

# **The Disclosure Practices of a South African Born Adolescent Raised in an American Lesbian Parent Family**

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*This qualitative case study explores the disclosure practices of a South-African born adolescent who is raised in a lesbian parent family in the United States of America, in an attempt to understand how adolescents negotiate their unique family structure throughout their daily lives. The data in this study were analysed using thematic content analysis. The concept of moral cultures is adopted from the work of Hart and Carlo (2005) and identified in the following dominant discourses in the life of the adolescent participant, namely: religion, school, friends, acquaintances and society at large, and emotions. Furthermore, social control seems to be a very prominent factor in the decision of adolescents raised in same-gendered families to disclose or withhold information. Casual-calculated disclosure is identified as a method for social control, when disclosing information about the family structure becomes inevitable for an individual. Furthermore, the decision to disclose is generally based on: (a) a perception of urgency, (b) the existence of an intimate relationship, and (c) the disclosure of information based on a shared experience.*

*KEYWORDS: Disclosure; adolescence; lesbian parents; case study*

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## **Introducing Lilly**

*Hey, I am Lilly [pseudonym given to participant]. I am turning 15 this year. I am a girl...I do not consider myself Christian to any extent. I have a dad and two moms. My parents were married for eight years and divorced when I was eight months old. My mother was a single mom for two years, I saw my father every second weekend, but then my mother met Anelie. My mother and Anelie raised me until I was six years old. My mother then realises she was in love with X. So now I have X as a mother and Anelie is not in my life anymore and then I still have to deal with my grade one concert. Life was tough. I knew X and her partner Rachel pretty well, she had been friends of my mom and Anelie for two years. I remember really liking X and Rachel. The first time X slept over I remember asking my mom whether X could sleep with me. My mother and X are still happily together. It has been 9 years now. I have never known anything but my mother and father separated and my mother having a girlfriend. So I do not know what it is like to live in a standard family and that does not bother me. So far the hardest things in my life that I have ever had to deal with were moving [from South Africa] to the USA. I was very close to my father and as I got older I saw more of him. It ended that I saw him and my mother equally a week. I was in a private school in South Africa, and I really liked it but I had a problem about my mother being gay. I was (and still am) labelled as gay. It bothered me a lot when I was little. It bothers me now but I can deal with it. When I was little it bothered me that I was being called gay, now it more bothers me that it is intended as an insult. I don't think my life is easy but then whose life really is easy. You might not know this but [I live in a very religious area]. So the mockery is bad here for those who know. It is mostly joking or teasing but I do get hurt by it. People don't do it to me anymore because only my friends know. And they know not to say anything. I hate having to*

*count my words around people for if I say the wrong thing about my household set up. I hate being scared about how my friends are going to react when they know I have a gay mom. I am lucky to be in [a very accepting] high school. My school is all about accepting everyone. I think if I was in a public school I would have more problems. I have never really spoken to anyone about this. I feel bad that I wish my mom wasn't gay. It is selfish and I would never wish X out of my life. I do love her as a mother. But it is hard to be judged on by the choices that your parents made. I don't like the feeling I get that I can't tell the people I care about my mother.*

This paper aims to explore the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in lesbian parent families, and to provide insight into their experiences as a background against which their disclosure practices can be understood. Perhaps because of the inevitable “otherness” that accompanies lesbian parent families, disclosing information about growing up in such a family structure could be quite challenging for adolescents in a heteronormative society, due to their unique developmental phase and more so because of their increased desire to be socially accepted by their peers. Being “other”, whatever that “otherness” entails, often leads to mockery, labelling, teasing and even social exclusion. Because young children are still emotionally immature, understanding and acceptance of difference is often absent (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter 2004). Although adolescents are cognitively and emotionally more mature than children, challenging the “normality” within society by outing their parent’s sexual orientation is still a sensitive issue to deal with. It is evident from literature on the experiences of children raised in lesbian parent families (Clarke et al. 2004; Fitzgerald, 1999; Patterson, 1992; Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001) that stigmatisation, homophobic bullying, and labelling are synonymous with having to disclose information on their family’s unique structure. The dominance of heteronormativity makes disclosure especially challenging for young adolescents raised in lesbian parent families. We

hold the assumption that “normality” is socially constructed (also see Rosen and Kuehlwein 1996) and that defining a “normal” family greatly depends on the viewer’s construction of normality. However, living amongst heteronormativity as the dominant discourse has often allowed for gayness to be positioned within society as an “abnormality”, thereby de-normalising (the otherwise normal) lesbian parent family.

