

Bubble Six

Framing my findings

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“Framing my findings”

(Bubble Six)

How can we conceptualise the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families?

In focusing on conceptualising the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families, I would like to recall that the lens of my inquiry focused on the individual children who were part of a family in which the two parents responsible for the family are of the same gender. That was my point of departure. But no family can be understood in isolation, because every family exists in the context of a local community, and these networks of communities constitute a society of which a family is (for most people) the most basic unit of social organisation. The children who were my research partners allowed me to obtain glimpses (and sometimes extended views) of what happened to them when they moved from the security of their homes into the “world”, and how they negotiated the difficulties inherent in inviting the “world” (in the form of their most intimate friends) into their family homes. The children also reported their experience to me in terms of their interaction with their close friends, classmates and peers, other significant adults (such as their friend’s parents), and other adults somewhat more peripheral to their lives (such as school teachers or ministers of religion).

Because of the current topicality and visibility of same-gender parents in South Africa (mainly as a result of intense media interest in some high-profile Supreme Court cases in recent years), and because same-gendered families are a “new” concept for most people in society (both in terms of family structure and the homosexual sexual orientation/ preference of the parents), how the children involved would perceive their families and construct the acceptability of their families in the community and society was a matter of intense interest to me. I

wondered whether the children would see their families as (in essence) no different from other families, or whether they would perceive their families as being different – and, if so, how they felt about it. As my research activities gained momentum, I soon came to realise that there are no clear-cut answers to any of these questions.

I did find that all the children without exception were indeed *aware* that people in general hold different points of view, perceptions and feelings about same-gender parents and same-gendered families. The children of same-gender parents thus experience a whole spectrum of reactions that range between rejection and prejudice (at one end of a continuum) to tolerance, acceptance and a belief that same-gendered families are just another variation in family structure (at the other end of the continuum). Because their own experience has made these children aware that people's reactions to their same-gendered families vary from enthusiastic acceptance or indifference to intense hostility, they have all (in varying degrees) become cautious about how much they are prepared to reveal about their same-gendered families – and sensitive about how this information might be received by others. This awareness leads them either *not to disclose* or *to disclose* the fact that they have same-gender parents.

Before I describe the different ways in which children of same-gendered families disclose, I would like to note that *awareness* is not the only factor that is relevant to disclosure. The level of okayness that the children experience, as well as their openness in relationships (something that derives at least in part from their okayness), also influences the disclosure process. While disclosure may be construed as a way in which these children offer support to their friends, they themselves, as children of same-gender parents, also obtain support from other sources.

I shall now analyse these statements in order to explain the interactions and links between awareness, disclosure, okayness, openness, and support, as I understand these terms.

We have already seen in Bubble Five that there are different kinds of okayness that children growing up in a same-gendered family experience. One kind of okayness is the different levels of being okay. These different levels may be placed on a scale that ranges between **being not okay** to **being okay**. The other kind of okayness ranges between **being okay to disclose this information** and **being okay to withhold it**. The **green** and **blue** lines in Figure 6.1 represent my understanding of these two types of okayness.

The children in this study growing up in a same-gendered family will at times **disclose** or **not disclose** the fact that they have two mothers. As I have already noted in Bubble Five, none of the children takes up an *absolute* position on this issue. My research shows that a continuum exists between disclosure and non-disclosure, and that (as one might expect) no child consistently takes up a definite position on the continuum, but will react in various ways to different circumstances. Thus while children may on occasion disclose quite openly on some occasions, they will choose at other times to disclose in a “minimal” or “masked” way. The extent and method of their disclosures are designed to deal with the circumstances with which they are confronted.

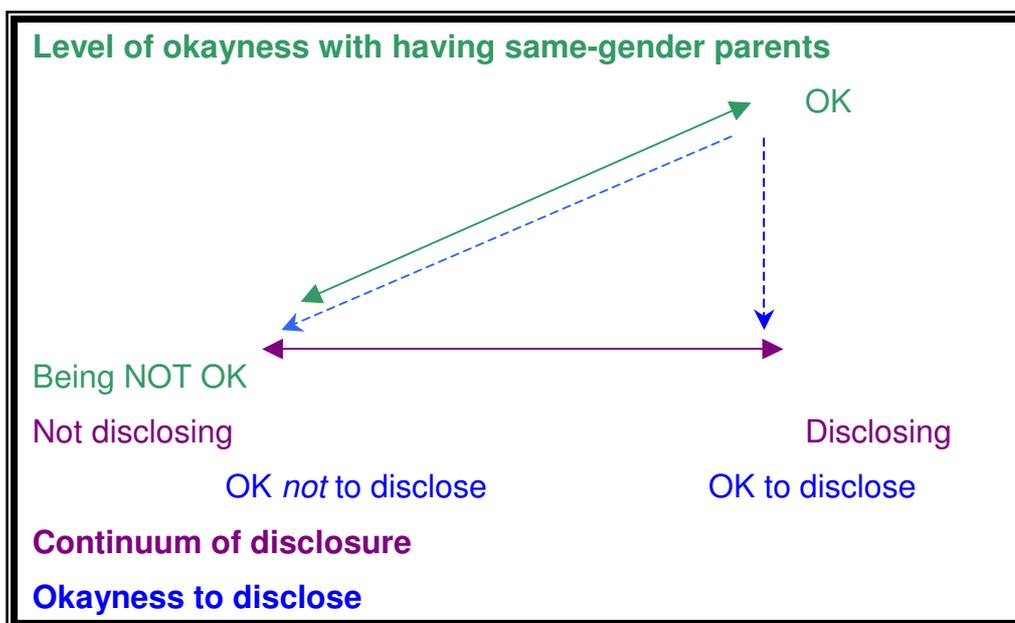


Figure 6.1: Okayness, okayness to disclose, and disclosure as experienced by children growing up in same-gendered families in this study

Figure 6.1 indicates that there are different degrees of disclosure, indicated on the graph as “**continuum of disclosure**”. The children in this study also show different degrees of okayness to disclose, indicated on the graph as “**okayness to disclose**”. The placement of okayness on the graph was elevated to indicate the being okay to disclose, as well as being okay not to disclose. The okayness however implies another kind of okayness, namely being okay or being not okay with having two mothers. This is indicated by the “**level of okayness with having same-gender parents**”. The **being okay to disclose** also coincides with the **being okay with having same-gender parents**, and therefore this “okay” position also needed to be elevated. This also created a visual indication of the increased openness that exists and that was reported by the children in this study (I will elaborate on this later in this text).

