1

Bubble One

Sunrise

Visual pointers to Bubble One...

Bubble One

Sunrise

What is the focus of my inquiry? What do I want to know? And why do I think that what I want to know is important?

One of the most central and enduring social institutions among human beings is the family. Families are considered by many to be a foundational institution in society, and the nuclear family is traditionally regarded in Western culture as the best place in which to have and rear children (Dalton & Bielby, 2000:36). Although having the kind of loving and caring parents that the ideal nuclear family presupposes is an undeniable condition for the development of psychological and psychosocial well-being, advances and changes in globalised culture compel us to take cognisance of the wide variety of ways in which families are formed and in which children grow up. In modern times, families are appearing in sometimes dramatically different forms that challenge society's traditional views. Such new family arrangements are forcing us to redefine what we understand by family (Dunne, 2000; Gottfried & Gottfried, 1994).

We observe at the outset of the 21st century that people are choosing to live their lives and rear their children in associations that only fifty years ago would not have been regarded as families. Each of these new family forms challenges the traditions of the past (Plummer, 2003:5). In addition, other societal factors such as working mothers, adoption, divorce and HIV/AIDS have all played a part in influencing the ways in which non-traditional family forms have developed. One such non-traditional family form that has challenged society's traditional notion of what a family means is the same-gendered family.[1]

---

[1] See terminology section in this Bubble for what is meant by a *same-gendered family*.

Walsch (1998:28,36-37) is of the opinion that because people in Western societies have become excessively individualistic, they tend to forfeit the richness and resources that strong affiliations to a group allegedly confer. But Walsch does acknowledge that this tendency is being mitigated by an increasingly widespread awareness of the value of community and all its benefits. By creating community networks and by nurturing extended family ties, we create safety nets and support for ourselves that exceed those that a single traditional Western nuclear family could offer on its own. While no one would contest the statement that all children need protection, safety, guidance and care, the 21st century compels us to confront the questions: Do children necessarily have to be cared for only by their biological parents? Is it not a fact that grandparents, older children, tribal elders and other members of the extended family also possess wisdom and knowledge that enriches and empowers children? An even more radical question might be: Are our children not more capable of teaching *each other* the moral values of love, compassion and care? Walters (2000:61) asks: "What are the real value(s) behind family? Community and care? Or is it just an empty institution?". These are the questions that we need to ask ourselves. And it is in these questions that the present study is situated.

Although members of the gay community[2] have in the past usually been associated with a childless lifestyle, more and more gay people are opting for motherhood and fatherhood by creating families of their own or by continuing to live with their children as divorced parents after they have entered into gay relationships. But the very concept of "lesbian mother" or "gay father" means that any study of same-gendered families cannot be considered apart from sexuality. The same-gendered family is sexualised in the sense that the concept itself implicitly evokes the sexuality of the parents concerned as well as the dichotomy between homosexuality and heterosexuality. When we write about same-gendered families, it can be done in such a way that "takes the category for granted, as if it is unproblematic" (Fine,

---

[2] The usage of "gay" to mean "homosexual" is favoured by homosexual individuals with reference to themselves. It still has an informal feel to it but is now well established and in widespread general use (Thompson, 1995:561,2). In many instances it is used in application to male homosexuals and "lesbian" is used when discussing female homosexuals. This however, can be restricting, although it helps in clarification. In this study the word "gay" will be given preference and can refer to both male and female homosexual individuals. When referring specifically to females the word "lesbian" is used.

Weis, Weseen and Wong, 2000:112). While Fine et al. (2000) discuss "race" and "racism" and point out that because it might be prejudicial to take "race" seriously as a category, I apply a similar caveat to gayness. Their concerns resonated with me and I decided to explore the constructs of "gay", "homosexuality" and "sexuality" in a similar fashion. In the literature gay communities are still considered to be "sexual minorities" (Chung, 2001:33) because of prejudice, social oppression and discrimination that is directed against them (Oswald, 2002:374). The point made by Fine et al. may be framed in the following questions: By writing about minorities, do we not (re)inscribe their fixed and essentialist positionality? If we problematise their positionality theoretically while knowing full well how profoundly it impacts on the daily lives of countless millions of people, do we not disregard the enormous power that heteronormative discourses exert in individual lives and communities? Even though being gay is a social construction, how can we destabilise the notion theoretically while at the same time recognising its centrality to so many human lives and communities?

These considerations confronted me with the challenges of my role as a researcher and theoretician. The challenges were: (1) How would I use the opportunity and responsibility to situate same-gendered families in the broader gay community? (2) To what extent would I be able to do justice to same-gendered families in and through my research? In this research I have not only kept same-gendered families as the central theme of my study and research; I have also confronted in a continuous way the complexity of how families are socially constructed.

The traditional nuclear family (which is widely accepted to mean a legally married, two-parent heterosexual couple) has for a long time been the norm and benchmark against which all other kinds of couples or family arrangements have been measured and judged in Western society. Jackson and Scott (2004:236) are of the opinion that the sexual world that children eventually learn about, and come to participate in, continues to be ordered by institutionalised heterosexuality. This is also true in South Africa, which is a strongly traditional and family-based society

5

with a culture in which the traditional family is prominent, powerful, visual and valued.

Even though this is the case, there have, as I have noted above, been significant changes in many modern Westernised or semi-Westernised societies. A far greater openness and acceptance are at the present time evident in popular culture as it is reflected in mass media. Thus, for example, a number of popular television dramas have focused on lesbian or gay characters. There are also indications that some sections of communities have become more accepting of and open to the existence of same-gendered families, and significant legal rulings have been made in favour of same-gender families (De Bruin, 2004; Ellis, 2003; Sullivan, 2003; Truter, 2003; Underhill, 2003). This is a new trend that has only emerged in the past few decades (and more especially in the last decade or two). The fact that the prevailing discourses of heteronormativity have become increasingly fractured suggests to me the extent of the tensions and contradictions that society continues to face. Not least of these is the changing structure of what contemporary people regard as the family.