Exploring the experiences and subsequent disclosure by adolescents raised in lesbian parent families cannot be done without a constant reminder of the society in which this exploration takes place. The dominant discourses in society such as religion, medical and legal discourses are interlinked and each in its own way directly or indirectly, contributes to the meaning making assigned to the experiences of adolescents raised in lesbian parent families. Therefore, one can also assume that these discourses ultimately influence the decisions of adolescents raised in lesbian parent families to disclose, or withhold, information about their family structure. For the purpose of this study, the concept “moral cultures” is adopted from the work of Hart and Carlo (2005) in an attempt to classify the dominant discourses in which experiences were co-created between the adolescent and his/her life-world, and that consequently proved to be influential in adolescents’ decision to disclose or withhold information about being raised in a lesbian parent family. According to Hart and Carlo (2005), within adolescent life, certain moral cultures, as agents of change play an influential role in what adolescents do and the way they think. These multiple moral cultures (e.g. school, neighbourhood, work) and their social agents of change (e.g. parents, media, peers) are important influences on the compromises that adolescents make on their family demands and the demands placed on them by the broader community (Hart and Carlo 2005).

Furthermore, literature on the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in lesbian parent families (Fairtlough, 2008; Goldberg, 2007; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Pennington, 1987) has highlighted the concept of social control by means of disclosure. Because children

often fear the discovery of their parent's sexuality, certain control strategies are employed by them for the purpose of managing their own public image. Furthermore, Bozett (1987) has thoroughly documented these social control strategies in his work on gay fathers. According to Bozett (1987) social control strategies can take various forms such as: (a) *boundary control*, whereby the child refuses to be seen with the gay parent and partner; (b) *non-disclosure*, whereby the child withhold information about having a gay parent (this could be done by referring to the parent's partner as "uncle" or "aunt" by hiding any paraphernalia in and around the house that might indicate the presence of a gay parent); and (c) *disclosure*, whereby the child discloses information about the parent's sexual orientation in an attempt to prepare others for the truth about the parent's gay relationship. Therefore, it is understandable that social control is used as a barrier against society for the purpose of protecting the self. Disclosure by children raised in lesbian parent families is clearly a complex process, constantly negotiated within the adolescents themselves and with the society they live in.

### **Method**

A qualitative case study design informed the research. The participant taking part in this study preferably had to fall within the criteria of middle- to late adolescents phase (Thom, Louw, Van Ede, & Ferns, 1998), who had been raised in a lesbian parent family and who was still living with their parents.

Since Lilly spent half of each year living in the United States of America, we made use of information technology to facilitate our conversations. Various follow-up conversations took place via e-mail and these allowed for the continuation of her stories. Lilly also made a collage that represented her experiences of being part of a lesbian parent family. The collage was explained to us in depth during her visit to South Africa later in the year. During her time in South Africa, face-to-face interviews were also conducted.

Furthermore, any spontaneous contribution by Lilly also was included in the data set (for example, looking at photographs of Lilly and her family contributed to enriching the data).

Four interviews were used to collect Lilly's ideas and opinions of her experiences better to understand how she negotiated disclosure of their unique family structure (Hayes, 2000). The interviews were conducted at Lilly's home; however, these face-to-face interviews were kept to the minimum, since Lilly communicated a preference for relaying information via e-mail, which certainly raise an interesting point. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and were conducted every second week for the duration of her stay (approximately a month). After the first interview, three follow-up interviews and planned questions were used for the purpose of clarification of previous discussions.

Quality or rigour in research refers to the thoroughness and precision of scientific research (Hayes, 2000). As the criteria for dependability, comprehensive accounts were given of all the aspects that require contemplation in designing the research (Clandinin, 2000). Prolonged engagement with Lilly within her family context enhanced credibility. Since this study focuses on a very sensitive topic, a constant awareness of deep personal experiences was kept in mind. We tried to ensure that Lilly was at all times comfortable with the level of disclosure and exploration in the discussions.

