, and addressing such cases have demanded a great deal of discretion (Connolly, 1996). One could ask why such hostile legislation-related expressions are continuously being made despite research which produces favourable results regarding same-gendered parenting. In a study by Patterson (2000), same-gendered relationships are presented as relationships of positive adjustment,

despite stressful conditions. Kurdek (2004) found that seventy-eight percent of same-gendered couples function better in their relationship than do heterosexual partners with children. He further states that these findings (amongst others) can be taken as one basis for claiming that gay men and lesbian women are entitled to legal recognition of their relationship. Kurdek says that they deserve the same rights and privileges, especially since it is the same processes that regulate their relationships as those that regulate the relationships of heterosexual couples.

In South Africa, however, issues pertaining to stigmas in the area of gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships have changed as legally a break through has been made (Thoreson, 2008). In 2006, the South African Constitutional Court avowed same-sex marriages as a legal right (Polder, Nel, Kruger & Wells, 2008). This being the case, it could easily be assumed that in South Africa the “anti-gay rhetoric” has taken a backseat and that equality for all has surfaced as the dominant discourse. However, this is not always the case. Historically, South Africa has been sculpted as a predominantly heteronormative society and homosexuality together with many other issues (such as race and apartheid) will for a long time yet still be under discussion, with or without the laws on paper.

Medical and religious discourses also provided their fair share of creating and marinating the idea of “homosexual-abnormality”. Up until 1972, being homosexual was classified as a mental illness in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Drucker, 1998) and as recently as 2003, the Vatican released a document stating that, “...allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such unions would actually mean doing violence to these children...” (Garner, 2005, p14). These allegations were made in ignorance of the fact that some children were already living in such family structures. Cruelly, these children were being told by the leader of one of the world’s largest religious denominations that being raised by same-gendered parents was not favourable to their development (Garner, 2005). This statement is but one of the hostile expressions directed at same-gendered parents in our heteronormative society. The debate on homosexuality within the Christian

faith has been well researched and documented (e.g. Canda & Furman, 1999; Hodge, 2005; Jimenez, 2006; Melendez & LaSala, 2006) and (I assume) will continue to be a point of discussion for a very long time to come.

These discourses I find personally interesting since, through the lens of social constructionism, generation of knowledge and impressions of reality (“normality”) are sparked by a social process (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). Because social processes continuously change, our individual understanding of concepts and “normality” is also subject to change. The fight for gay rights inevitably becomes as much a fight for the children of same-gendered parents, as is their parents’ struggle. Also, realising that, as a straight child, you form part of that same straight community that often offends your parents can easily lead to feelings of guilt or treason (Garner, 2005). Children need to be reassured that regardless of their own sexual orientation, their parent’s love and support will prevail. It is also crucial that same-gendered parents do not talk down to straight people and avoid making generalizations that were caused by their unfortunate contact with homophobic individuals (Garner, 2005).

As stated previously, children from same-gendered families have had to deal with conversations about very adult issues in terms of questions about their family structure and consequent legislation. Not only does this constant need to defend their family structure creates stress for the children of same-gendered parents, but there is also an underlying pressure to be seen as “perfect” so as to emphasise the normality of their (societal-created) “abnormal” family. However, always presenting an idealistic, pure and clean picture of same-gendered families in the media encourages society to have a very restricted perspective of how children from a same-gendered family “should” be (Garner, 2005). Wood (1986, cited in Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996) commented that when it comes to emotion and society, learning “that we ought to experience” a particular emotion also teaches us what to do and think. Emotion therefore engrosses internalization of social representations which includes a range of societal attitudes and desires. Some of the children in same-gendered families struggle with a wide array of problems – the same

as could be found in any other straight family – but these children keep them hidden out of fear that these problems will be assigned to their family structure.

Another aspect of concern for children from same-gendered families is the attitude of those in and around the school environment. For twelve years children will spend most of their time in the school setting among their peers and teachers. Providing a child from a same-gendered family with enough love and care simply is not enough to keep them from the harsh comments in and around the school environment. Many same-gendered parents are concerned that their children will be teased (Meezan & Rauch, 2005). Emily Hansen (in Garner, 2005, p95) expresses this by saying, “I think the hardest part is that people tell me not to take people’s comments personally. But I do. Every time. They are personal. This is my family”.

What is very often neglected, is that coming out as same-gendered parents, once you have children, is an ongoing process. Constantly, same-gendered parents have to explain their family structure to new teachers, doctors, parents of their children’s friends and many more (Garner, 2005). In her research, Lubbe (2005) proposes that open disclosure about family structure might be increased if schools fostered a more tolerant and accepting attitude towards diversity. However, a study done on citizens’ held values and attitudes towards gay and lesbian rights (Craig, Martinez, James & Gainous, 2005) has shown that many people mostly foster an ambivalent attitude towards issues pertaining to gay and lesbian rights. Although this research focused specifically on the legal rights of gay and lesbian individuals, I am of the opinion that this ambivalence is present in many other issues surrounding gay and lesbian families, and even present in the school system. Preparing the child for homophobia is not an easy task and the support of the school is an important contributing factor to supporting the same-gendered parents and child. The more supportive the school seems to be, the more likely is an open attitude towards “otherness”. As for experiencing “otherness”, some children of same-gendered parents have communicated an awareness of themselves as “being part of the gay culture” (Garner, 2005, p192). Although not being

gay themselves, having grown up in a same-gendered family most certainly leads to a feeling of identification with the gay culture. Orson Morrison (in Garner, 2005, p 192) supports this notion by saying, “the gay community and the gay culture, I grew up in that. To think that that’s not a part of who I am or who I have become would be denial”. Garner (2005) further communicates that by being among “straight” people the more she moved away from the home environment, made her realise how much she had considered the gay community to be her community.

Within the school community, parents’ sexual orientation does influence the child. Sexual behaviour is not a common topic of discussion among young kids, but inevitably, family is. Since family discussions come up regularly, it can be expected that a child from a same-gendered family might feel hesitant to disclose the information there and then. Fear of homophobic bullying, stigmatisation and teasing might prevent many children from opening up about their unique family structure (Clarke, Kritzing & Potter, 2004; Fitzgerald, 1999; Patterson, 1992; Robitaille & St Jacques, 2009; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). By not talking about their family structure, children from same-gendered families create a protective buffer around them, allowing society’s general assumption that their parents are straight to persist (Drucker, 1998). However, evidence of children having increased difficulty with peers on grounds of their parent’s sexual orientation is mixed (Meezan & Rauch, 2005). Lubbe (2005) explains that with few exceptions, schools do not talk about same-gendered families. The absence of displayed positive role models for same-gendered family structures strengthens the assumption that all parents are heterosexual by nature and this encourages children into silence about their family structure.

Keeping silent or denying allegations about their same-gendered family seem to be one of the most frequently used defence mechanisms by children. Tina (in Garner, 2005, p98) bears witness that, “...the truth is that I was terrified to speak on that subject ... and I’d outright deny it”. For some children, the first clue about their “difference” occurs once they enter the school setting. Derek (in Garner, 2005, p97) explains, “I drew our family ... mom and Donna ... the

teacher asked who Donna was. I told her ‘Donna’. I thought every family had a Donna”. Whether it is because of ignorance or fear, at some point in their lives, the decision to disclose their family structure seems to create a relevant amount of internal conflict or distress for children raised in same-gendered families. In this regard, disclosure seems to be a complex process, multi-faceted in a number of ways. Let me take you forward by exploring literature on disclosure and how this relates to children raised in same-gendered families.

2.6 Exploring the disclosure practices of adolescents in general

Disclosure can be defined as the process of revealing personal information. The reactions and perceptions elicited by disclosure also form an essential part of the disclosure process as a whole (Rotenberg, 1995). Thus, strongly linked with the decision of disclosure is the social perception following the act of disclosure itself and this inevitably forms an essential part of social relationships (Rotenberg, 1995). Literature on disclosure practices (Cheleune, 1979; Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Rotenberg, 1995) refers to the complexity of deciding to communicate secrets. In an article by A.E. Kelly (1999, p105), “secrecy” is defined as “actively hiding private information from others”. Self-presentation and the role of the confidant seem to be two of the most prominent themes in deciding on disclosure. According to Kelly (1999), the main concern in revealing personal, adverse information about oneself is that the revealer may come to view themselves in an undesirable way if others know their stigmatizing secrets. The inability of the confidants to keep secrets and to protect the identity of the revealer is another problem associated with disclosure. Kelly (1999, p107) further states that “a number experiments from self-presentation literature have demonstrated that describing oneself as having undesirable qualities leads to negative shifts in one’s self-beliefs and behaviours”. Many other articles in the literature (e.g. Bozette, 1987; Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Derlega & Grzelak, 1979) refer to the purpose, or function, of disclosure and contend that disclosure rarely happens without some form of gain from the feedback.

Although disclosure in adults has been documented thoroughly (e.g. Goldberg, 2007; Hendrick, 1981; Jourard, 1971; Miller, 1990), limited attention has been given to the disclosure processes of adolescents. I am of the opinion that disclosure by adolescents (and most age groups for that matter) rarely happens without a reason or a purpose (also see Taylor, 1979). All in all, literature also reflects that disclosure serves as instrumental in gaining social input, generating constructive dialogue and providing feedback by which youngsters can address their concerns (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Within the disclosure process the targeted relationship partner that serves as the recipient of disclosure is largely determined by two factors: (a) the specific type of social input needed and (b) the structure of the social environment that restricts or allows opportunities for disclosure. Interesting is that it seems as if an increase in self-disclosure relies on who the recipient of the disclosure is and it is suspected that increasing self-disclosure during adolescence is due to an increase in self-disclosure to friends (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Since intimacy and self-disclosure are important features in childhood and adolescence (Berndt & Hanna, 1995, cited in Buhrmester & Prager, 1995, p31), increasing self-disclosure and adolescence can almost be viewed as synonymous. But then, since self-disclosure seems to fluctuate, we have to ask ourselves, what would the function of self-disclosure be?

Self-disclosure can be divided into five broad categories. Each of these categories serves the purpose of either adding some benefit or addressing a concern of the discloser (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). The first purpose of disclosure is that of *social validation* in which individuals convey information in the hope to gain feedback that might assist in clarifying the appropriateness of their beliefs, attitudes and values. The second purpose is that of *gaining social control* in order to manage a certain impression or control one's social image (also refer to 4.2.2). This form of disclosure can involve the disclosure or withholding of selected information in an attempt to preserve the self. Self-disclosure for the purpose of self-preservation is not uncommon in adolescents (Bozette, 1987; Harter & Lee, 1989 cited in Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Socialization pressure is at a peak during adolescence and fears of humiliation lead to the censoring of information disseminated. The third

purpose of disclosure is that of *self-clarification* in order to gain insight into one's own beliefs, attitudes and values. Derlega and Grzelak (1979) state that in this type of disclosure, dialogue results in the construction and reconstruction of ideas, which leads to clarification that the discloser might not have achieved, had he/she not disclosed that particular piece of information. It is also true that the achievement of formal operations during adolescence allows for the construction of more abstract self-portraits and subsequent resolving of issues between the real and ideal self (Harter, 1990). The fourth purpose of disclosure is that of *self-expression* and it is used to gain therapeutic release for constrained feelings. This also serves as a mechanism to mobilise coping and social support (also see Thoits, 1986). Goldberg (2007) also refers to the feeling of relief experienced by individuals raised in same-gendered families after disclosure has been made and neutral reactions have been received. Derlega and Grzelak's (1979) fifth purpose of disclosure is that of *relationship development*. Here, the wish for establishing initial connections and then developing this connection into intimacy is of the essence.