In spite of a greater acceptance of sexual diversity in many quarters, the heterosexual couple remains enshrined as the normative form of adult sexual relationships. As Walters (2000:61) notes: "It is hard to believe that the structure of exclusion and discrimination that surround gay life will not in some way impact gay family life." Significant societal biases remain evident in the media in newspaper accounts of legal debates, television debates on moral and religious issues pertaining to the family, the portrayal of families in school textbooks, articles in popular magazines, and legal questions such as the debate that surrounds the sanctioning of marriage between same-gender couples and the use of the word "marriage" to portray such unions (Ellis, 2003; Jackson, 2003; Khan, 2002; Knowler & Donaldson, 2002; McCafferty, 2001; McGill, 2002; Mphaki, 2003; Powers, 1998; Wallis, 2003). But descriptions of "societal attitudes" simply cannot capture the complex and content-specific aspects of everyday thought and practice, the practical reasoning and the gut reactions that inform everyday conduct (Jackson &

Scott, 2004:237). A study carried out by OUT LGBT Wellbeing (the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Organisation) in Pretoria, South Africa, revealed for example that 37% of a sample of lesbian, gay or bisexual people had experienced verbal harassment or abuse because of their sexual orientation while 15% have been asked to leave their faith/religious community because of their sexual orientation (Polders & Wells, 2004:8). Because the traditional family structure is widely accepted to mean a family with totally heterosexual parents, most researchers and investigators agree that same-gendered families are still stigmatised by society (Barrett, 1997; Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002; Dunphy, 2000; Kershaw, 2000; Paechter, 2000; Richardson & Seidman, 2002).

I therefore maintain in this study that stigma still attaches to non-heterosexual identities because of heteronormativity, discrimination and homophobia, and that this stigma consequently devolves on same-gendered families. Because such generally assumed and widely unchallenged belief systems about the ideal family create a dominant narrative of what a family is or should be, a perception is created that same-gendered families are different, "other" and "alternative". This study presupposes the theoretical assumption that the dominant discourse/narratives in society assume a normative status for the heterosexual family both in the world of science and in everyday life.

I have assumed for the purposes of this study that children growing up in same-gendered families are aware of this discrimination and stigmatisation. As they participate in the activities of their schools and churches, and as they watch television or surf the Internet, they become aware of – and form their own perceptions of – what a family is or should be. Because of the heteronormativity of Western society,[3] one of the major challenges for every child is the integration of their family experience with that of the wider society outside the home. Tasker and Golombok (1997:77) note that a major challenge for every child and his or her family is the integration of family experience with the expectations and values of

[3] Heteronormativity is probably evident in most countries and societies in the world. However, in this study I will focus on the westernised cultural and structural forces that shaped homo- and heterosexuality.

the wider society outside their home. Although this is a universal dilemma, integration is more difficult to achieve when a family's divergence from prevailing norms within the wider social group is greater than average.

Even though research into same-gendered families has increased over the past few years, a limited number of qualitative studies have investigated in-depth the experiences of children of same-gender parents. Much of the impetus for research into gay parenthood has arisen from the consequences of custody hearings in which judicial concerns for the welfare of the children have been expressed. It is therefore not surprising that most of the available literature on these studies reflects the impact that gay parents have on their children and more specifically the influence that they have on their children's gender identity and sexual orientation, personal development, social relations, and the extent to which they (the children) may be bullied or teased by others (Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002; Fitzgerald, 1999; Parks, 1998; Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Finding research performed specifically from the children's perspective is ambiguous because although many studies do indeed focus more on the children concerned rather than on parenting, the evidence for such children's perceptions was derived largely from interviews with their parents (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Patterson, 1992; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristofferson & Breaways, 2002). Some research does however include findings that are derived from standardised psychometric assessment strategies conducted with children (Dundas & Kaufman, 2000; Patterson, 1992; Tasker, 1999). More and more studies include interviews and other forms of data collection from the perspectives of children such as, for example, their school experiences (Ray & Gregory, 2001), analysis (from the perspective of adulthood) of the experience of growing up with a lesbian mother (Paechter, 2000), stigmatisation, self-esteem and coping (Gershon, Tschann & Jemerin, 1999), and acceptance of a lesbian mother (Van Voorhis & McClain, 1996).

This study will focus on the children, and will present and represent their unique experiences of growing up in a family with same-gender parents in a dominantly heterosexual world. Little is known about the ways in which children in same-

gendered families function within the predominantly heterosexual society, what makes such functioning possible, and what makes such functioning easy or difficult to manage. In this study I will explore the processes of negotiation between individual children and those members of society with whom these children come into contact, the factors that these children use in their negotiations, and the specific behaviours that such children engage in to encourage or prevent particular situations. I will also use this study to investigate and describe the experiences of children who grow up in a family with same-gender parents from the perspectives of the children themselves.

The purpose of this study then is to explain the ways in which children in same-gender families negotiate their own personal experience narrative within the dominant narrative of society in order to inform our current understanding of how children experience the social construction of same-gendered families. I shall therefore use the following key questions to drive the inquiry:

♀♀   What are the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families?

♀♀   How do children growing up in same-gendered families negotiate their personal experience narratives within the dominant narrative of society?