The data in this study were analysed using thematic content analysis and coding (Henning, Van Rensburg, and Smit 2004; Marshall and Rossman, 1999; Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 1999). These themes and sub-themes and the content thereof were confirmed or amended by the participant. The final sub themes were compared to the different moral cultures identified by Hart and Carlo (2005). To understand experiences (consisting of thoughts, feelings and subsequent behaviour) that influence disclosure practices, the moral cultures that featured as prominent role-players in Lilly's adolescent life and ultimately

influenced her decision to disclose or to withhold her unique family structure were considered.

### **Findings**

Two main themes were identified in Lilly's data, namely: a) the role of moral cultures as agents of change (as referred to above), and b) disclosure practices of the adolescent. In the first theme the role of the moral cultures of religion and school, and the role of friends, acquaintances, and society at large, alongside Lilly's own emotions, were all identified as important. In the second main theme, the thematic analysis enabled us to elaborate on social control as a disclosure strategy.

#### **Moral Cultures**

**The role of religion.** Religion and "gayness" have long been (and, we assume, will continue to be) a sensitive point of discussion. The Christian faith has been identified as one of the major condemners of homosexual relationships and has been over the years strongly associated with heteronormativity (this could be true for many other religions but Christianity forms part of Lilly's frame of reference). The debate on homosexuality within the Christian faith has been well researched and documented in different countries (e.g. Canda and Furman, 1999; Hodge, 2005; Jimenez, 2006; Melendez and LaSala, 2006). It becomes clear that Lilly has had her own struggles of acceptance and understanding with regards to religion. In the conversations with Lilly, religion was one of the first moral cultures referred to. Lilly considered it important to introduce herself as a non-Christian individual: *"I do not consider myself Christian to any extent."*

It was also evident that, throughout her interaction with Christian individuals, Lilly has constructed a perception of Christians to be non-accepting of anything that is not heteronormative. This is evident when she said:

*...it's called a sin because people interpret the Bible that way...They are actually criticising one of Gods creations while in the same instance claiming that they are Christian. It does not make sense...I don't want to associate myself with the kinds of people who don't accept it. There has been a time where I had a crush on this guy who was a major Christian but when I found out his views it was a major turn off.*

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

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

The school's religious environment and attitudes also plays a significant role in this regard. Lilly communicates that her school is a school based on the Christian religion, but focusing strongly on acceptance and understanding of differences. Was it not for this religious-accepting environment, Lilly herself communicates that being in school might have been a big problem for her: “[people at my school] are Christian but they accept all other religions... it's never really about God it's usually about a value like integrity or acceptance.”

To understand disclosure, it is thus important to understand the impact of religion as a moral culture on Lilly's life world. Religion featured as a prominent role player in Lilly's decision to disclose. It became evident that Lilly's interaction with the Christian religion had a strong impact on Lilly's construction of Christianity and Christian individuals.

Subsequently, if the recipient of the disclosure is Christian, Lilly is extra cautious when making information about her family structure known.

**The role of the school.** As mentioned above, religion is strongly linked to the role of the school. Friendships are mainly created in the school environment and since the greatest part of the day is spent in school, adolescents construct many meaning making processes out of their daily experiences within the school environment. The Christian mindset has been indirectly influential in Lilly's interactions with her peers, in both South African and American contexts. This is clear from the following statement:

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

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

It has also been confirmed by literature that school attitudes towards acceptance plays a significant role in the child/adolescent's construction of meaning. Since family discussions turn up regularly, it can be expected that a child from a lesbian parent family might feel hesitant to simply disclose the information there and then. Research by Ray and Gregory (2001) on school experiences of children of same-gender parents, found that children of lesbian parent families often felt disempowered, afraid and lonely. When the children requested assistance from adults (teachers) to help them counteract the homophobic culture, the teachers' responses were most often described as non-existent or inadequate. In extreme cases, some teachers even contributed to the homophobia by making homophobic comments. However, it is comforting that Lilly's experiences concerning teachers specifically, indicates that not many negative encounters have occurred:

*I've never experienced issues with teachers but that would be very unprofessional of them if they do voice something or treat me differently. In*

*actually today in Spanish, we were doing the family tree and my teacher, who is about 23, actually asked me 'but do you have a dad and how does that work?' She looked pretty uncomfortable asking but it wasn't offensive or anything but besides her actually nothing ever. Well that I can really recall.*

Adjustment to the school environment is another issue addressed by Lilly: *"I don't feel like a social outcast or anything. I fit in and I have many friends."* It was found that school adjustment has been better for children who have a close relationship with their parents, regardless of family type (Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Although a range of variables relate to school and personal adjustment, no significant differences have been found among children from heterosexual parents and those from lesbian parent families. Also, no differences were found in terms of academic achievement or trouble in school.