With regard to *being not okay* with having two mothers, I had to accept that it is highly unlikely that a child will state explicitly that s/he is not okay with having same-gender parents, and that it is even less likely that s/he would express such reservations to a researcher. The sign that probably indicates most notably that they are not okay is the fear they express should someone find out that they have two mothers. I could therefore deduce their being okay/ being not okay from the way in which they disclose (or do not disclose).

Children growing up in a same-gendered family are confronted with prejudices against their parent’s sexuality, and with hostile societal discourses that construct what and how a family ought to be. Some of the children in this study reported that they were afraid that someone would find out about their family structure. They therefore construct their having two mothers as a secret that could shame them and their families if it were revealed. Previous experiences of being teased and mocked has sensitised them to the perception that they cannot simply disclose to people at random and without careful consideration because in society as we know it there are people would reject and hurt them (or worse) should they learn the family “secret”. The secrecy and silence of these children are therefore part of the effort they make to protect themselves. The children from same-gendered families in this

study have become aware of the divergence between the dominant narrative in society, and what they personally experience at home. For some, the only way to manage, negotiate and reconcile this divergence is by keeping quiet, hiding, and not disclosing.

Once again, this protective response is neither fixed nor invariable among all the children all the time. Some do not want people to find out by accident or by chance, and are adamant about retaining the right to choose whom and when to tell. But even this insistence on the right to choose signifies that they are capable of moving towards a slightly more okay level as they themselves become more okay with having same-gender parents. There are also times when even though some of the children are not willing to disclose their family structure to just anyone, they are okay when someone finds out incidentally or by chance. This signals yet another higher level of being okay with the family structure and with disclosing – even though the occasion and means of such disclosures might be passive, indirect and incidental.

The children from same-gendered families in this study seem to be aware without exception of the perceptions and worldviews of people “out there in the world”, and they seem to accept as a fact of life that while some people will be blunt and outspoken in their aversion against gays, others will be more polite, tolerant and circumspect. While yet others will be sufficiently open-minded and open-hearted and open to accept the diversity inherent in human nature. These children realise more clearly as they mature that many important, trustworthy and admirable people are prepared to celebrate diversity and uniqueness. As this happens, their recognition of open-mindedness in others, their awareness, their openness, and their willingness to disclose all work together in their lives to create a coherent and reliable ideology of growing up in same-gendered families.

This may be the reason why some children are okay *not* to disclose: their experience has given them the ability and maturity to see that other people might not be ready to be confronted with this information. Some of the children from same-gendered

families in this study reported that they were sometimes unsure of the other person's openness and therefore wanted to get to know the other person better before disclosing. Such uncertainty serves the useful purpose of enabling them to see when non-disclosure might be a more appropriate strategy than disclosure in a particular situation. The children in this study are also quick to recognise and understand the (sometimes quite subtle) signs that indicate that another person might not be okay with a disclosure of this kind. Apart from clearly indicative and relatively crude signs such as outright prejudice and discriminatory remarks, there is a whole body of more subtle and diffuse indicators that they are more likely to encounter among their friends, that act as cues either to disclose or not disclose. Such indicators would include emotional discomfort, unfamiliarity and uneasiness or (in terms of body language) they might see their friends looking around with suspicion and observing transactions between their same-gender parents with a kind of withdrawn vigilance. Such behaviour often constitutes a cue or sign for the children of same-gendered families in this study to intervene and to disclose because they *need* their friends to be as okay as possible with their same-gendered family. Disclosure then serves the purpose of establishing and legitimising okayness, and of enhancing the quality of openness between them and their friends (and between their friends and their same-gender parents).

I have constructed an interior dialogue of how I imagine one of the research participant children might think in a situation where s/he is confronted by a new friend who is not yet familiar with same-gendered families and alternative sexual orientations in parents. It illustrates the kind of process that children in these situations undergo and the syllogistic logic to which they subject the progress of new relationships with other children. Here it is:

Will I tell you? Or will I wait until you ask me what is happening? Is it okay if you don't ask and I don't tell? If we are both open to diversity and you feel okay to be around gay people, then, yes, we can continue our friendship. But if you're not okay, and I'm not sure whether I'm okay with your being not okay, I must take into account that these two women are my parents and that I can never be disloyal to them. What then can I do in such a

situation? I suppose that we could continue our friendship and just never talk about it – provided that your parents continue to allow you to play with me. But if it is an issue for them or an issue for you, then I'll have to let you go and terminate our friendship.

Even though I did not explore the experiences and reactions of the friends, peers or “other people” that the children of this study came into contact with, the children reported that certain of their friends seemed more open-minded and more okay with the phenomenon of same-gendered families than did others. Some mentioned how other children (such as classmates) would talk about other people while assuming that they (the children) shared the same racist or conservative premises as the interlocutors. This kind of disjunction of sensibility is quite common among relative strangers in a society where a wide range of opinions exists among people who otherwise seem similar. The indicators or markers that the children in the study used to establish conclusions about whether their classmates would more likely to be open-minded and tolerant included the way in which their friends (but also other classmates) interacted with them, whether or not they asked questions of a pertinent kind, whether they were willing and happy to come for sleepovers or not, and how they reacted in the presence of their two mothers. (I hypothesise that these “other” children also experience degrees of okayness and open-mindedness that vary from time to time and place to place in their lives.)

It seems that when a child in a same-gendered family is open about having two mothers and perceives that her or his friends are open-minded and tolerant of sexual diversity, disclosure might enhance the authenticity of the relationship. There is no doubt that the children in this study *want* to establish straightforward and honest relationships with their friends and other significant people, and that they therefore feel the need to disclose, either fully or in a masked or minimal way. In propitious circumstances, disclosure enhances openness while the ideal of openness enhances the quality of disclosure. In addition, openness is valued as an ideal by the children in this study because of their awareness and appreciation of the importance of open relationships. The support that the children in this study offer their friends through their acts of disclosure, augments and enriches the

quality of openness in their friendships and relationships. Openness serves the purpose of facilitating and deepening feelings of reassurance, reliability and trust among friends. They also signal okayness in the friendship, and okayness with the same-gendered families. The more okayness there is in a relationship, the more openness there is likely to be. Okayness and openness therefore enhance the quality of authentic relationships. Even if the family structure of having same-gender parents is never explicitly discussed, openness about other things is still possible in friendships where open-mindedness, tolerance and okayness prevail as personal values. A point may thus be reached where it might even become irrelevant to even talk about the parents' sexuality, especially among young people who are less conditioned by heteronormative ideologies and who are more influenced by the pervasive tolerance of dissimilar life styles that prevails in some "alternative" Western-influenced youth cultures. (One might note that some modern "alternative" youth cultures – although representative of a minority – are characterised by extreme intolerance of difference and diversity. This is a disturbing feature of contemporary Western culture.)