Additional insight into the importance of disclosure by adolescents is given by Rotenberg (1995, p138) when he refers to the work done by Hunter and Youniss (1982) in connection with the diverse socialising functions served by peer friends and parents. According to them, the peer relationship based on equality and reciprocating ideas stands in direct contrast to the authoritarian role of parents who wish to reinforce already existing standards of behaviour. Therefore, the relationship with peers is of greater importance during adolescence (also see Berndt, 1989; Sherif & Sherif, 1964). I am of the opinion that this is primarily the reason why adolescents gradually develop more intentional independence from their parents and seek to belong to a group of peer friends. Jackson and Rodriguez-Tome (1993, p2) also confirm this growing independence when they refer to the "less direct supervision by parents and adults and more involvement with peers". However, as has been said before, self-disclosure is an act of intimacy and functions to intensify and sustain relationships (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Thus, belonging would mean creating intimacy and intimacy would be gained through increasing

disclosure. It is then easy to understand that because of the need for social belonging, the disclosure of perceived positive information would reign over disclosing potentially humiliating information. It is at this point that I find it fitting to refer to the theory of “social penetration”.

The theory of social penetration⁶ explains how multi-levels of verbal and nonverbal exchanges develop into interpersonal relationships. Herein lies an essential component to understanding disclosure by weighing up the costs and benefits in terms of the exchange of information (Taylor, 1979). Although this theory has never been linked to disclosure practices by adolescents (or adolescents raised in same-gendered families specifically), I choose to establish a connection here. Since adolescence is a sensitive developmental phase and since being raised in a same-gendered family brings with it a unique set of challenges, I can only assume that weighing up the pro’s and cons of disclosing one’s family structure is an integral part of the disclosure process. Social penetration describes the relationship building process as gradually proceeding from non-intimate to intimate disclosure. But, most significant in this process is the reciprocal or co-constructing nature of information exchange. Personality, which is embedded in layers, will then only be exposed to others as the level of intimacy in disclosure develops (Taylor, 1979). This process includes verbal, non-verbal and environmentally orientated behaviours. Social exchanges rarely happen without a perceived increase in the benefit after disclosure. However, sometimes we disclose information and receive negative, worthless, hurtful or embarrassing feedback. This could refer to the cost of disclosure and in this regard Thibaut and Kelly (1959 cited in Cheleune, 1979) refer to the process whereby individuals have to decide on either staying in a relationship or to pursue an alternative one (also referred to as the “dyadic effect”). Thus, constant evaluations of ongoing relationships takes place and based on this, decisions about future interactions are made.

⁶ Please refer to Taylor (1979, p110-118), in Cheleune’s book *Self-Disclosure: Origins, patterns and implications of openness in interpersonal relationships* for a comprehensive explanation of social penetration theory and the dyadic effect. Although this is a very old source, I have not come across any recent literature that describes the theory in such a comprehensive manner and thus I consider this to be a very valuable source of information.

In this regard, Cheleune (1979, p16-20) also refers to situational factors embedded in self-disclosure. He highlights factors such as, “To whom?”; “On what topic?”; “To what degree?” and “Under what circumstances?” as fundamental questions asked when we explore self-disclosure. I consider all of the above as essential components in disclosure by adolescents. Especially important is to take cognisance of the fact that regulating self-disclosure with the same efficiency as the next person is not always possible for all individuals. Social norms create discrepancy in power relationships and therefore create situations where disclosure might be expected from the individual or even forced (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). These same social norms sometimes inhibit self-disclosure and isolate individuals. Faced with the “responsibility” of weighing up disclosure and considering the subsequent social perception of that disclosure make the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families somewhat multi-faceted. Let me take you forward by sharing with you existing literature on this topic.

2.7 Exploring the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families

Many studies have been done on disclosure practices of children raised in same-gendered families (Bozette, 1987; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Pennington, 1987) but very little of this research has focused on teenagers or adults specifically. Goldberg (2007) found that as adults, these individuals offered a number of reasons for coming out about their family structure to other people. Amongst these reasons were, educating others about their family set-up; screening out homophobic individuals and a desire for openness in their relationships with others. However, several adults did not disclose their family set-up at all, while others only disclosed when necessary (Goldberg, 2007). This fluctuation in disclosure can be assigned to the predominantly heteronormative society and the perceived reactions of the homophobic culture to the discloser.

Disclosure and its consequences are matters that many children raised in same-gendered families are constantly meddling with in their heads. Children of lesbian mothers often fear being disliked and becoming lonely once their parents' sexual preference is made known (Pennington, 1987). Being scared of becoming a victim of physical harassment by their peers is also not an uncommon worry (Lewin & Lyons, 1982, cited in Pennington, 1987). Fear of the discovery of their mother's sexuality can lead to children becoming anxious, withdrawn, hyper vigilant and controlling of their mother's behaviour. These controlling strategies by children are mainly employed for the purpose of managing their own public image and have been thoroughly documented by Bozette (1987, p41-42) in his work on gay fathers. I am of the opinion that it may be applicable to lesbian mothers too.

The first social control strategy that Bozette (1987) refers to is that of *boundary control*. Hereby the child attempts to control the father's behaviour by strategies such as refusing to be seen with the father in public, not inviting the parent or co-parent to school functions or not bringing certain friends home so that they will be prevented from meeting the father and his partner (also see Tasker & Golombok, 1997). By doing this, the child limits the father's expression of his homosexuality within boundaries set by the child and thereby avoids embarrassment because of their father's homosexuality. According to Lubbe (2005), the function of boundary control can be a sign of how children guard themselves from discrimination, and possible discrimination, by peers. It may also be purposefully employed to serve as a cautionary device in the company of others who might not be as comfortable or familiar with same-gendered families as the children of gay parents might themselves be.

The second social control strategy is the use of *non-disclosure*. Referring to their father's partner as an "uncle" or a "housemate" or hiding artefacts such as gay newspapers or magazines when friends visit, can all be seen as acts of non-disclosure (Bozette, 1987). In this way, children protect themselves by being "silent" and at the same time prevent any consequence of the truth coming out about their parent's sexual orientation (Lubbe, 2005). This

strategy also allows children only to tell about their parents' sexual orientation when they feel that it is safe to do so.

The last form of social control identified by Bozette (1987) is that of *disclosure*. In fear of others reacting in a derogatory or homophobic way when meeting their parents, children often decide to disclose in an attempt to prepare their friends about their parent's sexual orientation. This information sharing is actually a highly selective process since children want to be sure that the information shared will not be conveyed any further. Bozette (1987) also mentions that many of these children attribute exceptional decoding capacity to others and therefore assume that others are able to recognize that their parents are gay when they meet them for the first time. It is because of this that they prefer to prepare friends in advance before they meet the parents. However, deciding what to tell their friends was a major concern for some children in a study undertaken by Tasker and Golombok (1997). While some of the children in the study disclosed directly, others were merely unassertive about their parent's lifestyle.

The coming-out (disclosure) process amongst sexual minorities may be relevant in exploring the processes and predictors of disclosure amongst children from same-gendered families (Goldberg, 2007). Cass's stage model (1979) lends itself helpful in this regard when it states that individuals move in stages from confusion to acceptance to tolerance to ultimately pride and synthesis. Disclosure is thus a continuous, but not necessarily linear process. Contradiction, change, pride and shame all form part of the ongoing process. Therefore, it can be expected that these children's narratives in terms of their disclosure practices may mirror change, stress and struggle instead of predictable patterns of disclosure and non-disclosure (Goldberg, 2007).

Other research focusing on disclosure by minority groups is that of Rosenbloom and Fetner (2001). Because their research focused on disclosure by a minority group I consider it useful for this study. In their research on student sex workers' self-disclosure in the classroom, Rosenbloom and Fetner (2001) found that the revealers' perception of how

the teacher and classmates will receive the information disclosed is crucial to their decision to keep or share their secret. Self-disclosure in the classroom thus seems to depend on weighing the benefit of empowerment and emotional connection to fellow classmates against the cost of exposing personal information that might lead to complications (Rosenbloom & Fetner, 2001). The management of personal information is a familiar strategy in the attempt to control stigmatization. However we may look at it, self-disclosure as a process of revelation of personal information is a social matter that affects classroom dynamics. Keeping information to oneself has proven to be a resourceful way to avoid being unkindly judged by others (Rosenbloom & Fetner, 2001). It is possible, however, that as social norms change, the substance of sensitive self-disclosure is likely to shift; however, the experience of being a student with a secret will indubitably endure (Rosenbloom & Fetner, 2001). Within the disclosure process, the targeted relationship partner that serves as the recipient of disclosure is largely determined by two factors: (a) the specific type of social input needed and (b) the structure of the social environment that restricts or allows opportunities for disclosure. It is interesting that it seems as if an increase in self-disclosure relies on who the recipient of the disclosure is and it is suspected that increasing self-disclosure during adolescence is due to an increase in self-disclosure to friends (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995).

Lubbe (2005) found that children often internalise society's criticism of their parent's relationship as a criticism of themselves. Hancock (2000, cited in Lubbe, 2005) further states that the prominent focus on the sexuality of the parent often leads to associated feelings of vulnerability. It is thus understandable that deciding on how to communicate this sensitive information, and to whom, remains a serious consideration for the child. However, Lubbe (2005) found that rejection is not always the outcome of a child's decision to disclose, in fact, she describes rejection as "rare". Bozette (1987) explains that communication of information always leaves an opportunity for transference of what has been said. Therefore, disclosing sensitive information has become a highly selective process for children from same-gendered families, so as to make sure that the recipient of the

information does not communicate it to someone else. It can be said that people tend to reveal only particular information about themselves in order to be socially accepted and to have some sort of maintenance over the image they want to display (Lubbe, 2005), similar to social control as described by Derlega and Grzelak (1979).

It seems as if a prominent role player in the decision to disclose or withhold information about their family structure is the immediate environment. Perceptions of the environment as reacting with, for example, homophobia are likely to keep these individuals from disclosing their family structure (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). In my opinion, social control as described by many authors (e.g. Bozette, 1987; Derlega & Grzelak, 1979; Lubbe, 2005) links to this perception of the environment and strongly features as an essential determinant of disclosure. Furthermore, it seems that children from same-gendered families seek to associate themselves with social networks where disclosure will not be an issue (Goldberg, 2007). In my opinion, disclosure "not being an issue" can be constituted either as refusing to disclose (for example, "I don't say anything, therefore there will be no issue") or choosing homosexual-accepting friends. From the literature I have explored and from my own interviews during this study, the latter seemed to be a preference among children raised in same-gendered families. However, it should be noted that besides a preference for disclosing in an accepting environment, many participants had disclosed information on their family structure even when the audience was perceived as potentially unsupportive. Nonetheless, in the majority of cases disclosure seems to be negotiated in constant consideration of the expectations of a heteronormative society.