The aim of this study is not to investigate the sexual orientation or sexuality of the parents or of the children; it is to focus on how they reconcile their construction of the world with the prevalent heteronormative view that society holds about a family. My aim is to explore how these children interpret, understand and define same-gendered families within the dominant narrative of society. I do not assume that the child's experiences in the home and family differ much from that of a heterosexual family. I am mainly interested in how they negotiate their personal and community relationships outside of their homes. If the children encounter problems or experience difficulties because they are growing up in a same-gendered family, then an investigation of their stories should provide insight into how they resolve problems such as stereotyping and stigmatisation. If (conversely) they find it easy to negotiate relationships that pertain to their family structure, an

investigation of their stories should provide insight into how they manage and resolve the discrimination and stereotyping that gay people experience at the hands of society. I will then be able to describe same-gendered families in terms of the advantages, richness and diversity that they confer on both same-gender parents and their children, and in this way enlarge the scope of heteronormative family theory.

Assumptions of the study

I believe that to be gay is a special gift, and that the gay lifestyle can enhance one's engagement with the world and contribute to the diversity and uniqueness of what it means to be a human being in this world.

I view a person with a gay orientation or preference as a healthy, normal individual with essentially the same dreams, passions, hopes, fears, ambitions, aspirations and the possibility of creating a spiritual richness in being alive as anyone else. I place the highest value on growth, well-being, hope and happiness. In short, we each have the capacity to be authentic versions of ourselves.

Because of historically negative constructions of homosexual people, living the life of a gay person is not always easy. My working assumption is therefore that every person with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual needs to reconcile his or her sexual orientation somehow with the heteronormativity of society. In the same way that gay people need to do this, so the children of same-gender parents need to engage in such a process of reconciliation and negotiation.

I do not assume that experiences that children with same-gender parents have in their homes and family lives differ in any qualitative way from those of children from heterosexually gendered families. The difference lies (and it is this in which I am especially interested) in the necessity of their having to negotiate their relationships in their landscape *outside* their homes. In this study I assume that only the heterosexual family model is regarded as normative in the dominant discourses

10

and narratives of our society *in everyday life* – and that they are also therefore dominant in the same-gendered families that I interviewed.

How do I intend to find out what the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families are? Here is an explanation of my method of inquiry.

What kind of study am I planning?

The particular methodology that has allowed me to discover and do justice to the perceptions and complexity of my research partners' understandings,[4] and that has also allowed me to present and represent their stories in a way that answers my questions about the experiences and social significance of growing up in a same-gendered family, has been the utilisation of a generic qualitative study with a narrative research design.

Narrative research attempts to understand and represent experiences through the stories that individuals live and tell (Creswell, 2002:525). The narrative inquirer tells and retells, lives and relives, presents and re-presents the stories that make up people's lives, individually and socially, in order to answer questions of meaning, experience and social significance (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:71,187).

The goals of narrative inquiry, according to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998:72), are: (1) to assist us to understand the inner or subjective world of people and how they think about their own experience, situation, problems and life in general, (2) to obtain insight into the individual that clarifies what had previously been meaningless or incomprehensible and that suggests previously unobserved connections, (3) to convey to a reader the feeling of what it must be like to meet the person concerned, (4) to effectively portray the social and historical world in which the person is living, and (5) to illuminate the causes and meanings of events, experiences and conditions in the person's life. I have used the narratives that

---

[4] I view the research participants as partners in this research because they emphasise through language the collaborative quality of my inquiry. See Bubble Three for more detail.

reveal their everyday interpretations to present a reflexive and interpretive understanding of their experiences. While I have focused on their personal experiences, people's narratives reflect not only their *own* meaning-making, but also the themes of the society or culture in which they live. All my research partners' personal narratives must therefore be understood against the backdrop of society's construction of what lesbian and gay families mean (Josselson, Lieblich & McAdams, 2003:8).

Narrative research is by its very nature full of loose ends and seeming contradictions (Riessman, 2002a:697). It also lacks the relatively fixed and traditional interpretative framework that a researcher would use to analyse and interpret findings. Another compromise that I had to make when I chose a narrative design is that I had to accept the process of working in an *emergent* design. Unlike quantitative research methodologies that begin with well-defined hypotheses which are then tested by fairly rigid research designs, qualitative narrative research always leads one in new directions as it unfolds. Discontinuous and fragmentary texts are a typical feature of narrative research. These texts need to be read and reread as one strives towards coherent and consistent interpretation. Even after one has captured the research partners' stories in writing, the texts one is left with are never comprehensive enough to represent the research partner's whole life. In this sense they are fragmentary.

The narrative approach implies an acceptance of pluralism, relativism, and the validity of individual subjectivity (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998:2). All these factors are themes and motifs in postmodern and poststructuralist thought. They also relate to my research paradigm because I immediately found myself identifying with the qualitative *interpretivist* paradigm. After some reflection I realised that the *social constructionist* view could also give me valuable insight because interpretations cannot be disentangled from the social context in which they arise. I believe that the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families reveal how they co-construct their social reality, and that this reality is itself socially constructed and situated within a specific social, historical and political

12

context (Bevan & Bevan, 1999; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). As I wrote up my research, I realised ever more strongly the extent to which I was drawing on the *poststructuralist* paradigm by focusing on multiple voices and pluralist assumptions. The writing process required me to reflect on the multiple realities contained in the narratives, to engage with the ambiguities that this kind of research entails, and to recognise the effects that these factors were having on my research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000:171). I soon realised, as I continued to incorporated aspects of postmodernism, feminism and post-structuralism into my operative paradigm, that I was engaged in constructing a complex methodological hybrid that was composed of elements that are typical of apparently different paradigms. After months of reflection and contemplation, I positioned myself mainly in the social constructionist paradigm while acknowledging the strong influence of post-structuralism on my thinking. In addition, I have incorporated points of view from other non-positivist paradigms because I found that they were valuable for the way in which I analysed current literature, conducted the analysis, and for aiding my reflection on the conduct of my research. This complex hybrid reveals to some extent the complexity on which I have based my study and research.

