

Bubble Two

Discovering &
exploring the landscape
of literature

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Bubble Two

Discovering and exploring the landscape of literature

THE FIRST LINK IN A STRING OF RIBBONS THAT REFLECTS BUBBLE TWO

The story of homosexuality, of gayness, 'otherness',
queerness and beyond...

and so **the voice** said, "before we embark on this journey of experience, before we let these children speak again, there are some things that you ought to know..."

"If we want to understand how same-gendered families and the children in same-gendered families have to negotiate their position in the world, we first need to understand how life in Western bourgeois society is dominated by a social discourse of "straightness". We need to examine the children's personal narratives in the context of society's construction of same-gendered families. I will therefore now retreat into the background, and let Carien unpack the constructed and hegemonic categories that organise a Western-influenced society."

Carien:

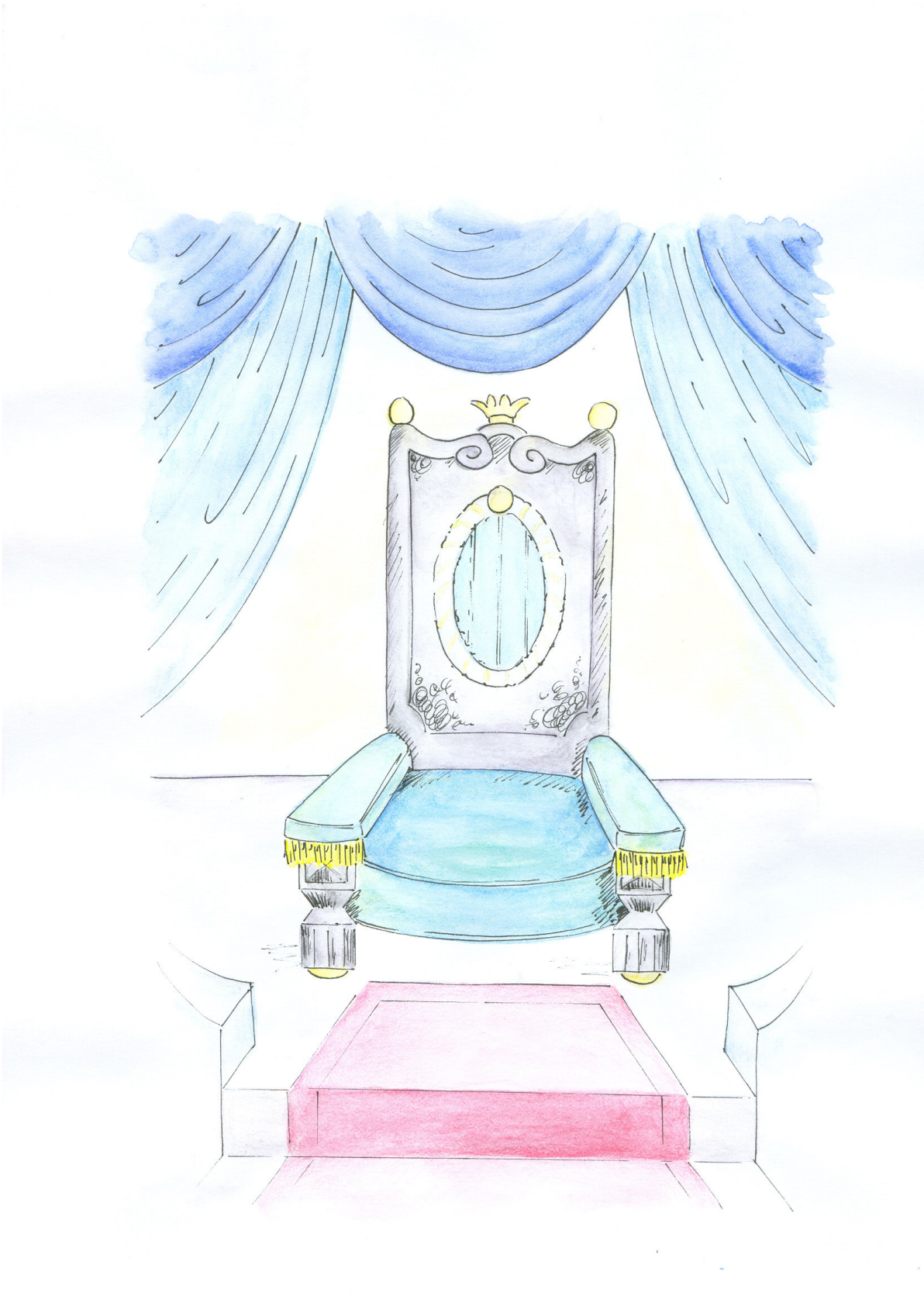
Caution: Parental guidance is advised. This story contains sensitive images and concepts of a sexual nature.

Setting the scene: This is a story of the reign of King Heterosexuality, a king whose rule has been taken for granted in every country of the world for as long as anyone can remember. As happens in any kingdom, the King has a council of trusted and loyal advisors whose duty it is to make laws to safeguard the state against any kind of opposition to the King's rule. Who is this opposition?

In the first place, they are made up of people who question the King's rule. These are instigators— instigators who are forever asking questions. To combat their influence, the King's advisors devised a plan called "Operation safety in binaries" as a means of preventing and controlling dissent. This measure forces everyone in society to think only in terms of dichotomies and only to live in terms of the discourses of heteronormativity.

This strange state of affairs did not happen overnight. It took quite some time for the King and his advisors to get everyone to accept it. But now, once again, it has come under attack. A fierce opponent of this royal policy has appeared! But little is known of this opponent. All that the King's spies can tell him are that this brutal opponent is Queering the Silence...

But let me not rush straight into the story. First let me tell you how the King managed in the first place to establish his heteronormative rule.



The King believed that he would be remembered forever if he could but change history. In order to do this, he decided to create something for future generations that would be both different and radical. The King decided that he wanted his memorial to be in the Field of Sexualities, so he ordered Sexual Categories to be constructed. Whereas other societies such as that of the Ancient Greeks had established categories of active-passive and dominant-subordinate to reflect social relations, the King decided to establish naturalised and individualised categories such as man-woman and homosexual-heterosexual.¹ He selected a group of experts as advisors – some men and a few women – and ordered them to work diligently behind the scenes so that they could be instrumental in fulfilling his wish.

These sexual categories reflect deeply held assumptions in Western thought. Because Western thought has throughout its history been dualistic in its most basic epistemological assumptions, people influenced by these assumptions tend to perceive reality in terms of binaries such as male/female, hetero/homo, black/white, dominant/subordinate, and public/private. These categories for defining particular kinds of relationships and practices are culturally and historically specific and have not operated in all cultures at all times. This does not mean that same-gender relations do not have a long, rich history. But the rigidly binary terms that are used to frame social and personal understandings of same-gender relations are characteristic of Western thought. As Norton (2002:¶2) states: “The absence of language does not indicate the absence of conceptual thought.”

Long, long ago, in the second half of the 19th century, a concept was created in Europe. In terms of this concept, there are people who can be labelled “homosexual” because of their sexual orientation – and such people exist in a category that is distinct from “heterosexual”. To be precise, in 1868, Karl M. Kertbeny² introduced the term into the Western-influenced society for the first time, while, in 1880, the word “heterosexual” was used for the first time in printed form

¹ I do not want referencing to interfere in the “green storyline” in this paragraph. So here is the reference: Roseneil (2002)

² Born as Karl-Maria Benkert (1824-1882)

(Richardson & Seidman, 2002; Sullivan, 2003). At this point, I must add that the King's experts initially made a mistake, and how the way in which they corrected it can only be described as something short of a miracle. When the term "heterosexuality" was used by the medical specialist, James Kiernan, in 1892, he used it to describe the "sexual perversion" of individuals who engage in non-procreative sex with the opposite sex for "pleasure alone" (Dunphy, 2000:6). This was definitely NOT what the King had intended! His whole intention was that his experts should legitimate and establish heterosexuality as the *only* valid form of sexual association – not link it to any form of "sexual perversion". Thus, by the end of the 20th century, people in the West and in Western-influenced societies had become widely accustomed to using only these two categories of sexual labelling to describe the sexual orientation of human beings and manifestations of sexual desire. Listen to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has to say in her justly famous book, *Epistemology of the closet* (1990):

What was new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to male or a female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or a hetero-sexuality, a binarised identity full of implications (Sedgwick, 1990:3).

The main consequence of the hegemony of this binary model of sexuality is that heterosexuality became privileged (Bernstein & Reimann, 2001; Dunphy, 2000; Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2002; Esterberg, 2002; Puri, 2002). This was just what the King wanted! For Clunis and Green (2000:62), "heterosexism" refers to the assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual. Since the invention, dissemination and widespread acceptance of these binary labels, heterosexuality has been considered to be the outcome of a normal and healthy psychosexual development – whereas homosexuality has been considered to be a pathological deviation from that supposed norm.

The King's rule of the "straightness" of Westernised society exists on three levels (Jenness & Richman, 2002:408): the level of the individual (homophobia), the level of the institutional or structural (heterosexism), and the level of the cultural (heteronormativity). *Homophobia* refers to negative attitudes towards, a dislike of, a fear of, and even a hatred of homosexual people. *Heterosexism* links the privileged

status of heterosexual discourse and personal anti-homosexual bias(es) to cultural discourses in institutions such as the law, religion, family and the economy. On a structural level, heterosexism maintains these forms of prejudice in the structures and institutions of society and provides a pretext to those who wish to discriminate, chastise, and even perpetrate violence against those who deviate from conventional sexualities, identities or practices. This kind of heterosexist pretext is particularly valued by those who wish to exercise their discrimination in punitive official, institutional and legal ways. It also provides criminal or inadequately socialised elements in the proletariat of welfare societies with informal pretexts (“motives” in police jargon) for committing horrendous crimes against gay people and their families. Heterosexist assumptions are evident in the acts, canons and dogmas of most forms of contemporary religions when they (for example) view and treat homosexuality as problematic. Heterosexist thinking is also evident in laws that are designed to legalise marriage only between people of the opposite sex. Sullivan (2003:51) also views heterosexuality as a complex matrix of discourses and institutions that have become normalised in culture. The effect of heterosexism creates a collective cultural delusion that traps uncritical minds into imagining that heterosexual relationships, lifestyles and identities are natural, ahistorical and universal.

On a cultural level, *heteronormativity* emphasises the “correctness” of heterosexual dogmas and traditional family forms while at the same time censoring, punishing, medicalising and rendering homosexuality invisible in all of its manifestations. Heteronormativity indicates how heterosexuality dominates in frequently unconsciously or in conspicuous ways. Puri (2002:432) explains that this normativity of heterosexuality – the fact that all of us are unquestioningly assumed to be “straight” (until proved otherwise) – becomes visible in subtle forms of discrimination, indifference or in unwarranted assumptions. One often encounters such unwarranted assumptions in conversations where references to marriage and relationships are predicated on the universal validity of opposite sex relationships. Thus someone may remark to a woman: “Are you married?” or “What does your husband do?” Janet Wright (2001:279) uses the term “heterosexual supremacy” to

describe our largely heterosexual-supremacist societies in which the male/female bond is idealised as “naturally” spiritually, physically, emotionally and intellectually superior to any other variant sexually orientated relationship. Heterosexuality is unthinkingly “idealised” or “privileged” because it is taken for granted by most people that heterosexuality is “right”, “natural” and universal. In addition, the laws, institutions and values of Western-influenced societies are predicated on these erroneous assumptions about heterosexuality. Heterosexual supremacy entrenches forms of gendered and patriarchal society on human beings who do not fit neatly into those categories (Clunis & Green, 2000; Dunphy, 2000; Epstein, O’Flynn & Telford, 2002).

The heterosexual/homosexual binary created well-defined insider and outsider groups, which I will later show are not mutually exclusive. The opposite group, the outsiders, the “others”, who have been constructed as homosexuals, are regarded as a threat to society’s well-established set of symbols which provide meaning and order for most of its members. Homosexuality is a social “taboo” to the eyes of many people because gay people do not live in families; they often cannot or prefer not to have children; they defy the neat categories of the two-gender system; they live in defiance of the morality to which most people defer in heterosexist society, and they violate the “natural order” of things that most people take for granted. Since there are no known contemporary societies in which homosexuality is accepted as the widespread form of sexual orientation, hostility to homosexuality is linked (if only unconsciously) to fears about threats to social order (Plummer, 1998:87-89). One of the most effective means that the King and his advisors used to persecute homosexual people was to lock them up in psychiatric institutions, to inflict judicial punishments on them, to imprison them, to silence them in various ways, to make them invisible, to incarcerate them in “private” clinics and hospitals and to marginalize them by ensuring that they all remained out of sight in millions of so-called “closets”. Heterosexuality was publicly declared to be the privileged and dominant discourse of society. Institutionalised forms of social organisation such as the state, education and religion were used as instruments to reinforce this state policy (Klesse, 2002; Plummer, 1998; Puri, 2002; Sedgwick, 1990).

The King's advisors began to implement their plans with increasing ferocity. Here is what they had planned to achieve. Gay people would be closeted through a discourse of *deviance*. Homosexual acts (not a category of persons) would be punishable by law. Because this stipulation means that *anyone* in principle is capable of committing this crime, such a representation of homosexuality cannot be linked to an innate sexual identity (Sullivan, 2003:4). Although surviving historical documents mostly indicate that it was men who were accused and convicted of this "crime", there are also records of a few cases in which women were tried and convicted for "acting like a man", or committing a "crime against nature"³ (Duggan, 2003; Sullivan, 2003). Alongside the discourse of deviance, a *religious* discourse that defines all undifferentiated non-procreative sexual acts as sin, was established. This discourse that have been embedded in society since the Constantinian accommodation of the Roman Church to pagan Roman culture in the 4th century CE.

Medical analyses of various forms of non-procreative sex as categorisable perversions and deviations also began to replace earlier religious discourses. Ulrich's work between 1864 and 1879 paved the way for the development of the notion of homosexuality as an illness, a pathology, and an "unnatural" aberration that required medical scrutiny. In 1886, Richard von Krafft-Ebing classified all possible forms of non-procreative sex, not a sin, but as a disease, an illness (Sullivan, 2003:7). While this transition from dogmatic religious opinion to proto-scientific medical discourse might have appeared to some to represent the triumph of science over the superstitions of religion, this science simply reflected how deeply entrenched the idea was that homosexuality is "unnatural", "perverted", and a "disorder". While the design of the pieces on the board was changing, the game remained essentially the same.

From the 1910s onwards, sexologists (as they were later to be known) began to develop an ideal that marriage for heterosexual couples might be legitimately

³ The 1477 Trail, for example, of Katherina Hetzeldorfer. It is said that she had a long-term relationship with her female household, acted like a husband, made sexual advances to other women, wore men's clothes - and therefore transgressed gender norms (Duggan, 2003:75).

predicated on the pleasure that they might derive from mutual sexual intimacy. In the early years of the 20th century this new discourse of *sexuality* targeted the gender of the object choice of one's sexual desire and orientation (Creith, 1996; Sedgwick, 1990). To be gay now meant and implied that one lived as a sexual being (King, 2004:123). Gayness and sexuality became equated. By the 1950s, this definition of marital heterosexuality was firmly entrenched in Westernised societies. It rapidly gained an ascendancy that was supported by the power, prestige and influence of the media and by evolving as social, legal and political institutions and policies. The power of the media first became evident in the glamour of the Hollywood film industry, the nascent television industry, and in women's magazines which, although they were not as glossy as they are now, exerted a tremendous influence over generations of younger women in the 20th century. **It seemed as though the King's plans were becoming a successful instrument of his policy.** Sexuality was used to control and oppress, and a sexual hierarchy came into existence that consequently acted as a new form of social control. **But the King made sure that heterosexual people were not under any significant pressure to analyse and question their sexual preference or orientation** (Creith, 1996; Richardson & Seidman, 2002).

