

Sexuality education: how children of lesbian mothers 'learn' about sex/uality

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Sexuality is something that children experience from an early age. It may be a cause of individual concern and anxiety, but is seldom, if ever, deconstructed at any stage of a child's education. Institutionalized fear and misunderstandings of Section 28 (1988) have effectively removed discussion of sexuality, homosexual or otherwise, from the English school curriculum. This structural silence on sexuality is all too frequently repeated at home. In this article I interrogate how children from lesbian parent households 'learn' about sexuality, looking at the effects of their parents' (homo)sexual orientation on their 'sexuality education'. I consider how sex education is taught in schools; what children traditionally 'learn' about sexuality. I then look at whether sexuality education is any different for children from lesbian parent families; whether these children have greater sexuality knowledge, and, if so, how this has been 'learnt'. I suggest that it may be the ambient presence of sexuality—as both a topic of conversation and mothers' unspoken sexual identity—that means lesbian parent families offer a distinctive form of sexuality education. This article draws on empirical research on sexuality and lesbian parent families with lesbian parent families who lived in the Yorkshire region, UK.

Introduction

Sexuality is seldom, if ever, deconstructed at any stage of a child's education (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000). It is something that children experience from an early age, which may be a cause of individual concern and anxiety, but which few adults ever mention. Institutionalized fear and misunderstandings of 'Section 28' (1988) have effectively removed discussion of sexuality, homosexual or otherwise, from the English school curriculum (see Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Thompson & Scott, 1992).¹ Indeed, Amy Wallis and Jo VanEvery highlight a paradox in sex education policies and practices. They point out that one purpose of sex education is 'to give children education and information about their rights so that they are less likely to be abused. At the same time, because they are 'innocent' and 'corruptible', it is deemed necessary to 'protect' [primary school] children from carnal knowledge' (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000, p. 418). The structural silence on sexuality is all too frequently repeated at home, with children being left to collect around them pieces of an adult jigsaw; but without instruction or guidance, they are unable to fit together the whole (sexual) picture (Jackson, 1982).

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In this article I interrogate how children from lesbian parent households ‘learn’ about sexuality, looking at the effects of their parents’ (homo)sexual orientation on their sexuality education. In the first instance I consider how sex education is taught in schools; what children traditionally ‘learn’ about sexuality. I then consider whether sexuality education is any different for children from lesbian parent families; whether these children have greater sexuality knowledge, and if so, how this has been ‘learnt’. I suggest that it may be the ambient presence of sexuality—as both a topic of conversation and mothers’ unspoken sexual identity—that means lesbian parent families offer a distinctive form of sexuality education. This article comes out of wider research on sexuality and lesbian parent families; therefore my focus on sexuality education in same-sex families is in some ways accidental.²

The empirical data cited in this article comes from interviews and/or informal discussions with 21 lesbian parent families who lived across the Yorkshire region, UK, alongside auto/ethnographic observation of my own and others’ families. While my insider status gave me easy access to the ‘lesbian community’, I rejected friends as subjects for interview as such a sample would be too restrictive and because I felt it might compromise friendships. Therefore I elected to use the lesbian mailing list of a women’s bookshop in York, *Libertas!*, to circulate a flier that briefly detailed my project, while also ‘snowballing’ out from my friendship network. From the original 21 families who expressed an interest, through a process of self-selection, I interviewed 13 families in depth, constituting 18 parents and 13 of their children. Of this number, nine families were contacted through *Libertas!*, and four through extended friendship circles. Respondents spread across the socio-economic/class range and represented a variety of family forms. In the original sample approximately half self-identified as middle-class, the vast majority of the remainder self-identified as working-class, although three parents felt unable to classify themselves within this class frame. Three mothers conceived through AID (Artificial Insemination from Donor) while self-identifying as lesbians, the rest conceived through hetero-sex. One-third were single parent families, two-thirds lived in households headed by two lesbian parents. As a lesbian mother myself, I situate ‘my story’ as one among the many that appear in this research; my experiences and status are embedded within the research process.