What is my approach to analysis and interpretation?

After contemplating different strategies for analysis, I utilised a holistic analysis to construct descriptive and explanatory accounts of the subjective experiences of the children growing up in same-gendered families. My use of the bare transcriptions as a matrix from which to construct the narratives reveals my analysis because this process required me to make sense of what my research partners had said in the form of a more polished story. The narratives are also an interpretive document in the sense that they represent my own way of making sense of the children's experiences.

After that I proceeded to a more interpretive phase of the research. In this phase, I confronted the data (narratives) with analytical questions that enabled me to frame and focus the experiences of children in same-gendered families. I utilised these grounded narratives as an interpretive tool to develop "interpretive themes".

Following this process I developed a framework in which the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families were conceptualised.

The guiding framework for this study

I did not begin work on this thesis with a specific theoretical or conceptual framework (in the sense of a specific theory or point of view) against which I proposed to frame the data. My reason for doing this was that I wanted to be able to go into the field with an open mind about what I would hear. I wanted to be able to hear the stories of the children and their parents and siblings with my mind uncontaminated or distorted by predetermined conceptual biases and preconceptions. Because I needed to be as open as possible to whatever arose from my research partners (the children), I had to place myself in a frame of mind in which I would be open to literally anything that the children and their parents might tell me. In other words I had not made up my mind about what I would hear. In a phenomenological sense, I was in a state of bare attention to the subjective realities of the children involved in this study. And because I had no preconceived theoretical constructs about the experiences of these children who were growing up in same-gendered families, I hoped to be able to discover more about them and their subjective realities. Any predetermining framework of questions, for example, would have made my inquiries too specific, too leading and ultimately too limiting. I wanted to create a forum in which the children felt safe to disclose. If I had approached the inquiry with specific opinions and points of view in mind before the inquiry actually began, I would have deprived my data of the richness, diversity and uniqueness that I sought from the interviews. The narrative method and an open-ended interpretive framework allowed me to pursue my inquiries without the distorting effect of strongly established prior hypotheses.

Although I had reviewed the relevant literature in depth, I had not by any means made up my mind that this or that person's representation or theory would guide my investigations. I stayed open to whatever new and unfamiliar or old and familiar data might come to my attention during the research process. There were

times when such openness to whatever might happen certainly exhausted me because I was continually confronted by so many ideas, formulations, fields of inquiry, opinions and philosophies: radical lesbianism, postmodern feminist writing, queer theory, positive psychology, symbolic interactionism, interpretive interactionism – and many more. But I never chose one author or authority's opinions above another's because no one's approach was so comprehensive that it would have allowed me to capture the essence of the subjective realities of the children who were growing up in same-gendered families.

How will I take care of my research partners? (Ethical considerations)

While the practical consequences of the ethical dimensions of this study are discussed in detail throughout Bubble Three, I wish to mention here that I made use of the following principles to ensure that my inquiry and procedures complied with widely accepted ethical standards for this kind of research (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999; Mason, 2002; Mouton, 2001; University of Pretoria, 2003). The principles that I used to guide me:

- The principle of *voluntary participation*. This means that the research partners could withdraw at any time from the research programme. The research partner might also, for example, refuse to answer any question. Research partners were also interviewed at reasonable times and by prior arrangement (appointment).
- The principle of *informed consent*. This means that the research partners were at all times fully informed about the research process and purposes, and that they freely consented to participate in the research. I kept my research partners informed by means of an ongoing dialogue between myself and the research partners throughout the duration of the inquiry process.
- The principle of *safety in participation*. This means that research partners were never placed in situations in which they might be at risk or harmed.
- The principle of *privacy*. This principle incorporates the principles of *confidentiality* and *anonymity*: The identity of all my research partners as well as the information gathered were given under conditions of anonymity and

confidentiality. I explained to all research partners how pseudonyms would be used and how all data created would be stored in such a form that it would remain anonymous and impenetrable to anyone seeking to identify them.

- The principle of *trust.* This principle is especially important because trust develops gradually when one is doing interpretive research, conducting interviews over a period of time, and utilising the other in-depth data collection methods that are associated with such methods. I was careful not to exploit this trust for personal gain or benefit by deceiving research partners or betraying the confidences of research partners in my research process or its published outcomes.

I also complied with the highest possible professional ethical standards when creating data, analysing field texts or data, and when interpreting and presenting findings. This included the implementation of appropriate referencing techniques and the rejection of any form of plagiarism. Since I am a qualified educational psychologist, I adhere to the ethical guidelines of the governing body for Psychology in South Africa, namely the Health Professions Council of South Africa. These same ethical guidelines guided my research in all its stages.

Caring for research partners is perhaps the most important of the ethical guidelines. Research is not merely a set of techniques. It is also a well considered, ethically grounded process that enhances values such as trust, respect, empathy and dignity as these come into play between the researcher and the researched.

Specific comments on potential risks and pitfalls for the research partners
Since I was engaged in research into a deeply controversial topic, I remained intensely aware throughout the whole process of any possible risk and harm that might affect the research partners. In research such as this, the research partner is exposed to personal risks because in-depth data collection may bring to light hidden or subconscious thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. This paradoxically might constitute one of the main *advantages* of participation to the researcher if

16

thoughts, perceptions, and feelings of this kind are dealt with in an adequate, helping and appropriate way by the researcher and by significant others.