But neither the King nor his advisors foresaw a revolution that was looming on the horizon. It was during the decade of the 1960s that the residual morality and inhibitions of the Victorian era were seriously challenged. It was during this "permissive" decade that the revolutionary idea that *women* might also legitimately expect satisfaction and pleasure from sexual acts was not only hypothesised, but actively lived out by an increasingly large and vocal sector of the post-war "Baby Boomers" who were reaching their twenties during that decade. The sixties also saw the appearance of activities such as "swinging" and group sex. Topics that were previously regarded as deeply private started to be discussed more and more openly and in more and more public forums such as the media. The women's liberation movement paved the way for lesbian feminism and gay liberation politics that flared up in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 1960s. These movements were made topical and relevant by a changing social climate that

increasingly emphasised human rights, especially those of women, ethnic minorities and previously colonised people (Corber & Valocchi, 2003; Creith, 1996; Dunphy, 2000; Palmer, 1993; Zimmerman, 1992). From now on the King's advisors could only look on in impotent rage and frustration. But here – in essence – is what happened.

Increasing urbanisation after World War II meant that many people who moved away from their families and home communities were for the first time able to enjoy some degree of personal autonomy in their private and public lives. By the same token, those who were homosexual were able (if they had the courage) to “come out” and enjoy the freedom of a developing homosexual subculture (Gevisser, 1994:18). Homophile organisations began, very tentatively, to emerge in the 1960s and claim a public voice for homosexuals. The all-important Stonewall Riot of 1969 marked the beginning of a gay liberation movement that spread rapidly and idealistically in the United States, Britain, Australia and other countries.

A new modernist tale emerged: the “coming out” story. Lesbian and gay coming out stories were never heard before the late 1960s and 1970s because, before that time, there was nothing to come out to except public disgrace, humiliation and punishment. While there have probably always been a minority of fortunate gay people who have managed to find personal accommodations in their private lives against all the odds, it was during this period that gay people could at last “come out” to a new kind of subculture. While gay people could honour and celebrate their gayness before the mid-1960s, this occurred mainly in isolation – either to oneself alone, to a solitary lover, or somewhere in a deeply disguised and secretive homosexual underworld (Plummer, 1995:120, 121). The stories that emerged from the 1970s were “liberating” coming out tales of some degree of triumph over terrible odds. These narratives were in dramatic contrast to the pathological and forensic accounts that we possess from the 19th century and earlier. They represented an attempt to assert a positive identity that was based on self-acceptance, pride and even (most courageous of all) visibility, and many of them

resonated with a new sense of belonging and community (Dunphy, 2000:118). Coming out now represented “a broken silence” (Creith, 1996:44).

As coming out became an ideal in the gay subculture, newly “liberated” lesbians and gay men and their social movements started to appear to “document and celebrate the lives of people with homoerotic expression” (Adam, 2002:16). **In this era of globalisation, it is important for us to note important differences that still exist in the King’s country.** Different regions have different records when it comes to human rights, of which gay rights are an important branch. The Nordic or Scandinavian countries, for example, have been leaders in the toleration of homosexuality and developing ideas of sexual freedom. Their political and welfare systems are also not as gender-biased as is that of (say) the United Kingdom (Löfström, 1998; Lützen, 1998). **A country of particular interest** is that of South Africa, where the discourse of sexuality was also rigidly controlled by the apartheid system. While the history of black male homosexuality was openly acknowledged in the mine compounds, incidents of white middle-class and upper middle-class homosexual encounters were intensely scrutinised by the state⁴ (Elder, 1995; Gevisser & Cameron, 1994). However, in every country where political, social and political conditions permitted it, there were groups of influential people and their supporters (both straight and gay) who campaigned ceaselessly for the state to grant fundamental human rights to homosexual people. There were also those who campaigned for a more extreme position. These people desired “to free the homosexual in everyone”, to overthrow “compulsory heterosexuality” – thereby abolishing the boundaries between the homosexual and heterosexual (Plummer, 2003; Sullivan, 2003; Walters, 2000). Assimilationist politics and radical politics were both features of the gay liberation movement of those revolutionary years. As homosexuals ceaselessly demanded equal rights and protection as a minority group, and even eventually began to obtain some of these rights, homosexuals in the more enlightened countries of the globe began to enjoy some of the benefits of

⁴ It is not the intention of this thesis to go into a detailed history of South African homosexuality. An excellent resource to consult is that of Gevisser, M. & Cameron, E. (Eds). 1994. *Defiant desire*. Braamfontein: Ravan Press.

freedom and legal rights and to witness the growth of more confidence in lesbian and gay communities as they slowly create their own institutions and traditions.

Which brings us to the **lesbian legacy**...

If we focus now on the emergence and development of the “lesbian” as a socially and personally acknowledged reality of the 20th century, we can see that women have been repeatedly sexualised, desexualised and then resexualised throughout recorded history in accordance with social and historical preconceptions. In the Victorian times, lesbianism was not even publicly admitted. It only emerged in tandem with the growing realisation that women in general have sexual needs and desires, and that they are not merely the passive and male-dependent creatures that they were assumed to be in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Dunphy, 2000:19), and of course in the centuries prior to those. But of course lesbians have always found ways of enjoying rich and cultured lives and personal relationships under the most difficult circumstances precisely because official public denial of sexual element or passion in lesbian relationships was so rigid that it also served as a useful screen behind which lesbians and indeed women of all kinds of sexual orientation could lead their lives. What nowadays might be regarded as lesbian relationships were in the 19th century regarded as “romantic friendships” to which no stigma was attached and which were fully compatible with the outer and visible arrangements of heterosexual marriage (Plummer, 1998; Sullivan, 2003). Because lesbian identities emerged much later than their gay male identities (which began to be vigorously researched and defined from the latter half of the 19th century onwards), they were less visible because their “identity” could be subsumed under categories such as “romantic friendship” or “Sapphic love” – which was idealised by a society steeped in classical learning as non-sexual. The same kind of cover operated effectively for men until the public were made aware of the sexual nature of male “special friendships” by the trial of Oscar Wilde at the end of the 19th century. Thereafter homosexual men had to be very careful indeed as they were subjected to an increasingly hostile scrutiny by a public that was pruriently

obsessed by sexuality. Fortunately (or unfortunately) for lesbians, there was never any female equivalent of the Oscar Wilde trial.

Lesbian identities developed alongside the dominant discourses that determined gender roles, with the implication (at least) that lesbianism is incompatible with motherhood. The existence of lesbian motherhood presents a challenge to the dominant ideologies of gender and family because it is negatively constructed by hostile critics as a threat. Radical lesbian feminists argue that to be lesbian is to repudiate the very category of *woman* because this category is a foundational concept in the discourse that equates women with motherhood and the inequality inherent in patriarchy and heterosexuality (Creith, 1996; Dunphy, 2000; Palmer, 1993; Zimmerman, 1992). “She is a disrupter of heterosexuality, a presence standing outside the conventions of patriarchy, a hole in the fabric of gender dualism” (Zimmerman, 1992:4). Zimmerman states that there is a long tradition that became more and more visible from the beginning of the 20th century in which lesbians portrayed themselves as radicals, outlaws, and transgressors against “Man’s law”. Such radical movements proclaim that the lesbian expresses “the rage of all women”, that it brings to light the “monster” that lurks within patriarchy, and that it is “threat” to male supremacist institutions and an “attack on hetero-relations” (Zimmerman, 1992:4).

In the 1970s, developing parallel to the gay (male) liberation, lesbianism was desexualised by lesbian feminists who asserted that the adoption of lesbian identity should be regarded as a political strategy that offers lesbians a positive lesbian identity within a close-knit community of women. Probably one of the strongest proponents of this position was Adrienne Rich (1980:632), who stated that lesbianism is a potential *political* position for all women. Politically inclined lesbians (thus defined) made no claims about women’s “innate” sexuality. Instead they emphasised women’s ability to choose their sexual orientation in situations where sexuality becomes a voluntary act of sexual reorientation. This position entails that a women’s sexuality becomes a sexuality without any ontological basis and that it is defined in opposition to “male” sexuality. In this view, lesbians are regarded as

being “naturally” feminists while feminists are regarded as being “naturally” lesbians (Andermahr, 1992; Creith, 1996; Kitzinger, 1987; Maher & Pusch, 1995; Palmer, 1993).

In South Africa, the women’s organisations of the 1950s and 1960s focused primarily on the rights and condition of women in the workplace and on the anti-apartheid struggle and its priorities. It neither addressed itself to issues of sexuality, nor did it situate itself within a feminist ideology. This means that that lesbians in South Africa have historically found it more difficult than gay men to find their own distinctive “space” and subculture. In spite of these difficulties, we have evidence that lesbian communities existed throughout this period – mostly in the form of small cliques of friends (Gevisser, 1994:22). During the 1970s, the gay subculture of both men and women underwent an expansion, mostly because developments in media improved communication and this meant that homosexuals of both genders were able to follow (to some extent) ideological and political trends in the United States and United Kingdom. I say “to some extent” because the censorship laws of South Africa under successive apartheid governments prevented all but the most innocuous texts from entering the country.

The worldwide AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s saw the development of new forms of political activism on a collective level and in communities that strengthened association and communality among gay people of both genders and among those who were most severely affected (initially, gay men). What has followed in the wake of the AIDS pandemic and discussions about safer sex is a resexualisation that reaffirms the existence of woman-to-woman sexual acts. But the old categories were forever superseded (Creith, 1996:45).

Lesbianism, once an act of passion between women, has now become a complex metaphor. Once defined by idiosyncratic sexual acts and private modes of self-understanding, lesbianism has now become a profoundly complex symbol that anchors a wide range of concerns, pleasures and anxieties (Plummer, 1995:141). As Zimmerman (1992:9) notes, “lesbian” is positioned as a metaphor among the radical

dispositions of dominant systems and discourses. The representation of lesbians as belonging to a single, homogenous group has also been questioned (Palmer, 1993:17). While sexual differences or proclivities between or among lesbians may be few, all other forms of difference (which are numerous) are important determining factors in the construction of self-identity. These differences include factors such as race, class, origins, employment status, age, religion and physical abilities, and while we may struggle against these differences within our “individual spaces”, they have a material and social reality that cannot simply be denied or wished away. It may well be the case that lesbian space could more easily be defined by difference than similarity (Zimmerman, 1992:12).

Stronger and stronger voices of resistance began to be heard... Some came from the distant wise observers while others came from different communities and different academic disciplines. Many voices even passed unheard in the great concatenation of social forces and movements that became ever more visible in parades, film festivals, television, printed media – and even in the spectre of some gay couples that lived openly together. And so the kingdom began to witness strange and troubling sights. Nothing anywhere seemed to be exactly the way that it had been previously. It was as though a spell had been cast on the land. It seemed apparent that people were beginning to reason independently of the King’s edicts, and groups of people were observed to be gathering together secretly or in public. Provinces emerged all over the country... Among these were the province of Structuralism, the province of Poststructuralism, the province of Social Constructionism, the province of Radical Feminism, and the province of Queer Theory. What was interesting was that these provinces had no clear boundaries. Some people even began to think that Postmodernism was taking over the world because so many disciplines and paradigms began to be defined in terms of overlapping boundaries and common interests. Boundaries became “soft” rather than “hard”. Fluidity became a distinguishing feature of the times. Some scholars began to declare that they had seen clearly from the beginning that social

construction and discursive⁵ practices determined all literature, research and scientific practice. If we are to understand the developments that took place in the history of the reign of King Heterosexuality, we need to pay attention to some of the developments in the *Book of Fables* (which deals with academic disciplines).

Now the King's secret began to crumble... Prominent scholars in all these provinces criticised the construction of the theories and interpretations that we unthinkingly use in society, and attempted to demonstrate their underlying inconsistency and fragmentation. One such prominent figure in the Province that has overlapping boundaries between Structuralism and Poststructuralism was Michel Foucault (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2002:148-150). Michel Foucault was a leading French scholar who was particularly interested in the "knowledge" of human beings and the various "powers" that act on human beings. His best-known statement is perhaps "Knowledge is Power". Because knowledge and power work primarily through language, Foucault focused throughout his work on one of the central concepts of the social sciences, namely the categorisation of people into normal and abnormal. He also emphasised that society's assumptions about abnormal people, madness, illness, criminality and perverted sexuality varies greatly in different times and in different epochs. The exclusion of abnormal people does not make these people dispensable to culture because what is "normal" cannot be defined except in contrast to what is "abnormal". Thus it is only through "abnormality" that "normality" can ever be known (Fillingham, 1993:5,17).

For Foucault the category "homosexual" is a product of the work of social control by scientists, jurists, psychiatrists, psychologists and sexologists, all of whom defined this category in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Corber & Valocchi, 2003:4). Here is one of his widely quoted statements:

In... the 19th century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology... The homosexual was now a species (Foucault, 1980, in Sullivan, 2003:4).

⁵ Discursive practices entail a focus on language, although this is beyond the scope of the thesis to elaborate extensively on how language shapes and construct sexualities.

The discourse practices construct “the homosexual” as different from the “straight” man or woman. It is in these discursive contexts that homosexuality is produced, created and recreated, and repeatedly offered as a constructed reality that forms an “unaccepted” part of society (King, 2004:123).

Foucault argues that we are all enmeshed in relations of power and that we are affected by the discourses about sexuality in complex ways. Power is not something that one group or group possesses in order to control another. Power is productive rather than simply oppressive. Power comprises a network of relationships among people who (in some minimal sense at least) are free to act and to resist. He does not deny the reality of domination but for him it is not the whole story; power can be positive and liberating as well as negative. Although power is unevenly distributed and concentrated in various social institutions, it does not operate unidirectional or hierarchical but can be circular and local (Corber & Valocchi, 2003; Dunphy, 2000; Fillingham, 1993; Mottier, 1998; Reddy, 2003; Sullivan, 2003).

Power in the Foucauldian account is discursive in nature and operates by means of the internalisation of norms. The subject is constituted in meaning systems, normative structures, and culturally prescribed taxonomies that circulate in society. Individuals internalise the norms generated by the discourses of sexuality while they participate in social institutions such as schools, clinics, prisons, churches, mental hospitals, and the mass media. As people internalise these discourses, they become self-regulating subjects, or subjects who “police” their own behaviour so that they will appear to be “normal”. As Plummer (2003:99) states: “We construct social worlds of the normal, and we use these to locate ourselves and our sense of the deviant or the aberrant.” One of Foucault’s most valuable contributions is the concept of “reverse” discourses. As we challenge stereotypes and labels – such as when, for example, lesbians and male homosexuals challenge discourses that define same-gender sexual attraction as “perversion”, we engage with the dominant discourses of the society in which we live. As soon as we do so, we are obliged to invent new labels and identities that may empower us in one way but that may also

limit and regulate us in other ways. In essence, according to Foucault, we *participate* in dominant systems of regulation as soon as we try to change them.

Although power relations and discourses may change, we can never escape from them. Resistance is a continuous process because although discourses are products of power, they in turn generate the power from which they derive their validity (Mottier, 1998:117). Power can never be completely overthrown. It can only be resisted or reversed because it can never be possessed. It can only be exercised. Power implies more than domination and repression. It can also be positive, productive and creative when it offers possibilities for action.

And so a deconstructive reading of heterosexuality and homosexuality entered the Book of Fables in this kingdom, and it changed the landscape forever...