Above and beyond the legal and social progression in South Africa today, homosexual individuals and their children are still faced with the heteronormative beliefs of a predominantly heteronormative society. Being one of the countries in which human rights are put on centre stage, we need to realise the importance of acceptance and the harmful effect of our own individual prejudices. While doing this literature study, I came to realise how much normality children from same-gendered families experience within their

family structure. It is mostly when they encounter “the world outside” that the challenges begin and that “differences” surface. Could it then be that the “homo-hostiles are the ones who are most confused” (Garner, 2005)?

CHAPTER 3

Research Methodology

***“To live in the world without becoming aware of the meaning of the world is like wandering about in a great library without touching the books” – The secret teachings of all ages
(Dan Brown: The Lost Symbol)***

When we attempt to answer questions on phenomena (such as homosexuality, domestic violence, gender inequality or any other topic of interest) from within a certain paradigmatic perspective, we flag them as being social topics worthy of exploration and better understood through inquiry (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). But, as with so many things in life, knowledge is not a “given”. As researchers, we need to plough and ponder through various sources of information, asking, probing and questioning to gain the insight we yearn for. In this chapter, I aim to describe the various ways in which I purposefully ploughed and pondered, ultimately to gather the information I needed to explore the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families in an attempt to create new social realities and insight.

3.1 Paradigmatic perspective

The purpose of a paradigm is to guide the investigator in proposing a certain ontology and epistemology. I subscribed to the paradigm of Constructionism when conducting this study. Social constructionism seems to encourage the person to question the traditional prescription of the world along with a critical appraisal of thoughts that are commonly accepted (Burr, 2003). It meets customariness head-on as it is experienced by those living it (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Social constructionism’s underlying premise is that we, as human beings, co-produce knowledge as we interact with other people in particular circumstances, contexts and cultures (Maree, 2007). The “truth”

therefore is subjective and may hold multiple realities. According to Gergen (1990, cited in Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996) meaning does not exist in the minds of individuals but is situated in the product of interaction within the context of ongoing relationships. Over time, knowledge and meaning are thus constructed and reconstructed within the social context (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). Social constructionism resonates with the aim of my study since the goal of my study is to understand the subjective experience of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. I viewed their constructions of reality through the lense of their interactions and experiences, as it is exactly those interactions that guide their negotiations of their unique family structure in their daily lives.

Social constructionism emphasises that the human life-world is fundamentally constituted in language (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). In social constructionism, language is of the essence to help construct one's reality. It can therefore be described as being concerned with broader patterns of social meaning encoded in language (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Social constructionism views reality as being meaningful to the extent that it is discussed, argued and reproduced, however, it does not research the language *per se*, but it focuses on the interpretation of the social world as a type of language. In other words, language constitutes of meaning and practices, which in turn constructs reality (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). A social constructionist viewpoint emphasises that knowledge is based on communal creation of information (Sliep & Kotze, 2007). Therefore, when we speak of something, it is not useful to view it as "the truth"; one should rather evaluate the narratives of what is being said in terms of their usefulness (Thrift & Amundson, 2007). When an adequate number of people reach a social agreement on the explanation or constitution of something, that something is viewed as an objective reality (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996). Therefore, it can be understood that the manner in which people engage with each other and the world (for example, what is viewed as normal or abnormal) unfolds by the way in which the world is constructed (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Social constructionism challenges the "accepted" truths that are set as dominant discourses in society (Sliep & Kotze, 2007).

According to Rosen and Kuehlwein (1996, p15), “social constructionism traces the source of human action to relationships and the very understanding of ‘individual functioning’ to communal interchange”. As mentioned previously, social constructionism resonates with the aim of my study since the goal of my study is to understand the subjective experience of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. I preferred to employ a social constructionist approach in this study since social constructionism allows for diversity. In claiming that each of us constructs our own realities through our experiences and interactions we can safely assume that individual experiences allow for individual realities and diversity of meanings. Within the "realities" each of us are born into, we have the power and opportunity to create our own meanings and (to an extent) to change what we do not like. Social constructionism tells us that we do not have to be mere receivers of our own life stories, but we can be active creators in the stories of our parents, families and life in general. It is exactly how this active creation and co-construction contribute to who we are and the decisions we make that I aim to understand and explore in this study.

⁷The participant whom I chose to interview in this study was born, like all of us, into a story. Her story had made meanings, which provided for certain restrictions and judgements, but also provided her an opportunity for living freely and feeling liberated. The choice between these opportunities, however, was (and always will be) according to her own creation of meaning and subsequent decision making. The personal narratives that the participant in my study developed over time were not constructed in a void of emptiness but came to be out of her interaction with her family, friends, her ideas and concepts of normality and society’s contribution to the co-constructions of her beliefs. I take cognisance of the fact that as a young child, the participant in my study held some of these beliefs as absolute truths. But, as an adolescent with reflective metacognitive ability, her understanding of her own stories is

⁷ The construction of this paragraph would not have been possible without the guidance of Rosen and Kuehlwein (1996, p23-24). However, I did not reference them through out the paragraph since I replaced selected words to suit my own explanation of what I aim to do and how social constructionism resonates with my study. The above concepts have been taken directly from their work and adapted to suit my own interpretation. Please refer to reference list for more details if you are interested in reading their work.

likely to have changed. This reconstruction of personal realities would have provided her with the opportunity to re-position herself and to adapt to that which she believes is true. It is in and through this meaning making process that I wish to travel with her in an attempt to understand how she adapts herself to a heteronormative society while being part of a same-gendered family. I wish to understand how she remains open for new interpretations while revising her old constructions of reality and creating new ones (Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996).

3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Qualitative research

Recognising that knowledge-making itself is a form of intervention, has led to a growing emphasis on planning and executing research in such a way as to make clear provision for how research fits into its real life context (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Therefore, I decided to embark on a qualitative study – using words as a compass to guide me to my destination. Qualitative researchers collect data in written or spoken language or in the form of observations that are recorded in language and then analysed and themed. Qualitative research is a naturalistic, holistic and inductive way of gaining information and allows us to become part of the participant's daily life, providing us with more genuine insight into that which we aim to explore (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). According to Berger and Luckmann (1976, cited in Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p153), "...there is one [reality] that presents itself as the reality par excellence. This is the reality of everyday life [which] always appears as a zone of lucidity behind which there is a background of darkness". I have decided to employ a case study design in my exploration so as to come as close as possible to the real life context of the participant with whom I am engaging.

3.2.2 Case study design

In this qualitative study, I employed a case study design in order to explore and understand the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. According to Creswell (2007, p67), the case study design entails “the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system”. This exploration would take place through the process of in-depth data collection within a real-life context. I followed the model of intrinsic case study in this study, which means that I focused on the specific issue of same-gendered families for the purpose of better understanding its uniqueness and to make sense of the intrinsic aspects related to it (Berg, 2001). The benefit of using the case study design is that it opens up a pathway for discovery in which I can create hypotheses and do subsequent studies (Berg, 2001). Applying the case study design allowed me direct interpretation from the study and created the possibility of collecting in-depth and rich data from this minority group. Furthermore, this design allowed me to investigate issues that are otherwise difficult to approach (Berg, 2001). However, one has to question whether this design allows for too many subjective decisions, which might influence objectivity. Furthermore, the extent to which the information gained through this design can be generalised is questionable (Berg, 2001). However, the main purpose of this case study is not for the information to be generalisable, but to find depth and richness in the participant’s story in an attempt to create better understanding. One of the main challenges of the case study design is to decide on a case worthy of study and then select one case out of a few possible options.

3.3 Selection of participants

3.3.1 The intended method

Selection entails the process of gathering research participants for the purpose of creating the data needed for a research study (Hayes, 2000). Because the focus of this study falls on a minority group in society, the selection of a participant was not necessarily easy. Therefore, I originally planned to make use of opportunity sampling when selecting my participant. According to Hayes (2000, p19), opportunity sampling can be defined as “the

researcher using whatever participants are available at the time that the research is being conducted”. It is also crucial that the participant selected should be representative of the target population. I started off by having conversations with colleagues and friends who could help me identify a possible participant who would meet the criteria of middle- to late adolescence phase, thus between ages 11 to 21 (Thom, Low, van Ede & Ferns, 1998), who had been raised in a same-gendered family and who was still living with his/her same-gendered parents in their home. I decided that there would be no specification about the sex of the participant or his/her same-gendered parents. However, life has its own way of unexpectedly handing us exactly what we need.

3.3.2 Lilly and me

Early in 2010, on a game farm in the Free state, nestled between Vrede and Warden, I was having a conversation with the adolescent daughter (let’s call her Lilly) of one of my closest friends. I’ve always known about the “otherness” of the environment in which Lilly grew up, but knowing her for as long as I did, blinded me to the wealth of information she carries with her. Not only did she grow up with the glitz and glamour of the entertainment industry around her, but the fact that she has formed part of a same-gendered family since the age of eight months made her a perfect candidate for my study. Yet, I was hesitant to approach her because of our established connection, and in my mind, I decided it would be best to let go of the idea. But, as our conversation that evening grew, the topic of homosexuality (unintentionally) came up and Lilly fed into it with a kind of intensity that was completely unexpected. I could sense that this was a topic Lilly considered with much more sincerity and passion than any of the other (and older) participants taking part in the conversation at that time. I allowed the conversation to spontaneously flow and I allowed myself to engage with her truly – not focusing on my need for a participant, but on what she was giving to me through our conversation. When the conversation ended that night and we all retired to our rooms, I lay awake for hours, re- playing the conversation over in my mind, triggered by the richness of the information she unwittingly had

given me. It was during breakfast the next morning that I decided to approach her and ask her to take part in my study. I needed her experience, her insights, but more than that, I needed her passion, to help me create this dissertation. I asked her permission to use the information she gave me as part of the data in my research and I assured her that she need not feel obliged to commit herself to my study because of our established connection. However, Lilly was very enthusiastic about the prospect of sharing her life story as a willing participant, and so my journey with Lilly began.

Hey, I am Lilly⁸. I am turning 15 on May 26th I am a girl. I lived in Pretoria, South Africa my whole life. But I relocated to Greensboro, North Carolina, United states of America December 29 2008. I do not consider myself Christian to any extent. I have a dad and two moms. My parents were married for eight years and divorced when I was eight months old. My mother was a single mom for two years, I saw my father every second weekend, but then my mother met Anelie (not real name). My mother and Anelie raised me until I was six years old. My mother then realized she was in love with K. So now, I have K as a mother and Anelie is not in my life anymore and then I still have to deal with my grade one production. Life was tough. I knew K and her partner Rachel (again not real name) pretty well she had been friends of my mom and Anelie for two years. I remember really liking K and Rachel. The first time K slept over I remember asking my mom whether K could sleep with me. My mother and K are still happily together. It has been 9 years now. I have never known anything but my mother and father separated and my mother having a girlfriend. So I do not know what it is like to live in a standard family and that does not bother me. So far the hardest things in my life that I have ever had to deal with were when I broke my hip and moving to America. I was very close to my father and as I got older I saw more of him. It ended that I saw him and my mother equally a week. I was in a private school in South Africa and I really liked it but I had a problem about my mother being gay. I

⁸ The aim of the data-generating techniques is to gather as much “authentic” information from the participant’s experiences as possible, therefore all written reports done by Lilly were not technically edited to ensure authenticity.

was (and still am) labelled as gay. It bothered me a lot when I was little. It bothers me now but I can deal with it. When I was little it bothered me that I was being called gay now it more bothers me that it is intended as an insult. I don't think my life is easy but then whose life really is easy. You might not know this but North Carolina especially Greensboro is known as the Bible belt. So the mockery is bad here for those who know. It is mostly joking or teasing but I do get hurt by it. People don't do it to me anymore because only my friends know. And they know not to say anything. I hate having to count my words around people for if I say the wrong thing about my household set up. I hate being scared about how my friends are going to react when they know I have a gay mom. I am lucky to be in a Quaker⁹ high school. My school is all about accepting everyone. I think if I was in a public school I would have more problems. I have never really spoken to anyone about this. I feel bad that I wish my mom wasn't gay. It is selfish and I would never wish K out of my life. I do love her as a mother. But it is hard to be judged on by the choices that your parents made. I don't like the feeling I get that I can't tell the people I care about my mother.