The position of being okay not to disclose will probably result in a lesser degree of openness because the other person will have to come to conclusions on their own. In such situations, their adaptation to the family structure will depend partly on their own open-mindedness, okayness and familiarity with alternative family configurations. Interactions among children in same-gendered families and their classmates or friends were at times characterised by the friends or classmates asking questions for different reasons. The reasons included being unsure or mere curiosity and interest. But it was the *process* of asking questions that furthered openness among them. Openness in most cases thus engenders authentic relationships, and both of these are connected to okayness, awareness, support and disclosure. I consequently visualised their processes of interaction as being similar to those of children in same-gendered families, as illustrated in figure 6.2.

The other person's (e.g. a friend or class mate) process of asking questions or inquiry into the same-gendered family structure is termed "**preparedness to ask**",

where I propose that the friend’s willingness to ask or inquire can also be plotted on a continuum ranging between *okay to ask* or *okay not to ask*. Similar to children growing up in same-gender families, I also propose that this stem from an *okay* or *not okay* point of view, thus presenting a continuum of “*level of okayness*” once again. The okayness is derived from the *perceived open-mindedness* of the friends (ranging between being *open-minded* and *not open-minded*).

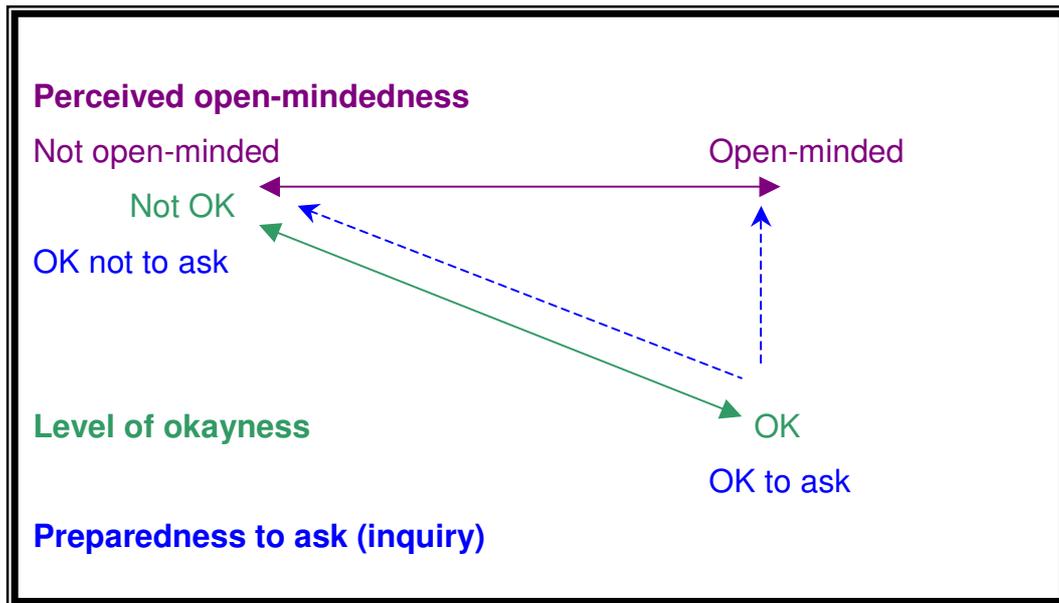


Figure 6.2: *Perceived open-mindedness, okayness and preparedness to ask, as reported by children growing up in same-gendered families in their interaction with others*

Thus far I have examined the relationship between awareness of the okayness and perceived open-mindedness of other people by children from same-gendered families and how the interaction they may or may not have will influence their relationships. But these children also exhibit different modes or styles of interaction with others apart from the kind of non-disclosure that indicates silence and secrecy.

I deduce from my findings that disclosure may happen in four different ways:

Style 1: I am OK to disclose – You ask

Style 2: I am OK to disclose – You are NOT asking

Style 3: I am OK NOT to disclose – You ask

Style 4: I am OK NOT to disclose – You are NOT asking

		“Others”	
		Ask	Not asking
Child of same-gender parents	OK to disclose	<i>STYLE 1</i>	<i>STYLE 2</i>
	OK <i>not</i> to disclose	<i>STYLE 3</i>	<i>STYLE 4</i>

Figure 6.3: Schematic presentation of the four styles in which disclosure happens

Style 1: I am OK to disclose – You ask

This is probably the style in which the most openness, clarity and mutual honesty will be found. Although it depends on who tells or asks first, it is characterised by an open sharing of the two-mother family structure. Spontaneous disclosures may also occur. This for example, happened to Carl when a friend spontaneously asked him which church they attended. Carl then shared with his friend that his parents are gay (the church they attend is predominantly run for gay people although it also actively welcomes heterosexual people). Carl is able to do this because he is okay about sharing his family structure with friends.

Tom (another example) is okay about disclosing and is of the opinion that his friends only ask anyway to confirm *what they already know*. Tom therefore welcomes their questions. Style 1 therefore includes situations where friends might enquire *before* any disclosure has happened.

This may also be the style in which children disclose more easily because they sense that some people are more open-minded than others. An example of this would be Kashni who realises that she *has* to tell if she wants to build and maintain enduring relationships.

Since disclosure is usually always a one-off event with a particular person, this style cannot be used repetitively because when “I’m okay and you’re okay”, the need to ask or disclose becomes redundant.