A deconstructive reading of heterosexuality as something that is represented as natural and original (in the sense of being a primal condition), and discrete and essential, reveals that heterosexuality is logically dependent on its so-called opposite (homosexuality) for its identity. In other words, heterosexuality (and what is “natural”) logically includes what it excludes – homosexuality (and what is “unnatural”). It is at this point that Foucault’s work on power enables us to make a decisive point. Because power is circulated and never fixed, homosexuality *enables* heterosexuality to occupy a privileged position. It enables heterosexuality to function as the social norm from which homosexuality deviates. Heterosexuality therefore depends on homosexuality for its coherence and stability (Ingraham, 2002; Sullivan, 2003). The work of Foucault and queer theory enable us to describe sexuality as a regime of knowledge and power that structures the economic, political and social life of modern societies.

As if this was not enough, this powerful opponent, Sir Queer, emerged to threaten the peace and order of society, those routine mundane lives of ordinary people who just “live out coherent, defined and relatively unchanging sexual identities, fundamentally organised by the available positions of homo and heterosexuality, and also bisexuality that reiterates them” (Johnson, 2004:187).

Sir Queer and his attendant Meanings were out to cause discomfort because of the fluidity with which the term “queer” is used. This fluidity works to disrupt and alter understandings of sexual minorities and the way in which they see themselves and are regarded by society. Queer theory rejects the idea of “homosexuality” as a stable or autonomous category. It regards “homosexuality” as a logical necessary and supplementary term that stabilises heterosexuality by functioning as its binary opposite. It emphasises the existence of heterosexuality and interrupts silent assumptions about heterosexuality as a normative practice. The use of the word “queer” as opposed to “gay”, “lesbian” or “bisexual” decisively disrupts the notion of sexual identity as fixed and immutable. In other words, we use the word “queer” deliberately to complicate the apparently stable binary of “gay” and “straight”, and this causes a re-figuring of identities that contain unstable, and always multiple and partial positions (Butler, 1990; Corber & Valocchi, 2003; Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004).

Because of the predominantly binary structure of Western thought, intermediate categories such as bisexuality and transgenderism, and non-fixed variations of homosexuality such as cross-dressing, transsexuality, female-to-male transfers who identify themselves as lesbian, and even sadomasochism, have been widely ignored. This serves to emphasise that sexual categories are *social constructions* that open up new ways of thinking about a wide range of subcultural practices and identities, and that force researchers to rethink and reconsider the stratification of sexuality (Corber & Valocchi, 2003; Richardson & Seidman, 2002; Roseneil, 2002). A change from the perception that homosexuality is a discourse of deviance and illness to the perception that homosexuality is a discourse of gender and sexuality that is socially constructed, challenges many of the dominant meanings of homosexuality.

If we take Foucault’s analysis of power to its logical conclusion, we can see that the consolidation of the binary organisation of sexuality reified and further entrenched the category “homosexual”. The history of the gay liberation movement further illustrates the complexity of the nature of discursive power: despite the fact that it

shifted relations of power to some extent, it did not effect homosexuals' liberation from oppression. It inevitably created the need for further struggles that continue even now (Corber & Valocchi, 2003; Sullivan, 2003). Plummer (1998:85) also observes that the liberationists themselves became key definers of the homosexual role, thereby casting themselves as the primary regulators of their supposedly liberating definitions. Plummer adds that liberating social movements are never just that. By creating their own orthodoxies, they create a necessity for the regulation of the behaviour of people who have been "liberated" by their definitions.

Academic interruption:

This is something from which my study cannot escape. By merely using words and terms such as "gay families", "lesbian parents" and "children raised in same-gendered families", I circumscribe and entrench "homosexuality" by labelling and by categorisation. I would therefore prefer to follow in Plummer's example by saying that I am not studying "homosexuals", but "homosexual categories" or "homosexualities" (Plummer, 1998:85). This flows from the research done by Kinsey (Esterberg, 2001:218), who was the first to advocate the need to view homosexuality as existing on a seven-point continuum, where 0 means "exclusively heterosexual" and 6 means "exclusively homosexual". Kinsey's research has shown that human sexual experience can be more accurately represented by metaphors of flux, change and diversity. This in turn has contributed to the notion of "homosexualities" rather than "homosexuality".

Queer theory also suggested that it is impossible to classify sexualities into fixed sexual categories and that sexuality is often ambiguous, identifications are fluctuating, and sexuality is "strategically performed" (Butler, 1994; Reddy, 2003). This does not imply that it is possible to write or do research without setting up binaries. Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford (2002), and Johnson (2004), argue that most people live around the dichotomy of homo/heterosexuality. In spite of a significant increase in "toleration" of homosexual practices and identities over the past few years in many mostly First World, Western-influenced countries, homosexuality's habitual propensity to operate in terms of binaries has remained intact and that the

outside/inside dichotomy still prevails in the minds of most homosexual people. Johnson (2004) does not predict a “movement of incorporation or a disintegration of boundaries”, but rather representations of assertions of difference and rigidity, of “specialisation, of separating out, of producing defined and singular beings” (Johnson, 2004:186). Critics of queer theory such as Dunphy therefore argue that while queer theorists may *claim* they are opening up new possibilities for a politics of diversity, the reality is that their formulations depend on the validity (or otherwise) of an extreme subjectivism that reflects bourgeois individualism and that consequently defeats the aims of the collective struggle of lesbian and gay movements (Dunphy, 2000:138-139). She emphasises that queer scholars may well have forgotten the trauma that still attaches to coming out as gay in any society, while Klesse (2002:269) maintains that same-gender relations are increasingly tolerated but that, unlike respect, tolerance is an attitude that is based on disapproval and granted from a position of unequal power.

(We are now entering a space where the boundary of the story being told becomes blurred because I have no choice but to enter into and becoming part of the landscape of the King’s rule.)

The contribution of queer scholars is that they succeeded in raising an awareness of the fractured lines and tensions within sexual categories, a view that permits a more complex understanding of homosexuality and heterosexuality. For me, deconstructing the presumed opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality is vitally important because it enables us to acknowledge that experience, meaning and identity are all constructed. Only by seeing this can we begin to imagine alternative ways of thinking and of living. I agree with Esterberg (2002) that sexuality is a far more complex phenomenon than we had previously recognised.

And then one beautiful morning, the inevitable happened. Sir Queer met the Prince of the Kingdom, and the moment they laid eyes on each other, it was as though the Universe stood still... And the rest is history...

THE SECOND LINK IN A STRING OF RIBBONS THAT REFLECTS BUBBLE TWO

Situating families in the world of research

When King Heterosexuality heard what was happening, he became frantically alarmed. He commanded all his messengers, spies and bureaucrats to gather together immediately in his Royal Presence (all wise councillors had long since been abolished), and he ordered them to perform some Research. He wanted them to find out what had happened to that core of society which is called the family. Why? Because the King's only son and heir, the Prince, had announced that he wanted to marry Sir Queer – and they had jointly announced that they wanted to have a family... A family? A family? His son and another man? What madness!

And so the King waited impatiently for the research to be completed. As soon as it was completed, the Research Report was brought to him. Grimly, King Heterosexuality took his seat on his throne and commanded his Chamberlain to read the Research Report aloud to everyone assembled in the Great Hall of his Castle.



Carien:

I understand that an important question has arisen. This question is: “Why is research into families so important?”

The family is perhaps the most timeless, central and enduring of all social institutions. Because of this, the concept *family* is often taken for granted and not subjected to the critical scrutiny that it requires. It should therefore be helpful for me to relay some of the views of feminist scholars who argue that the family is an *ideologically* based concept, experience and institution. All the practical, material and ideological premises that we use in defining the concept *family* depend on the cultural assumptions about families and gendered relations within families themselves (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Gabb, 2001).

My personal position is that same-gendered families present new challenges to the privatised nuclear family. Same-gendered families raise suspicions and engender scepticism in some quarters because any departure from the “traditional” family system and structure raises uncomfortable questions such as “What is a parent?”, “What is a family?”, “What is a father and what is a mother?” Same-gendered families challenge dominant notions not only of gender but also of sexuality. The categories “lesbian mother” and “gay father” might seem to imply that a parent's *sexual* orientation is the most important factor in a gay person's parenting skills. King (2004:123) argues that people assume that to be gay means being sexual. Thus, I agree with Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh (2004:151) that the queer family is “hyper-sexualised”. Bernstein and Reimann (2001:5) argue that it is in gay parenting that we will experience the heteronormativity – and therefore the opposition – of society most powerfully. This happens because our modern Western social construction of sexuality masks a very real groundswell of opposition to the homo/hetero dichotomy and the maintenance of strict sexual borders that such a dichotomy requires. Although its opposition to any blurring of sexual boundaries is usually unspoken and ironically silent, heterosexuality remains the ever-present and influential sub-text of modern sexual discourse. When homosexuality comes “out of the closet”, this coming out is reflected in a specific

domain of written and spoken discourse. In contrast to this, the social construction of heterosexuality is hidden, and it establishes a normative and “natural” sexual identity at the expense of homosexuality. Heterosexuality remains foundational, normative and original, as opposed to the enduring problematic *other*, homosexuality, that usually maintains the silence (Johnson, 2004:188). While the normativity of heterosexual families remains silent, it is usually homosexuality that conspires to maintain the silence.

In such circumstances, it seems incontrovertible to assert that the “married, two-parent heterosexual couple” is the norm against which all other kinds of couples are measured, evaluated and judged. The view that same-gender couples are significantly different from and inferior to hetero-gender couples, is still widely prevalent in Westernised society and in the relatively few countries in which such family arrangements are permitted. These generally assumed and usually unchallenged belief systems create a dominant narrative of what a family is or should be – a narrative that maintains that heterosexuality is the only rightly sanctioned mode of intimate relationships and family life. This dominant narrative creates a perception that the same-gendered family is different and something “other” or alternative.

Because most families convey strong heterosexual messages, they provide many opportunities for their children to receive positive reinforcement, approval and validation for their heterosexual orientation. This is also true of South Africa which is traditionally a strongly family-based society with a culture in which the traditional family is prominent, powerful, visually present and valued. Most parents encourage the dating of opposite-gendered individuals, marriage and eventually children – especially as adolescence and sexual maturity approach (Hunter & Mallon, 2000:230-231). Even the knowledge and values that are socially constructed in educational settings are constructed along heterosexual lines and are bound up with the organisation and regulation of the heterosexual family. According to Epstein, O' Flynn and Telford (2002:272), myths of “happy heterosexuality” are abound at every stage of childhood development – from the

playhouse of the nursery school to the dating games of senior primary and secondary schools and universities. Children come to understand the hetero/homosexuality is a natural dichotomy that “proves” that heterosexuality is a normal and desirable end in itself. Heterosexual behaviour and language are integrated and imposed to such a degree within the school culture that they have come to constitute a norm that reflects what is “natural”.

But heterosexist "nuclear" family concepts and language do not describe the reality of family connections in many other minority groups (Clunis & Green, 2000:42). Sullivan (2003:49) and Dunphy (2000:81) note that heterosexual women who are on welfare, and single mothers and/or women of colour who do not fit the ideal image of heterosexual femininity, are also often perceived as something other than “normal”. Bernstein and Reimann (2001:4) argue that being different from the “ideal white, bourgeois, native-born family” continues to be interpreted as the primary cause of a groups’ social problems (such groups would include, at the most obvious level, immigrant families and families of colour) and of “society’s ills” in general. Invisibility and heteronormative assumptions play out differently for birthmothers and co-mothers of a same-gendered family. Thus, for example, when a child and his/her two mothers are in public settings such as department stores or visits to doctors, the role of the “second” mother becomes “unintelligible” to many strangers or observers and thus requires legitimation and explanation (Bernstein & Reimann, 2001:10).

Heterosexuality and its accompanying destiny in straight nuclear families are still assumed as a desirable norm for “ordinary” people, although this singular view cannot be taken for granted anymore in the realm of academic scholarship (Zimmerman, 1992:13). Queer scholars argue that gay individuals and families are moving “beyond the closet” and that we are entering a post-gay era (Roseneil, 2002:38). Ellis and Murphy (1994:65) state that challenges and alternatives to traditional views about “appropriate” gender roles and relationships are increasing in psychological practice and theory and that there is a growing accumulation of data that confirms psychological similarities among different types of couples.

Reflexive heterosexual identities are becoming increasingly widespread, and all over the Western world heterorelations have a significantly less sure hold on the general population across the generations. Sasha Roseneil (2002:34) remarks that at the beginning of the 21st century, there are few families that do not include at least some members who diverge from traditional, normative, heterorelational practice, whether as divorcees, unmarried mothers and fathers, singles, lesbians, gay men or bisexuals. She argues that we are experiencing the “queering of the family”, as the constituted meaning of family faces radical challenges and more and more kinship groups have come to terms with the diverse sexual practices and living arrangements chosen by their own family members. Valerie Lehr (1999:145) holds a similar view, namely that the married, co-resident heterosexual couple with children no longer occupy the centre ground in Western societies and cannot be taken for granted as the basic unit in society. Processes of individualisation and the weakening of the bonds of tradition are increasingly releasing individuals from traditional heterosexual scripts and from the patterns of heterorelationality which accompany them. Postmodern living arrangements are diverse, fluid and unresolved; they are constantly chosen and re-chosen, and heterorelations are no longer as hegemonic as they once were.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (in Roseneil, 2002:32-33) also share the view that individualisation, de-traditionalisation and self-reflexivity are opening up new possibilities and increasing expectations in heterosexual relationships, which nowadays are characterised far more by processes of negotiation and negotiated commitments. Such processes are replacing the traditional obligations that blood ties alone required people to fulfil in the 19th century and before. It is this self-reflexivity that Mottier (1998:114) utilises to broaden Foucault’s critique of sexology by arguing that sexological discourse can also be a “reflexive resource for the active shaping of the sexual self”. This reflexivity means that sexuality is the locus not only of disciplinary power/knowledge mechanisms, but also of liberating practices of self-fashioning. If this is so, I propose that in spite of being situated as “other” in the dominant heteronormative discourse, same-gendered families comprise individuals who actively shape their own lives and experiences.

What queer scholarship contributes to the richness of our understanding of families and the way in which individuals and society function resides in its description of a far richer understanding of the world in which we live. It is no longer possible to maintain one privileged view in the world of scholarship at least, and we as researchers, scientists and scholars should give an accurate account of the diversity and plurality that we encounter in ways that people live their lives. Being confronted with the notion that sexualities are fluid and open, and that we can move beyond the fixed fundamental categories of homo/hetero binaries, challenges each of us to be self-reflexive and to actively shape and reshape our lives. Whether or not this is practically possible for everyone, I do not know. But it certainly calls for a more flexible approach to parenting and the view that we take of families. The complexity that we detect in understanding “family” is further evidence of postmodernist influences in the world in which we live in. Absolute meaning has collapsed in many sectors of society because society itself offers more choice, fragmentation and diversity (Kidd, 1999:12). Even though societies have always been ambiguous, variable, conflicted and changing, conservative notions of “the family”, of what it really means to be “a man”, “a woman”, and “the truth” about our sexuality, are all ideas that have been seriously interrogated in modern times. Whereas we once spoke exclusively of “men and women”, a postmodernist sensibility would speak of masculinities, femininities and genders (Plummer, 2003:19).

No universally accepted definition of what is meant by “family” exists. Families are not “things” that are done to us, they are happenings, practices and processes - we “do” the family though acting in life. We create or make families through our choices and actions in life. The postmodern approach to family is characterised by choice, freedom, diversity, ambivalence and fluidity. Postmodern interpretations of the family argue that it is no longer possible to claim that any one type of family is “better”, more “natural”, or more “normal” than another. This latter kind of thinking is a residue of modernist and conservative thought in which social actors searched for fixed meanings about life and ready-made truths according to which life could (and should) be lived (Kidd, 1999:13). This kind of thinking negate a core

issue, that family revolves around relationships, and relationships cannot be prescribed or structured and cannot be lived within fixed guidelines.