Sex education in schools

In the UK, children are taught social codes of decency as universal truths and normalities under the guise of ‘natural’ sex/uality education. Traditional sex education provides basic information on the mechanics of reproduction. A few children who profess knowledge circulate rumours, passing (mis)information to those ‘innocents’ who know nothing. Illicit encounters with explicit sexual (pornographic) material provide highly orchestrated performances. Whatever the source, this ‘education’ is laden with ideological meaning that poses gendered roles and heterosexuality as the ‘natural’ and socially acceptable means to live our lives (Ennew, 1986). Nowhere is this (mis)information more pronounced than in the provision of sex education in schools.

Underpinning the sex education curriculum, and much sex education legislation, is the view that ‘children have a right to be educated about sex in order to allow them to make socially desirable decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive relationships’ (Thorogood, 2000, p. 431). In sex education legislation, sex is seen as synonymous with reproduction. The only compulsory part of sex education in primary school teaching remains ‘an elementary understanding of human reproduction’ (DfES, 1994, p. 7).³ Furthermore in Key Stage 3, the only references to human sexuality in the new PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) guidelines are within the context of reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases. ‘Sex education in this model, therefore, becomes concerned with contraception, and by implication hetero-sex, fertile sex and childbearing’ (Thorogood, 2000, p. 423). Guidelines for secondary schools, on how sex education should be framed, emphasize the centrality of ‘marriage, family life and stable loving relationships’ (DfEE, 2000). Sexuality, outside such reproductive ‘logic’, is not an educational imperative.

The focus on reproductive sex and its ideal context, ‘the (heterosexual) family’, stigmatizes all deviations from this norm. At Key Stage 3, homosexuality is discussed at the discretion of the teacher, but it remains marginalized—sexual practices and identities of others. Therefore, given the absence of informative teaching on homosexualities, it is not surprising that for children who identify as lesbian/gay or those from lesbian/gay households, homophobic abuse and bullying may be part of school life. In my study, one particular child (Sid) was subjected to systematic bullying, and this routinely spilled over from school into his local neighbourhood. Children are especially vulnerable to this pervasive and incessant abuse as their public and private worlds are not demarcated into work and home life.

Sid (15): At school in the first year [...] for some reason everybody knew. You know, I had people coming up and sort of: ‘is your mum a lesbian?’ [...] At the start of year eleven it got really bad, I couldn’t sort of walk to another lesson without anybody saying anything erm ... and these people who were doing it they were saying stuff at school but they were also saying it out on the street. [...] I can’t go to the video shop without people saying something.

Both Sid and his mother said the school made little attempt to tackle this bullying. Moreover, when Sid requested that he do a personal development project on his family, in order to confront the issue and illustrate the sameness of his family to any (heterosexual) other, he was advised against this course of action. The reason cited for this ‘advice’ was Section 28. Negative stories such as these, are largely absent from research in this area; these analyses tend to focus on the virtues of lesbian parent families. Psychological research (strategically) suggests that children from lesbian parents, relative to their socio-economic circumstances, are no more likely to be bullied than any other (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Indeed, such studies tend to indicate that Sid’s experience of bullying was more likely to be a consequence of his working-class parentage than his mother’s sexuality. But such explanations neither account for other children’s stories in my study nor do they help the children who are being victimized. Several leading players within ‘the community’ are beginning to call into question this idealized picture of ‘lesbian families’. For example, Lisa

Saffron has opened up the debate in *Diva*, the UK popular lesbian lifestyle magazine, pointing out that ‘for at least some of our children, having a lesbian mother is no picnic [... Our children] are suffering because their parents are lesbians. Our sexuality does matter’ (Saffron, 2002, p. 51). It is apparent that the ‘community myth’ of unyielding tolerance needs to be thoroughly problematized in order to incorporate the presence of unhappy stories within its narrative.

Furthermore, bullying comes in many forms. While most children in my sample had no experience of physical or verbal abuse, the majority had internalized the stigma attached to homosexuality, feeling ‘embarrassed’ (John, aged 13) about their mother’s sexuality and/or the presence of ‘an/other mother’ around their friends. This was neither due to individual ambivalence towards their parents’ sexuality nor did it indicate a lack of emotional investment in the ‘other mother’; it was a consequence of their friends’ expressed or perceived discomfort on the topic of homosexuality. However it should be noted that while many children did feel ‘awkward’ (James, aged 7) to varying degrees at some time, most experienced no significant instances of bullying.

Joshua (14): Most the teasing’s done if I miss a shot at football or something!