Style 2: I am OK to disclose – You are NOT asking

The example above of Kashni links with Style 2 in which children in same-gendered families, sensing an uneasiness in their friends, do not even wait for their friends to ask. This uneasiness may be conveyed by a feeling (intuition) that they have about their friend’s situation, or they may deduce it from the behaviour or facial expressions of their friend. They see this uneasiness as a sign that the friend may not be that okay with their family structure, they then conclude that if they disclose to the friend, s/he might be helped to progress towards the end of the continuum that represents being okay. As I have noted above, children in same-gendered families disclose because they want their friends to be okay. Disclosure serves to strengthen and establish their friends’ okayness, and to enhance mutual understanding, openness and honesty in the relationship.

Some of the children will disclose to their friends in a straightforward manner even before they ask. Others wait until they sense the uneasiness of the other child and then they intervene. The timing and manner of disclosure also depend on the personality and temperament of the child. Kashni, for example, discloses in a direct manner to some of her friends. Or else she sometimes decides to wait until she senses or observes their uneasiness. Although Tom disclosed spontaneously to his whole class, he only discloses once he senses or observes their uneasiness once he has invited a friend to his home. Carl disclosed his family structure to his girlfriend before she even asked or raised the topic.

The children of same-gendered families will usually support their friends’ processes as they come to terms with this new information by asking them if they are alright and by inviting any further questions they might have. They will also sometimes offer suggestions about how these friends might in turn tell their parents. Tom, Kashni and Carl all explained to me how they implemented this process of

supporting friends to whom they had disclosed. Most of them (Carl, Tom, Luanne, Kim) take the position that if the person to whom they disclose does not want to continue with the friendship after they have disclosed, then it was not a worthwhile friendship in the first place.

Kim's experiences at the camp also fall in this category because she shared her mother's sexual preference with camp mates who were unknown to her as people. She also supports her gay friends when they wish to disclose.

Style 3: I am OK NOT to disclose – You ask

When the friends of children of same-gendered families in this study ask questions and they (the children) are *not* prepared to share, they make use of what I call a "masked" disclosure. Masked disclosure is usually motivated by discretion and respect for the friend's beliefs and/or sensibilities because not everyone in society feels able to accept gay people. In such situations, the children therefore construct the co-mother as an "aunt" or "friend" of their biological mother.

Research participants from my study who practise "masked disclosure" are Kim, Luanne, Ryland and Danielle. Sometimes masked disclosure does not satisfy the friend's curiosity or their desire to know more, and they will probe further. This happened to Danielle when her friend asked her if her mothers sleep together. She was then "forced" to disclose more fully.

The children in the study might also utilise Style 3 when they sense that the other person is merely curious – and that they probably do not accept the okayness of same-gendered families. The children in this study reported that they will then tell such inquirers as little as possible to answer their question, and that they will not elaborate extensively or share more than is needed to answer the question. This is what I have called a minimal disclosure strategy. Sometimes they will also phrase their answer in such a direct (or even aggressive) manner that it discourages any further questions. This strategy was described by Danielle and Erid. In contrast to this, the children might disclose fully even though they had not made any decision

to do so. This happened to Carl when his classmates posed a question to him in a group. But then Carl is more comfortable and willing to disclose to his friends than to more unfamiliar persons such as classmates.

When the children use Style 3, they exhibit a more passive role in their interaction with their friends. Style 3 presupposes that they do not act pro-actively but that they wait for their friends to ask them questions. In such cases, the children from same-gendered families usually operate from the unspoken assumption of “If you want to know, then ask me”. We have examples in the narratives of how Erid, Luanne and Carl used this technique. Kim also observed that she will disclose if an unfamiliar person confronts her with a question about her mothers being partners, but that she is more reluctant to do this when it comes to her close family or friends.

Style 4: I am OK NOT to disclose – You are NOT asking

Style 4 occurs when children of same-gendered families do not see the need for disclosure. As far as they are concerned, disclosure is not necessary. This usually happens when they are of the opinion that their family is just an ordinary family. Because of this, they refuse to take responsibility for creating a situation (by means of disclosure) in which another person who encounters their family might have an issue or problem about their same-gendered family structure.

Erid expresses this in terms of his beliefs about friendship when he defines friends in part as “those who do not ask questions”. Carl noted that if someone has a problem with his family, then that would be *their* problem – and not his. Luanne reports that none of her friends confront her with questions about her family, and that if they have, she cannot remember it happening. She does not see the need to disclose. Even in an intimate relationship such as that with her boyfriend, she did not see the need to disclose – and he did not ask. According to her, she left it to him to work it out for himself. And although one of Kim’s friends (Jane) does not know, Kim is adamant that she does not *need* to know. Kim has therefore not disclosed to Jane and Jane has not asked anything. Kim bases her preference for non-disclosure on the fact that people have different opinions about same-gendered parents and

that one is bound therefore to encounter negativity or hostility eventually if one keeps disclosing. It seems as though she uses non-disclosure to protect herself, her friends and their friendship.

One could hypothesize that using Style 4 might undermine authentic communication and that it could compromise openness and understanding in relationships. Conversely, this style could work well for both parties, especially if one's friends do not regard same-gendered families as something different, questionable or negative.

Why would children be okay not to disclose (Styles 3 and 4)? One could speculate that these two styles are caused by personality factors. Thus some children may be more introverted and private than others, or they may need to be surrounded by a greater degree of discretion than other children. Perhaps these styles also protect them and others from feelings of embarrassment and uneasiness. Or they might feel that they need to protect *themselves* from the possibility of rejection or from getting hurt, especially if they have been rejected and hurt before. Sometimes these children view disclosure of their family structure as a personal decision that needs to be taken by their mothers. Such an attitude may indicate that they are aware of how disclosure might harm or impact negatively on their mothers. Such children have somehow accepted and learned that it is best not to disclose, and they are okay with that. Some of the children simply do not see why disclosure would be necessary because all the people they know have never known them as anything but a same-gendered family. Some of the children in a same-gendered family view their family as just another ordinary family. For them disclosure therefore becomes irrelevant.

In conclusion, the following figure summarises the possible disclosure processes that a child growing up in a same-gendered family may adopt. The figures also show how awareness, levels of okayness and open-mindedness are interrelated.