Plummer (2003:8) explains that most of us live simultaneously in traditional, modern and postmodern worlds. Old stories remain side by side with the new, because for every new story, a rival one may be adduced from the past, and stories about “new” family configurations are countered by tales of “family values” and the inevitability and normality of heteronormativity. There will always be opposition to whatever is new and non-traditional. There will always be “someone who is going to say no to the queer, ‘Don’t touch me’. Don't touch me because you’re sick and you’ll contaminate me, ..., or you’ll contaminate Western civilisation” (Dinshaw, 1999:173). Many prefer to cling to what they falsely idealise as a simpler and kinder past because they feel anxious and insecure. They try to preserve their distinctive identity as a person or group in contemporary societies that are changing with bewildering rapidity. Such nostalgic and authoritative voices can be heard emanating from religious fundamentalists of every kind, whether they be the fundamentalists of the religious right from the “Bible Belt” of the United States or Muslim fundamentalists from the Middle Eastern countries. In Western countries, people regret what they regard as a threat to the alleged sanctity of the nuclear family by opposing the legalisation of gay marriages (Kirkpatrick, 2004; Lacayo, 2004). Even in South Africa, homosexual identities have been condemned (McGill, 2002; Prins, 2003; Whisson, 2003). Stephanie Coontz (1992:2) explains that people often yearn for an idealised romantic past that never existed in the first place, or for the kind of happy and devoted family that was alleged to have existed in a world now lost. This kind of family is actually a sentimental delusion that forms part of the happily-ever-after mythology that middle-class people hark back to in plain contradiction of the record of what actually happened. Such pious hopes demonstrate how many of our “memories” of how families were in the past function primarily as mythical stories that are useful for morale building and family cohesiveness and exclusivity. “Families have always been in flux and often in crisis; they have never lived up to nostalgic notions about ‘the way things used to be’ ” (Coontz, 1992:2).

When I consider the words of Lévi-Strauss (1978:20) that the “more civilisation becomes homogenised, the more internal lines of separation become apparent, and what is gained on one level is immediately lost on another... I don’t see how mankind can really live without some internal diversity”, I realise that even though we live in a world influenced by postmodern ideas, we cannot realistically hope that the recent increases in harmony, tolerance and open-mindedness will remain as permanent features of society. I personally still long for a greater acceptance of diversity, compassion and gracefulness. My consolation is that my humble opinion resonates with one of the most outspoken and intelligent contemporary exponents of humanism, that of Ken Plummer (2003:146). Plummer writes:

Of course people will not agree with each other, but they may learn to engage in dialogues... People may become willing to award each other some respect... If we can learn how to talk and how to listen, we may sense that in the end there are some common values that hold humanity together.

This is what I am interested in. My intention is to explore how children of same-gender parents live in the postmodern world, and how they negotiate the world inside and outside their families. I shall not assume that the child’s experiences of home and family life differ from those of a heterosexual family. I am primarily interested in negotiating relationships in their own “landscapes” outside of their homes. For the purposes of this study, I presuppose the theoretical argument that a dominant discourse/narrative in society assumes a normative status of a heterosexual family *in everyday life* for those families that I interviewed.

We utilise our experience to construct our reality, and children growing up with lesbian mothers certainly have experiences that shape their reality. Johnson and O’Connor (2001:7) state that “parenting is universal... But the day-to-day experiences that our family encounter can be unique. The homophobia that surrounds us affects our families in subtle and not so subtle ways.” The scarcity of positive images and the abundance of negative stereotypes, as well as the invisibility of same-gendered families in the institutions outside the family, all combine to create a sense of difference, uniqueness, and secrecy (Bernstein & Reimann, 2001; Wright, 2001). The children growing up in same-gender families are simultaneously members of gay

and straight communities. Little is known about the ways in which children in same-gendered families function within predominantly heterosexual (“straight”) communities, what makes such functioning possible, and what makes it easy or difficult to manage.

Let me return for a while to how same-gendered families contradict in practice the sexual and gender dimorphism upon which the traditional family is based. What lesbian families or their male counterparts succeed in achieving is to transfer the traditional focus away from *gender*⁶ in parenting and families. In addition, the development of reproductive technologies in the past few decades has challenged gender divisions by allowing potential parents to enjoy the advantages of *reproduction* without engaging in any sexual activity at all with a member of the opposite sex. This has given same-gender couples opportunities to procreate within the bonds of same-gender relationships (Bernstein & Reimann, 2001; Lützen, 1998; Plummer, 2003). Because of this pioneering work, *parenting* has also been freed from the bonds of gender and sexual activity undertaken for purposes of procreation. The lesbian couple as a family challenges the normative conceptions of the traditional model of the two-parent (hetero-gender) family because it is socially and legally constructed from a biological model of reproduction. Giddens (1991:2) has given us the (rather odd) term “plastic sexuality” by which he means that human sexuality has been liberated to follow whatever paths are right and “natural” to individuals (whatever their sexual orientation or preferences may be), and that intimate relationships between men and women have been freed from the exigencies of reproduction. He stated that “pure relationships” of emotional equality are emerging between men and women, and that lesbians and gay men have been “pioneers” in experimenting with “pure relationships” and “plastic sexuality”.

⁶ Implicit in this conceptualisation of gender relations is that male and female, masculinity and femininity are oppositional and mutually exclusive categories. In our postmodern world gender categories are also being contested. One of the most influential writers is Judith Butler. Her central argument is that gender is constructed and performed.

The same-gendered family offers a more egalitarian view of parenthood that one can see, for example, in shared parenting with lesbians. Gender difference still shape roles and functions in the family among many heterosexual couples. While Jackson and Scott (2004:240) confirm the view that while the egalitarian ideals pioneered by homosexual couples have had an influence on heterosexual couples in formal relationships and that such ideals have even become embedded within contemporary discourses, asymmetrical relationships are still widely prevalent among men and women in marriage relationships. The fact that lesbians are more likely to share parenting equally and challenge traditional conservative gender arrangements seems to imply that gender is primarily a function of the division of labour (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Malone & Cleary, 2002; Patterson, 1995). This is not to deny that some lesbian parents replicate heterosexual (male/female) role divisions – a practice that Dunne (2000:134) calls “theoretical heterosexism”. Some lesbian couples do indeed play out traditional roles of provider and nurturer/caregiver. But that is a choice that has to be respected.

For some queer scholars, same-gendered families offer a post-patriarchal vision of what families could be like if people were willing to abandon centuries of conditioning and accept a gender-neutral discourse that is sympathetic to the kind of feminist legal reform that discards the categories of “mother” and “father” and collapses them into the more generic concept of “parent” (Dunne, 2000:12). The cultural change towards a more egalitarian model of parenting is evident in same-gendered families as same-gender parental couples find solutions to problems such as how to make time for the children as well as time to earn a living. Because they are same-gender parents, couples have to consciously negotiate agreed definitions of boundaries, meanings, and the attributes of parenthood that they wish to implement in their lives and families. Lesbian parents and their children transgress the normative status of heterosexuality in relation to reproduction and the organisation of parenting roles. Activities that are usually traditionally dichotomised between mother and father are redefined or incorporated. In the end these transgressive modalities offer more opportunities for cooperation and creativity, and in doing so they demonstrate the viability of non-heterosexual

parenting models. It is indeed the absence of gender differences that permit a reconstruction of the cultural values of family and parenting (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Walters, 2000).

Parenting can be understood and analysed culturally in terms of gender. The argument of Judith Butler (1990) is that if gender is a *performance* and connected within a heterosexual matrix, and if gender performances can be imitated in ways that are not necessarily linked to fixed gendered identities grounded in nature, bodies or heterosexuality, then *parenting can also be defined in terms of a performance*. As I have argued above, we “do” the family through performing various acts in life, just as we “do” or perform gender. And just as gender is constructed, so also are families constructed. I therefore argue that both *parenting* and *family* are constructed and performed. Gender and parenting should be regarded as fluid variables that shift and change to suit different contexts at different times. What are the implications of this for parenting? They offer people who want to be parents the possibility of choosing, forming and performing their own individual identities as parents in a way that brings their unique abilities, strengths, skills and talents into play. It challenges society to disregard the stigmas of the past. Is it inherently important if the mother of a family changes a light bulb or services the car? Or the father cooks, minds the children, and takes care of the garden? Or indeed if all these functions are efficiently performed in a same-gendered family in which the children are loved, nurtured, cared for and protected? What we can learn from this is that parental roles, duties and functions can be performed in a wide variety of ways that are not linked to gender stereotypes. It also makes it clear that if people are willing to relinquish their traditional dogmas and stereotypes about gender and sexuality, structural variables, such as the gender composition of families and the division of parental performances, are less important than process variables such as the quality of relationships and the quality of care given to the children (Clarke, 2000; Dunne, 2000; Malone & Cleary, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

Before we analyse the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families, we need to be aware of the plurality of views that have a bearing on my analysis of the research findings. So please be patient while I describe how same-gendered families are differently represented in the research literature.

In general, most of the research that describes how children in same-gender households fare suggests that such families produce gender-syntonic and well-adjusted children. Some research even suggests that many of the children growing up in same-gendered families possess attributes that make them superior in terms of their adaptive and social skills. The research in general repeatedly emphasises as a theoretical proposition that same-gendered families are either equal to or superior to heterosexual families in areas of parenting, social support and individual member adjustment (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Malone & Cleary, 2002; Patterson, 2000).

It is possible that researchers from this theoretical proposition are attempting to give same-gendered families due credit for being equal to and even better than heterosexual families so that they become eligible for normalisation in society (as an alternative to heterosexual families), and so that current social prejudices and legal obstacles to their establishment in society might eventually be relaxed. One might caution at this point that any normalisation process will inevitably effect an internalisation and therefore a re-idealisation of the traditional notion of the family (the ideal of the heterosexual family). This “reverse” discourse that is set into motion by the production of power is evident in the literature. There one sees how the opposing viewpoints of the “otherness” (the confrontation or transformation viewpoint) and “sameness” (the assimilation viewpoint) of homosexualities are in constant tension.

Scholars such as Clarke (2002a, 2002b), Coyle and Kritzinger (2002) and Stacey and Biblarz (2001) repeatedly question the claim that there are no significant differences between children brought up in heterosexual and homosexual families. Their cautionary stance is founded on the suggestion that such claims are based upon a

“highly defensive” conceptual framework that has been evoked by heterosexist ideology. The implication is that such “defensive” findings are created to counter the homophobia that still flourishes in cultures and societies throughout the world – homophobia that feeds on cultural stereotypes. The corollary is that research that has assimilation as a covert goal will fail to emphasise any differences between same-gendered and “traditional” families. In the face of such negative prognostications, one should not overlook the fact that the research that has been done might indeed point towards valid conclusions.

The danger of assimilation is that it can lead to decontextualisation and desexualisation and that this will effect but a minimum transformation in the field of sexualities. Victoria Clarke (Clarke, 2002a:108-112; Clarke, 2002b:217-218) assesses the political costs and benefits of assimilation representations that “normalise” same-gendered families. As far as she is concerned, the political benefits are that researchers might succeed in making same-gendered families seem more sympathetic (acceptable) to families to potentially hostile or ignorant heterosexuals, and that this might make them “safe” and viable in the long run. In her opinion, the drawback of such defences of same-gendered families is that they may serve to reinforce heterosexual and gender-biased norms rather than to transform, deconstruct or resist them. What happens in such cases is that gay images merely become assimilated while core underlying values that support the heteronormative values of society remain unchallenged. Savin-Williams and Esterberg (2000:209) confirm such a point of view when they argue that the emphasis on *similarities* between lesbian and gay parents and heterosexual parents does not, ultimately, serve lesbian and gay parents or their children. The “sameness” or assimilation discourse is fundamentally defensive, and apologises or ignores points of potential conflict rather than celebrating diversity and uniqueness.

Another position is to accept that a continuous tension exists between confrontation and accommodation, and between political advocacy and social understanding. Debates between these opposing discourses have been evident from the early beginnings of the nascent gay movements of the 1960s in America and Britain.

These debates invariably centre on whether “we are just like everyone else, except who we sleep with, or if we are indeed on the margins: the centre versus the margin, the normative versus the deviant, the straight versus the queer, assimilation versus transformation” (Nardi, 2002:47). As Zimmerman (1992:4) suggests, “lesbian” is positioned as a metaphor that acts as a radical critique of dominant systems and discourses. The radical and social constructions of same-gendered families challenge socio-political system and institutions, they are less defensive and apologetic, and they acknowledge and celebrate being different from the “norm”. Even some queer theorists insist that homosexuality must always remain outside the mainstream because homosexuals anyway exist outside society – and they want it to stay that way. These theorists critique what it means to be a “good citizen” by pushing the boundaries of normativity (Plummer, 2003; Sullivan, 2003; Walters, 2000).

The debates surrounding the legalisation of gay marriages certainly draw attention to these pluralist views. For some gay people, gay marriages (and the resultant legalisation of the co-adoption and co-parenting of children) represent the last struggle for equal opportunities in the fight against discrimination. Gay marriages and their consequences send a message to straight society that says: “We are just like you with the same needs and longings and appropriate roles” (Lützen, 1998:241). For other gay people, the family is a most potent symbol and cornerstone of heterosexual privilege, and if one is “truly” gay, one will oppose these traditional institutions. In the latter view, gay and lesbian marriages *reinforce* heterocentric models of living together, they merge models of parenting and partnering (Walters, 2000:55), and they serve to marginalize the unmarried (Plummer, 2003:44).

Another viewpoint argues that relationships and not marriage should at the present time be the most significant form of intimacy amongst gays – and many straights. In modern Western-orientated societies, relationships and parenthood are currently being continuously separated because of the high incidence of divorce and because reproduction and sexuality have become separated. While relationships and sexuality have become private affairs, parenthood is still a public affair. Lützen

(1998:238) is of the opinion that registered partnerships have been legalised in countries like Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands because marriage for so many people has become an empty institution. The fact that many of these states sanction same-gender relationships, but not same-gender parenthood, reinforces the traditional heteronormative dogma that a child should grow up with a father and a mother. Others argue that a “registered partnership” is not equal to “marriage”, particularly in legal and economic terms because the institution of marriage confers extensive financial and social benefits (Halvorsen, 1998; Lacayo, 2004; Singh, 1995).

I agree with Altman (2002:415) that the advantage (for researchers) of such a plurality of viewpoints is that they create opportunities for researchers (1) to investigate whether the different modes and structures that lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual people pioneer for themselves are able successfully to accommodate their romantic, sexual and friendship relations, and (2) to examine the values that inform marriages and families in different societies.