3.4 Data collection and documentation

Data collection and documentation pertain to those methods I used (a) to co-construct data with the participant and (b) to store the data for later analysis. Constructionist data collection techniques usually entail unstructured, open-ended qualitative materials. Data in this qualitative study has been collected through various methods. Unstructured interviews with Lilly were one of the most prominent ways in which we co-created the data needed for this study. Kahn and Cannell (1957, cited in Marshall and Rossman, 1999) describe an “interview” as having a conversation for a definite purpose. Constructionist approaches see the interview as grounds within which particular linguistic patterns can come to the fore. This approach also takes into account that the interviewer cannot play a purely facilitative role during the interview process. Therefore, all information coming forth out of the interview is viewed as co-

⁹ Quaker high school: a school of Christian religion but the focus does not fall on God necessarily, but on values such as e.g. acceptance of diversity.

constructed between interviewer and interviewee (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Since Lilly spent half of her year in the United States of America, we had to make use of information technology to facilitate our conversations. Various conversations took place via e-mail, which allowed for the continuation of the telling of her stories. I also required Lilly to make a collage that replicates her experiences of being part of a same-gendered family. The collage was explained in depth during her visit to South Africa later in the year. During her time in South Africa, face-to-face interviews were also conducted. Furthermore, I welcomed any spontaneous contribution of data by Lilly that allowed me better understanding into her life. Looking at photographs of Lilly and her family contributed to enriching the data collection in this study.

The interviews in this study were used to collect Lilly's ideas and opinions of her experiences better to understand how she negotiated disclosure of their unique family structure (Hayes, 2000). The interviews were conducted at Lilly's home; however, these face-to-face interviews were kept to the minimum, since Lilly communicated a preference for relaying information via e-mail. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and were conducted every second week for the duration of her stay (approximately a month). After the first interview, follow-up interviews and planned questions were used for the purpose of clarification of previous discussions. The initial interview consisted of open-ended questions from which Lilly's responses were later analysed, categorised and sorted into themes. The strength of using the interview as the data gathering method was that I was able to gather large amounts of data in a relatively short time. Furthermore, by building a relationship of trust with Lilly, it allowed me in-depth understanding of the meanings that she ascribed to her everyday activities (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). However, certain problems can arise from using the interview as data gathering method. When conducting the interview, I had to be careful not to impose my own values onto the participant by the phrasing of the question, or interpretation of the data. I employed various methods (see quality criteria section 3.6) to eliminate possible bias.

Because the topic of the study provokes such controversial arguments in the media and in the public domain, I relied heavily on field notes, news paper/magazine articles and other informal conversations with people around me as reference points to statements made in this study. All informal impromptu conversations on the topic, which arose out of conversations in my daily life, were jotted down as soon as possible and added to the field notes created throughout this study. During the process, I found some of the most valuable information to emerge spontaneously, and I choose not to disregard it on the grounds of it not being part of a planned session or interview. All spontaneous information was captured and documented as field notes. Discussing “otherness”, unconventional practices and ideas have often led to scepticism and many people tend to become defensive when confronted by “that of which we do not speak”. I attempted to understand, document and include those sceptical arguments (of friends, colleagues and the media) not as a weakening of my ideas, but as way of strengthening them. By acknowledging disparate views in my research, I attempted to strengthen its credibility (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

3.5 Data analysis and interpretation

Albert Einstein once said that “information is not knowledge”, while Martin H. Fischer contributed, “knowledge is a process of piling up facts; wisdom lies in their simplification” (www.brainyquote.com). Gathering up piles of information is futile in research if we do not know how to make sense of it. Within qualitative research designs, the analysis of data is used to make sense of and interpret the information gathered. In constructionist approaches, data analysis should not be viewed as a detached phase that starts only after all the data has been collected. In this type of approach, the different phases (from collection to final results) blend into each other (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Qualitative data are multifaceted and not easily translatable into standard measurable units (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The most fundamental way to analyse qualitative data is to look for similarities in concepts or themes that can be categorised. Although there are many ways of

analysing qualitative data within a constructionist approach, they all share one aim, to reveal the cultural materials from which specific statements or actions have been constructed (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

All the e-mail conversations between Lilly and myself were kept and the interviews transcribed. The data collected in this qualitative study were analysed using thematic content analysis, in other words, I identified themes that emerged from our conversations. Repeated terms, expressions and metaphors usually lend a particular kind of meaning to the events spoken about (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Challenging was the fact that these terms, expressions and metaphors were not always explicitly communicated by Lilly. I had to search for repetitive implications, hidden meanings and sometimes direct references to create linkages between what were said. However, these themes were all confirmed or amended by Lilly after we discussed them and before we finalised my findings. By coding the emerging themes, I gave visual clarity to the spoken and written words and created structure in which to situate the findings.

Coding guided me through the analysis of themes and as the categories and themes developed, I began to evaluate the plausibility of my understandings through the exploration of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Since my study focused on the way in which reality is constructed from experiences, the interpretation thereof would explore how realities are systemized, organized and rationalised (Henning, 2004). Therefore, I started off by reading and studying the data to gain an overview of the context. I then proceeded to coding segments of meaning and categorising the related codes into themes. All of this was done for the purpose of seeking relationships between categories for thematic patterns. Lastly, I wrote up the final themes and presented the pattern of related themes as part of my study results (Henning, 2004).

3.6 Quality criteria

Quality or rigour in research refers to the thoroughness and precision of scientific research. Reliability can be defined as the consistency of measuring results over time while validity is concerned with whether the measure truly addresses what it is suppose to be measuring (Hayes, 2000). The main goal of qualitative research is to develop a true understanding of what is studied, rather than trying to generate results that can be replicated. The communication and social processes that come from the participant(s) is thus the focus of attention. Because of this fact, I acknowledged that the individuality of human beings meant that the research results were unlikely to be easily generalised or replicated (Hayes, 2000). However, the idea behind conducting this study was to gain in-depth, rather than widespread data. My prolonged engagement with Lilly within her family context therefore served to enhance the credibility of my findings (Mohangi, 2008). As the criteria for dependability, I provided comprehensive accounts of all the aspects that require contemplation in designing the research, in generating, analysing and interpreting the data, as well as the presentation and representation of the participant's written and verbal accounts (Lubbe, 2005).

Qualitative research involves an active participation of the researcher with the material that is being researched and this allows for possible bias, self-fulfilling prophecies and distortion. Clandinin (2000, p46) refers to the fact that researchers are inevitably "struggling with personal tensions as they pursue their narrative inquiries". In an attempt to overcome this issue, some very explicit approaches to the analysis of qualitative data have been developed (Hayes, 2000). Since I am a childless, heterosexual female individual, I might not always be knowledgeable about the issues that same-gendered families face, or even agree with the ways in which these families handle such challenges. Therefore, to eliminate and contain any possible bias from me, as the researcher, I employed *methodological empathy* (McGuire 1982 in Mouton, 2008) to ensure that I understood and acknowledge situations and happenings without necessarily having to agree with them. In some cases, data analysed needed to be re-analysed or reappraised. In this study, results were discussed with professional colleagues for the purpose of debriefing and eliminating any possible bias.

I clarified emergent themes with Lilly to ensure that my developing conceptions were in line with the “true” experiences of those participating in my study. As previously stated (3.4), I attempted to acknowledge and understand sceptical arguments (from Lilly herself, friends, colleagues and the media) that arose from conversations throughout the research process, not as a weakening of my ideas, but as a way of strengthening them. By acknowledging disparate views in my research, I attempted to strengthen its credibility. Although qualitative data seems more challenging in the area of rigour, its rewards are high (Hayes, 2000). The data obtained from qualitative studies can provide rich information and allows for exploration of the complexity of human behaviour. I strove for transferability of the research findings by providing thorough and precise descriptions, generally referred to as “rich and thick” descriptions (Lubbe, 2005).

Since this study focuses on a very sensitive topic, a constant awareness of deep personal experiences was kept in mind. Therefore, searching questions in various contexts might draw Lilly’s attention to issues she did not consider before the research process started, and this might have put her in a vulnerable position as the study progressed (Lubbe, 2005). I therefore discussed with Lilly and all the family members involved the way in which such occurrences would be addressed should they arise from the study. I ensured that Lilly was at all times comfortable with the level of disclosure and exploration in our discussions (Lubbe, 2005). Furthermore, regular visits and the intimacy of our discussions might have led to the development of an even closer relationship than the existing connection between Lilly and I, and other family members involved in the study. The termination of our relationship was therefore discussed at the beginning of the study to ensure that everyone involved understood the nature of the closure process (Lubbe, 2005).

CHAPTER 4

Interpretation of results

“No man can reveal to you nothing but that which already lies half-asleep in the dawning of your knowledge”.

- Kahlil Gibran

When we look at the interpretation of qualitative data we aim to find patterns and establish similarities and differences in the textual data (Burnard, 1996). In this chapter, I invite you to explore the context of what I have found through the research for this study. Throughout all of my communication with Lilly, impromptu conversations, my own informal observations, questioning and subsequent constructions, I have conceptualised the answers to my research question(s) in such a way as to better understand the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. This chapter aims to frame these “discoveries” in an attempt not only to enlighten but also to guide the way for future research.

I decided to structure this chapter according to my perception of adolescent disclosure. First of all, I believe that all disclosure practices are informed by experiences and therefore the findings on the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families will be my point of departure for this chapter. However, it is important to note once again, that the findings in this chapter are based on the authenticity of Lilly’s life story. The focus of this chapter is to capture Lilly’s life story in an attempt to identify how Lilly discloses her unique family structure. Attention to Lilly’s experiences is only given to such an extent as to understand how this informs her disclosure practices. Although little attention has been paid to adolescents and young adults, the experiences of children raised in same-gendered families have been quite well documented over the past years. Therefore, in this chapter,

the discussion of experiences only serves as a backdrop against which disclosure practises can be better understood and interpreted.

Furthermore, to look at experiences without acknowledging the unique thoughts and behaviour that co-exist within these experiences and to ignore the reciprocal relationship between what we think, feel and consequently do will be like attempting to drive a car without wheels. We are not only recipients of experiences, but we are also active co-constructors of events and meanings that specific experiences elicit. Herein lays an essential component for understanding Lilly's story. It is at this point that I want to refer to the moral cultures described by Hart and Carlo (2005) in an attempt to explore and interpret Lilly's experiences. According to Hart and Carlo (2005), within adolescent life, certain moral cultures as agents of change play an influential role in what adolescents do and the way they think. These multiple moral cultures (e.g. school, neighbourhood, work) and their social agents of change (e.g. parents, media, peers) are important influences on the compromises that adolescents make on their family demands and the demands placed on them by the broader community (Hart & Carlo, 2005).