There is, apart from such personal considerations, a possible contextual risk noted by Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999:385) that I need to examine at this point. The risks involved arose out of the fact that – quite apart from my reflection process – I needed to give the research partner and his/her parents an opportunity to think about the possible ramifications of involvement. It is fairly obvious that in controversial research such as this, searching questions might be asked in the context of family and friends, school peers and so on. It could also happen that certain people might become suspicious for reasons of their own and draw attention to issues that the research partner had initially been unaware of – issues that might cause research partners to feel exposed. And even if the child and family did not feel personally exposed or vulnerable, their participation in my research might have led them to feel so. I therefore discussed with the families concerned, strategies that we could use through the process, and I also discussed the vital issue of closure with them. Closure was extremely important both for the families and for me. We all needed to realise that my regular visits and active involvement would at some stage decrease in frequency and eventually cease because the goals and purpose of my research required that this should happen. It could well have been that an intimate working relationship had developed between me and the research partners because narrative inquiry is a form of inquiry that is based on relationships and it cannot but influence the lives of everyone concerned (including of course the researcher). It is for this reason that the termination of this working relationship has to be discussed and understood right at the beginning of the relationship between researcher and research partners.

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999:387) state that when one intends merely to assess a situation and the assessment then leads to a change in the situation, one is already in ethically problematic territory, especially when one is dealing with areas of deep personal experience (as I most certainly was). Although the initial agreement might have established that the interview would focus on a specific personal topic, it might happen, and indeed it often does happen, that the interview might well take

on a life of its own. Such an interview will then become almost like a psychotherapy session and the participant will begin to disclose thoughts and feelings that he or she had not previously admitted to having – even to himself or herself. The interviewer must therefore be extremely cautious and ensure that the interviewee feels comfortable with the level of disclosure and exploration in any given discussion. Mason (2002:67) warns that one should not try to turn an interview into a therapeutic encounter because this may not be the "best" moral choice – or even a sound intellectual option.

As I engaged with children, I reflected on what sound ethical practice in research with children might imply. There are different points of view, but I headed the opinion of Bergen (1994:199), who advocates that the researcher must assume the role of an empathic listener and be open to the "real" emotions and feelings of participants. Great value is placed in this procedure on personal interaction and identification with the individual's experience. While the rationale behind such a method is that it could produce research that is richer in insights, the corresponding caution is that the researcher should obviously be meticulous in refraining from deceiving, exploiting or manipulating research participants in pursuit of his or her own agenda.

I therefore formed the determination constantly to examine, reflect upon and assess my actions and my role throughout the duration of the research process. It is Mason (2002:7) who calls this activity *active reflexivity*. Because a researcher cannot be neutral, objective or detached, she or he should seek to understand her/his role in the research process, and this is what I was determined to do. I realised that I would have to climb out of the "ivory tower", become involved with the people who would participate in my research, and communicate with them as equals whenever possible. I therefore aimed from the outset to eliminate as many barriers as I could and thereby open the field to the generation, reception and interpretation of truly authentic data.

Good qualitative research consciously grapples with the entwined issues of power and responsibility in relationships with individuals or groups that are often more lasting and intimate than is commonly the case with quantitative research projects (Rogers, 2003:59).

Benefits and advantages to the research partners

For the research partners my research was an opportunity to relate their experiences and perceptions and to share their personal stories and perceptions with a researcher trained in the rigor of Western Pyschology. As I also intended to expand our knowledge in the area of my research and I hoped also to exert a beneficial influence on the way in which practitioners and educators view same-gendered families, the families involved in my research had an opportunity to contribute to this process. I also desired to prove in my research the validity of a methodology that focuses on extracting valid conclusions and useful knowledge from the stories of participant individuals. I realised then that a personal exploration of their own experiences might prove to be beneficial and even empowering for the participants concerned.

Note on Terminology

"Same-gendered family"

This refers to a family constituted by two gay parents of the same gender (two females or two males), who are involved in an intimate and committed relationship. While "gender" in this sense refers to the biological sex of the parent, I acknowledge that "gender" is socially constructed. It is because of the effect of this construction that I refer to such families as "same-gender**ed**" families and not "same-gender" families. Such families are also widely referred to as lesbian or gay families, or same-sex families.

In the text I sometimes refer to *children growing up in a family with same-gender parents*, or *children with or of same-gender parents*, or merely *same-gender parents* or

same-gender households which then indicate the same-gendered family. These terms are therefore used interchangeably.

"Two mothers"

There is a difference between the **role** of a mother and the **gender** of mother in my text. "Mother" in English is both a **noun** (the way in which I use it when referring to "two mothers") and a **verb** (to mother someone) (Thompson, 1995:886; personal e-mail correspondence with R.K. Loveday, 17 April 2005).

Throughout my research, I describe the two lesbian women who are their same-gender parents as "two mothers" – although the roles that these women adopted in the lives of their children often varied considerably. As with any conventional (non-same-gender) parents, each parent acts out different roles in the lives of their children. Although I touch on this phenomenon in greater detail in Bubbles Four and Five, I would simply like to note here that one does not *necessarily* have to belong to a particular gender in order either to "mother" or "father" in child-rearing. This is precisely the reason why same-gender parents *can* be successful – and why the same-gendered family is a valid and viable "alternative" family structure.

"Experience"

(Refer also to Bubble Three for an extended discussion of what this word means in this research.)

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (Thompson, 1995:474) describes "experience" as "an event regarded as affecting one, the fact or process of being so affected". This is similar to what is understood by the German word *Erlebnis*, which refers to experience as something one has: an event or adventure connected with an individual. *Erfahrung*, somewhat differently, denotes "experience" as something that one undergoes so that subjectivity is drawn into an "event" of meaning. Experience so understood is integrative, unfolding, dynamic and hence singular (Schwandt, 2001:86). In the Concise Oxford Dictionary, experience is also explained as a verb as "to have experience of, to undergo, to feel or be affected by". It is this latter sense in which I am interested: the *subjectivity* and process of being *affected* by

what the children of same-gender parents *undergo*. In the end, it is experience that constitutes our life worlds because "in each experience there is something there, but there is also something which is only potential. And all potentialities of all our experience constitute, so to say, a world" (Valdés, 1991:453).