As I reflect on the ways in which discourses of sameness and difference can shape and construct same-gender parenting *and* same-gendered families, I follow the analytical framework presented by Victoria Clarke (2000b:211-216). This analytical framework focuses on four dimensions of difference that inform lesbian parenting. I extrapolate it to same-gendered families in general and implicitly accept her constructionist point of view that assumes that concepts, categories and ideas do not *reflect* the world as it is – but that they (instead) *make* the world what it is (Clarke, 2002b:211). From a constructionist point of view, “truth” is contingent upon social processes. But I will discuss this in more detail in Bubble Three. The four dimensions are four different positions from which to view and construct same-gendered families. Underlying these positions is the predominantly binary thinking of western society. I visualise these four dimensions as follows:

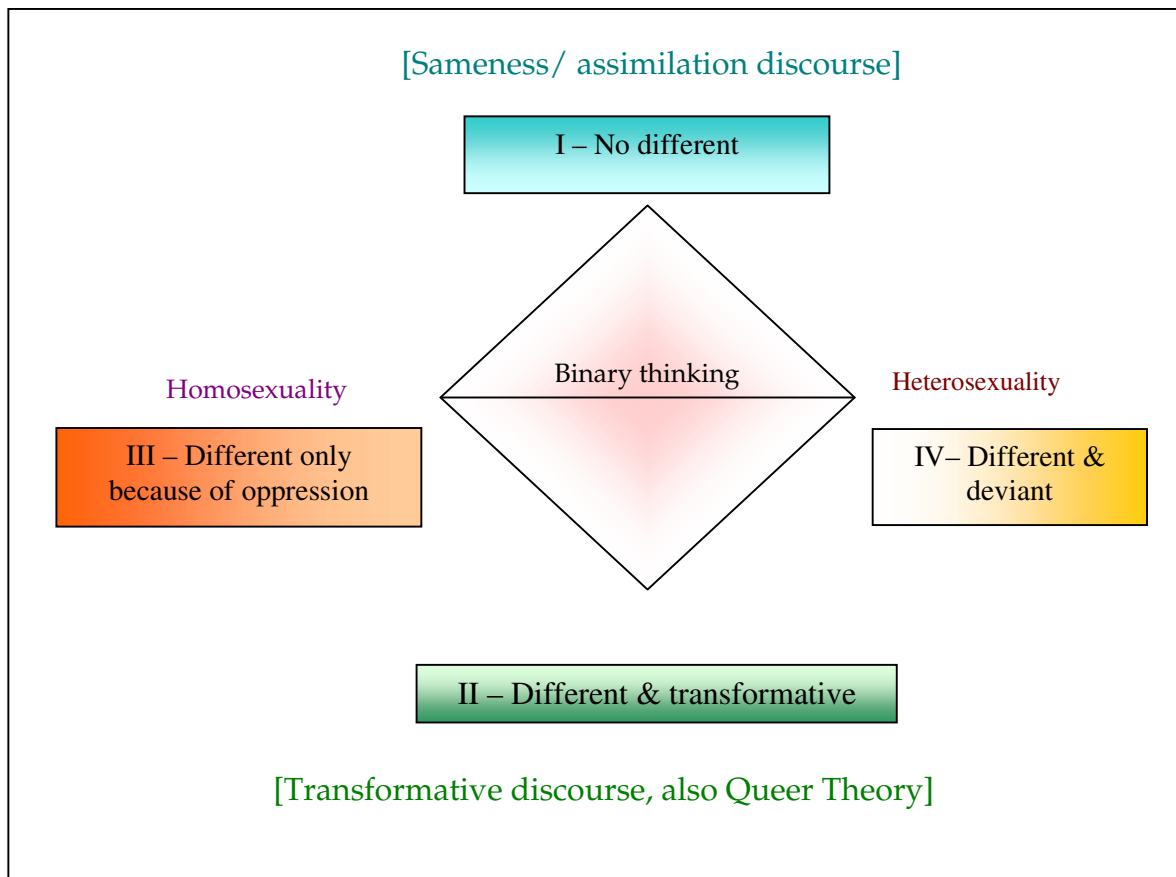


Figure 2.1: (Pre)conceptual framework of constructing same-gendered families, adapted from Clarke (2002b)

Dimension I: No different

Same-gendered families are seen as “no different”. The basic assumption is that sexuality or sexual identity is but one small part or minor aspect of all human personalities. Similarities between heterosexuality and homosexuality are emphasised on an individual and family level. Negative stereotyping is challenged and acceptance of same-gendered families is encouraged because same-gendered families reflect part of the rich diversity of humanity. This dimension forms part of the assimilation discourse that I have discussed in the above section.

In this construction of homosexuality as equal to heterosexuality, heterosexuality is once again established as the norm. This dimension therefore ignores the power and structures that support and privileges heterosexuality (Clarke, 2002b:211-212).

Dimension II: Different and transformative

This dimension is inspired mainly by lesbian feminist work that celebrates lesbian difference. These analysts reject the emphasis on similarities and focus on lesbian parenting as “a living statement of the concept of difference” (Goodman, in Clarke, 2002b:214). They honour lesbian parenting and never apologise for it because in their view it offers a unique opportunity to birth and raise children in a revolutionary way that contributes to social transformation instead of assimilation into the mainstream of “heteromotherhood”. Even for radical lesbian feminists, parenting is a political act because they regard it as an act of rebellion against and repudiation of patriarchal models. Nevertheless, this dimension challenges lesbian parenting to move beyond “equality” by exploring new ways of parenting. This dimension is characteristic of anti-essentialist or transformative discourse, and is placed in the figure opposite the sameness/assimilation discourse.

The downside of this dimension is that “research” can be used to service political goals. It may neglect to engage in a fight for the liberation of same-gender parents and fail to draw attention to the invisibility of lesbians in liberal discourse (Clarke, 2002b:215).

Dimension III: Different only because of oppression

This dimension’s basic assumption is that the differences of same-gendered families are not chosen but are imposed by society by means of oppression. In this dimension, there is an underlying acceptance that same-gendered and heterosexual families are inherently the same because life in same-gendered families is just as “varied, challenging, comforting, amusing, frustrating and rewarding” as life in any other kind of family (Nelson in Clarke, 2002b:215). Heteronormativity and homophobia are the main sources of systemic difference that challenge same-gendered families. It is thus assumed that once these societal forces are reformed, same-gendered families will be normalised. This dimension synthesises ideas from liberalism and radical feminism, namely the liberal emphasis on sameness and radical feminist ideas about specific forms of oppression that same-gender parents endure. Research in this domain prefers to use the idiosyncratic voices of same-

gendered families in (for example) narrative research because of the richness, depth and immediacy that narrative research provides if one compares it to the lack of such elements in statistical data (Clarke, 2002b:216).

This dimension ignores the possibility that same-gender parents might *choose* to be different and disregard any of the positive qualities that are associated with marginality.

Dimension IV: Different and deviant

This dimension is associated with work done by anti-lesbian/anti-gay psychologists and other scholars who entertain strong fundamentalist moral beliefs. They typically argue that there are numerous differences between same-gendered and heterosexual families that are indicative of gay/lesbian pathology and deviance (Cameron & Cameron, 1997; Cameron, 1999; Cameron, Cameron & Landess, 2001). They construct these alleged differences as a source of danger and a threat to societal values and stability (Clarke, 2002b:213-214).

I have placed Dimension III and IV opposite each other in the figure because they reflect in my mind the dichotomies between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

This preconceptual framework constitutes the foundation upon which this study is based. It is an open framework which permits the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families to be investigated. For me it is important to situate the different positions or perspectives on same-gendered families into these four dimensions because they provide a framework in which to analyse relevant literature, as well as a point of reference from which to reflect upon data creation, analysis and the interpretation processes. These dimensions, especially the first three, are present and assumed throughout this study.

My dear King and fellow listeners, I have looked at the construction of families in society, and have contemplated the assimilation and transformative frameworks in which gay and lesbian literature can be analysed. It is now vital for me to reflect on the relationship between private lives and public debates, that is, the relationship between the individual and society.

Carien directs everyone who is present to turn and look towards the back of the Great Hall. All the people who have gathered in the Great Hall turn around and look towards the stage at the back. There they see a symbolic dance, ever-present and subliminal, being performed... This dance is both private and public. It is the dance that takes place between private lives and public debates...

Ken Plummer (2003:69,70) states that what appears to be personal is in reality connected to, structured by, and/or regulated through the public sphere. The most personal events and the most private activities of family lives are ultimately engulfed in legislation that regulates marriage, divorce, child care and so forth. Personal lives are thus connected with what is public and political in ways that might sometimes be difficult to discern.

Plummer uses the concept of “intimate citizenship” to hint at worlds in the making – worlds in which a public language of “intimate troubles” is emerging around issues of intimacy in the private lives of individuals. Intimate citizenship looks at “the decisions people have to make over *the control (or not)* over one’s body, feelings, relationships; *access (or not)* to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc.; and *social grounded choices (or not)* about identities, gender experiences and erotic experiences. It does not imply one model, one pattern or one way” (Plummer’s emphases). He regards these as sensitising concepts that are open and evocative (Plummer, 2003:14). Private and personal decisions connect human beings with public debates. For him, the 21st century is inviting us, as never before, to consider the great variety of possible ways in which we may live out our lives. Some of the new critical discourses that are developing are new forms of publicly recognised “family” life. These include same-gendered families – a topic that has

generated intense public debate about how to live a personal and intimate life in a postmodern and global world (Plummer, 2001, 2003).

Same-gendered families are exemplars of the increasingly rich and diverse forms that modern Western societies are allowing to emerge. The forms that I wish to discuss here are ways of living together that are based on mutual support. The very concepts of kinship and family are becoming increasingly contested. Some families in our time no longer have a deep need to be based on links created by biology and blood. Many new personal stories have emerged around “families we choose or create” rather than “blood/biological families”. Kath Weston (1995:94-96) explains that same-gendered families are more than just biologically tied. Instead they define kinship in terms of those people who will “be there” for them. Weston states that this happened mainly because some gays were cut off from their biological kin once they had come out. Gays and lesbians contend that same-gendered families are every bit as legitimate as other forms of kinship because their family relationships have lasted. Stability, strength and commitment are used to identify and determine who or what counts as “family”. Plummer (1995:154) also supports this by saying that gays may create mutual networks of support, care and friendship that are as strong as those of heterosexual families (and perhaps even stronger) because they are chosen rather than simply given. Another way of “creating” families (these are called families-by-choice) is when lesbians and gay men adopt children or “create” children through artificial insemination. Some gays and lesbians marry heterosexual spouses and raise families, and then only decide or realise at a later stage that a gay or lesbian relationship is what they would really prefer. Gays and lesbians may be uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters or grandparents. While the lives of lesbians and gays are connected to “family” in every direction, stories about this diversity have rarely, and then only recently, been told.

I would like to reflect upon the concept of *care* that Valerie Lehr (1999) introduced as she contemplated in depth some of the functions that families perform in our society. For Lehr, one of the main functions of a family is to provide care for infants,

dependants and young children. She notes that this usually happens in a gender-specific way. If (in contrast to what happens now) the responsibility of providing care is not seen as a family responsibility but as a social concern, we will have to evaluate individuals and society in new ways. In a society with different moral boundaries, we would have to refrain from asking, "Am I (or are we) living in accordance with the moral precepts of my/our society and with universal moral precepts?", and would instead have to ask, "How am I/we best fulfilling my/our caring responsibilities?" (Lehr, 1999:147). This latter question implies that our evaluation of our caring requires that we consider not just our own actions, but how others for whom we are caring receive and experience these actions. She calls this "responsiveness" and says that it is a central component of the practice of caring. *Responsiveness* suggests a different way of understanding the needs of others: it requires that we consider the other's position in terms of how that other expresses it.

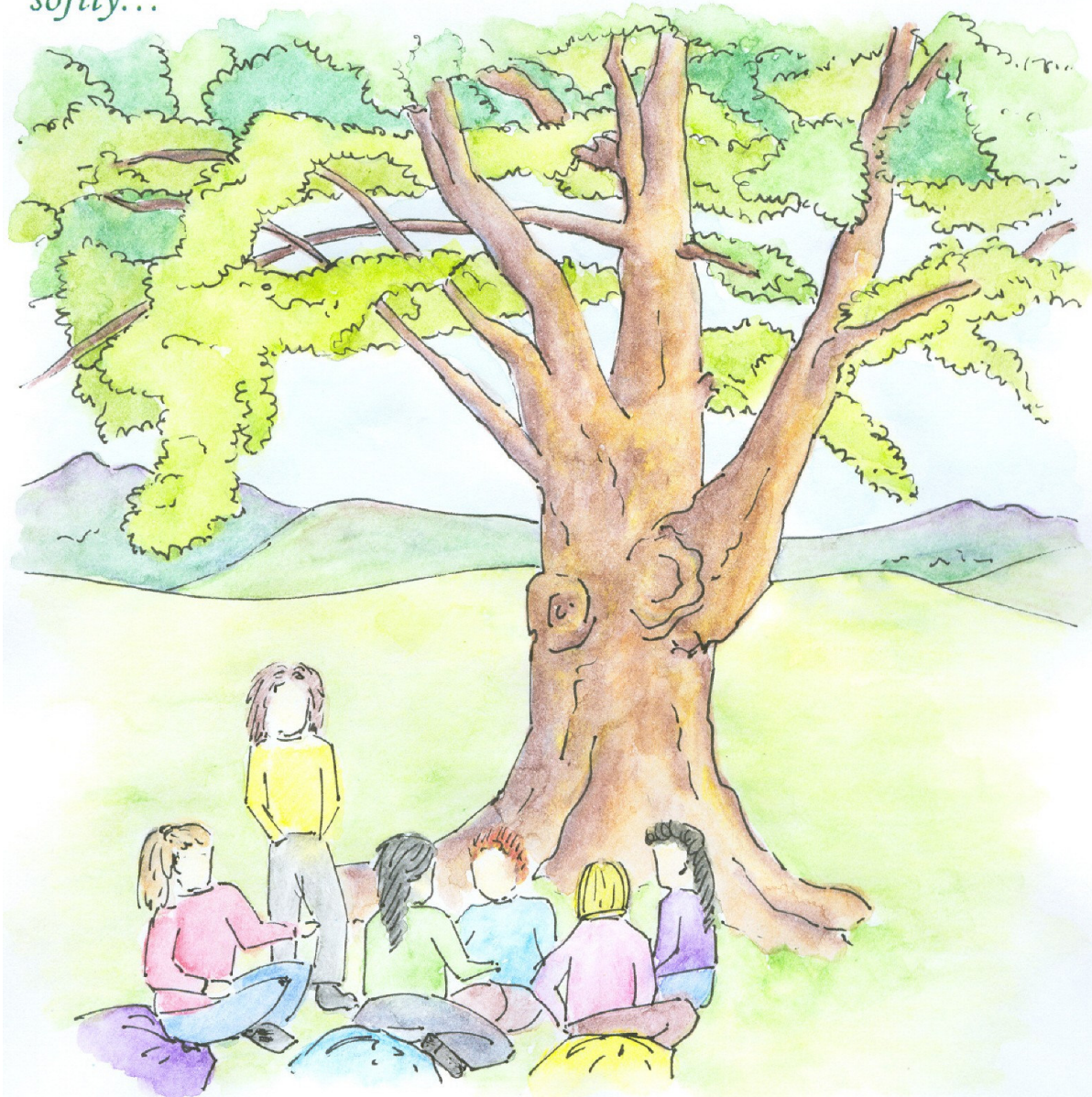
Her argument for care as a fundamental form of self-assessment encourages us to adopt a more empathetic form of engagement with others. It enhances and reinforces values of care, compassion and understanding so that we engage with others from a position of acceptance of pluralism and diversity. It also encourages a more compassionate way of living, of acceptance (and not mere tolerance), and an absence of springing to judgement. She states that although individuals need to construct moral ideals for themselves, an acceptance of cultural pluralism helps individuals to examine and re-examine their values. Moral decision making and political decision making entail a complex process of critical reflection, action and interaction with others. Simplistic, two-dimensional and authoritarian/patriarchal precepts no longer serve as adequate solutions to complex social problems (Lehr, 1999:149). In Lehr's view, same-gendered families create a counter narrative that opposes the dominant ideology that only one type of family is normative, that only certain approved forms of family are capable of meeting the caring needs and producing individuals who are capable of performing moral actions within a democratic society.

And so a profound and weighty silence fell upon all who had gathered in the Great Hall. Slowly, thoughtfully, one by one, they left the Great Hall and the Castle, and each one pondered what had been said...

THE THIRD LINK IN A STRING OF RIBBONS THAT REFLECTS BUBBLE TWO

Critical analysis of research on same-gendered families

And so, in this land, far, far away, high upon a hill, with fertile valleys and streams below, a few people gather in a circle under a great Elm tree. The sun breaks splendidly through the clouds and its light sparkles among the leaves. Gentle breezes cool the brows and lift the hair of those who have gathered here. For a long time they are silent, and then one of them starts to speak slowly and softly...