Thus, to understand experiences (consisting of thoughts, feelings and subsequent behaviour) that influence disclosure practices, I considered it important to identify and explain the moral cultures that featured as prominent role-players in Lilly's adolescent life and ultimately influenced her decision to disclose or to withhold her unique family structure.

4.1 Moral cultures of Lilly

4.1.1 The role of religion

Religion and "gayness" have long been (and, I assume, will continue to be) a sensitive point of discussion. In following the local news and articles in local media, it appears that the Christian faith has been identified as one of the major condemners of homosexual relationships and has, over the years, been strongly associated with heteronormativity (this could be true for many other

religions but I choose to focus on Christianity since this forms part of Lilly's frame of reference). The debate on homosexuality within the Christian faith has been well researched and documented (e.g. Canda & Furman, 1999; Hodge, 2005; Jimenez, 2006; Melendez & LaSala, 2006). However, more recently, some South African Christian churches have broken the barrier to this form of discrimination, and have identified themselves as institutions accepting of homosexuality, even employing gay preachers. This however, has brought about great controversy in our country, ironically a country known for embracing human rights. Reflecting on this also brings to the fore struggles in other countries, such as statements on same-gendered parenting made by the Vatican in 2003 (refer back to chapter 2). Looking at the impact of religion on accepting or "normalising" homosexuality cannot be done without acknowledging the impact of legal and medical practices in this area.

Although Lilly did not refer to any legal influence on her life, it is important to recognise that legal, medical and religious domains are continuously informed by each other and live in a reciprocal relationship. Jimenez (2006, p185) also refers to the power of traditional Christians to shape national politics, while Hodges (2006) states that Christian churches imply moral righteousness can be determine by majoritarianism. Case law in many countries has been ambivalent concerning the rights of gay and lesbian parents. This can be ascribed to the fact that lesbian and gay couples with children do not fit the traditional concept of a "family" that has been protected by law and addressing such cases has demanded a great deal of discretion (Connolly, 1996). Medical discourses also influenced the marginalization of homosexuality. The history of homosexuality as a "mental illness" (refer to chapter 2), also contributed to the creation and maintenance of heteronormativity up to today.

Reverting back to religion, especially Christianity, it is clear that Lilly also has had her own struggles for acceptance and understanding. In my conversations with Lilly, religion was one of the main – and first – moral cultures referred to. Lilly considered it important to introduce herself as a non-Christian individual:

“I do not consider myself Christian to any extent”

Using this sentence as an introductory statement as to “who” she is made it clear to me that her interaction with Christianity has been a less pleasant experience. Throughout her interaction with Christian individuals, Lilly has constructed a perception of Christians to be non-accepting of anything that is not heteronormative. This is evident from our conversations when she said,

“...it is the way they interpret it. They are actually criticising one of Gods creations while in the same instance claiming that they are Christian. It does not make sense.”

Concerning Christian responses to homosexuality, Canda and Furman (1999) have classified “Christian Ideological Responses to Homosexuality” into four groups, namely those who condemn homosexuality as a whole; those who accept the person, but condemn the behaviour; those who affirm homosexuality, and lastly those who depart from Christianity. Since Lilly’s experiences of religion and homosexuality have been constructed out of her interactions with others, as her being part of a same-gendered family, encountering discriminative resistance towards her from Christians has clearly been part of her life. However, this could be argued from various standpoints. Arguments, such as those painting the picture of Christianity as not being monolithic in its identification of transcendent truths (Melendez and LaSala, 2006), insists that Christianity prides itself on the acceptance of differences in opinions and interpretation among Christians. However, this case is unique to Lilly’s life and therefore the interpretation of Christianity through her eyes should be handled with care.

Lilly confirms her struggle with Christianity as she continues to explain how living in her neighbourhood is especially difficult because of the religious Christian orientation of the area,

“You might not know this, but North Carolina, especially Greensboro is known as the Bible belt. So the mockery here is bad for those who know.”

“...you would see a church on every second block. I’m not even over exaggerating like no joke. There are churches everywhere. And also if you talked to people the first thing they ask you is what church you belong to. It’s really actually terrible.”

“...it’s called a sin because people interpret the Bible that way...”

Living in a predominantly religious Christian area has not only influenced Lilly’s perceptions of “Christianity” but also, indirectly, affected her decision to establish relationships, for example,

“...I don’t want to associate myself with the kinds of people who don’t accept it. There has been a time where I had a crush on this guy who was a major Christian but when I found out his views it was a major turn off.”

Lilly seems not only to find it hard to establish friendships with Christian individuals but also seem to ascribe certain characteristics to individuals purely based on their Christian orientation. It is interesting to see how her construction of Christianity, through her interaction and experiences with Christian individuals, has influenced her decision to establish relationships. Since Lilly is also socially in a sensitive developmental phase, creating friendships is of cardinal importance and having restrictions put on her, by herself and indirectly by others, can cause a lot of frustration for her. The school’s religious environment and attitudes (also refer to 4.1.2) plays a significant role in this regard. Lilly communicates that her school is a Quaker high school; a school based on the Christian religion, but focusing strongly on acceptance and understanding of differences. Had it not been for this religious-accepting environment, Lilly herself communicates that being in school might have been a big problem for her,

“...the Quakers...are Christian but they accept all other religions...it’s never really about God it’s usually about a value like integrity or acceptance...”

Considering the above, it is safe to conclude that religion has had a prominent impact on Lilly’s experiences and subsequent construction of relationships. This is important to note because it is usually within relationships that disclosure takes place. To understand disclosure, it is thus important to

understand Lilly's reasoning behind relationship creation and the impact of religion as a moral culture on this reasoning. Lilly's interaction with religion, especially Christianity, seems to have been a less positive experience, which is inevitably linked to her decision to disclose or to hide her family set up.

4.1.2 The role of the school

Strongly linked to what has been stated above is the role of the school. Friendships are mainly created in the school environment and since the greatest part of the day is spent in school, adolescents construct many meaning making processes out of their daily experiences within the school environment.

Referring back to 4.1.1, one can assert that Christian religion has been a dominant theme in many South African public, and some private, schools. It is only in the past approximately ten years that religion has taken a back seat in certain schools and that religion is not proposed as a compulsory module for schoolchildren. However, the mindset of Christian values is still very dominant in some South African public schools even though they now distance themselves from aligning with a dominant religion. This mindset has been indirectly influential in Lilly's interactions with her peers, in both South African and American contexts. This is clear from Lilly's statement as she says,

"I am lucky to be in a Quaker high school. My school is all about accepting everyone. I think if I was in a public school I would have more problems."

"I was in a private school in South Africa...but I had a problem about my mom being gay..."

It has also been confirmed by literature that school attitudes towards acceptance plays a significant role in the child/adolescent's construction of meaning. Since family discussions turn up regularly, it can be expected that a child from a same-gendered family might feel hesitant to simply disclose the information there and then. It has already been said (refer to chapter 2) that fear of homophobic bullying, stigmatization and teasing might silence children in terms of disclosure about their family structure (Robitaille & St Jacques,

2009; Fitzgerald, 1999; Clarke, Kritzingler & Pottter, 2004; Patterson, 1992; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Silence is thus used as a defence mechanism or a safe-keeping method for protecting information on the sexual orientation of their parents. Absence of displayed positive role models for same-gendered family structures also strengthens the assumption that all parents are heterosexual by nature (Lubbe, 2005) and this encourage children into silence about their family structure even more. However, Meezan and Rauch, (2005) makes reference to the complexity of the evidence on children and their increased difficulty with peers on the grounds of their parent's sexual orientation. They state that evidence in this regard often varies but nonetheless, concerned about their children being teased (Meezan & Rauch, 2005) or stigmatized still prevails. This can be confirmed by Lilly's statement,

"... I was (and still am) being labelled as gay."

Research by Ray and Gregory (2001) on school experiences of children of same-gender parents, found that children of same-gendered families often felt disempowered, afraid and lonely. When the children requested assistance from adults (teachers) to help them counteract the homophobic culture, the teachers' responses were most often described as non-existent or inadequate. In extreme cases, some teachers even contributed to the homophobia by making homophobic comments. However, it is comforting that Lilly's experiences concerning teachers specifically, indicate that not many negative encounters have occurred,

"I've never experienced issues with teachers but that would be very unprofessional of them if they do voice something or treat me differently. I actually today in Spanish, we were doing the family tree and my teacher, who is about 23, actually asked me 'but do you have a dad and how does that work?' She looked pretty uncomfortable asking but it wasn't offensive or anything but besides her actually nothing ever. Well that I can really recall."

Adjustment to the school environment is another issue addressed by Lilly. Says Lilly,

"I don't feel like a social outcast or anything. I fit in and I have many friends..."

When we explore school adjustment, it does not seem that Lilly has had any difficulty settling into her school environment. She has, however, experienced incidents in which she has been the target of ridicule because of her parents' sexual orientation (also refer to 1.4.3). But overall, Lilly communicates that school has been a pleasant experience and that she has many friends. This agrees with literature on school adjustment in children of homosexual parents. It was found that school adjustment has been better for children who have a close relationship with their parents, regardless of family type (Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004). Although a range of variables relate to school and personal adjustment, no significant differences have been found among children from heterosexual parents and those from same-gendered families. Also, no differences were found in terms of academic achievement or trouble in school. Concerning Lilly, trouble in school did feature – however not as a prevalent theme. Says Lilly,

“...I got in trouble at school about boys so now I’m not allowed to touch not hug nothing guys at all cause my head thinks they are going to take advantage of me so yeah, don’t tell my dad I don’t want him to worry or anything.”

I find it especially interesting that Lilly got into trouble over her behaviour towards boys and I would deem it an interesting study to explore whether sexualised behaviour (which includes dressing and talking) is a dominant theme in straight adolescents from same-gendered families. Also, if this is found to be true, is it because of compensation to eliminate labelling and stigmatization as being gay themselves? Or would it be that being more physical comes naturally to children raised in same-gendered families, as Lilly said,

“...also one thing that bothers me about having gay parents was that I was brought up like that and I think sometimes I’m more touchy than I really should be and I don’t realise it...”

Overall, Lilly seems to be well adjusted in her school setting, she has many friends and is quite popular. Even so, stigmatisation, teasing and homophobic remarks from peers within the school setting have inevitably formed part of her school career. This is not uncommon for children raised in same-

gendered families. Fairtlough (2008) also notes that nearly half of the participants from his study commented that they had experienced homophobic comments and/or – abuse in the school setting. However, in terms of school policy, teacher attitude and behaviour, the school environment has also served as a protective factor, shielding Lilly from hurtful incidents and remarks.

4.1.3. The role of friends, acquaintances and society at large

The acceptance of heteronormativity and subsequent teasing, bullying and targeting of children from same-gendered families in society has largely been one of the biggest influences in non-disclosure by children brought up in this family structure. Much literature (Clarke, Kritzing & Potter, 2004; Fitzgerald, 1999; Patterson, 1992; Robitaille & St Jacques, 2009; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001) focuses on this topic. However, referring back to the assimilation debate (Chapter 2), an ongoing discussion on the pros and cons of being raised in a same-gendered family allows for positive experiences to be highlighted as well.