The school environment allows Lilly to function among her peers and to establish social bonds. Lilly's family structure does not seem to be a huge role player in terms of her school adjustment. However, not many of her peers know about her family structure and, therefore, one should question if this would prove to be the same should her family structure be more widely known. Lilly's encounters with teachers have been a positive experience and she does not see teachers as being biased against her because of her family structure. However, occasional teasing and labelling has been evident from her encounters with her peers when her family structure was known. However, in terms of school policy (both in South Africa and the USA), teacher attitude and behaviour, the school environment has also served as a protective factor, shielding Lilly from hurtful incidents and remarks. In our opinion, certain school practices, (e.g. sex education) can be adapted to teach children, teachers and parents, acceptance of diversity and can possibly lead to creating a school environment characterised by open-mindedness.

**The role of friends, acquaintances, and society at large.** It would be expected that Lilly's negative encounters concerning her family structure would stem from society at large, such as those who do not specifically know Lilly as a person and that positive reinforcement and support would stem from friends with whom close relationships have been formed. Although this is mostly the case, Lilly had also experienced many disappointments in terms of reactions from her friends/peers. It seemed as if Lilly's friends have been both a source of strength, as well as at times a weakness in her struggle against a heteronormative society. Exploring how friends contributed to safeguarding Lilly against hurtful remarks, she commented: "*...my friends know. And they know not to say anything...I choose friends that I know will handle the news well or okay.*"

However, Lilly also referred to incidents where her friends were responsible for mockery aimed at her and she painfully disclosed her feelings of betrayal and disappointment.

*I have met many people who I thought were my friends until I tell them my mother is gay. Then all of a sudden I'm this big dyke now. Not so long ago I found out that my so-called 'best-friend' told everyone that I was lesbian...she meant it as an insult because that meant she didn't really accept it. Also I think also because I knew that everyone agreed when she said it and the only reason they thought so was because my mom is gay. I was hurt and it hurt me more that it hurt. Does that make sense? Like I was more upset about the fact that her calling me a lesbian was upsetting you know because I knew it shouldn't be.*

Besides the protective and potentially hurtful factor related to the close relationships that children from lesbian parent families form with their friends, the society at large is still one more factor that has to be dealt with. Lilly has mentioned a few incidents that highlight how society has constructed homosexuality and how this construction has inevitably clawed

its way into her life: “...in our society it isn't considered normal and it's going to take many years before people understand it.”

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

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

Lilly has taken on an identity of “being other” because of her family structure. Although she sees herself just as “normal” as any other adolescent girl, society, by implication of her family structure, has reinforced this idea of her being “other”. One could say that this is a lot of responsibility for a young girl to deal with. It has become evident that Lilly felt that she had the responsibility of dealing with the constructions placed on her by society. Lilly stated:

*...I am terrified of what they would think of me afterwards. I know that they do think about it...it's hard to be judged on by the choices that your parents made... But when I go out with both of them I kinda wish I don't see people because I don't want to put myself in that situation...I don't want to be gay because from my own experiences I know that it is worse than hell... And I know that it's hard to be different especially if people don't appreciate it.*

Being raised as part of a lesbian parent family in itself does not seem to markedly contribute to Lilly's development as being “other”, but it is more society's perception of normality that has placed a label of “otherness” on Lilly. One can thus perhaps say that it

seems as if children from lesbian parented families turn out to be well-adjusted and content through their own eyes as compared to the perceptions of (in many cases uninformed) individuals in society.