Carien: I would like to share what I have with you and hear your thoughts on what feels to me like a very personal quest. I wrote this the other day - to my unborn child:

What am I going to do to you? Into what kind of world will I bring you into life? Will you be able to say proudly that you have two mommies? Or will you not even need to feel proud? Perhaps having two moms will just be matter-of-fact for you? How I wish for that.

When I look at some of my friends and see that they are not allowed even to declare their love, or the fact that they live together with their life partners, because they are teachers and nurses and they are afraid of losing their jobs, afraid of what others might think, I think: If not even these people are allowed to be out, how will people react to you? Will my choice to give you life and my longing for you confer on you outsider status and the possibility of forever feeling different and, yes, even being different? Will kids tease you? Or will they think that it is cool?

But perhaps, as so many of my friends have told me, you will bring a gift into this world - you and all the other kids who are growing up in same-gender households...

Betty: " 'Cause the prejudice of others can't stop me from being who I am, and who you are going to be..." (Berzon, 1992:61).

Kath: I can understand your concern and agree with you. Let me put it this way. "The thing is, as they get older and go out into the world, they're going to realise that their family's different. Substantially different. How will they handle that? How will we help them handle that?... From a child's perspective, the context is going to be defined by having different parents. And she didn't choose it. She just has it. 'How can you knowingly saddle a child with the stigma of gay or lesbian parents', ask heterosexual critics, invoking cultural notions of childhood innocence. This is an argument that would deny children to the poor, the racially oppressed,

and members of all other groups not assigned to the mythical mainstream of society..." (Weston, 1991:195).

Roberta and Dianne: "As with most lesbians mothers, there is a small part of us that worries and has doubts about the effect that our lifestyle will have on our children. At the same time, intellectually, we realise that our children will turn out to be just as good or just as rotten as children being raised in a traditional family" (Abbitt & Bennett, 1992:94).

Laura: The first Lesbians Choosing Children Conference I attended back in the early 1980s (still) stands out in my mind. (Let me share some of what I can remember). "One after another, women stood up and asked if they had a right as lesbians to bring children into their families. It was one thing, they reasoned, for them to suffer the pain of prejudice for a choice they themselves had made, but it was quite another to involve a child. About halfway through one workshop, an irate woman finally took the floor. She said that as a lesbian mother of two and as a Jew, she was horrified by the discussion. Would any of us ... tolerate this kind of talk about ethnic minorities? Since Jewish children face discrimination at some point in their lives, should Jewish women consider simply not bringing them into the world? ... It's not the same, some said, we've chosen this lifestyle. Thus the tiresome debate about choice or biological imperative threatened to take over the proceedings ... Soon the conversation took other runs: Was the choice to have children a matter really of rights? Was it any more selfish a choice for lesbians than for any others? Was selfishness in this instance really a bad thing – wasn't it better for children to be wanted and chosen than not?" And there I was, sitting "lost in memories of my own childhood, thinking about the ways feeling different has shaped me. It had often been painful, but it was also the core of my being, ultimately the richest source of my strength" ... But I became "far more interested in how parents can help kids flourish in the face of life's difficulties ... How do parents help their children not only thrive but develop strength in response to bigotry? How and when do they try to shield their children from pain, to actively advocate for them, to hold back and let them find their own way of dealing, to be present and bear

witness to their suffering? What do the travails that children face stir up for their parents who have gone through, and are most often still in the midst of, their own processes of grappling with homophobia? ... There is another worry that plagues many lesbian and gay parents: what if a child is the vehicle through which homophobia enters family life? ... What if they hide all the gay literature when friends come over, or implore you not to hold hands in public, or say they hate you because you're a lesbian?" (Benkov, 1994:189,190).

Neville: "A lesbian parent once said to me of her nine year old son, 'Oh, it's not an issue. He understands and it's not a problem.' I think she's very wrong; that she's wishing away problems she and her son are going to have to face. I think that her kid and ... all the children of gay and lesbian parents will have to deal with a whole lot of homophobia and gay-bashing. And I think that we have to do – probably all we can do – to help our children cope with society's prejudice is to educate other people about gay parenting" (John, 1994:343).

Roberta and Dianne: We always believed "...that if we have a positive attitude about our lesbianism and impart it to our children before they reach the age where peer pressure moulds their thinking, that they too will have positive attitudes and will be better equipped to handle some of the problems that may lie ahead. This doesn't mean that we will be surprised if at some point in the future one or more of our children withdraw from us emotionally and think that we are awful. Looking back at our own adolescence and speaking with others has made us realise that most children have to find fault with their parents at some level so that they can become separate individuals in their own right... But now fifteen years on our worst fears never realised, not even close. Except for the usual dilemmas of adolescence, our children's teenage years were pleasurable, for them and for us" (Abbitt & Bennett, 1992:95,96& 100).

Phylis: "And so I want to create a world, like every parent, where my children will have a happy, well-adjusted, successful life, and part of that is creating an

environment where they're not going to be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation" (Burke, 1993:129).

Suzanne and Elizabeth: "By providing a healthy understanding of lesbian relationships and letting your child experience the love between you and another woman, you can do some little bit to counterbalance mainstream propaganda and give your child something approaching a free choice. Rearing a child in a non-sexist non-homophobic household can be a most challenging and valuable experience. It is wonderful to be able to offer a child some of the wisdom and freedom that most of us have attained only in adulthood and with tremendous struggle at that" (Johnson & O'Connor, 2001:101).

Ullah: "And because of your own journey to identity, your child will always know that s/he has choices, instead of growing up assuming heterosexuality is the only way ... I see a new rainbow generation that is colour-blind and liberal. Imagine those men and *womyn* in twenty years time; they might roll their eyeballs at the very mention of kd lang or the Vagina Monologues, but at least they'll have been educated" (Kelly, 2002:45).

Cassandra: "As one of the parents that I interviewed said: 'It's got to be obvious that when people put this much effort and thought and planning into producing a family these kids are going to be loved and cared for and valued' " (Wilson, 2000:35).

Carien: Indeed, deciding whether to have a child or not is a quest and a journey that takes a lot of thought, and reflection, and the moulding of ideas and dreams and hopes and concerns over and over again. As I analyse available literature on the benefits and strengths of children growing up in same-gender households, I am filled with hope. So I hope that you, my unborn child, will grow up ...

to develop an appreciation of differences and different ways of living;⁷ to respect, empathise with and tolerate environments full of diversity, to celebrate how others live;⁸ to treat homosexuality as a normal variation in sexuality and lifestyle and that you will therefore be more likely to consider the possibility of having gay relationships. I will allow you the opportunity to explore your sexuality so that you can confirm either your hetero- or homo-identity.⁹ I hope that this will help you to learn not to worry so much about what other people will think, and that you will have the potential for being more self-reliant and self-confident.¹⁰ We as a family are challenging the norms set by society and therefore you will have to be aware to take responsibility for yourself and your choices, to accept your own sexuality, adopt an empathetic and tolerant attitude and consider other points of view.¹¹ I hope that you will benefit from your personal experience of diversity within a community and may therefore be less restricted in your outlook and more able to appreciate a society full of diversity.¹² I hope that we can provide you with the opportunity to experience flexible interpretations of gendered behaviour, that you can observe and experience female role models that can be strong, independent and nurturing¹³ and give you the freedom to engage in egalitarian personal and intimate relationships; that you will come to understand that families are not based only on biological relationships but perhaps more so on love, self-definition and choice.¹⁴ I hope that you will grow up in openness and acceptance¹⁵ and that our family will be characterised by love, honesty, openness, emotional closeness, good communication, shared values and goals, emotional support, respect for each other and humour.¹⁶

⁷ Hare, 1994; Koepke, Hare & Moran, 1992

⁸ Laird, 1994; Patterson, 1992

⁹ Golombok & Tasker, 1996

¹⁰ Pennington, 1987

¹¹ Hare, 1994; Harris & Turner, 1985/6

¹² Tasker & Golombok, 1997

¹³ Pennington, 1987

¹⁴ Allen, 1997

¹⁵ Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Golombok, 1999

¹⁶ Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993

Joan: Yes, as I said: "Given the fact that such children often do grow up in a social context in which homosexuality is seen as deviant and subject to contempt, in which lesbians risk enormous oppression and even violence, it is remarkable that they appear to grow and thrive as well as children with heterosexual parents. In fact, as the research demonstrates, such children may have some advantages. Little attention has been focused on the remarkable strengths of gay parents and their children, their extraordinary resilience in the face of pervasive homophobia. The professional research and clinical literature has focused scarcely any attention on the exploration of gay and lesbian social and cultural life, on their everyday personal and familial experiences, on relationships with family and community, and on their work lives. Most of the available studies note the negative effects of homophobia, which is an important endeavour, nevertheless – outcomes that support the vision and strength of these individuals and families" (Laird, 1996:563).

Queen Academia: But Carien, since you are undertaking this scientific research, what about the experiences of the children? Have the children's viewpoints ever been represented? What do we know already about the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families? On what road has the research taken us?

Carien:

Because of the sparse documentation of lesbian and gay history in South Africa, I have had to rely on the vast literature that emanates from the northern hemisphere, especially that of the United States and the United Kingdom. Please bear with me while I present you with an overview of current literature before I will focus on the specific "country" of South Africa.

When I critically analysed the literature on same-gendered families, one of the first things I observed was the theme of development – how research on same-gendered families between the 1980s and today has developed. The earliest research began by comparing¹⁷ gay and non-gay families, and this is still a current theme in some

¹⁷ Peculiar aspects were researched in the early 1980s, such as the difference in make-up of lesbian versus straight mothers, truck-playing by the children (Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986) and breastfeeding patterns (Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981).

more recent research.¹⁸ From the late 1990s and early 2000s, researchers that analysed the literature began to argue for a non-defensive approach to the study of all kinds of same-gendered families. Until the late 1990s most findings suggested that lesbian and gay parents do not produce children who are inferior (or even slightly different) from the children of other parents. Rare, small differences between gay and non-gay parents were reported in such a way that they favoured gay parents because they portrayed them as being somewhat more nurturing and tolerant, and their children in turn as being more tolerant, empathic and less aggressive.¹⁹

It seems as though more recent studies are coming to terms with the realities of the postmodern family condition. These studies begin with a pluralist premise concerning the legitimacy and dignity of diverse family structures and they ask whether or not and how gay and lesbian families differ – rather than deviate – from non-gay families. These studies attend as much to the differences among same-gendered families as to the differences that make them dissimilar to non-gays, and they explore the particular benefits as well as the burdens that such families bestow on their members.²⁰ One may therefore conclude that most researchers now engage in the assimilation and transformation debates that centre around the “sameness” or “otherness” of same-gendered families. This tension between “sameness” and “otherness” has been introduced by studies conducted from a more social constructionist and critical perspective.²¹

Another theme that became evident in my analysis was that a great deal of the literature focused on problematic issues of sampling, possible biases in selecting a minority group, and issues of representivity and generalisability. The comparative

¹⁸ Flaks, Ficher, Masterpaqua & Joseph, 1995; Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; Gottman, 1989; Green et al., 1986; Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981; Koekpe, Hare & Moran, 1992; Parks, 1998; Patterson, 1992

¹⁹ Demo & Allen, 1996; Laird, 1994; Tasker & Golombok, 1995

²⁰ Patterson, 1994b; Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000; Stacey, 1998; Weston, 1991

²¹ Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002; Baetens & Brewaeys, 2001; Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe & Mikach, 1995; Clarke, 2002b; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001

research sometimes failed to distinguish between single heterosexual parents and “single” gay male or lesbians who were actually in a partnership.²²

The earliest research – almost without exception – commented on the incongruence between parenthood and being gay. A lot of emphasis was placed on the apparent dichotomies (at that time) of “father”, “mother”, “parent” versus “gay”. A discourse about “protecting the child” that stemmed from the political and legal climate of the times in which the research was carried out became evident. Most parents at this time behaved in a discreet manner and were what we would nowadays call “closeted” because of fear of engendering prejudice and discrimination. Such parents explained that they would do anything to help their children to deal with a homophobic world. They recommended precautions such as being careful about not openly showing affection for their partners, not exhibiting literature, art or any form of home decoration that might be interpreted as lesbian-orientated, and encouraging their children to refer to their partner as “aunt” so that friends who were brought to the house would feel more comfortable.²³

The discourse of protection occurred alongside a legal discourse that provided the main impetus for research into gay parenthood and same-gendered families. The legal concerns for the welfare of the children centred around the availability of a father figure to act as a role model in the case of lesbian parents; the possibility – described as a “mythical belief”²⁴ – that gay parents might molest their own or somebody else’s children; an alleged lack of stability in this type of parental relationship that exceeded rates of instability among same-gender couples; the possible impact of a gay parent’s sexual orientation on a child (this research was specifically directed at establishing what influence, if any, the parent’s own sexual orientation might have on the child’s own gender identity and sexual orientation,

²² Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002; Fitzgerald, 1999; Parks, 1998; Tasker, 1999

²³ Bozett, 1987; Cramer, 1986; Demo & Allen, 1996; Hare & Richards, 1993; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; Pennington, 1987; Stacey, 1998

²⁴ Barret & Robinson, 2000; Causey & Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Lynch & Murray, 2000; Patterson, 2000; Patterson & Redding, 1996

personal development and social relations). Most of the available literature therefore reflects the findings of research into issues of gay parenthood.²⁵

The research into gay parenthood investigated the [quality of the relationship](#) between the partners;²⁶ between the parents and their children;²⁷ the degree of social and emotional support that same-gender parents exhibit for each other,²⁸ and the emotional health of the birth mother.²⁹

Another topic of investigation was the [division of labour/household chores](#). These research findings concluded that household roles are not based on stereotyped heterosexual marital roles, but on the time and talents of the parents involved. Same-gender parents create their own methods or rules that govern how they relate to one another, and how they present themselves to others and children.³⁰ This research relates to [child-rearing practices, discipline and parental style](#).³¹

Other research focused on the [co-mother](#) or the social mother, on what and how she is named, her attachment to the children, and (once again) the division of household chores, discipline and parenting style, and on how questions from doctors and schools would be handled.³² The difference in the research between the 1980s and the late 1990s becomes evident in how the co-mother is named. Kirkpatrick et al. (1981:546), for example, mention that the co-mother is seen as “an

²⁵ Allen, 1997; Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002; Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bozett, 1981a; Bozett, 1987; Cramer, 1986; Di Lapi, 1989; Fitzgerald, 1999; Fowler, 1995; Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; Hare, 1994; Hare & Richards, 1993; Kershaw, 2000; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; McIntyre, 1994; Parks, 1998; Patterson, 1997; Patterson, 2000; Patterson & D’Augelli, 1998; Patterson & Redding, 1996; Stacey, 1998; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Stacey & Davenport, 2002; Victor & Fish, 1995

²⁶ Bos, Van Balen & Van den Boom, 2003; Gartrell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks, & Bishop, 1996; Golombok, Perry, Burston, Murray, Mooney-Somers, Stevens & Golding, 2003; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Koepke et al., 1992; Laird, 1996; Levy, 1992; Oswald, 2002; Patterson, 2000; Pies, 1990

²⁷ Green et al., 1986; Golombok et al., 2003; Tasker, 2002; Pies, 1987; Wind, 1999

²⁸ Hare, 1994; Levy, 1992

²⁹ Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997

³⁰ Chan, Brooks, Raboy & Patterson, 1998; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Lynch, 2000; McCandish, in Bozett, 1987; Parks, 1998; Patterson, 1995; Patterson, 2000; Pies, 1990; Stacey, 1998

³¹ Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe & Mikach, 1995; Gordon, 1990; Green et al., 1986; Harris & Turner, 1985; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Segal-Sklar, 1995; Tasker, 2002; Tourini & Coyle, 2002