From my discussions with Lilly, many negative reactions that enforce the idea of a heteronormative society have been highlighted. Interesting was the dichotomy of where the negativity stems from. It would be expected that most of the negativity would stem from society at large, such as those who do not specifically know Lilly as a person and that positive reinforcement and support would stem from friends with whom close relationships have been formed. Although this is mostly the case, Lilly has also experienced many disappointments in terms of reactions from her friends/peers. It seems as if Lilly's friends have been a strength, but also at times a weakness in her struggle against a heteronormative society.

Exploring how friends contribute to safeguarding Lilly against hurtful remarks, she comments,

“...my friends know. And they know not to say anything.”

“...I choose friends that I know will handle the news well or okay.”

“...I don’t want to associate myself with the kinds of people that don’t accept it.”

However, Lilly also refers to incidents where her friends were responsible for mockery aimed at her and she painfully disclosed her feelings of betrayal and disappointment. More so, she communicated that she felt disappointed at being hurt by these remarks, rather than brushing them off. Bozette (1987) and the Lesbian Mothers’ Group (1989, cited in Fairtlough, 2008) refer to many young people who rather avoid disclosing their parents’ sexual orientation in an attempt to prevent losing friends and feeling betrayed. Lilly confirms this when she explains,

“I have met many people who I thought were my friends until I tell them my mother is gay. Then all of a sudden I’m this big dyke now. Not so long ago I found out that my so-called ‘best-friend’ told everyone that I was lesbian...”

“...[calling me a lesbian]... she meant it as an insult because that meant she didn’t really accept it. Also I think also because I knew that everyone agreed when she said it and the only reason they thought so was because my mom is gay.”

“...I was hurt and it hurt me more that it hurt. Does that make sense? Like I was more upset about the fact that her calling me a lesbian was upsetting you know because I knew it shouldn’t be.”

“...it’s mostly joking or teasing but I do get hurt by it.”

Besides the protective and potentially hurtful factor related to the close relationships that children from same-gendered families form with their friends, society at large is still one more factor that has to be dealt with. It has been said many times during the course of this study that we live in a heteronormative society. Exploring Lilly’s life story highlighted how much, besides constant emphasis on change, perceptions on homosexuality and subsequent same-gendered families have remained the same. Lilly seems to experience most condemnation in terms of her family structure from the perceptions nestled in a heteronormative society. This would not necessarily

exclude friends (as stated above) but mostly refers to acquaintances and other people with whom the adolescent does not have significant meaningful contact. Such contact would usually include meeting new friends, speaking to a random teacher or taking part in a general class/social discussion. Lilly has mentioned a few incidents that highlight how society has constructed homosexuality and how this construction has inevitably clawed its way into her life,

“... in our society it isn’t considered normal and it’s going to take many years before people understand it...”

Regardless, it seems Lilly’s biggest hurdle with regard to her same-gendered family is born out of society’s negative and ignorant attitude towards homosexuality. It is also clear from Lilly’s comments that this construction of homosexuality as an “abnormality” has made homosexuality a personal issue for her to deal with – despite being straight,

“Well I know this [that it makes your life difficult to be gay] from how I’m treated and I’m not even the one who is gay. And I know it’s hard because people don’t understand it and things that are different are either loved or hated and I think gayness is definitely hated. And I know that it’s hard to be different especially if people don’t appreciate it.”

Lilly has taken on an identity of “being different” because of her family set up. Although she is just as “normal” as any other adolescent girl, society, by implication of her family set up, has reinforced this idea of her (not just her family) being different. One could say that this is a lot of responsibility for a young girl to deal with. It has become evident that Lilly feels that she has the responsibility of dealing with the constructions placed on her by society. Lilly states,

“...I am terrified of what they would think of me afterwards. I know that they do think about it.”

“...it’s hard to be judged on by the choices that your parents made.”

“But when I go out with both of them I kinda wish I don’t see people because I don’t want to put myself in that situation.”

“I don’t want to be gay because from my own experiences I know that it is worse than hell.”

From the above, it is clear that stigmatisation, homophobia and teasing have been a big part of Lilly’s life. This has also been true for many other children raised in same-gendered families, according to research. Fairtlough (2008) refers to the stress carried by young people raised by homosexual parents. He notes that this stress is caused by a heteronormative society and frequently occurs by the widespread use of words associated with homosexuality, meant as an insult. Homophobic jokes and derogatory comments voiced in their environment fuel their feelings of awkwardness and reinforce their need to keep their family structure unknown.

However, despite occasional teasing and stigmatisation, Lilly communicates that she is well adjusted at school, that she has many friends and that she is quite popular. This agrees with literature on the social development of children raised in same-gendered families (Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004). Although homophobic jokes and comments almost always surface in research on the social environment of children from same-gendered parents, no significant differences in their social adjustment have been noted. Patterson (1992; 2000) and (1995, in Lambert, 2005) found that children from same-gendered parents have normal peer relationships. Another study by Tasker and Golombok (1995) found that adults raised in same-gendered families functioned well in terms of their psychosocial well-being and relationships. Meezan and Rauch (2005) found that the development, adjustment and well-being of children from same-gendered parents do not differ markedly from children with heterosexual parents.

In conclusion, being an adolescent raised in a same-gendered family has been a challenge for Lilly. However, this challenge did not markedly contribute to Lilly’s development as being “different” but it is more society’s perception of normality that has placed a label of “difference” on Lilly. Therefore, one can say that it seems as if children from same-gendered families turn out to be well adjusted and content in their own eyes when compared to the

perceptions of (in many cases uninformed) individuals in society. All in all, dealing with the perception of society and friends seems to be a bigger challenge than dealing with the difference of their family structure itself.

4.1.4. The role of emotions

Goldberg (2007, p.115) states that “participants’ feelings about their parent’s sexual orientation inevitably changed during the course of their lives.” According to Fairtlough (2008), many young people convey respect for their same-gendered parents and admire their bravery in surviving in a heteronormative society. He continued to classify children’s emotions towards their parents’ sexual orientation in four categories: positive; neutral; ambivalent and somewhat negative. The highest number of participants from his study was classified under the ambivalent category. From all my conversations with Lilly, I also identified a strong theme of emotions.

Lilly’s emotions seem to be strongly and directly linked to her decision to disclose her unique family structure. It is clear from all of the above that certain emotions have been evoked by certain actions and reactions. It was especially informative to realise how emotion itself could be characterised as a moral culture. Morally, we rely a lot on how we feel about things. We often make decisions based on the emotions they elicit in us. Lilly is no exception. Based on my discussions with Lilly, I have identified strong positives and negatives in terms of emotions, which in turn are closely linked to behaviour and self-talk.

It became clear that, although Lilly communicates neutrality towards her mother’s sexual orientation, (that she has “no problem” with her family structure, or that she does not “care” what people think), ambivalence in her emotions is still evident. This can be seen in statements such as,

“And when I was little I think I just wanted to be normal and I knew that people didn’t consider it normal. So now I just don’t really care anymore what people think because it’s my mom and has nothing to do with me. Well of course I care but I can handle it now.”

This coincided well with research done by Fairtlough (2008) on ambivalent responses to parents' sexual orientation and that these responses often change over time. Pennington (1987) also refers to the strong sense of ambivalence in children's feelings towards their lesbian mothers. Lilly's mentioning of the fact that she is better equipped to handle remarks and attacks on her character now that she is older, reinforces the theory that adolescents are better developed cognitively to reason and reflect (e.g. Jacobs & Klaczynski, 2002; Louw, Van Ede & Louw, 1998; Rosen & Kuehlwein, 1996; Steinberg & Morris, 2001) and thus handle such situations better. Despite her self-confirmed ability to be better equipped to handle conflicting situations, other negative emotions still surfaced in her communication with me. Pennington (1987) notes that she has not found that children completely deny their negative feelings towards having a lesbian mother. In this sense, I have to agree. Emotions that strongly featured in Lilly's discussion on her family structure and subsequent disclosure were stress and frustration,

"Life was tough"

"...being called gay...now it bothers me more that it is intended as an insult. I don't think my life is easy, but then who's life really is easy."

Anxiety and fear of the possible reaction after having to talk about her family were very evident from Lilly's discussions,

"I hate having to count my words around people for if I say the wrong thing about my household set up. I hate being scared about how my friends are going to react when they know I have a gay mom."

"I don't like the feeling I get that I can't tell the people I care about my mother."

"I was kind of uncomfortable to talk about my mom being gay [with her friend's mother, also gay]... in the back of my head I had that nagging feeling. And I also noticed my friend looked uncomfortable so I don't think it's just me really who feels that way."

These negative emotions are not uncommon in children of same-gendered families. In many instances, children are exposed to such cruel comments and prejudice that their positive experiences are dominated by negative exposure and thus this negativity features as the dominant narrative (Fairtlough, 2008). Guilt about wishing for a "simpler" family set up also seemed to surface when Lilly addressed her family structure,

"I feel bad that I wish my mom wasn't gay. It is selfish and I would never wish K out of my life. I do love her as a mother."

"... just mentioned it... and kind of hope people don't ask for more details."

"Like I was more upset about the fact that her calling me a lesbian was upsetting you know because I knew it shouldn't be."

Both children and mothers in lesbian families (and in my opinion any same-gendered family) have to negotiate the balance between self-effacing guilt and healthy self-protection (Pennington, 1987). Not only does guilt seem to be an emotion Lilly negotiates with in terms of her family structure, but it seems as if Lilly also feels a need to distance herself from thoughts of being part of the gay culture herself, which in turn creates feelings of guilt. Goldberg (2009) states that children of homosexual parents often face negative reactions from peers and others and therefore develop a less positive interpretation of what it means to be gay. Distancing themselves from their parents is often a means of protecting their self-image. Being part of a same-gendered family inevitably makes Lilly part of the gay culture. I gathered, from my conversations with Lilly, that seeing herself as separate from the gay culture must be very difficult and must place a high demand on Lilly since she feels forced to deny a part of who she "is". Also, defending the gay position, but at the same time explicitly devoting herself never to be "that which she defends" create a lot of emotion that Lilly has to negotiate within herself. This became clear when I asked Lilly about the possibility of her being in a gay relationship herself,

“...it’s contradictory but I just don’t think that I want to put someone else in the position that I myself am in.....I don’t want to go through with it all and I don’t want my child...to have to go through it either...I don’t want people to say yes I knew she was actually gay. I don’t want people to be right if you know what I mean....I don’t think I will favour that life. And I think it would be very hypocritical for me to reject that love...”

With the above reference in mind, it should be noted that according to Pennington (1987), girls from same-gendered families often worry more about becoming gay than do boys. With the emerging sexuality that accompanies adolescence, same-sex attractions or sexual encounters may cause fear in the adolescent from a same-gendered family of being gay her or himself. I am of the opinion that hormonal fluctuations and sexual emergence in adolescence that bring forth these same-sex experiences, should not be viewed as an indication of potential homosexuality, but rather be embraced and explored by these young adults in a safe and responsible manner. Exploration and responsible experimentation may allow adolescents to discover aspects of their own sexuality that is essential in the development of sexual maturity. In my opinion, rigid prescriptions of sexual behaviour in adolescence can often lead to the denial of one’s own sexuality and sexual preference.