"Personal experience narrative"

This means the experiences of everyday life as they are internalised in the subjective consciousness of individuals. This meaning originates from the phenomenological and ethnomethodological tradition (Creswell, 2002; Plummer, 1995; Schwandt, 2001). In this research, this term refers to the daily experiences of the children growing up in same-gendered families. These experiences collectively constitute their personal stories.

The type of narrative research method that I use in this study is that of the "personal narrative". It is in these personal narratives that the personal experiences of individuals in particular social settings are explored. The opposite of personal experience is impersonal knowledge. Impersonal knowledge is derived from personal knowing when what is personal and immediate has been transformed through intellectual generalisation and categorisation into what may be described as "universal facts" or "objective knowledge". Such knowledge (it is claimed) is not dependent on a particular person or on the social practices and understanding of a particular knower (Creswell, 2002; Plummer, 1995; Riessman, 1993).

"Dominant narrative"

This term is derived from the "master narrative" or "grand narrative", a term made famous by Lyotard (Boje, 2000:14). Part of the stated agenda of postmodernism is to shatter the grand narrative into many small stories and replace any linear, mono-voiced grand narrative of the past with an open, polysemous (containing many meanings), and multivocal web of little stories. For me personally, the dominant narrative in this study is the dominant heteronormative discourse that stereotypes and stigmatises the gay community.

"Narratives" and "stories"

Narratives are defined in various ways. Although they have been called "stories", they also refer to other forms of discourse (Bruner, 1986; Mottier, 2000). Some researchers do not regard a story and a narrative to be the same thing (Becker, 1999; Lemon, 2001). I define *stories* as accounts of incidents, events, thoughts and feelings, and *narratives* as the end process of the activity that a researcher engages in when that researcher imbues the "raw" data of a story with structure, organisation and rhetorical coherence – but always in a way that is consistent with the personal truth of the person or people from whom the raw data was originally collected. By this definition, narratives are *ex post factum* – they are in a sense a retrospective explanation or making-sense of stories that might otherwise be largely incomprehensible or incoherent because of their discursiveness or lack of organisation (Boje, 2000:3,4). It is by means of narrative that experience is reorganised and reconstructed for both the original tellers and for possible audiences (Cortazzi, 1993:1). A narrative has a "beginning, middle and end". In the structuralist tradition of narrative research, a narrative "represents a connected succession of happenings" (Lieblich et al., 1998:2). I also utilise "life history" and "life story" approaches, which focus on individual subjective definitions and experiences of life. They relate what is private and public, and what is personal and social (Schwandt, 2001:17).

"Negotiate"

According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Thompson, 1995:912), to negotiate means, firstly, to confer with others in order to reach a compromise or agreement, or to arrive at some settlement (Merriam-Webster Online, 2003); secondly, it means to arrange or bring about (a result, for example); thirdly, it means to find a way over, through, etc. (e.g. through a difficulty, challenge).

Negotiation for me also contains a strong element of "reconciliation". It means in addition "to harmonise, or make compatible" (Thompson, 1995:1148), "to make consistent or congruous, or to restore harmony" (Merriam-Webster Online, 2003).

The negotiation performed by the children of same-gender parents does not mean that they are attempting to accept the dominant discourse of society in an uncritical or unthinking way. It implies the acceptance of an equality of status of both heterosexual and homosexual discourses – a position from which they can become capable of reconciling these two worlds. "Negotiation" in this research describes the process of how the children who were my research partners "confer with others" in the transactions between themselves and their peers, close friends and significant others.

"Society"

We may regard *society* as a continuous work in progress that requires all responsible citizens to maintain its status in the way that they maintain their own and other consensual identities. Society is the totality of how ordinary individuals define themselves as people who are involved in social networks (Katovich & Maines, 2003:294,304).

According to Katovich and Maines (2003:289), society can be regarded as something that exists in situations. Whatever exists among human beings exists in a process that is comprised of people who behave and act in concert to create situational objectives. The innumerable elements of any given society are shaped by people who engage in collective action in "situations". It follows therefore that society is always dynamic, flexible, changeable and transient rather than certain, monolithic, static, rigid, enduring and unchanging. If one accepts this definition, society is characterised by various degrees of uncertainty. This uncertainty creates a demand (in a healthy society) for a constant revisioning and reinterpretation of dominant discourses, "facts" and knowledge – however prestigious and privileged they are or may have been in the past.

It is social acts and gestures that create society (Katovich & Maines, 2003:289). I focus in the present study on various forms of hegemony or relations of domination that exist in society that remain largely invisible (but are no less potent for being so). These forms of hegemony or relations of domination are kept in place, not by

coercion but by the consent or unthinking acquiescence on the part of those who are dominated (During, 1993:5).

"Sexual preference" and "sexual orientation"

While *sexual orientation* in the traditional sense is usually associated with the belief that everyone is born with an innate sexual identity, *sexual preference* indicates that a person has made a *choice* about her or his sexual identity. Sexual preference is usually used by radical feminist approaches as opposed to the more "traditional" term "sexual orientation". This term (and its accompanying attitudes) became popular in the 1960s and 1970s when it used to make a statement about one's political choice (Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002; Creith, 1996). In this study I use the terms interchangeably because I prefer to use the term as a particular author uses it when describing or commenting upon that author's point of view. I personally would prefer to use the term "preference" – but not because I do not regard sexual identity as innate and not because I do not believe that one's sexual identity expresses a deliberate political choice (as understood by the feminists who have defined it in this way). For me, the term *sexual preference* indicates that sexual identity is but one aspect of any person's total identity as a human being. One chooses a "soul mate" or life partner, and sometimes that person happens to be a person of the same gender as oneself. But in order to remain in line with the more conventional usage, I opted mainly for "sexual orientation" in the interpretation chapters because most authors in the literature I reviewed prefer the term "sexual orientation".