³² Dunne, 2000; Gartrell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reeds, Sparks & Bishop, 1999; Green et al., 1986; McCandish, 1987; Muzio, 1999; Wilson, 2000

aunt”, or adult friend, or big sister, whilst Laird (1996), Mitchell (1998) and Lynch (2000) discuss how many of the children explain their “two-mom family” to their friends in a much more open manner, although some children still find this difficult to do. There was also research on the motivation for and the expectations that parents entertain with regard to pregnancy and parenthood, the decision making process, and value of children for gay parents.³³

Some of the research explored the awareness of the parents of the [heteronormativity of society](#) and their status as a minority group.³⁴ These same themes usually coincide with research into how parents [come out to their children](#).³⁵

One may sum up the available research by saying that the studies concluded that same-gender relationships were characterised by mutual commitment, emotional and physical intimacies that are similar or analogous to those that heterosexual couples with children experience.³⁶ One may also conclude that “the sexual orientation of the mother does not in itself influence the quality of parenting or the psychological well-being of the child...”.³⁷

Research done specifically from the perspective of the children is questionable because evidence of the children’s perceptions was largely derived from interviews with the parents.³⁸ Some of this research also included findings that are derived from utilising standardised psychometric assessment strategies with the children.³⁹ More and more studies included interviews and other forms of data collection from

³³ Bos et al., 2003; Gartrell et al., 1996; Pies, 1987; Siegenthaler & Bigner, 2000b; Tourini & Coyle, 2002

³⁴ Benkov, 1994; DiLapi, 1989; Fitzgerald, 1999; Gartrell et al., 1996; Gottman, 1989; Green et al., 1986; Koepke et al., 1992; Krestan, 1987; Laird, 1996; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; Lynch, 2000; Lynch & Murray, 2000; Mitchell, 1998; Patterson, 1994a; Pennington, 1987; Pies, 1987; Sears, 1994; Stacey, 1998; Victor & Fish, 1995

³⁵ Benkov, 1994; Bozett, 1987; Gottmann, 1989; Hare, 1994; Levy, 1992; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; Lynch & Murray, 2000; Patterson, 1994a; Pies, 1990; Sears, 1994; Stevens, Perry, Burston, Golombok & Golding, 2003; Wind, 1999

³⁶ Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Patterson, 1992; Patterson, 1995

³⁷ MacCallum & Golombok, 2004:10

³⁸ Costello, 1997; Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1997a; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristofferson & Brewaeys, 2002

³⁹ Dundas & Kaufman, 2000; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Patterson, 1992; Tasker, 1999

children. Among these were interviews that dealt with (for example) school experiences,⁴⁰ analyses of the experience of growing up with a lesbian mother from the perspective of adulthood,⁴¹ and acceptance of the parent's sexual orientation.⁴² A large quantity of the literature discussed the [gender development](#) of children with gay parents, and elaborated on [gender identity, gender roles and the children's sexual orientation](#).⁴³ Aspects of the children's [psychological health and development](#), such as those that relate to self-esteem and coping,⁴⁴ were also investigated. A noteworthy finding by Patterson (1994a:168) showed that the children of gay parents expressed more anger and fear in stressful situations as well as a stronger sense of happiness than did the children of straight parents. She attributed this difference either to an increased ability to acknowledge positive and negative feelings, or, alternatively, to the experience of greater degrees of stress in their everyday lives than that experienced by the children of straight parents.

MacCallum and Golombok (2004:10) noted that the growing number of what they call "father-absent families",⁴⁵ and the changing social climate that has led to a greater degree of acceptance of non-traditional family forms, influenced some of their previous findings. Most significant of these was that children in father-absent families at the age of six perceived themselves to be less cognitively and physically competent than children from father-present homes, but that this finding no longer appeared in children who were 12 years of age, when it was found that school adjustment and self-esteem were similar among children across family types. They also found that boys raised without a father demonstrated more feminine characteristics, although no fewer masculine ones when assessed in terms of gender role orientation (as measured on a Children's Sex Role Inventory's femininity and

⁴⁰ Ray & Gregory, 2001

⁴¹ Paechter, 2000

⁴² Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe & Mikach, 1995; Dundas & Kaufman, 2000; Gottman, 1989; Paechter, 2000; Tasker, 2002; Van Voorhis & McClain, 1996; Wind, 1999

⁴³ Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, & Mikach, 1995; Dundas & Kaufman, 2000; Fitzgerald, 1999; Gottman, 1989; Green et al., 1986; Patterson, 1992, 1994b, 2000; Patterson & Redding, 1996; Sears, 1994; Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Victor & Fish, 1995

⁴⁴ Fitzgerald, 1999; Gershon, Tschann & Jemerin, 1999; Golombok et al., 2003; Huggins, 1989; Laird, 1996; Patterson, 1994a; Victor & Fish, 1995

⁴⁵ MacCullum and Golombok (2004) researched families in which the parents are both lesbians. They refer to these families in their article as "father-absent" families.

masculinity scale). Their findings suggested that the absence of a father in itself does not necessarily result in psychological disadvantages for children (Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004).

A prominent theme in the literature dealt with the [social adjustment, social competence and social relationships](#) of children with gay parents, and especially [the influence of the heteronormativity of society](#). These studies focused on the fear of [teasing, harassment and stigmatisation by their peers](#) and feelings of being different⁴⁶. There was also mention of the parents' awareness of the stigma and their consequent concern for their children's well being.⁴⁷

Most reviewers found little or no empirical evidence to support the conclusion that children who are raised by lesbian and gay parents have any deficits as the result of living in same-gendered families.⁴⁸ As Savin-Williams and Esterberg (2000:209) state: "There is no difference between children who are raised by lesbian or gay versus heterosexual parents regarding gender identity, sex-role behaviour, sexual orientation, likelihood of being sexually abused, self-concept, intelligence, personality characteristics, behaviour problems, peer relations, reaction to father absence, parental separation and divorce, general adjustment and accomplishment of developmental tasks". Anderssen, Amlie and Ytteroy (2002:336) included research from Scandinavian countries that found that there was also no difference with regard to emotional functioning, sexual preference, gender role behaviour, behavioural adjustment, gender identity and cognitive functioning – although the children raised in same-gendered families were more likely to be teased about their mother's sexual orientation and were more likely to be teased about being gay themselves. MacCallum and Golombok (2004:10), in contrast, found that there was

⁴⁶ Fitzgerald, 1999; Gershon, Tschann & Jemerin, 1999; Golombok et al., 2003; Gottman, 1989; Parks, 1998; Patterson, 1992; Patterson, 1994b; Patterson & Redding, 1996; Pennington, 1987; Sears, 1994; Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Victor & Fish, 1995; Wind, 1999

⁴⁷ Bailey et al., 1995; Barrett & Tasker, 2001; Gartrell et al., 1996; Gottman, 1989; Hare, 1994; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; Stevens et al., 2003; Tasker, 2002; Tourini & Coyle, 2002; Vanfraussen et al., 2002

⁴⁸ Anderssen, Amlie & Ytteroy, 2002; Baetens & Brewaeys, 2001; Bailey et al., 1995; Barrett & Tasker, 2001; Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Gershon et al., 1999; Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Golombok et al., 2003; Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Patterson & Redding, 1996; Patterson, 1997; Patterson, Hurt & Mason, 1998; Pennington, 1987; Tasker, 1999

no evidence to support the finding that children of lesbian mothers would experience more teasing or bullying and more difficulties in their relationships with their peers.

Although this is not directly related to my study, a new emphasis that began to emerge from the late 1990s onwards was a focus on **families created by donor insemination**.⁴⁹ Themes of this research include the role and level of involvement of the donor, the impact of father-absent families from infancy on children,⁵⁰ and the psychological adjustment and family structure.⁵¹ Baetens and Brewaeys (2001:515) concluded once again that the emotional, behavioural and psychological development of children of same-gender parents was very similar to that of children raised in heterosexual families.

What is important for this study is to analyse literature that focuses on how children manage these potential difficulties, and on how they disclose or “come out” to others on behalf of their families or their same-gender parents.

Queen Academia: Yes, that’s maybe a good idea. I was wondering, what are the risks of disclosure or coming out for the children?

Carien:

Children tend to experience a community’s disapproval of their parent’s relationship as a disapproval of themselves as well. The sexuality of a gay person, and the emphasis therefore on a parent’s sexuality, becomes associated with a feeling of vulnerability (Hancock, 2000:93). For most children, growing up in same-gendered families remains an issue when it comes to communicating such information to their friends, especially during their school years. Because they wonder how their friends or classmates might react, they constantly have to make choices about whom to it might be safe to tell and whom it would not be safe to tell.

⁴⁹ Bos et al., 2003; Donovan, 2000; Dundas & Kaufman, 2000; Mitchell, 1998; Stevens et al., 2003; Tasker, 2002; Tourini & Coyle, 2002; Vanfraussen et al., 2002

⁵⁰ Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004

⁵¹ Chan, Raboy & Patterson, 1998

Some children are “torn between” a desire not to make a fuss about the “situation”, and a realisation that if one is going to tell people, one needs to do it carefully, as this statement of Paechter (2000) clearly demonstrates:

My stance is now more implicit than explicit... I want to treat my mother's lesbianism as ordinary rather than exotic, although having an out gay or lesbian parent is clearly not common amongst my generation (Paechter, 2000:404).

Research on possible stigmatisation by peers and possible bullying revealed that these children are either teased about the mother's relationship or some aspect of her identity, or else that they themselves are subjected to homophobic bullying (allegations – whether true or not – about the child's own sexual orientation). It is not unusual for some children, especially adolescents, to experience persecution because of their membership in such families (Bozett, 1980, 1987, 1989; Golombok, 1999; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Gottman (1989:186) stated that the children felt pressured to exercise caution in disclosing information about their parents' lifestyle, and feared not only for themselves but for their parents as well (in matters such as, for example, custody or job security). Children in same-gendered families therefore also often share responsibility for maintaining secrecy about the adults' relationship in the community.

“But are these fears grounded?” someone in the group asks.

Carieen answers:

Although disclosure seems to be difficult because of fear of rejection and consequent stigmatisation, rejection is in fact rare. It appears that incidents of gays being collectively rejected are more common than are incidents of individual rejection. One can detect collective rejection in the subtle and sometimes explicit images that society portrays. Societal attitudes in general can be deduced from the very little willingness or from a total absence of willingness – either within or outside of the gay/lesbian community – to admit that same-gendered families may be a viable family form. There are no time-honoured and widely recognised rituals or ceremonies that officially recognise the status of same-gender parents, marriage itself is not a legal option in most countries, and the larger community seems

mostly hostile and rejecting. The fact that the children of same-gender parents may sometimes receive support from others who express sympathy for their alleged plight or from those who perceive them as being unwilling or unfortunate members in such families, points to an underlying discourse of shame and suffering (Bozett, 1987; Johnson & O'Connor, 2001). Although socially approved terms have not always been available to define the couple relationship or name the role of the co-parent (Laird, 1996), they are emerging (Chan, Raboy & Patterson, 1998; Wilson, 2000).

Some authors argue that what is decisive in such instances is more an *awareness* of a perceived stigma or threat of homophobia and/or censure from society than the reality of the stigma itself. This line of research therefore focuses on the fear itself rather than on actual occurrences of homophobia (Bernstein & Reimann, 2001; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Wright, 2001). Others may argue that a “perceived” threat is as real as an actual threat, and they mention examples such as gay bashings and murders (Greene, 2000; Patterson, 2000), or the fact that families remain invisible to schools and other social institutions (Casper, Schultz & Wickens, 1992; Victor & Fish, 1995). With few exceptions, schools are not required to talk about same-gendered families or display positive role models or images of these families. Since same-gendered families are mainly absent from the curriculum in schools, they are consequently absent from the consciousness of both teachers and learners, and this maintains the erroneous assumption that all parental couples are heterosexual. This in turn can serve as a justification for same-gendered families to remain closeted. Gay parents themselves have different views about the degree of “outness” that is required: “You do not have to, and should not, lie about your relationship to anyone. You do not have to broadcast it either” (Johnson & O'Connor, 2001:102). One might oppose this to: “To hide it [one’s sexual orientation] is to give yourself the message that you are ashamed and that there is some cause for shame. To hide it is likely to give them (the children) the same message. And it is not such a good feeling to have a parent who is ashamed” (Clark, in Bozett, 1987:13).

Queen Academia: I remember that you mentioned that something that also intrigues you is the question of “**How do families negotiate this perceived stigma of their ‘otherness’ as families?**”. Are there any indications about this in the scientific literature?

Carien:

Parents and children from same-gendered families may at times strategise about peer and family relationships, whether they do so consciously or unconsciously. Two researchers, namely Griffin (1991) and Bozett (1980, 1987), have been prominent in this area of research.

Griffin (1991:190-196), who has done research with gay and lesbian teachers, has identified four identity management strategies. Even though the research’s findings cannot be generalised to children because it was performed on adults, Paechter (2000:399) states that her own experience and the literature in this area suggest that the strategies used by children of same-gender parents to manage the identity of their families parallel those of gay and lesbian teachers. If we isolate the essential features of these strategies, we may speculate that children growing up in same-gendered families might well use them on occasions as well. They are: (1) *Passing*. This is when one deliberately leads others to believe that one’s parents are heterosexual, for example when one changes the gender in conversations or makes up stories about an other-gender parent. (2) *Covering*. This is when one censors what one is saying without actually lying. Thus a child might be careful not to mention names or genders in stories or anecdotes. (3) *Implicitly coming out*. This is based on the assumption that people know although they do not explicitly give any indication that they know. (4) *Explicitly coming out*. This is direct disclosure in which the speaker uses gay terminology that is so explicitly that there can be no ambiguity.

Bozett (1980:176-178) identified the following four types of disclosure that gay fathers employ to disclose their sexuality to their children. *Direct or verbal disclosure* that happens either spontaneously or in an external, social condition that may serve

as a motivating force (an example would be entering into a relationship with someone of the same gender after a divorce). *Indirect disclosure* means that the father does not tell people or his children directly, but that he behaves as a gay man by, for example, holding hands or dining out in gay restaurants. While the last two strategies happen less frequently, they do occur. *Accidental disclosure* happens when the parents meet someone in a particular gay social context and they had not known about each other person's sexual orientation before. *Secondary disclosure* occurs when someone else discloses one's sexual orientation (an example may be that the heterosexual parent discloses gay parents to friends, grandparents or the children).

In addition to this, Bozett (1987:40-42) did research the children of gay fathers and identified four social control strategies that children use to manage their public image. These are specific behaviours that children employ so that they will be perceived by others as they want to be perceived.

The first social control strategy is *boundary control*, which has three facets: (1) control by the child of the father's (parent's) behaviour (behavioural or verbal control in order to control the parent's expression of his/her homosexuality by, for example, not holding hands, or not bringing a co-parent to school/party of friends); (2) control by the child of their own behaviour (refusing to be seen with the father in public, not inviting the parent or co-parent to school functions); (3) controlling others vis-à-vis the father (not bringing certain friends home so that they will be prevented from encountering the parent and partner).

The function of these boundary control strategies is to keep the boundary of the father's expression of his homosexuality within the limits set by the child. By controlling the father, the self and others in relation to the father, the child controls others' perceptions of himself or herself so that others see him/her as not being gay. Children use these strategies because they help them to avoid the embarrassment they might feel because of their father's gayness. The first two strategies inform the gay father about where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour have been drawn by

their children. For me, a function of boundary control is an indication of how children protect themselves from discrimination and from perceptions of possible discrimination or teasing by peers. It may also function as a form of discretion in the presence of others who might not be as comfortable or familiar with same-gendered families as the children of gay parents might themselves be.