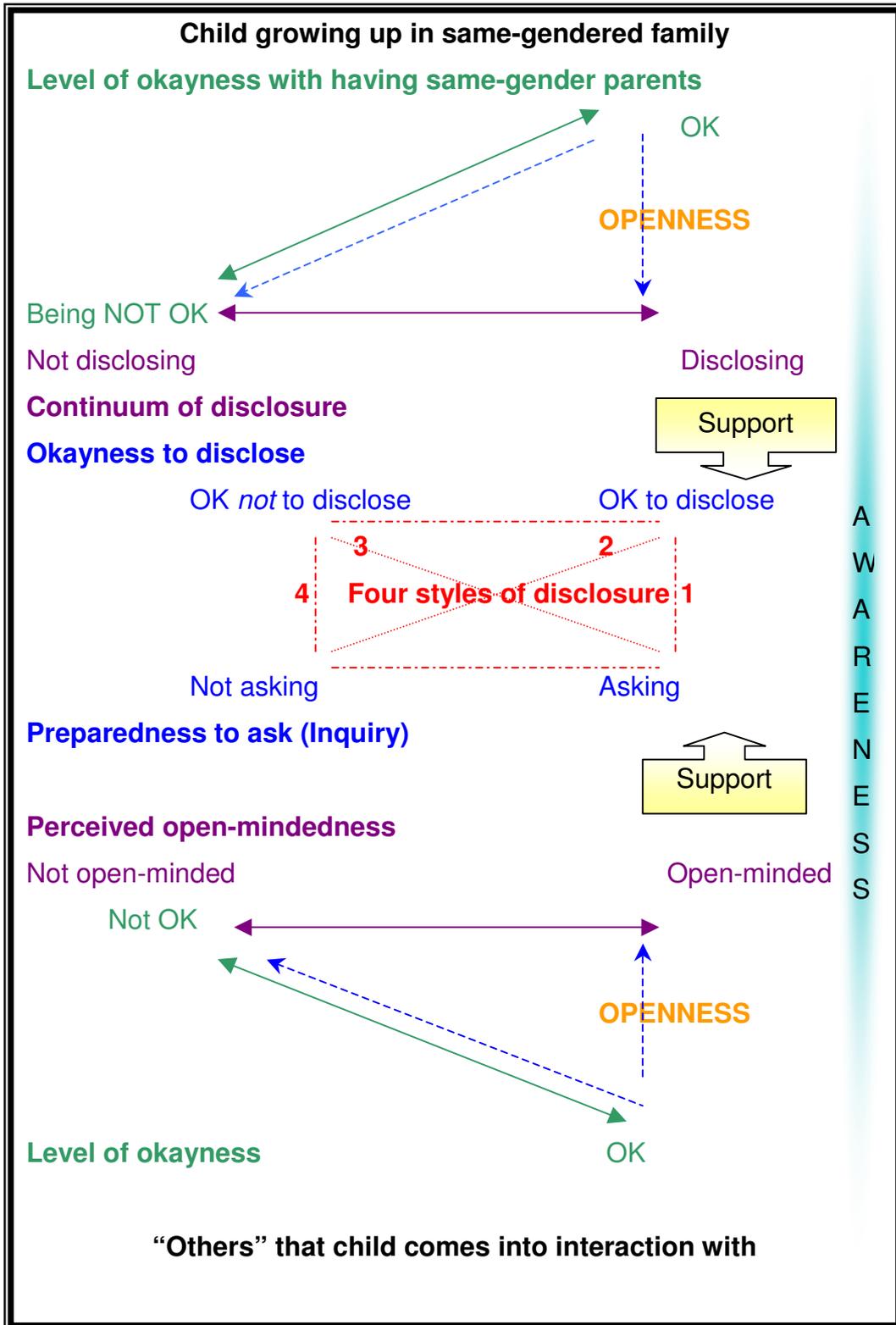


Figure 6.4: Visual representation of the conceptualisation of the disclosure processes of children growing up in same-gendered families

The focus of the discussion thus far has mainly centred around disclosure, awareness, levels of okayness, openness and open-mindedness. I have looked at the ways in which children growing up in same-gendered families are aware of the dominant discourses and narratives in society and how this awareness influences their interaction with others. I have elaborated on various styles these children adopt to either disclose or not disclose. I have also described how the methods and styles of disclosure that these children adopt are influenced by their perceptions of the open-mindedness of the people whom they meet and interact with, as well as their own levels of okayness with having two mothers. Another factor that influences these children is “support”. I shall now describe what I understand this term to mean.

While this research has shown how disclosure serves as a support to same-gendered families by helping *others* to reach a better understanding and awareness of same-gendered families, it also reveals how the children in same-gendered families in this study receive an immense amount of support from different sources. This in itself enhances the okayness and openness that these children who grow up in same-gendered families experience. Their parents, for example, support them in various ways. Sometimes this support takes the form of active and direct intervention (as when, for example, Kashni’s mother, Anriëtte dramatically intervened to deal with an incident in which Kashni was insulted and teased at school). Sometimes their parents discuss the family structure beforehand with appropriate school officials so that the child will not bear the brunt of having to explain the family structure to teachers. At other times, parental support takes the form of being emotionally available to their children and of being willing to discuss the various viewpoints (both positive and negative) that people in society hold. Finally, but not least, the parents of these children support them by encouraging and making their support clear to the children on a daily basis.

Children growing up in same-gendered families also receive support from their friends. This kind of support includes firstly, being okay and not rejecting them, secondly, continuing to visit them, playing with them, and sleeping over at their

houses, thirdly, not asking questions when questions are not welcome, and fourthly, being accepting and realising that it is sometimes difficult for children from same-gendered families to disclose only in a minimal or masked way. This support from friends strengthens the okayness that children from same-gendered families feel because they experience it as positive feedback from their peers. Such positive experiences might also encourage openness in children from same-gendered families as they interact with new people because they will be able to model relationships with previously unknown people on these successful encounters.

Schools that foster open-mindedness as a communal value and that nurture diversity in culture and religion are experienced by the children in this study as being supportive. According to the children's reported experiences, the absence of aggressive, negative comments from other children and the value that such schools place on tolerance and diversity in the school community as a whole all contribute to the children's feelings of openness and okayness and create an atmosphere of normality and ordinariness in which these children can relax and benefit from what such schools have to offer.

Siblings offer one another tremendous support. They share their concerns with each other and discuss among themselves new and challenging circumstances. In this study specifically those families where the children were born into the context of a heterosexual marriage, they supported each other as to how to come to terms with their mother's "new" sexual identity. Some of the siblings are protective of one another, and older brothers or sisters are especially protective of their younger siblings. But such support is not always necessarily welcome – especially when siblings disagree about how much disclosure is appropriate.