Matters of sex education legislation remain highly contested (see Allen, 1987; Melia, 1989; Redman, 1994; Stanley, 1995): ‘a subject of considerable controversy’ (Harris, 1996, p. 12). Although teaching about ‘sex’ has been part of the school curriculum for many years, the first legislation to formally regulate teaching provision in this area was introduced in the 1986 Education (No. 2) Act, being amended in 1993, to include sex education within the National Curriculum (DfES, 1994). In primary schools English law does not require the teaching of sex education; individual governing bodies decide if and how sex education will be taught. Thus Amy Wallis and Jo VanEvery suggest that primary schools are one of the last arenas where sexuality is not acknowledged as part of everyday life’ (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000, p. 419).

In contrast, the families in my study either actively or passively situated sexuality across the breadth of their family lives. Thus I now want to move on to consider how sexuality education is ‘taught’ at home through experiences and participation within lesbian parent families, to look at whether children from lesbian parent families are likely to be more ‘knowledgeable’ on matters of sexuality. Indeed, given the ‘ideological icing’ that coats sex education in schools, I consider the obvious advantages in taking responsibility for this ‘curriculum’ away from schools and giving it to children’s families. I acknowledge that ‘home tuition’ is not unproblematic, especially in matters of sex and sexuality. For example, moral conservatives present a markedly similar argument, believing that ‘control is best exercised by removing sex education from the school curriculum and entrusting it to ‘the family’’ (Thorogood, 2000, p. 431). Sex education in this context is hardly likely to be more complex and thorough, and is only likely to strengthen the association between ‘the family’ and sexuality. Moreover, research evidence suggests that leaving sex education up to parents can result in failure in terms of quantity, relevance and accuracy (see Weeks, 1986). Thus I do not contest the need for formal ‘teaching’ of sex education in

schools, but instead highlight how non-traditional families, especially lesbian and gay parent families, make an additional, valuable contribution to children's sexuality education.

Home tuition: sexuality education in lesbian parent families

Debbie Epstein points out that teachers are often nervous about questions of sexuality (Epstein, 2000, p. 388). The cumulative effect of this awkwardness and the self-censorship invoked through Section 28 (Thompson & Scott, 1992), is that parents, especially lesbian and gay parents, necessarily fill the gaps in their children's education on sexuality. Given that '[c]hildren of lesbians and gay men are almost entirely absent from the literature around sexual orientation and schooling' (Paechter, 2000, p. 396), parents' provision of an additional sexuality education is vital. The lesbian parent families in my study illustrate that 'home tuition' gives their children a thorough and tailor-made sexuality education. My focus on this aspect of lesbian parent households is one of the few accounts to consider how parents' sexuality affects their children, especially within the school environment.

Knowledge of children's lives and experience in lesbian parent families is both partial and problematic. Their 'stories' have been largely restricted to either psychological accounts that aim to 'prove' their 'normality' (Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 1981; Golombok *et al.*, 1983; Harris & Turner, 1985; Tasker & Golombok, 1997) or selective autobiographical reflections on childhood (Rafkin, 1990; Saffron, 1996). There remains very limited research into the effect of parents' sexuality on children within the school environment (Lesbian Mothers Group, 1989; Epstein, 1994; Saffron, 2001). Sociological research into lesbian and gay parent families seldom, if ever, represent children's experience and, conversely, 'childhood studies' typically neglects same-sex families. The research that does exist is problematic because it is frequently motivated by a political desire to represent same-sex families as examples of 'normality' and/or progressive family practices. Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz (2001) have recently queried interpretations of psychological studies, suggesting they are resistant to acknowledging differences between children raised in heterosexual and same-sex households. They contest the findings of 21 such studies, arguing that while they are 'technically accurate' they also close down further enquiry into interesting anomalies and differences that are present.

Stacey and Biblarz's analysis substantiates the argument put forward by Sandra Pollack some 10 years earlier. As Pollack points out, focusing on similarities between heterosexual and same-sex families, 'may be important as part of a courtroom strategy, but it negates the healthy and positive characteristics unique to lesbian parenting' (Pollack, 1987, p. 316). Many autobiographical accounts and the community handbooks that promote/assist lesbian parenting similarly suggest that children from lesbian parent families are extra-ordinary. 'According to the people I interviewed, there may well be meaningful differences in moral and social development' (Saffron, 1998, p. 37). Lisa Saffron suggests that the children in her research had 'more accepting and broad-minded attitudes towards homosexuality, women's independence, the concept of family, and social diversity' (Saffron, 1998, p. 37). Jess

Wells paints an equally optimistic picture, celebrating the political potentialities of children from ‘lesbian families’.