"Coming out"

"Coming out", the process of disclosing or revealing one's own sexual orientation or preference, comes from the (originally) American phrase "coming out of the closet" (Plummer, 1995; Richardson & Seidman, 2002; Sedgwick, 1990; Sullivan, 2003). It usually refers to the complex process of moving from an assumed heterosexual (and confused and conflicted) identity to a strong, positive and keen sense of identity as a gay person. But "coming out" has been so widely used that it has entered the English language in its own right simply to mean "disclose". Thus it no longer refers exclusively to sexuality, but may include, for example, people who

"come out" in terms of belonging to a certain religion or a positive HIV status. In current practice, any person who asserts a positive identity that is based on self-acceptance, pride and visibility has come out of the closet. The term also implies a refusal to hide some condition, experience or past action that might be disagreeable to others and so provoke criticism, opposition or open antagonism. Dunphy (2000:118) notes that life experiences, innate character traits and the processes of social formation often place people involuntarily in various "closets" (British and American English: cupboards). The closet is therefore a place in which to hide something disagreeable and shameful. This may even be something as central to one's identity as one's innate sexual orientation. "Coming out" is not a one-off event or moment, but rather a lifelong process.

In the context of this study, "coming out" refers to the disclosure of *the family structure* by children of same-gender couples. For me the children's process of disclosing that their parents are gay (as they reveal it directly, reveal it by implication, or as they reveal it when they tell me or others that that they have two mothers) is a process parallel to that which gay people undergo when they come out about their sexual orientation. It is also sometimes as fraught with emotion and other difficulties as is the gay experience of coming out. These children also, for example, often have to choose to "come out" about their family structure.

"Being okay", "okay" and "okayness"
While a reader might wonder at my use of these phrases and their variant forms because of their informality or designation as colloquialisms in most dictionaries, I use them in this thesis in a deliberate and conscious way that imbues these terms with more depth and meanings that go beyond their everyday colloquial use.

"Okay" was the preferred term used in his psychological theory and practice by Thomas A. Harris in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Harris, 1973), as part of transactional analysis, a psychological approach that was developed mainly by Eric Berne (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992). Harris described four life attitudes that people use to summarise their feelings of self-worth and their perception of the worth (or

25

lack of worth) of others in personal interactions (transactions). He described four life positions which he variously designated as: "I'm OK – You're OK", "I'm OK – You're not OK", "I'm not OK – You're OK", "I'm not OK – You're not OK". The concept of "OK" represents an introjected conviction of being empowered, of being authentic, of having good human relationships, of being capable of solving problems constructively, and of being responsible (Harris, 1973).

In ordinary everyday usage, "okay" expresses agreement, acquiescence, being alright or satisfactory. It may also indicate approval, agreement or sanctioning (Merriam-Webster Online, 2005; Thompson, 1995; personal e-mail correspondence with R.K. Loveday, April 8, 2005).

In this thesis, *being okay/okay*, and thus also the term of *okayness*, imply the capacity of the children to be in emotional, cognitive and even spiritual congruence with the fact that they have two lesbian women (mothers) as parents. This would then also imply that they are in harmony with this fact of their lives, that they acknowledge it and that they do *not* deny it. *Being* refers to "to be", to exist, thus a state of being or a state of existing. *Being okay* thus indicates that there exists in the children a generalised feeling and frame of mind that in turn indicates an inner awareness of, contentment with and acceptance of the fact that they have two lesbian mothers.

These terms also indicate the nuances of being *satisfied* with, *content* with, *at ease* with, *at peace* with, and *alright* with having two mothers, which taken together might also indicate *acceptance* of having two lesbian mothers. Acceptance in psychological terms is a complex and deep process that is usually achieved after a prolonged contemplation of different factors (Kübler-Ross, 1986). The synonyms in the first sentence of this paragraph, may be regarded as referring to internal processes of being okay.

The terms *acceptability, adaptation* and *adjustment* also imply the existence of external processes that are associated with social approval and social acceptability. While these processes are important and certainly play a role in the any conviction of

okayness, they do not capture the particular meaning of what *being okay* implies (as it is used in this research).

After much consideration of possible alternatives, I could find no terms more apt or suitable for conveying the acceptance of their same-gender parents on the part of the children than what is conveyed in the terms *being okay* and *okayness.* To me these words signal an authentic and fundamental awareness, feeling and belief that the children in this study have an **unfolding** experience and an intuitive **knowing** that their same-gender lesbian mothers are okay *in every way*. This then is the way in which I use these terms in this thesis.

"Housekeeping" – or what to expect as you navigate this thesis

You will encounter "bubbles"…

My thesis consists of what I have called "Bubbles" rather than traditional chapters. I use the metaphor of a bubble to indicate that our current understandings are only the understandings of a moment in time and space, that the construction of knowledge is temporary and transient, that such constructions can only last for a limited time and that they can never be fully captured, stabilised or pinned down in a way that makes them rigid, stable, enduring, unalterable and privileged. This metaphor therefore incorporates postmodern, post-structuralist, feminist and gay beliefs and assumptions about the nature of our perceived and consensual realities.

The Concise Oxford dictionary also defines a bubble as "a thin sphere of liquid enclosing air" (Thompson, 1995:167). Just as this thin "skin" of the bubble separates liquid from air, so metaphorically do my Bubbles. You will find that I have enclosed in each Bubble various (air) pockets of knowledge. Thus even though the different Bubbles are thematically different from and physically separate from each other,

they are probably not always as definite as chapters, which the same dictionary defines as "a *main* division in a book" (Thompson, 1995:220) [my emphasis].