**The role of emotions.** Lilly's emotions seemed to be strongly and directly linked to her decision to disclose her unique family structure. It is clear from all of the above that certain emotions had been evoked by certain actions and reactions. It was especially informative to realise how emotion itself could be characterised as a moral culture. We rely a lot on how we feel about things and often make decisions based on the emotions they elicit in us. Lilly was no exception. It became clear that, although Lilly communicated neutrality toward her mother's sexual orientation (i.e. that she had "no problem" with her family structure, or that she did not "care" what people thought), ambivalence in her emotions was still evident. This can be seen in statements such as:

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

Furthermore, ambivalence in her feelings toward her family structure can be noted when she answered a question on the possibility of herself being in a gay relationship:

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

Besides ambivalence, emotions such as anxiety and frustration featured strongly in Lilly's account:

*I hate being scared about how my friends are going to react when they know I have a gay mom...I don't like the feeling I get that I can't tell the people I care about my mother. I was kind of uncomfortable to talk about my mom being gay [with her friend's mother, also gay]...in the back of my head I had that nagging feeling. And I also noticed my friend looked uncomfortable so I don't think it's just me really who feels that way.*

Guilt about wishing for a "simpler" family set up also seemed to surface when Lilly addressed her family structure: "I feel bad that I wish my mom wasn't gay. It is selfish and I would never wish X out of my life. I do love her as a mother." However, positive emotions were also elicited from the conversations with Lilly:

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

Tasker and Golombok (1997) also indicated that family pride in some instances led to disclosure even if there was no definite chance of the family structure being discovered. In their study they state that pride towards their lesbian parents is a prominent emotion felt by children from lesbian parent families. However, in the conversations with Lilly, pride about her family structure was never referred to as a reason for disclosure. Lilly communicated that:

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

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

Experiences, and the associated emotions they elicited, were an influential element in having to decide about the disclosure of sensitive information. Lilly communicated fear, stress and anxiety as prevalent emotions associated with possible disclosure. However, certain strengths seem to be acquired by being raised in a lesbian parent family. Being sensitive to minority groups and being accepting of "otherness" were two of the main positives traits Lilly developed through her experience of being raised in a lesbian parent family.

### **Lilly's Disclosure Practices**

With the above mentioned moral cultures, and related experiences as predecessors for disclosure, the following information about the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in lesbian parented families were highlighted in Lilly's account.

Disclosure can be defined as the process of revealing personal information, which includes the subsequent reactions and perceptions that form part of the disclosure process as a whole (Rotenberg, 1995). It is, therefore, the pros and cons of weighing up the decision to disclose that plays a significant role in the disclosure processes. This also was evident from Lilly's experiences. By exploring our findings, as well as by considering existing research, we have to come to realise how social norms have greatly contributed to the decision to disclose, or withhold information, especially for individuals raised in lesbian parent families and more so because of the social norms that define "normality".

Social control seems to be a very prominent factor in the decision of adolescents raised in lesbian parent families to disclose or withhold information. Managing the ideal social image is especially important during adolescence, and even more so for those adolescents raised by lesbian parents. Throughout the conversations with Lilly, a strong theme of social control was identified. Lilly seemed to be very careful in: a) selecting a recipient of disclosure, and (b) disclosing the information about her family appropriately so as not to feel embarrassed or labelled. Although she made reference to both the fact that she did not care what others think, and to being terrified of having to disclose and the subsequent social reaction, the fear of being confronted with her mother's sexuality (planned and unexpected) are a dominant narrative in her life story. Perhaps this can be related to the fact that she is an adolescent in a sensitive developmental phase, which places certain demands (cognitively, physically, socially and morally) on her. Conforming to many of these demands, especially socially, can place high demands on Lilly to blend in with her peers as she starts to function more independently from her family system. Being part of a lesbian parent family in a predominantly heteronormative society is often challenging. Being different, no matter what that difference constitutes (having big ears, freckles, red hair, overweight, homosexual parents etc.) will rarely go unnoticed and frequently becomes a point of discussion and possible teasing. It is for this same reason that it can be deduced that Lilly carefully plans and selects her disclosing procedure and participants.