We parents are unlike any others, and this is most evident in the mothering of our sons. Lesbian households are raising a new generation of men who will be significantly different from their counterparts from patriarchal families (Wells, 1997, p. x).

Wells’ evocation of ‘the lesbian family’ as distinct from and better than heterosexual others may be an extension of a lesbian feminist standpoint but it correspondingly shores up the binary logic of sexuality and gender. She constructs ‘*the* lesbian family’ in contradistinction to ‘*the* (heterosexual) family’; a move that paradoxically closes down tolerance of difference. Lesbian parent families come in all shapes and sizes, and reflect divergent forms and practices. Sons *may* grow up to be advocates of a gender-free world, but also they may not. Lesbian parent families are only part of a social shift in contemporary masculinities, to herald them as the vanguard of the feminist project is unfair and unrealistic. This said, in my research there was a general consensus that children’s awareness of their mothers’ lesbian sexuality generated an underlying attitude of tolerance towards ‘difference’, and called into question traditional—heterosexual—understandings of gender, wherein masculinity and femininity are mapped onto boys and girls. In some cases boys were encouraged to be more ‘sensitive’, if they were so inclined:

Annie: I think, I think they’re [...] just a bit more knowledgeable, which makes them a bit more articulate and a bit more sort of sensitive, erm, I think just from what they’ve had to put up with from people and their peers and everything [...] just the fact that they come from, they have a lesbian parent or parents I think just makes them different anyway. They’ve just got a lot more to understand and a lot more to sort of think about, understand.

Maggie: I think Luke is really sensitive and I wonder how much of that is about growing up with two women, although he has contact with males, he’s got male figures [...] He’s been quite clear about his identity as a male and quite positive about his identity as a male but I do wonder whether he’s more sensitive in just ... you know, not just about sexuality but generally he’s a lot more ... I think he’s really in tune with other people’s feelings.

Like Maggie, Varna highlights how boys raised without fathers may be ‘different’, but in contrast she believes that this does not make them less typically male than their peers. She cites friends as hugely significant in the building of her son’s sense of masculine self:

Varna: [I used to think] that if he wasn’t sort of brought up with any sort of a male influence then in some ways he could be socialized differently, and he might not grow up with some of the male characteristics that I don’t particularly like (laughs)! But I don’t think it makes any difference at all. I think that’s more about friends, well not just about friends, some of it’s bound to be about biology. I’m sure he sees himself as different.

Many mothers I interviewed, while acknowledging their children *may* be different from others, were particularly cautious in attributing this difference entirely to their sexuality:

Kar: She thinks she's different [...] there's a lot of ways which she is different. She's different because she's very bright, she's different because she is independent-minded [...] She's different because I'm a lesbian. She's different because I'm more highly educated than most people so that makes it different from the point of view of sort of, you know, the sort of conversations that she can have at home and things like that, and she's different because she's err, she's only got one parent. She's also different because she lives here now [in an ex-council house ...] You know there are lots of reasons why Louise is different and it's not just because I am a lesbian; but I think that is a significant factor in it.

Matilda: [... Our children are likely to be different] because either the households are different, or the children have had to deal with a kind of emotional concept or difficulty that other children don't, so that gives them a kind of emotional maturity [...] rather than because they're children of lesbians.

Like these parents I am wary of making claims to extraordinariness and difference, though I think it is fair to say that children from lesbian households do tend to be generally broadminded. All the older, and some younger, children I interviewed were aware of debates on stigma and prejudice and the need to not discriminate against anyone. This did make them tolerant and open-minded though I cannot claim they were categorically more so than other children as no comparisons were made. It may be their open mindedness was due to liberal parenting and values, factors that are not necessarily linked to their mothers' sexuality in any way (Saffron, 1998). These children may be extra-ordinary, but I am reluctant to read this as something specific to lesbian parent families. Future research could usefully look at whether children raised by heterosexual feminists are equally tolerant and/or 'different'.