Tasker and Golombok (1997:84) explored how children maintain a boundary between their home and school life, and suggest that the *visibility* of the parent's lesbian identity is a major determinant in how comfortable they are in allowing their friends to meet their families. The children in her study felt concerned about visible indicators such as books, posters or even affectionate behaviour between the two parents, and reported that they felt concerned that their parents might be "obvious" to their visiting friends. They expressed a wish for their mothers to be more discreet. Tasker and Golombok (1997:85) also found that the mothers themselves were sensitive to the possibility that their openness might lead to prejudice against and difficulties for their children. Johnson and O'Connor (2001:99) are of the opinion that parents should be especially sensitive to their children during adolescence and that they should therefore "tone down" visible signs of being gay in front of their parents. In my opinion, this does not mean that parents should lie or deny who they are, but rather that they should support their children in the realisation that there are more important things in life than fitting in with the crowd.

The second social control strategy is *nondisclosure*. Unless children believe that it is *safe* to tell others, they will avoid telling others that their father is gay. Nondisclosure may take forms such as referring to the father's partner as an "uncle" or a "housemate", or hiding artefacts such as gay newspapers or magazines when friends visit. Children believe that not telling others prevents "identity contamination" (the possibility that others may think they too are gay), that it helps to maintain relationships (i.e. their friendships or romantic involvements), and that it keeps them from becoming social outcasts. For me, the function of nondisclosure is protection by means of a silence that hides the truth and therefore avoids any

possible consequences that would eventuate should peers realise or find out about parental sexual orientation.

The third and final social control strategy is *disclosure*. Telling others is a highly selective process because, as Bozett (1987:42) explains, closure of information channels is (almost always) impossible because people of all ages love to gossip and relay what they may regard as sensational news. These children make very sure about who they tell “because you have to be sure they won’t tell somebody else”. Bozett (1987:42) also mentions the important fact that many of these children attribute exceptional decoding capacity to others. That is to say, they assume that others are able to discern that their parents are gay when they meet them for the first time and so they prepare contacts well before they meet the parents. Paechter (2000:403) also observes this immense sensitivity on the part of children about whom they feel it might be “safe” to tell. As Gottman (1989:186) explains, most children chose friends so that the friends that fit into their family – rather than attempt to make their family fit their friends. Another issue that is important in “coming out” about one’s gay parents is what one should say and what one might expect as a result of how one’s associates might react such disclosures (Paechter, 2000:403). Feeling different from their friends and deciding what to tell their friends were major concerns for some children in the study undertaken by Tasker and Golombok (1997:79). While some of the children in the study disclosed directly, others were merely unassertive about their parent’s lifestyle. Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen and Brewaeys (2002:243) support this finding. The children in their study had not discussed their parents with their friends. Their friends simply came to their homes or noticed their two mothers at school. These researchers found that it was easier for the children to talk about their two mothers than it was to explain or tell their friends that their mothers were “lesbian” or “homosexual”.

Johnson and O’Connor (2001:77) remark that the level of the *parental* comfort with their own family configuration helps assists or hinders their children if they want to be “out” as a family. When children are open, unashamed and nonchalant about having two mothers, people often respond positively to this. The presumption of

heterosexuality in our society is so strong. For same-gender parents, coming out and being out challenges this presumption. They also concluded that gay people's fear of a negative response is often unrealistic. While people may initially be surprised, allowing others to deal with this "new" information might lead to a new and healthy openness. New and positive reactions and acceptance of disclosure by those to whom disclosure is made facilitates the development of helpful experiences of affirmation within a family structure. Such experiences inevitably support a child's awareness of different family forms and of the fact that having two moms or two dads is (or should be) a natural part of social living. The role of the non-gay parent in circumstances of divorce is also important because if the non-gay parent is accepting of the gay parent's sexual orientation, the child will be less confused and will thus be in a position to maintain stable and guilt-free relationships with both parents (Cramer, 1986:506).

In research conducted by Ray and Gregory (2001:30) into the school experiences of children of same-gender parents, the researchers found that the children often felt disempowered, fearful and isolated. When the children called upon adult assistance (teachers) to help them to resist and possibly neutralise the culture of homophobia, the teacher's responses were most often described as non-existent or ineffectual. In extreme cases, some teachers even joined in making homophobic remarks. Some of the methods that children used to overcome such difficulties were to form groups of support and to focus on the advantages of having same-gender parents. While some children ignored teasing, others responded with violence. It is noteworthy that secondary school children especially engaged in self-protecting behaviours to avoid being teased or bullied. Such behaviours included, for example, hiding their parent's sexuality or "stretching the truth". They selected very carefully those whom they felt they could trust. Paechter (2000:401) also mentions that the children of same-gender parents may feel the need to defend their parents against anyone – including members of the extended family who are outspoken in their disapproval.

Derlega and Grzelak (in Buhrmester & Prager, 1995:30) identified five broad functions of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure serves a function to the extent that it

gives some benefit to, or addresses some basic concern of, the discloser because when they exercise self-disclosure, they (a) receive social validation, (b) gain social control, (c) achieve self-clarification, (d) exercise self-expression, and (e) enhance relationship development. One reason why people might self-disclose is because it gives them an opportunity to obtain feedback about their attitudes, beliefs, values and opinions. Social validation through self-disclosure entails social approval whereas evaluative reactions from a listener can provide a sense of social acceptance and value. To gain social approval, people disclose selected information so that they can *manage* other people's impressions by concealing aspects of themselves that do not conform to the image they wish to present. Underlying self-presentational concerns give rise to this desire to regulate self-disclosing interactions in ways to control one's image. A combination of cognitive and sociocultural determinants lead to self impression management, especially during adolescence when there is heightened concern about social approval (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995:31). Adolescents view and evaluate themselves by means of a broader system of social conventions and a "generalised other". The social construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality means that heterosexuality is the ideal of this "generalised other", as discussed in The First Link of this Bubble.

Someone in the group asks, "Carien, since you yourself live and work in South Africa, can you tell us **what does it mean to be a child of a same-gender couple in South Africa?**"

Carien:

Although lesbian and gay voices are no longer silent in South Africa, a relatively new (lesbian and gay) voice that is starting to speak out is that of the same-gendered family. Although they once lived at the margins, same-gendered families

are also emerging as part of a “collective”⁵² gay community. In South Africa in particular, the terms of the new Constitution give gay people permission to advocate their right to establish life partnerships, become eligible to adopt children, keep custody of their own children in divorce proceedings, and, more recently, be able to establish co-parenting. In spite of this, real-life attitudes towards gay and lesbian people are not so easy to change as the Constitution and resulting legislation (Cameron-Ellis, 1999; Knoesen, 2004; Singh, 1995). Acceptance and understanding that is characterised neither by silence nor by open judgement and condemnation will naturally grow slowly after two millennia of bigotry, persecution and discrimination because these negative attitudes are deeply embedded in the societal matrix. The South African society still exhibits signs of a culture of discrimination and judgement. Because of the legacy of South Africa's historically race-determined and neo-colonial system of capitalism in which “great men” dominate history textbooks, the points of view of workers, women, LGBT people, and of people from lower socio-economic strata were seldom and rarely heard (Bozzoli, 1987:xiv). This has however changed over the course of the last decade in particular. A whole range of ideological assumptions underlies the perception of even the simplest social interpretations. Many of these assumptions have their roots in the cultural and historical forces which shape and control the South African society, and also in conscious attempts by people to interpret and understand the world around them. Such assumptions may include assumptions about religion, ideologies of ethnicity, nationalism, and various forms of class or community consciousness. South Africa has a long history of deliberate disruptions of family life that were in the past sanctioned by law. In our time, eurocentric and patriarchal definitions of the family are being replaced by more inclusive definitions which take into account (among other factors) the role of culture,

⁵² Some authors question the existence of a gay community (Gevisser & Cameron, 1994:16). Lesbian and gay historiography is now split between “essentialists” and “constructionists”. The former group believe that there is an essentialist gay consciousness linking all gay people. The latter group believes that sexuality is determined by specific cultural, historical and social contexts. This ‘constructionist’ perspective understands that it is impossible to identify a single, cohesive ‘gay’ identity. This is because they ask this question. “When a white man calls himself gay and a black man calls himself gay, or a white woman and an Indian or Coloured woman calls herself gay, do we mean the same things... Is there a line of consciousness that leads from middle-class white homosexuals who called themselves ‘queer’ in the 1950s through to the hip young blacks who now call themselves ‘queer’, with a new subversive edge in the 1990s?”

gender, history, sexual orientation, autonomy and religion in determining family relationships (Knoesen, 2003:¶2).

Scientific literature on gay parenting and children's views remain scarce in the South African literature. Until the late 1980s and early 1990s homosexuality was regarded as deviant and criminal behaviour, and same-gender parents were believed to have a negative and even a corrupting influence on children's development (Botha, 1992; Botha, 2000; Van Niekerk, 1989). From the beginning of the 1990s (and in tandem with the political changes in our country), reviews and commentaries that dealt with custody cases and the right to adoption began to appear in law journals (Bonthuys, 1994; Clark, 1998; De Vos, 1994; Jordaan, 1998; Mosikatsana, 1996; Pantazis, 1996; Singh, 1995; Van der Linde, 1995). A literature keyword search retrieved on 20 July 2004 of the keywords "gay/lesbian/homosexual/parent" on relevant databases [e.g. Eric, PsychInfo, Nexus, ISAP, SA National Bibliography] gave 25 references that have appeared since the year 2000. Five master degree dissertations have been completed in this field, of which only one focused on parenting⁵³ (Botha, 2000). The remaining 20 references were to magazine articles in popular magazines, such as "Sarie", "Huisgenoot", "Drum", "Femina" and "Rooi Rose". Some articles on donor insemination have been published recently, although also in popular magazines (Fulton, 2004; Underhill, 2003; Von Geusau, 2003). Relevant literature indigenous to South Africa is indeed hard to find.

A few groundbreaking legal cases are breaking new ground for same-gender parents and their children. In 1993, even before the Equality Clause of the Constitution appeared, a court ruled that a divorced mother could not be denied

⁵³ What was also interesting to note was the assumption and hypotheses of the study of Botha (2000:4). *The assumption is made that homosexual parental commitments/ relationships have an other and possible negative influence on the adolescent.*

Original Afrikaans: "...die aanname word gemaak dat homoseksuele ouerlike verbintenis 'n anderssoortige en moontlik negatiewe invloed op die adolessent het..."

The hypotheses: *If the adolescent of a homosexual parent is exposed to the parent, it will have a negative influence on the child.*

Original Afrikaans:

"Indien die adolessent van die homoseksuele ouer aan die ouer blootgetel word, sal dit 'n negatiewe invloed op hom/haar hê."

access to her children because of her lesbian relationship (Isaack, 2003:¶2). In April 1998 a lesbian mother won custody of her child after the child had been removed by the Department of Social Services and placed in the care of its grandparents (Powers, 1998:3). In November 1998, a male gay couple were awarded custody of a child that they had fostered since birth (Oliver, 1998:3). In September 2002, the Child Care Act and Guardianship Act were formally changed after the groundbreaking case of De Vos and Du Toit, who jointly adopted two children. Another important judgement followed in November 2002 when a lesbian couple were together recognised as their twins' lawful parents (Cole, 2002:1). This case was also taken to the Constitutional Court which declared the Children's Status Act to be unconstitutional. This act deals with the legitimisation of children conceived by artificial insemination. Up to that point, it only made provision for "a woman" and "her husband" to be registered as the parents of their children (Ellis, 2003:9). The judge appointed to write up the judgement for this case noted that changes in the legislation that regulates relationships between gays and lesbians were also necessary. Although gay people could now legally be parents, they still could not be legally married (Mphaki, 2003:21). In the reactions that followed these cases, the discriminatory attitudes of many religious leaders was strongly apparent (Jackson, 2003; Mphaki, 2003; Whisson, 2003), reinforcing my belief that a normative heterosexist culture still prevails in the minds of many South Africans. A question that would be valuable to consider is: "What is the consciousness of children growing up in same-gendered families within a society that is shaped by such cultural forces?"

At the end of 2004 an internationally groundbreaking court order ruled that the Constitution should be amended so that it would include marriages between two people of the same-gender, although after a mere three weeks the Department of Home Affairs approached the Constitutional Court to appeal against this ruling (De Bruin, 2004; Jackson, 2004). The Supreme Court of Appeals declared the **common law** prohibition of same-gender marriages unconstitutional. However, the **Marriage Act** of 1961 remains unchanged as it specifies vows that are taken by husband and wife. The various reactions to this ruling reflected some of the discourses that

inform arguments against same-gender marriages. There are mainly four arguments against same-gender marriages that can be identified (Knoesen, 2003:¶3). Firstly, the discourse of procreation is used to assert that *marriage* is created for the purpose of procreation. This is no longer relevant because heterosexual people may marry even if one or both partners are unable to procreate. The change in the regulations of the Human Tissue Act recognises the right of a single women (irrespective of sexual orientation) to receive donor insemination for the purposes of having and raising children. This discourse of procreation is sometimes integrated with religious groups' objections to same-gender relationships and marriage. The second discourse that Knoesen (2003:¶6) mentions is the religious and moral discourse, which is probably the most deeply entrenched discourse that runs through our society, with views both for and against.

The other two discourses refer to the disintegration of the family and the alleged ill effects that same-gender parenting will have on children (Knoesen, 2003:¶7-8). Families throughout history have taken different forms and they continue to develop. As I suggested above, the *quality* of relationships in families is more important than the *form* or *structure* of the family. With a high divorce rate that prevails in traditional heterosexual marriages, this narrow definition of what a family entails is also under pressure. The argument that same-gender parents will exert an injurious effect on their children was also used against the validity and the legality of inter-racial marriages (in South Africa), and it could also be logically extended to families of low socio-economic status. While it may be true that children from families of low socio-economic status may be materially and even emotionally disadvantaged, neither state nor society has the right to remove these children from their parents. As I have argued in this chapter, research over the past twenty to thirty years has shown that having homosexual or heterosexual parents makes no significant difference to a child's psychological and emotional well-being.

[My dear Queen Academia and fellow listeners, to conclude:](#) Bubble Two (in three parts or links) is concerned with the exploration of the relevant literature for this study. The First Link provided a critical overview of the historical development of

homosexuality and heterosexuality in terms of dichotomies. It examined the different discourses of homosexuality, provided a synopsis of the liberation movement and the “coming out” stories of gay individuals, with a particular focus on the lesbian movement. This link also provided a background to queer theory and emphasised the discursive power of language from a Foucauldian perspective.

The Second Link provided an overview of research on families from the perspective of the heteronormativity of the family versus an opposite perspective of “queering” the family. Attention was given to postmodern influences on the family, and to the relationship between family, gender and reproduction. The tension between assimilation and transformative debates was introduced to provide the background against which research findings could be read and analysed. The interconnectedness between family life, generally regarded as a private institution, and public debates was examined, as well as the function of the kind of kinship and care that rethinks the role of families in a society.

The Third Link provided an analysis of the literature that deals more specifically with the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families. It started with a general overview before proceeding to an overview of research specifically carried out from the point of view of children growing up in same-gender families. It also focused on the disclosure experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families. A brief contextual discussion of the South African context was also provided. A dual story-line also entered the discussion in the Third Link. Apart from me analysing the literature and doing research, I began to wonder how it would be and what it would mean if I brought a child into this world.

And so, in the end, as the group fell silent again, Carien thought to herself: I wonder about the children...? How do the children feel...? What do they think...? How do they perceive their family and their parents...? And how do they perceive the "outside" world? What messages do they receive from newspapers, television, cinema, their schools, teachers, community organisations, the gay and straight communities, their peers, and their close friends...? What experiences do these children have, and how do they negotiate these experiences, how do they experience these experiences...?

And so Carien decided to find some families, and talk to their children, and listen to them closely so that they could tell their stories and share them with the world. So she stood up, and followed her heart...