Pennington (1987) makes reference to the positive impact of the lack of societal prescriptions for the lesbian family household. Because there are no preconceived ideas or role models for how these families should function, children from these families have greater freedom to negotiate roles and to have relationships that are more flexible with their mothers. This has allowed children greater opportunities for decision making and problem solving. Lilly also communicated particular positive effects and strengths gained from being part of a same-gendered family,

“...made me very sensitive to the minority...also made me stronger in a sense. I know how to deal with people and how to stand up for myself. I also think its good to not have a completely normal life and I have experiences that I never would have had.”

Some young adults raised in same-gendered families also communicated that being raised in such a family, and disclosing this information, made them feel proud and deemed it a reason to disclose and educate others. Feeling proud of their family identity was also reportedly more prominent when young children were allowed to decide when to disclose and not being directed by the parents themselves (Goldberg, 2007). Tasker and Golombok (1997) also indicated that family pride in some instances led to disclosure even if there was no definite chance of the family structure being discovered. In their study Tasker and Golombok (1997), state that pride towards their same-gendered parents is a prominent emotion felt by children from same-gendered families. However, in my conversations with Lilly, pride about her family structure was never referred to as a reason for disclosure. Lilly communicated that,

“...I’ve never disclosed because I feel proud of my family set -up. I also can’t say that I feel proud having a lesbian mother. I am proud of my mother as a person, but it has nothing to do with her gay relationship.”

Furthermore, in her research on lesbian families, Pennington, (1987) states that having a lesbian mother has proven to provide for positive female role models, women being strong, independent and nurturing who can do anything. Often children in this type of household learn early in life that judgement from others does not matter too much and they often become self-confident and self-reliant individuals. Lilly confirmed this when she said,

“...my [biological] mother is very independent, she is definitely the breadwinner in the house and she makes all the tough decisions...”

Whether it is a question of strength and subsequent pride, or a situation of emotional confusion, disclosing the information concerning their parents’ sexual orientation seems to be an action of choice. Deciding if and when to disclose seems to be a decision that children raised in same-gendered families want to control (Fairtlough, 2008), irrespective of a perceived positive or negative consequence.

In summary, what does all of the above tell us about Lilly's life story, specifically about her experiences and the influence of her moral cultures on her life? How have these influenced her construction of normality and how has the reciprocal relationship between herself and these cultures shaped each other?

Lilly seems to have faced many challenges from her experiences with a heteronormative society. However, over the course of her life, Lilly has developed into a well-adjusted and popular young girl, despite the difference of her family structure. Lilly has constructed a clear picture for herself of what society deems normal and she has positioned her family set up outside of this construction. Despite this, she has little regrets in connection with her being raised by same-gendered parents. However, ambivalent and somewhat negative emotions towards homosexual relationships as such are mostly directed at society's ignorance about homosexuality. Unfortunately, ignorance in society will always be part of Lilly's life and subsequently will influence her decision to disclose or safeguard the fact of her family structure. It is interesting to see how Lilly is more influenced by society's construction of what is deemed normal in making decisions about disclosure than following her heart and head based on her personal construction of normality. Ultimately, Lilly's disclosure practices seem to be strongly influenced by her experiences associated with being raised by a same-gendered family. Based on the above, let me move forward to the second focus of this study, the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families. What exactly does the literature say, and how does literature confirm, support, deny or add to what I have found in terms of Lilly's disclosure practices?

4.2 Lilly's disclosure practices

As been said before (refer to 2.6), disclosure can be defined as the process of revealing personal information, which includes the subsequent reactions and perceptions that form part of the disclosure process as a whole (Rotenberg, 1995). It is, therefore, the pros and cons of weighing up the decision to

disclose that play a significant role in the disclosure processes. I have also found this to be true for Lilly.

Exploring my own findings and existing research, I have to come to realise how social norms have greatly contributed to the decision to disclose, or withhold information, especially for individuals raised in same-gendered families and more so because of the social norms that define “normality”. While doing this research, I have identified social control as one of the major themes in the disclosure or withholding of information by adolescents raised in same-gendered families.

Throughout my conversations with Lilly, I also noticed a strong theme of social control. Lilly seems to be very careful in (a) selecting a recipient of disclosure, and (b) disclosing the information about her family appropriately so as not to feel embarrassed or labelled. Although she made reference to both the fact that she did not care what others think, and to being terrified of having to disclose and the subsequent social reaction, I found her fear of being confronted with her mother’s sexuality (planned and unexpected) to be the dominant narrative in her life story. This, in my opinion, can be strongly linked to the fact that she is an adolescent in a sensitive developmental phase, which places certain demands (cognitively, physically, socially and morally) on her. Conforming to many these demands, especially socially, can place many demands on Lilly to blend in with her peers as she starts to function more independently from her family system. Being part of a same-gendered family in a predominantly heteronormative society is often challenging. Being different, no matter what that difference constitutes (big ears, freckles, red hair, overweight, homosexual parents etc.) will rarely go unnoticed and frequently becomes a point of discussion and possible teasing. It is for this same reason that I think Lilly carefully plans and selects her disclosing procedure and participants.

If I then say that disclosure of sensitive and possible humiliating information is linked to social control, how does Lilly exercise social control via her disclosure style? Bozette (1987) identified three social control methods,

namely boundary control, disclosure, and non-disclosure (refer to chapter 2). As a result of my research, I would like to add another social control method that I have termed “casual- calculated disclosure” to this list.

In much of the literature referred to during this study (refer to chapter 2), ambivalence in their feelings towards their parents’ sexual orientation has repeatedly been identified in children from same-gendered families. Ambivalence has also come through as such a prevalent theme in my conversations with Lilly that I feel compelled to give this “ambivalence” a place in my research. Because of the homophobia of society, Lilly feels a need sometimes to “hide” her parents’ sexual orientation until she feels compelled, or safe, to share this information with selected others. Thus, one can say that having homosexual parents is not the main issue of concern for Lilly. Being part of a same-gendered family is “normal” to her, since it is all that she knows and the only family form she has been part of her whole life. However, society’s perception of homosexuality and homosexual parenting makes this an issue that Lilly has to deal with. Because of this ambivalence in her feelings towards her family set-up, Lilly has created “casual-calculated” disclosure.

What does casual-calculated disclosure mean? Because of Lilly’s attempts to manage when to disclose, disclosure takes place on a calculated basis, thus planned and expected by Lilly herself. Lilly highlights this when she says,

“I find that if I have the conversation in my head I just make it worse for myself...” [by implication, to know she makes it worse for herself she obviously has had these conversations in her head with herself and thus planned her disclosure]

“I only tell people about my mom when I get a good read on them. I have become pretty good at picking out the people that would freak.”

“I have never really spoken to anyone about this...”

“[when having to tell people]...I have this big tendency to over-think things...”

“...I tell them when I feel it’s appropriate.”

“I do choose friends that I know will handle the news well or okay...I don’t want to associate myself with the kinds of people that don’t accept it.”

“...but I usually only tell people when I know they won’t freak out on me.”

However, because Lilly has come to learn that society in general ‘de-normalises’ same-gendered families, she employs a casual manner of conveying this information so as (a) not to draw too much attention to her situation and (b) to normalise the situation for the recipient of the disclosure. She confirms this when she says,

“I don’t really have a conversation in my head I just tell them ‘hey by the way my moms gay!’ and take it from there. I try not to really make a big deal out of it.”

“...I usually just say it before I think about it too hard...”

“He just mentioned it like ‘yeah my dad and his boyfriend, John, bla bla...’ and I think I kinda tell it like that too and let people put two and two together if that makes sense?”

Casual-calculated disclosure is thus a calculated decision to disclose sensitive information in a casual way. This casualness does not reflect the discloser’s true feelings towards disclosure but serves a buffering purpose. However, Lilly’s method of social control through casual-calculated disclosure is always based on grounds of one of the following:

- Common ground – Lilly discloses information about her family structure based on the fact that the recipient of disclosure also has similar or very similar experiences to hers.

“Recently I was noticing that I’ve only been telling people that have gay parents or that believe they may be gay or bi themselves.”

“[my friend’s house...her mother is gay]...and I found that I was kind of uncomfortable to talk about my mom being gay or about gay relationships with her mom.” [but because of the common ground, the conversation took place nonetheless]

- Need to know – Lilly discloses information about her family structure only when she feels forced to do so, or when disclosure is perceived as inevitable.

“I think I tell people only when they have to know, not before.”

“...actually asked me ‘but do you have a dad and how does that work?’

- Relationship based – Lilly discloses information about her family structure based on the fact that the recipient of disclosure is a trusted friend or someone with whom Lilly has a close relationship.

“...because only my friends know...”

Reflecting on Lilly’s experiences and subsequent disclosure, I am of the opinion that being raised in a same-gendered family is in itself a multi-layered affair. Having to face challenges, but at the same time gaining maturity through having to defend and reason about “difference” and acceptance all form part of the growing-up experience. However, carefully selecting information and recipients of disclosure seems to be an unavoidable aspect for children growing up with same-gendered parents. Whether it is in the school context, within the bigger society, among friends or as a personal emotion, feelings connected to homosexuality are constantly being negotiated by these youngsters in an attempt to simplify their everyday lives. Lilly in her own way, has established a method of social control whereby she constantly tries to maintain a preferred image of herself as a ‘normal’ teenager besides having to negotiate ambivalent thoughts related to her family set-up. It is my opinion, based on the findings in this chapter, that despite positive and negative experiences, children raised in same-gendered families constantly negotiate the decision to disclose information on their family set-up in their interaction with others. However, the ultimate action of disclosure relies on the individual’s perception of urgency (need-to-know), their perceived relationship with the recipient, and the possibility of shared understanding through similar experiences (common ground).

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

“If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance”.

- George Bernard Shaw

Revisiting the start of this project brings to mind the fundamental question of why I decided to embark on this journey. Always trying to understand and make sense of “otherness”, I felt a need to explore how adolescents raised in same-gendered families disclose or withhold their unique family structure. This has raised a few key areas of exploration. This chapter aims not only to highlight the findings and subsequent contributions of the research done, but also to provide some insight into the limitations of this study. Furthermore, some suggestions for possible future research are made.

5.1 Findings on the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families

To understand the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families, I had to ask myself “What do I know about the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families, and how do these adolescents construct meaning out of their direct and indirect experiences related to their unique family structures?” Each of the areas explored to gain insight into these youngster’s experiences is referred to as “moral cultures”, a term adopted from the work of Hart and Carlo (2005). The moral cultures identified as major role players in the life of Lilly were religion; friends, acquaintances and society at large; the school and emotions. The following information on the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families was identified:

- Religion featured as a prominent role player in Lilly’s decision to disclose. It became evident that Lilly’s interaction with the Christian religion had a strong

impact on Lilly's construction of Christianity and Christian individuals. Strongly associated with the Christian religion was Lilly's perception of non-acceptance of that which is different, especially homosexuality. Lilly communicates a strong awareness from her side, that Christian individuals are mostly judgemental because of their interpretation of the Bible and this has led her to be careful in establishing relationships with Christian individuals. Subsequently, if the recipient of the disclosure is Christian, Lilly is extra cautious when making information about her family structure known.