While children's social-moral attitudes cannot be reduced to their parents' sexuality, I do contend that children from lesbian parent families have a distinctive relationship to, and knowledge of, sex/uality. Though none of the children I interviewed identified as lesbian or gay, many had arrived at a heterosexual identity via a considerable process of self-reflection: unlike most children there was no presumption of being 'straight':

Harriet (15): As far as me personally's concerned, it [mother's sexuality] hasn't had any impact on me. I haven't thought 'oh she's a lesbian, I should be one too'. It's just made me be more open-minded and I think I've got more of a strong idea about what my sexuality is because I've thought it over, whereas a lot of people my age would just think 'oh well I must be straight because everybody is' and then later on realize that they are not. So I think I have thought it over a lot more than most people of my age have.

Jeffrey (19): I think that unless you've considered your own sexuality, you cannot really say that you are any sexuality. Unless you've considered the possibility that you're homosexual how can you say you're heterosexual? The majority of people don't consider whether or not they are, they simply go along with the fact that they're a man or a woman so they want

a woman or a man. I think that's where a lot of people really screw themselves up. [... My friends] just believe they're heterosexual, simple as that, not even entertaining the possibility that they might be homosexual.

Stevi Jackson suggests that young, pre-pubescent children from heterosexual households have to (mis)read sexuality from the gendered performances which they see around them. They 'know' that men and women 'make babies', they may even know the 'mechanics' of the process, but they do not usually know or comprehend the *social* processes that this entails outside the act of procreation (Jackson, 1982). In contrast, unlike the naïve subjects of Jackson's heterosexual paradigm, who lacked real information and/or comprehension, the children of lesbian parents are often hugely knowledgeable about sexuality and debates on 'the family'. Learning about sex without a procreative determinant separates out its composite meanings, highlighting complex interrelationships with sexuality. The (sexual) knowledge of children from lesbian parent families articulates a 'family sexuality' that stands outside the heterosexual, reproductive narrative. A 'family sexuality' where parental desire, love and sex do not result in 'making babies'. This suggests that lesbian mothers' sexuality is central in constituting difference within children raised in these families. Several mothers independently asserted this viewpoint; they were certain that their sexuality and its social consequences made their children more 'knowledgeable' about sex/uality:

Annie: [Our children] haven't just got this one line, where a majority of kids who come from a heterosexual family they fit in perfectly with the media's whatever, socialization, ideas, ideals and all this and they are very narrow, unless they've got parents who talk a lot about all different issues. [...] I think kids who have come from gay parents are bound to be in a way more open, more having to think more, because of just where they come from. Probably without even being aware of it they have to be, because their mind just has to be a bit wider than another kid who has come from a heterosexual closed 'normal family', who've got no [experience of] prejudice [...] because there's no reason; because they fit in perfectly with society's idea of normal.

Maggie: I think Luke [son] is a lot more aware of his own emerging sexuality than other children [...] I grew up not really having any knowledge of sexuality, as far as I was concerned girls fancied boys and vice versa and that was it, so it [same-sex desire] was all a bit of a shock to me. Whereas I think Luke is far more aware of that than children who have grown up within straight families. Even if they have grown up with straight families who have links with lesbian and gay families, I think even then it's still probably not the same as actually living with a lesbian or gay family.

Thus, while mothers' lesbianism is unlikely to accord children difference *per se*, parents' sexuality does seem to make lesbian parent families distinctive, in that sex/uality education is not *dependent* on discussions and/or any parental openness: that could occur in any liberal/feminist household. Difference is simply a consequence of being raised within these families.

Let's talk about sex: families and sex/uality

Many parents made conscious efforts to talk to their children about all aspects of sex/uality and difference. While this is not unique to lesbian parenting it does illustrate how these mothers perceived sexuality to be of vital importance to their children and tried to foster an atmosphere in which children could reflect on such matters:

Jay: [We] talked about safe sex [...] I think probably the biggest thing I've talked about, probably more than sexual things, is you don't hit women and you don't treat women like they're nothing [...] He'll quite happily come to me about things, he'll tell me that [his girlfriend] is on the pill or he'll tell me that they are sleeping together or whatever that's ... which is good.

Michelle: I think Jayne ['birth mother'] was going on about work, she's was going training and Rob [son] was asking her about it and I think he asked what discriminate meant ... he said that he didn't discriminate because his mum was gay and Jayne ran upstairs with tears in her eyes and told me what he said. She was very proud.