Another source of support for the children is knowing that there are other gay families and being able to talk to, exchange experiences with, and perhaps even form friendships with other children who are also growing up in a same-gendered family. This kind of support from children in similar circumstances can be

enormously helpful to children who find it difficult to come to terms with a parent's newly visible sexual orientation. Some of the children in this study thought that they would experience more difficulties at school or in life generally after their parents had come out. But the reality is that *other* children from same-gendered families (children not included in this study but their friends) told some of the children in this study that life for them had become far more pleasant and relaxed under their same-gender parents than it had ever been when they had lived as the children of a heterosexual couple. This in itself was a great encouragement. At other times, the children were supported by knowing that they could contact, befriend and relate to other children in similar situations. The companionship of children in similar circumstances also helped my research partners to discover and participate in new and supportive family activities such as attendance at gay-friendly or gay-oriented churches.

I shall summarise this discussion by focusing on the interconnectedness between the key aspects that have emerged (visually represented in figure 6.5). As I focused on the way in which children growing up in same-gendered families experience their family in the context of a heteronormative society, the one aspect that received more attention and which therefore emerged most strongly in my analysis and interpretation was their *interaction with others*, which, in their context, means, mainly, *disclosure*. This does not negate the importance and relevance of the other four aspects and their interconnectedness, and their significance for children growing up in same-gendered families.

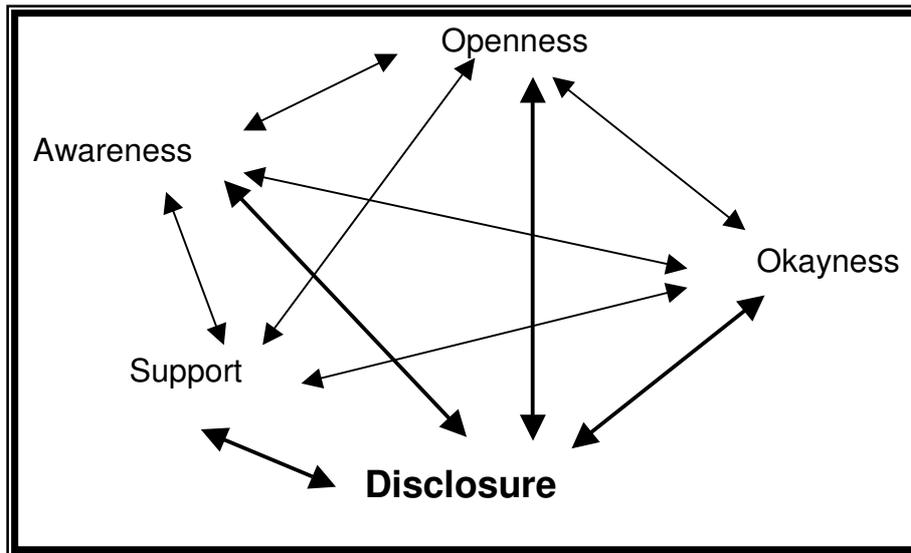


Figure 6.5: The interconnectedness of key aspects of the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families in this study

Because the support that children receive from by parents, friends, siblings and other children also growing up in same-gendered families enhances the children's openness and their sense of okayness, it influences the ways in which they conceptualise and practise (or do not practise) disclosure. Disclosure in turn seems to increase and empower okayness and openness in others. Disclosure acquires a positive value for these children when they see how it has contributed to the okayness and openness of others in situations similar to their own. The children in this study are also aware that openness between them and others has a potential to enhance authentic and healthy relationships. When they realise that a prerequisite for authenticity between them and their friends is that they have to be more open in their relationships, they tend to be far more appreciative of the value of disclosure. This in turn encourages them to be more supportive of their friends. Because they see that these qualities contribute to mutual understanding, the children are aware of the benefits that accrue from being open and honest. This in turn facilitates the growth of healthy relationships.

Children from same-gendered families in this study disclose when they become aware that their friends feel uneasy about their same-gender parents. Their disclosure then serves as an intervention that helps their friends to feel more at ease

and okay with the reality of their same-gender parents. Disclosure and okayness are thus directly linked because okayness increases the frequency and utility of disclosure. Being okay with having two mothers implies that one might be more willing to disclose that information. Conversely, being not okay will diminish the frequency of disclosure because it is obvious that a person is less likely or willing to disclose from a position of fear. Fears of this kind are grounded in memories of prejudice and other painful or embarrassing experiences that were precipitated by disclosure. Once children have successfully disclosed to friends or peers and the outcome of the disclosure has been favourable, their okayness is augmented. The satisfaction they feel once they have carried out successful disclosures probably also enhances okayness in their friends because the children of same-gendered families disclose as a result of having become aware of their friends' uneasiness, and they intervene to make their friends feel more okay. Thus okayness once again leads to openness between friends and openness in other significant relationships, in which the focus on the family structure of a same-gendered family might become less central in the awareness of everyone involved.

As I reflected on why disclosure had emerged so strongly in my analysis, I came to retrace my steps through a full circle in my research process. This movement led me specifically to contemplate the design that informs this whole study. As I translate my reflections into graphic terms, I find that the following diagram reflects the process of how I unravelled and built up my intellectual puzzle.