- The school environment allows Lilly to function among her peers and to establish social bonds. Lilly's family structure does not seem to be a huge role player in terms of her school adjustment. Lilly is well adjusted and popular among her friends. However, not many of her peers know about her family structure and, therefore, one should question if this would prove to be the same should her family structure be more widely known. Lilly's encounters with teachers have been positive experiences and she does not see teachers as being biased against her because of her family structure. However, occasional teasing and labelling have been evident from her encounters with her peers when her family structure was known. In my opinion, certain school practices, (e.g. sex education) can be adapted to teach children, teachers and parents acceptance of diversity and can possibly lead to creating a school environment characterised by open-mindedness.

- Friends, acquaintances and society at large are possibly the one area in which heteronormativity is most evident. Friends seem to serve as both a buffer and source of victimization. The larger society and acquaintances are the ones mostly responsible for Lilly's hesitance to disclose her family structure. Lilly has created an identity of herself as being "different" by association based on the perception of society about homosexuality. Managing her image among friends and within society seems to be a great responsibility indirectly placed on Lilly by society and by herself. Also, denying that she "belongs" to the homosexual culture seems to create feelings of guilt and creates a certain amount of stress for Lilly to negotiate during her everyday interactions with other individuals.

- Experiences and the associated emotions they elicit are influential elements in having to decide about the disclosure of sensitive information. Lilly has communicated fear, stress and anxiety as prevalent emotions associated with possible disclosure. However, certain strengths seem to be acquired by being raised in a same-gendered family. Being sensitive to minority groups and being accepting of difference were two of the main positive traits Lilly developed through her experience of being raised in a same-gendered family.

5.2 Findings on disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families

Based on the information gained about the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families, what have I learned about the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families?

- Social control seems to be a very prominent factor in the decision of adolescents raised in same-gendered families to disclose or withhold information. Managing the ideal social image is especially important during adolescence, and even more so for those adolescents raised by same-gendered parents. From my conversations with Lilly, I have identified that “casual-calculated” disclosure as a method for social control when disclosing information about the family structure is inevitable.

- Casual-calculated disclosure is described as the disclosure in a casual way of information on the family structure. However, the casual attitude that the discloser adopts is in direct contrast to the inner anxiety and fear of rejection that accompany the sensitive information conveyed. The discloser, in this case Lilly, adopts this casual attitude so as not to draw too much attention to her “otherness”.

- Furthermore, I identified that disclosure rarely happens without a reason. The decision to disclose information about their family structure is generally based on (a) a perception of urgency, in other words a need-to-know situation

where the adolescent is directly asked about or unexpectedly confronted by the fact of the parents' sexual orientation; (b) the existence of a intimate relationship between the discloser and the recipient of the information, in other words the act of disclosing information based on trust such as telling the best friend or the long lasting boyfriend; and (c) the disclosure of information based on a shared experience, in other words disclosing information about their family structure to friends who also have same-gendered parents or who are homosexual themselves.

Therefore, if we consider all of the findings above, what value does the research add to existing knowledge in the field of homosexual studies?

5.3 Implications for research, knowledge and practitioners

- Professionals working in a therapeutic relationship with individuals raised by same-gendered parents should take note that the inner experiences of these youngsters do not necessarily relate to their parents' sexual orientation as such, but are most likely related to their interactions with a homophobic environment outside of the household. Placing the focus of therapy on the home environment and the family relationships might divert the attention from the true problem of equipping the individual with the social skills to deal with a heteronormative society.

- The age and biological sex of the individual raised in a same-gendered family might allow for different needs to arise. To view this group of individuals as a generic group can inhibit tailor-made intervention programmes and might lead to less successful intervention results. It is important to explore the individual's personal needs, as a unique person in a unique same-gendered family, before deciding on the way forward in working with these individuals. Difference in experience and the subsequent construction of meaning allows for great diversity in this area of intervention.

- It is important that professionals dealing with individuals raised in same-gendered families are fully informed and knowledgeable about the processes

of disclosure. This relates to the inner processes that precede the act of disclosure, the emotions and experiences during disclosure and the reactions after the disclosure has taken place. It should be noted that although this is a process unique to each individual, basic knowledge on the disclosure processes and its related reactions and emotions provides for informed action when the counselling process is at its beginning and the relationship between therapist and client is still being established.

- Educating all other professionals that come in contact with children raised by same-gendered parents (e.g. teachers, lawyers, pastors etc.) on the "normality" of the family environment in which these youngsters grow up is crucial in eliminating the general belief of some form of pathology is inevitable in these youngsters' lives.

- Furthermore, this research adds to existing knowledge in the research field on the social education of society. It is important to understand how preventative work, such as research focusing on acceptance of diversity, closely relates to what has been found here. Values, such as acceptance, tolerance, understanding etc. all encapsulate the needs of many more minority groups besides the sexual minorities referred to in this research. Finding a common thread for focusing interventions within the broader society could largely assist in finding plausible solutions for issues in social education.

5.4 Limitations of the study

Much valuable information has been gained through this study. However, I cannot look at this research project without acknowledging the limitations that accompany it.

- One of the chief limitations to any case study is that of generalisability. In this study, I have made use of the authentic life story of one individual. Having the privilege of entering into the life world of Lilly allowed me an in depth exploration of the information that I was searching for. However, gaining rich and detailed information does not necessarily allow for generalization of

results since Lilly is but one of hundreds of adolescents that have their story to share.

- Furthermore, I have explored the life story of a female adolescent. I assume that because adolescence is such a sensitive developmental phase, boys do go through many of the same developmental challenges as girls. But, one cannot deny the uniqueness of the fundamental biological difference between the two sexes. These differences might account for different experiences and subsequent different behaviour to arise.

- Another limitation might be that of family composition. Lilly has been raised from the age of six months in a lesbian household. Exploring the experiences and subsequent disclosure of adolescents raised by (a) gay fathers and (b) raised in a same-gendered family from an older age thus also having the experience of being raised in a heterosexual household might highlight other important facets to the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families.

- Exploring sensitive, personal issues such as this study has done, make the selection of a participant often difficult, especially when the focus of the study falls on a marginalised group. I selected a participant with whom I already had an established relationship and I believe that this allowed for the generation of very genuine data. However, whether I would have got more detailed or truthful information from a participant less known to me, is questionable.

5.5 Recommendations for future research

Based on the findings in this study, the following recommendations for future research are made:

- This study focuses on the experiences of adolescents. However, adolescence has a duration of about nine years and it would be interesting to see if there is a significant difference in the disclosure practices of

adolescents raised in same-gendered families as they develop from early to late adolescence.

- The difference in disclosure practices between adolescents and specifically adults raised as children by same-gendered parents has not been explored. It would be interesting to see whether there is a significant difference between these two subgroups and what such a possible difference could constitute. I would like to know whether social control is less of an issue for adults who have grown into their identity versus adolescents who still need to establish a true sense of who they are and are therefore still careful to convey information that might hurt them socially.

- It could be a valuable study to explore in what way educating society on diversity and especially homosexuality, could simplify the disclosure processes of individuals faced with the same challenges due to their parents' sexual orientation. More so, it would be interesting to gain insight into what these youngsters themselves see as a possible solution to society's ignorance of homosexuality and their biased belief in heteronormativity.

- The positive gains from being raised in a same-gendered family are often neglected as a focus of studies on children raised in same-gendered families. Compiling a study based on specifically exploring the strengths gained from being raised in a same-gendered family can provide valuable and interesting insights into this unique family composition.

In conclusion, I realised that being part of a same-gendered family does not seem to be a main issue of concern for the young adolescent in this study, but defending herself against society's opinions and attitudes towards her family structure creates a lot of stress in her life. I have to ask myself once again, what constitutes normality and how is it that, based on acceptance by the majority, normality can be defined on behalf of others? Each in our own way, we all create our own normality based on our own experiences. However, the freedom to live accordingly is constantly limited by the restrictions set by the greater society.

Both positive and negative encounters with society, friends, school and religion contribute to the emotions elicited when these youngsters are confronted with their family structure. This also provides insight and understanding for us, as the readers, into how same-gendered families are socially constructed. This research indicates that society's preoccupation with heteronormative beliefs and its failure to accept and appreciate diversity will continue to be an influential element in the decision of adolescents raised in same-gendered families to disclose or withhold information about their family structures.

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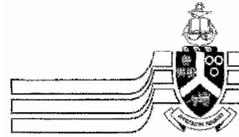
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RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

DEGREE AND PROJECT

INVESTIGATOR(S)

DEPARTMENT

DATE CONSIDERED

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE NUMBER :

EP09/11/07

MEd: Educational Psychology

Disclosure practices of adolescents raised in same-gendered families

Liana Kruger

Department of Educational Psychology

12 August 2010

APPROVED

Please note:

For Masters applications, ethical clearance is valid for 2 years

For PhD applications, ethical clearance is valid for 3 years.

CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS COMMITTEE Prof L Ebersohn

DATE

12 August 2010

CC

Dr C Lubbe-De Beer
Ms Jeannie Beukes

This ethical clearance certificate is issued subject to the following conditions:

1. A signed personal declaration of responsibility
2. If the research question changes significantly so as to alter the nature of the study, a new application for ethical clearance must be submitted
3. It remains the students' responsibility to ensure that all the necessary forms for informed consent are kept for future queries.

Please quote the clearance number in all enquiries.



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Voluntary consent form and background to the study

Dear Participant,

Please allow me the opportunity to explain my proposed study and why I am inviting you to consider taking part.

For many years I have been interested in people. The way they think, the way they act and the reason why they do things they way they do. I have come to realise that, since we are all individual human beings we all do and experience things very differently! It is particularly these personal experiences that I find interesting. Since I am now busy with my Masters degree in Educational Psychology at the University of Pretoria, I finally have the opportunity to explore these experiences and enable myself to understand how these experiences co-create who we are.

When I started off preparing for this study, I knew that I want to work with someone that can contribute greatly to the knowledge that I am seeking. I wanted to speak to someone who would be willing to share with me stories of their lives and especially experiences of their daily interactions. I have decided to position my research in the area of homosexual studies since I got to know many gay people who struggle with the created “normalities” in society. I am specifically interested in children that form part of a same-gendered family. I believe that being part of a same-gendered family produces a unique set of challenges! I believe this without neglecting the joys that also forms part of this family structure.

For this study I aim to explore the experiences of adolescents raised in same-gendered families to (a) better understand their experiences and (b) to understand how these experiences influence the way in which adolescents negotiate disclosure of their unique family structure.

The process of this study would stretch over a two to three month period in which we will meet once weekly to discuss the experiences in your life. You would be allowed to share anything you feel comfortable with and all of our conversations would be kept completely confidential. During this, you and I would make collages and/or a memory which would form part of my conversations with you. I would like for you to think and reflect about your life as part of a same-gendered family while doing all of this.

Please note, that should you agree to take part in my study, you would be a voluntary participant. This means that you can, at any time, withdraw should you feel that you do not want to be part of the study anymore. With your consent, I will type up all our conversations and you will have full access to it if you feel a need to do so. You will also be allowed access to the final product of which you helped me to create!

You are welcome to contact me at any time during the research process if you feel uncertain or need clarification about anything. My contact nr 082XXXXXX.

Thank you for travelling with me on this journey – and for allowing me to access your experiences and to use them in creation of this study! I value your contribution!

Participant..... Date.....

Parent/Guardian..... Date.....

Researcher..... Date.....