Jayne, the 'birth mother', was not always the instigator or the main point of contact for parent-child(ren) talk about sex/uality.⁴ This shift, from 'birth mother' to 'other mother', is a departure from the 'birth mother's' primary role and responsibility for the child(ren), and questions the special-ness of 'birth mother'–child intimacy. It suggests that children's relationship with the 'other mother' can have *distinctive points of interaction* that reinforce their 'special' relationship. As Kar suggests, it might be that the (emotional and/or discursive) distance of this relationship actually facilitates dialogue in certain instances:

J: How do you discuss issues of sexuality and sex with Louise [daughter]?

Kar: I suppose we tend to discuss it as a kind of, err, in a very sort of political intellectual way rather than a sort of personal way. Erm, but like most, like, teenagers, she doesn't really want to talk about the nitty gritty with me. She'd talk about it more with Janet [partner]. Janet's a lot better at doing all that kind of stuff, she's very good at doing that. [...] I've tried to initiate the conversation with Louise about the functional aspects of sex and she just don't wanna know, you know [...] She might talk to Janet about it, she presumably feels that is less embarrassing.

It is interesting that Kar perceives the way she talked about sex/uality with her daughter as being couched in political terms more than in pragmatics. This could be particular to her personality, but feminist politics similarly structured several mothers' discussions with their children. Some mothers, such as Astrid, were clear that their engagement with political issues, especially those pertaining to sexuality, necessarily influenced their children:

Astrid: Bee [daughter] knows about, I mean, I listen to the radio a lot and there was something on there about Section 28 and I was getting really cross, and she asked what was it all about, so I explained in quite simple terms, in terms of people loving each other. I said 'I think it's wrong', about prejudice, and she said 'yes I do too mummy'. So I suppose I put my views on her in that way.

Most of the older children interviewed were aware of the politics of sex/uality. This interest may be partly due to their mothers' influence, but it may also stem from their own experience of living within a lesbian parent family, being personally affected by the fall-out of surrounding political debates, such as Section 28.

Sid (15): BBC *Question Time* [...] was on about sort of gay issues and this Clause 28 and erm, and sort of I was watching the TV about it and I nearly threw my TV out the window. This woman said you know, it shouldn't be taught in schools because you can catch it, and I was raving about that; I was going mental. So in the end I phoned up and I got on the show, but I couldn't pluck up the courage to go.

Children 'learn' about sex/uality from a variety of sources; some orthodox like school sex education, others less legitimate, such as Internet pornography. However, as Jeffrey suggests, mothers' lesbianism may actually facilitate an *additional level* of familial discussion on the topic of sexuality:

Jeffrey (19): I think when you sort of hit around about the age of 15 you start to get a little bit freaked out about the fact that you can watch some pornography, and like lesbians, and it kind of confuses you 'cause you kind of go: 'Oh my God, Freud was right!' It err, does err, mess with the brain a bit [...] my mum assures me [such pornographic images] are not really anything that she would like to watch, not because she doesn't like pornography or anything, but because they're not realistic so to speak. They're not actual lesbians, they're just women being paid to pretend to be lesbians! (laughs)

Jeffrey saw himself as increasing his 'sex/uality knowledge' through such discussions with his mother. However, in many cases, though parents wanted and generally expected their children to have a broader comprehension of sex/uality, this openness was contained within traditional ('obvious') codes of parenting and was determined by the child(ren)'s age and/or maturity. In many households, especially those with younger children, sexually explicit books and videos were kept out of reach and 'adult conversations' were censored in children's earshot:

Michelle: A lot of my lesbian smut books [are] on the top there and we've got some videos [...] He can't watch the videos because they've got sex in and stuff like that and my books have got a lot of sex in, so for obvious reasons they are kept out of his reach... [J: Obvious reasons?] Oh God you know what I mean, it's like me having a porn movie and leaving it on the side there for him to get hold of. You just don't do it with kids do you! [J: Why not?] Well because he's a child and you just don't with kids, any kids. I don't want him reading that sort of smut. He's only 8; he's got to wait until he's at least 14 to read it!

Maya: You don't flaunt things of a sexual nature to children, you know, to any extent. I think it's ok to be open and honest with them if they want to know about things, but they don't have to be subjected to explicit material do they. So I think that's sort of bog standard parenting stance for whatever your sexuality may be.