The process of unravelling and building my intellectual puzzle

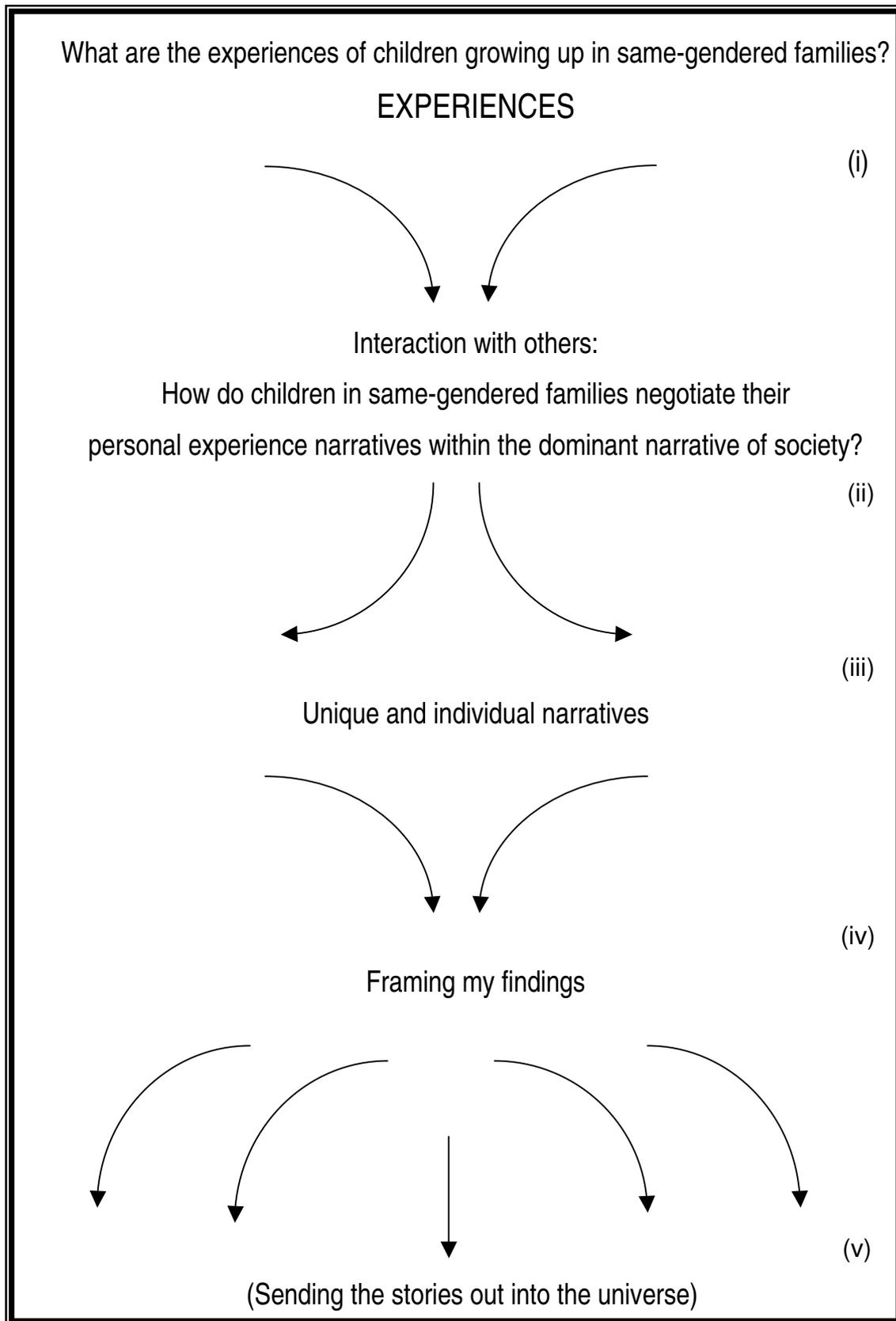


Figure 6.6: A graphic depiction of the journey of unravelling and building my intellectual puzzle

Because I began with a broad focus on the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families, my research question was “What are the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families?” (Position i).

For me, the “experiences” entailed “*erlebnis*”, experiences lived in terms of the dynamic processes of subjectivity, of being affected by events and circumstances that the children of same-gender parents undergo. I set out to understand the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families in terms of how they think about, feel and perceive their lives, and in terms of their accounts, interpretations, memories, thoughts, ideas, opinions, understandings, emotions, feelings, perceptions, behaviour, practices, actions, activities, conversations, interactions, secrets, their inner selves, and so on.

I had to bear in mind that I was only being allowed access to the *reported* experiences of children of same-gendered families. These were their subjective accounts of the experiences that they considered meaningful and were willing to share with me. In spite of this, I came away with the conviction that they had honestly shared with me various aspects of their inner lives, their thoughts, their feelings, and their daily activities.

Apart from these experiences, I was also interested in finding out how the children growing up in same-gendered families experience their own (same-gendered) families relative to the heteronormative image that society projects of what a (“normal”) family should be. I wanted to know whether they experienced same-gendered families as similar to – or as a different from – non-same-gendered families. Because I had constructed the heteronormativity of society as my working assumption, I assumed that same-gendered families are constructed as “different” by society. A review of the viewpoints of the children whom I interviewed might illuminate this assumption of mine.

My assumption was that because these children were confronted with heteronormative discourses as the dominant narratives in our society, they were

compelled to negotiate, reconcile and manage the differences and the challenges that these difference created through their interactions with other people. This led me to another critical question in my intellectual puzzle. I asked the question: How do children growing up in same-gendered families negotiate their personal narratives within the dominant narrative of society? (Position ii).

Although my focus on how they negotiated the dominant heteronormative discourse of society narrowed the focus of my inquiry, I was still not satisfied and something continued to bother me. I realised that if I concentrated *only* on their interactions with others, this focus would basically entail narratives about disclosure and non-disclosure. And although there were only a few references in the literature to research into the disclosure strategies of children growing up in same-gendered families, I kept returning to the theme of *experiences* because I felt that a focus on negotiation and their interactions with others would be too narrow.

This realisation influenced my data creation process because I then deliberately utilised an open and conversational style in the interviews as I tried to elicit as many experiences as possible from the children growing up in same-gendered families. My intention was not to contain or limit their stories in terms of any predetermined framework of my own. Similarly, I had no wish only to hear narratives about how they managed their disclosures. My intention was therefore to be as open as possible to *anything* that these children growing up in a same-gendered family might be willing to share with me (Position iii).

As I sat down to analyse the data that I had created on the basis of these premises, I realised that I had accumulated more than just (non)disclosure-experiences. In front of me were glimpses into eight unique and individual lives that were being lived by children in same-gendered families. And so my perspective and the focus of my inquiry once again shifted outwards as I constructed narratives for each of the children I had interviewed. My subsequent interpretations arose out of and were grounded in these narratives.

In making sense of the storied lives that I constructed and presented, I realised that I had to look beyond the individuality and uniqueness of each story in order to construct interpretive propositions about how the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families are constituted. But the narratives were always the source that inspired and shaped my interpretations even though I now realised that my focus could not longer remain as broad as it had been when I was writing up the narratives (Position iv). For this study to be amongst other things, transferable, I had to move beyond the individual narratives. Those who use this research will probably be alert to the possibility of transferability as they make connections between the concepts in the interpretation and their own experience.