Bozett (1987) identified three social control methods, namely boundary control, disclosure, and non-disclosure. As a result of this research, another social control method that we have termed "casual- calculated disclosure" came to the fore. In much of the literature (Fairtlough, 2008; Goldberg, 2007; Pennington, 1987; Tasker & Golombok, 1997), ambivalence in their feelings towards their parents' sexual orientation has repeatedly been identified in children from lesbian parent families. Ambivalence also came through as such a

prevalent theme in the conversations with Lilly that we felt compelled to give this “ambivalence” a place in the research. Because of the homophobia of society, Lilly felt a need sometimes to “hide” her parents’ sexual orientation until she felt compelled, or safe, to share this information with selected others. Therefore, one can say that having homosexual parents is not the main issue of concern for Lilly. Being part of a lesbian parent family is “normal” to her, since it is all that she knows and the only family form she has been part of her whole life. However, society’s perception of homosexuality and homosexual parenting makes this an issue that Lilly has to deal with. Because of this ambivalence in her feelings toward her family structure, Lilly created “casual-calculated disclosure”. What does casual-calculated disclosure mean? Because of Lilly’s attempts to manage when to disclose information, disclosure takes place on a calculated basis, thus planned and expected by Lilly herself. Lilly highlighted this when she said:

*[when having to tell people]...I have this big tendency to over-think things... I find that if I have the conversation in my head I just make it worse for myself...” [by implication, to know she makes it worse for herself she obviously has had these conversations in her head with herself and thus planned her disclosure]*

And also when she said:

*I only tell people about my mom when I get a good read on them...but I usually only tell people when I know they won’t freak out on me...I have become pretty good at picking out the people that would freak ... I do choose friends that I know will handle the news well or okay*

However, because Lilly has come to learn that society in general “de-normalises” lesbian parent families, she employed a casual manner of conveying this information so as:

a) not to draw too much attention to her situation, and b) to normalise the situation for the recipient of her disclosure. She confirmed this when she said:

*I don't really have a conversation in my head I just tell them 'hey by the way my moms gay!' and take it from there. I try not to really make a big deal out of it. ...I usually just say it before I think about it too hard... He just mentioned it like 'yeah my dad and his boyfriend, John, bla bla...' and I think I kinda tell it like that too and let people put two and two together if that makes sense?*

Casual-calculated disclosure is thus a calculated decision to disclose sensitive information in a casual way. This casualness does not reflect the discloser's true feelings toward disclosure, but serves a buffering purpose. However, Lilly's method of social control through casual-calculated disclosure was always based on her assessment of one of the following: a sense of common ground with her audience, whether this person needed to know, and whether she would be likely to have an ongoing relationship with this person.

Lilly disclosed information about her family structure based on her assessment of whether the recipient of disclosure had also had similar, or very similar, experiences to hers.

*Recently I was noticing that I've only been telling people that have gay parents or that believe they may be gay or bi themselves.[At my friend's house...her mother is gay]...and I found that I was kind of uncomfortable to talk about my mom being gay or about gay relationships with her mom [but because of the common ground, the conversation took place nonetheless]*

Lilly also disclosed information about her family structure only on a need to know basis, when she felt forced to do so, or when disclosure was perceived as being inevitable: “I think I tell people only when they have to know, not before” and “...actually asked me ‘but do you have a dad and how does that work?’”

Lilly also practiced disclosure based on her assessment of there being in an on-going relationship with the person she was disclosing to. For instance, she disclosed information about her family structure based on the fact that the recipient of disclosure was a trusted friend or someone with whom Lilly had a close relationship: “...*because only my friends know... .*”

Casual-calculated disclosure was characterized by the disclosure of information about family structure in a casual way, when disclosing information about the family structure was perceived as both necessary and inevitable. However, the casual attitude that for example Lilly adopted when she disclosed information was in direct contrast to the inner anxiety and fear of rejection that accompanied the sensitive information conveyed. We argue that the discloser adopted this casual attitude so as not to draw too much attention to her “otherness”.

### **Conclusion**

Reflecting on Lilly’s experiences and subsequent disclosure, we are of the opinion that being raised in a lesbian parent family is in itself a multi-layered affair. Having to face challenges, but at the same time gaining maturity through having to defend and reason about “otherness” and acceptance, all forms part of the growing-up experience. However, carefully selecting information and recipients of disclosure seems to be an unavoidable aspect for children growing up with lesbian parents. Whether it is in the school context, within the bigger society, among friends, or as a personal emotion, feelings connected to homosexuality are constantly being negotiated by these youngsters in an attempt to simplify their everyday life. Lilly in her own way, has established a method of social control whereby she constantly tries to maintain a preferred image of herself as a “normal” teenager besides having to negotiate ambivalent thoughts related to her family structure. It is our opinion, that besides positive and negative experiences, children raised in lesbian parent families constantly negotiate the decision to disclose information on their family set-up in their interaction with others.