Because bubbles have the capacity to reflect light, I extend the meaning of my bubble metaphor to indicate how my extended *reflection* has constructed an understanding of the experiences of children who are growing up in same-gendered families. In addition, light reflected through a prism in a particular way arranges itself into the colours that we call a "rainbow". It is significant for me that the rainbow (in its diversity of colours) is the universal global "symbol" of gay people. It is also incidentally a metaphor that South Africans have adopted. We call ourselves "the rainbow nation", because the rainbow is a symbol and celebration of our national, cultural and ethical diversity.

You will encounter a *"green story line"…*

This choice of format that I made entails issues of the kind of representation and presentation that one finds in qualitative research. It also underlines a shift away from theory, data and interpretation towards *language* and *presentation* as central elements in research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000:167-9). In terms of this paradigm, the researcher is regarded as an "author" because she or he cannot remain outside of the construction of her or his study. Authorship, style and text production are all central issues in research that have a significance that exceeds any superficial notions of "writing up results". Gergen and Gergen (2000:1029) use the term *literary styling* to indicate that the researcher (or inquirer's) description in qualitative research might take the form of fiction, poetry or autobiographical discursiveness. The deployment of stylized representations, particularly the replacement of traditional realist discourse with forms of writing cast in opposition to "truth telling", signals to the reader that the writing does not function as a map of the world, but as an interpretive activity that address a community of interlocutors. It therefore offers the qualitative writer a greater expressive range and an opportunity to reach audiences outside the academy. In the perspective of postmodernist ideals, authorship is about increasing the opportunities for different readings. The reader

becomes significant and assumes a more active and less predictable position in which interesting readings may be divorced from the possible intentions of the author. This is, in part, the purpose of the "green story line" or narrative tale which encloses the more formal academic writing. It is intentionally designed to present a multivoiced, dialogical and reflexive text.

Because this inquiry and this journey are intensely personal, I reflect on *my* role and identity, and *my* voice and positionality as researcher. In pursuance of this, I continually ask myself questions. Some of these are questions that I have found in books; some are asked by colleagues, and some have arisen within me as the journey progressed. Reflexivity is about confronting and embracing key issues of re-presentation, style, self, voice, vulnerabilities, researcher privilege, researcher self-disclosure, to name but a few. Reflexivity is also about responsibility and respect. It is in my attempts to explore and analyse the depth and complexity of research decisions at all stages of the research inquiry, that I reveal my awareness of my own role in creating the research. These writings of mine represent an "effort to include many voices and to offer various levels of knowing and thinking through which a reader can make their own sense" (Lather & Smithies, 1997:xiv). I do not want to be a researcher who is a "disembodied, 'objective' knower" who "listens as the expert" (Lieblich & Josselson, 1994:xiii). I am deeply aware of my own personal presence in the writing. By utilising the skill and appreciating the value of reflexivity, I situate myself among many voices that appear in the text (Lather & Smithies, 1997:xiii-xiv).

Some of these voices become fictional characters in this thesis as personifications of key constructs and/ or meanings found in the academic literature. The reader will therefore encounter King Heterosexuality, Sir Queer, The Prince of the Kingdom (the king's gay son), Queen Academia, The Book of Fables, and other devices. King Heterosexuality, Sir Queer and the Prince feature strongly in Bubble Two, while Queen Academia becomes more prominent in Bubbles Three to Seven.

The conversations that take place between Carien (me, the researcher) and Queen Academia embody my exploration of the reflexivity that I have just discussed. They also serve to guide the reader through important transitions in each Bubble. I identified a potential in constructing a text that would allow for *multiple interpretations* in the multiple layers ("layeredness") of the thesis. The reader is given an opportunity to join the "fellow listeners" in the Great Hall of the King Heterosexuality's Castle. The act of writing became a tool that allowed me to have a dialogue with the reader. It also allowed me to be transparent about the inner conversations with myself – mostly through my conversations with "Queen Academia".

You will encounter "ribbons"…

Bubble Five is tied together with three ribbons. These ribbons are symbolically representative of the interpretive themes that developed out of this study. In Bubbles Two and Three, the reader will encounter "links in a string of ribbons that reflect" that particular Bubble because these links symbolically represent the different sections that comprise each Bubble as a whole. The ribbons in Bubble Five, however, represent independent themes that are given prominence by the use of the "ribbon" device.

The outline of this thesis

In this Bubble, the study is contextualised and the rationale is explained. A brief introductory outlook on the research design was given. Relevant terminology was discussed, and the ethical considerations and necessary guidelines to situate the reader in the structure of the thesis were also provided.

In Bubble Two, I review and discuss the relevant scholarship that influenced and is relevant to my study. I also discuss the contextual background in which the study is situated.

Bubble Three is dedicated to a full explanation and justification of my research methodology. I discuss and explain the process of how I engaged with the practicalities of the field work. I would like once again to emphasise that the analysis and interpretation phases are at times interchangeable and interrelated because of the distinctive nature of qualitative research and because of the interpretative methodology that I used to answer the research question. Methodological postscripts therefore also appear after the interpretations have been offered at the end of Bubble Six.

In Bubble Four, I present the personal narratives of each child who was interviewed. The main focus of this Bubble is "to present the voices of others in a more or less unmediated way" (without the interference of academic interruption) (Lather & Smithies, 1997:126).

Bubbles Five and Six present the interpretive themes that emerged from the analysis of the data, as well as a conceptualisation of the experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families.

In Bubble Seven, I conclude this study by focusing on the criteria for quality that I have maintained throughout the research. I also offer a final summarised view of my findings and that relate this to suggestions that might inform and direct further research in this field.

Let the adventure Begin!