Once that had been done, I wanted to take the analysis and interpretation one step further and provide a framework in terms of which the findings of my study could be read. I also hoped to provide a framework that other researchers in the field of children in same-gendered families could use as the basis for their own research. It was during this process of conceptualisation that five interrelated concepts emerged. These are disclosure, awareness, support, openness and okayness. Among these, disclosure once again emerged as the dominant concept and narrowed the focus by positioning itself as one of the main experiences of children growing up in a same-gendered family, especially when such same-gendered families are viewed against a backdrop of a heteronormative discourse. Even so, the centrality of disclosure does not negate the importance of the other four concepts because all these concepts are interconnected, both in theory and in practice.

As the study comes to an end, the stories of the children that I wrote up will be read by a wider audience, who will construct their own meaning and interpretation apart from my own. This entails the notion of transferability as already mentioned, where the audience can relate the narratives and findings from this study to their own experience (Position v).

Methodological postscript: Revisiting the iterative and emerging process of analysis and interpretation

As I noted in Bubble Three (the Third Link), and mentioned briefly above, I used grounded narratives as an interpretive tool to develop “interpretive themes” in Bubble Five. Once I had individualised, unique, specific and contextualised narratives, I proceeded with the interpretive phase of this study. In this phase, my purpose was to find out what significance I could derive from the narrative accounts and what themes I might extract from the contexts that were presented in the narratives themselves and from my subjective understanding of the children’s experiences of growing up in same-gendered families. I therefore confronted the narratives with the question of significance – of what meanings might be derived from the narratives as a whole.

As I read through the narratives, one theme that emerged with prominence was that of a “being okay” and “okayness” with having two mothers as parents. I took each story and selected specific supporting evidence (quotations) in order to test this developing explanation (Mason, 2002:199). A continuum with different degrees of okayness emerged, and this tentatively suggested that some children were experiencing a greater degree of okayness than others. Tom and Luanne, for example, shared more experiences of okayness than Ryland. I reflected on this theme and questioned my own role in “seeing” this theme emerging. I questioned my influence on the interpretive process. I decided to search for the opposite, for examples of not-okayness among the children. When I did this, the theme of “protection”, of a need to protect themselves from the heteronormativity of society, emerged strongly. While Ryland’s story supported this theme very strongly, Tom’s story supported the contrary. I then realised that while experiences of *okayness/not-okayness* among the children did indeed exist on a continuum, the data from my study revealed stronger indications of okayness among the children. In addition, the theme of protection was negated when the data revealed another significant

type or kind of okayness, namely *the okayness to disclose/ not to disclose*, which did not necessarily arise out of any need for protection.

I realised that my conclusions as I contemplated the intellectual puzzle were consonant with the data, that I had interpreted them in a reflexive manner, and that I had shown a sensitivity to the whole range of interpretations and voices in my data. I also remained aware of the influence of my own personal opinions by constantly questioning and critiquing my own conclusions and suppositions. Both discussions with my supervisor and sharing aspects of my findings with interested people made this questioning process enormously valuable. Listening to diverse opinions and questions about my findings helped me to develop a critical interpretation.

Another feature that emerged quite early on, when I was still busy with the data-creation process, was that in almost every story a specific incident of central importance to that narrative occurred. This led me to posit my second interpretive theme, that of the “critical incident” that demonstrates how the children handled challenging situations in a way that usually effected significant changes in their lives. Pursuant to this, I once again examined each individual story, and analysed and interpreted them so that I could isolate and describe the unique critical incident that had occurred.

The third meaningful aspect was contextual factors that influenced the experiences of the children in this study. This highlighted aspects of the social context in which the children in this study function. I analysed the stories in this section in a more cross-sectional way as I gathered evidence from across all the narratives to support the themes of divorce, adoption, the school context, the changing of schools, age, and openness in family relationships.

When I looked at my data in this way, I saw that some of the quotations were used more than once because they served to confirm more than one theme. Such single quotations might support a level of being okay, illuminate a school context, and

simultaneously illuminate a part of a critical incident. After I had written the first draft, I used coloured pens (a different colour for each interpretive theme) to highlight each quotation that I had used from the narratives. I scrutinised the quotations that had been used repeatedly. I then either shortened some of them in the discussion, or removed those that occurred in cases where three of four others had already been used, when it did not deter from serving as supporting evidence. In some cases, they simply had to be included in two or even all three of the Ribbons. By highlighting all the quotations I had used, I was able to see where I had overlooked an important quotation that supported the evidence. These I then automatically included.

In taking the analysis and interpretation one step further, I made full use of the advantages inherent in narrative research by focusing on *individuals* as well as on the social context.

When we listen carefully to the stories people tell, we learn how people as individuals and as groups make sense of their experiences and construct meanings and selves. We also learn about the complexities and subtleties of the social worlds they inhabit. We gain deeper understandings of the social resources that they draw on, resist, and transform as they tell their stories (Chase, 2003:80).

Working with narratives enabled me to shift the focus of my inquiry and look with great intensity at whatever was small, minute, specific, and individual. This approach allowed me to illuminate the uniqueness, the specificity and the individuality of each child in this study while at the same time situating their experiences within their social context.

After immersing myself in the narratives of the children that I had interviewed and after I had presented their interpretative themes, I developed a framework of how I proposed to conceptualise the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families as I neared the end of my process of inquiry. This framework could serve as an emerging theoretical forestructure (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999:414) against which the findings, interpretations and narratives could be viewed.

As explained in Bubble One, my purpose was to enter the field in as open a way as possible so that I could hear the stories of the children without the contamination of a conceptual or theoretical framework. Since I had not at that stage explored theoretical constructs about the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families (such as, for example, concepts about disclosure or okayness), I was able to explore more freely and range more widely. Had I begun by focusing on one person's framework, I might have deprived myself of the richness, diversity and uniqueness of working in a narrative frame by structuring my interviews with the children in terms of that framework. As it was, I was free from any such artificial theoretical restraint during the interviewing process.

Although the framework that I present in this Bubble does extend the specificity of the narratives, it remains grounded in the narratives themselves. This framework is an integration and synthesis of the linkages and relationships between the emerging concepts of disclosure, openness, okayness, support and awareness.

“Now that I have explained what the Frame means, the time is drawing near when our journey will lead us on another path – one on which we will once again have an opportunity to manifest another dream...”

“So let us all walk outside, breathe deeply the cool air of the evening, and embrace the sunset of this day.”