The language parents use to discuss sex and sexuality also remained within a

conventional lexicon, often cohering traditional linkages between sex/uality and love:⁵

J: Do you think Rob [step-son] is different?

Michelle: ... I think he's a lot more aware of certain things than other children are, like you know gay; he's just more aware of gayness really for want of a better word. Whereas a lot of other children don't know what a lesbian is or know what gay means so yeh ... he's a lot more aware, you know, if he's like looked at our Pride pictures he's said 'oh you know that's a man in drag' so yeh he's aware ... He asked me what gay meant ages and ages ago and I explained what it was, about men loving each other and women loving each other. [J: So he knows of it in terms of love, not sex?] Well he probably knows about sex now but he was about five when I told him. No, that's how I explained it.

Parents' general containment of 'sex/uality teaching', coupled with some families' avoidance of conversation on such topics, questions how children's additional comprehension and 'knowledge' was actually achieved. As Annie conceded 'I didn't really talk much to her at all [to be] honest'. This suggests that children's sex/uality 'knowledge' is less a consequence of active 'teaching' by mothers and more a product of environmental (sexual-familial) awareness; learning through lived experience. This 'ambient knowledge' is thus part of who the children *are* rather than an exterior piece of information that they necessarily absorb. In addition, children's open-mindedness may be encouraged through contemporary cultural changes; they reflect a growing social acceptance of difference, including lesbian and gay lifestyles. Most children believed their friends from heterosexual families were as open-minded as they. In their friendship networks sexuality was seen as personal choice, even a source of experimentation.

Ted (17): I think it's down to each individual person to make their own choices really. It doesn't bother me so, erm, I know a lad, who's at college he's just come out and said he's gay. It doesn't bother me. [...] A lot of me mates know him 'cause they went to school with him and they're not bothered about it. So yeh, I'd say that's probably now how most kids feel.

Harriet (15): I've got lots of friends who are bisexual, so it's like, I think they find me a bit boring, its like 'oh I'm straight' and they're like 'ohhh!' [...] People tend to feel that you should experiment now in the sort of circles that I move in.

While cultural shifts towards human rights and tolerance may make young people more open-minded on sexuality than ever before, where children from lesbian parents do stand apart from their heterosexual counterparts is that they do not define the categories of sex/uality and family through acts of (procreative) sex. Children from lesbian parent families do not accept heterosexuality as the only ('natural') form of sexual desire. 'The family' is not presumed to be the only social unit; in fact their own experiences of kinship often contradict its primary status. Like many other children today, they grow up knowing there are many different *types* of family. For many, to accord 'sex' a symbolic status within their families would deny

their own familial experience. Heterosexual (procreative) sex is seen as an aspect of sexuality; it neither signifies sexuality nor constitutes family form. In this way lesbian parent families irrevocably separate sex and sexuality from the exigencies of ‘the (heterosexual) family’.

Throwing a spanner in the reproductive works: separating sex and ‘the family’

Though sexuality in lesbian parent families may be more or less evident, its distinctiveness remains clearly apparent.⁶ Traditionally women are represented as transforming from sexual object to nurturing subject as they enter into motherhood, their identity being coincident with the reproductive (heterosexual) narrative. Lesbian conception narratives refute this functionalist imperative. The traditional assumption of ‘where babies come from’ inadequately describes many, especially AID, lesbian parent families. When mothers who conceived as lesbians via donor insemination talked to their children about sex/uality and their families, the story they told was hugely complex; inherently querying the slippage between sex, ‘making babies’ and family composition. Matilda suggests that while conversations with her daughter remain tentative, because of her young age, she still feels it necessary to disaggregate the mechanics of sexual reproduction from familial roles:

Matilda: She’s asked in the past [about sex ...] I talked about it, you know, ‘this man wanted to have a baby’, and ‘this man was very nice and he gave me some seeds and [we] put them inside me and you grew inside me’ [... She says] she hasn’t got a dad, ‘cause you know sometimes children will say ‘where’s your dad?’ and she’ll say ‘I haven’t got a dad’ and they’ll say ‘is he dead?’ ‘No, I just haven’t got one’. But she does, you know, she knows who he is [...] we’ve always tried to stress that, ‘yes, he exists as a biological father, but he is not your parent in the way that we both are’.