However, the ultimate action of disclosure relies on the individual's perception of urgency (need-to-know), their perceived on-going relationship with the recipient, and the possibility of shared understanding through similar experiences (common ground).

### **Implications For Research, Knowledge, And Practitioners**

Professionals working in a therapeutic relationship with individuals raised by same-gendered parents should take note that the inner experiences of these youngsters does not necessarily relate to their parents' sexual orientation as such, but is most likely related to their interactions with a homophobic environment outside of the household. Placing the focus of therapy on the home environment and the family relationships might divert the attention from the true problem of equipping the individual with the social skill to deal with a heteronormative society. Furthermore, the age and biological sex of the individual raised in a lesbian parent family might allow for different needs to arise. Difference in experience and the subsequent construction of meaning allows for great diversity in this area of intervention and cognisance of this diversity is imperative for successful intervention. It is also important that professionals dealing with individuals raised in lesbian parent families are fully informed and knowledgeable about the processes of disclosure. This relates to the inner processes that precede the act of disclosure, the emotions and experiences during disclosure, and the reactions after the disclosure has taken place. It should be noted that while this is a process unique to each individual, basic knowledge on the disclosure processes and its related reactions and emotions provides for informed action when the counselling process is at its beginning and the relationship between therapist and client is still being established. Educating all other professionals that come in contact with children raised by same-gendered parents (e.g. teachers, lawyers, pastors etc.) on the "normality" of the family environment in which these youngsters grow up is crucial in eliminating the general belief of some form of pathology that is inevitable in these youngsters' lives.

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

### **Recommendations For Future Research**

The phase “adolescence” lasts about nine years and it would be interesting to see if there is a significant difference in the disclosure practices of adolescents raised in lesbian parent families as these adolescents move from early to late adolescence over time. Also, it would be interesting to see whether there is a significant difference between adolescents and adults raised as children by lesbian parents and what such a possible difference could constitute. I question whether social control is less of an issue for adults who have grown into their identity versus adolescents who still need to establish a true sense of who they are and are therefore still careful to convey information that might hurt them socially. Furthermore, it could be valuable to explore in what way educating society on diversity and especially homosexuality, could simplify the disclosure processes of individuals faced with the same challenges due to their parents’ sexual orientation. The positive gains from being raised in a lesbian parent family are often neglected as the focus of studies on children raised in lesbian parent families. Compiling a study based on specifically exploring the strengths gained from being raised in a lesbian parent family can provide valuable and interesting insight into this unique family composition.

Having the privilege of entering into the life world of Lilly allowed for an in depth exploration of her experiences and disclosure practices. However, this does not necessarily

allow for generalisation of results since Lilly is but one of hundreds of adolescents who have their story to share. It is however important to note that this case study is based on the authenticity of one adolescent's life story and its uniqueness should not be overlooked. Furthermore, the research focuses on the life story of a female adolescent in a sensitive developmental phase. One cannot deny the uniqueness of the fundamental biological difference between the two sexes and that these differences might account for different experiences and subsequent different behaviour to arise. Another limitation might be that of family composition. Lilly had been raised from the age of six months in a lesbian household. Exploring the experiences and subsequent disclosure of adolescents raised by either gay fathers, or adolescents who had been raised in a lesbian parent family from an older age than Lilly had, also might highlight other important facets to the disclosure practices of other adolescents raised in gay or lesbian parented families.

In conclusion, it seems as if being part of a lesbian parent family is not in itself a concern for the adolescent in this study, however, defending herself against society's opinions and attitudes towards her family structure created a lot of stress in her life. We have to ask ourselves once again, what constitutes normality and how is it that, based on acceptance by the majority, normality can be defined on behalf of others? Each in our own way, we all create our own normality based on our own experiences. However, the freedom to live accordingly is constantly limited by the restrictions set by the greater society.

Both positive and negative encounters with society, friends, school and religion contribute to the emotions elicited when these youngsters are confronted with their family structure. This also provides insight and understanding for us, as the readers, into how lesbian parent families are socially constructed. From this research, it seems that society's preoccupation with heteronormative beliefs and their failure to accept and appreciate

diversity will continue to be an influential element in the decision of adolescents raised in lesbian parent families to disclose or withhold information about their family structures.

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