Even when children come from past heterosexual relations, mothers’ explanations of love, relationships, sexuality and sex still tend to disrupt traditional narratives. As Vanita illustrates, lesbian parent families may be traditional in form, but this does not mean they are just like any (heterosexual) other. It is not only (queer) ‘families of choice’ that are politically potent. Irrespective of their sexual narrative, lesbian mothers’ sexuality represents a symbolic and material threat to the status and normality of the patriarchal family. Dialogue on sex/uality between mothers and child(ren) ensures the radical potentialities of lesbian parent families do not stay closeted behind familial doors:

Vanita: Yeh, he’s asked questions. He [son, aged 7 ...] knows we got ‘married’, and I suppose the obvious question was ‘can men and men get married?’ ‘Yes’. ‘Can men and men have a baby?’ ‘No’. It sort of comes out like that really, just from him trying to work out, trying to make sense of it. What can happen, what can’t happen and that it takes a man and woman to have a baby but there are all sorts of different families that the baby can grow up in. I don’t know; I tend to give him answers and just let him work it out himself. He’ll come back with more questions as time goes on.

The binary logic, that constructs ‘the family’ from two parents who ‘make a baby’, may be more myth than reality, but it remains so ingrained within Western culture that bizarre twists and misreadings occur to fit lesbian parent families within this model. Janis described how she and her partner (Alison) were so accepted as ‘natural’ parents by the local community, that people looked for both their familial likeness in the features of their child. The fact that they both had brown eyes and that their baby’s eyes were blue, was seen as ‘wrong’: the baby should share *their* brown eyes:

Janis: All babies have blue eyes don’t they, well most English babies have blue eyes [when they are born], so um all our neighbours came down the street to visit and they’d be whittering over us holding the baby, and they’d look at Alison and look at me and say ‘but the baby’s got blue eyes’. And I think that says something. I’m not sure what, do you know what I mean. They’re not stupid, they know how babies are made, they’ve all got children or had children or whatever, but ...

Lesbian parenting offers a conceptual framework that is not reliant on the binary logic of ‘the sexes’. Lesbian mothers’ gendered embodiment of parental roles challenges traditional family practices; their disruption of the reproductive narrative threatens the patriarchal basis of heterosexual society. Though these challenges stem from adult sexuality, it is children, albeit unwittingly, who routinely realize many of the transgressive potentialities of these families. It is they who primarily enter ‘(lesbian) family sexuality’ into discourse.

Karen: A while ago he had a friend round and they were playing upstairs and we heard them, sometimes we listen to their conversations, they’re great aren’t they kids’ conversations [...] So I heard this little voice say to David, ‘Who’s is that room?’ and David went ‘Oh it’s mum and Sarah’s’. And this little voice seemed to accept it ‘cause he said it so matter of fact, ‘it’s mum and Sarah’s room’. It was like, ‘well whose room do you think it is?’ and that was quite sweet really.

Whether it is through our children’s difference and expansive ‘sex/uality knowledge’ or because lesbian maternity is something seldom taken-for-granted; lesbian parent families represent new ways of conceptualizing sexuality education. Lesbian mothers exist outside the heterosexual narrative, contesting the (reproductive) linearity that connects hetero-sex and motherhood. While lesbians’ use of AID has been situated as procreative sex (Dempsey, in press), the pragmatics of lesbian sex does not produce a child. Thus children from lesbian parent households are learning a ‘new story’ (Plummer, 1995), a story that acknowledges sexuality as part of families, while separating desire and sexual pleasures from the reproductive narrative.

Concluding thoughts

In this article I have suggested some reasons why children from lesbian parent families may be different to their peers, possessing a deeper and more complex understanding of sexuality. In interviews with parents, mothers typically suggested that their children did not simply adhere to traditional patterns of gender, indicating that their children were probably more ‘knowledgeable’ about sexuality because of

their lesbianism. Many teenage children called into question traditional understandings of sexuality. While all of these children identified as heterosexual, many of them suggested that this sexual identity had not been taken-for-granted, but was arrived at through a process of self-reflection. They did not presume their heterosexuality, and thus queried its naturalness. However, these complex understandings of sex/uality were not enhanced through formal sex education, but rather inhibited. Older children clearly identified Section 28 as a factor that adversely affected their sex/uality education. Prohibitions on the syllabus and general lack of information about homosexuality in the classroom meant that bullying was sometimes unchecked, and they were actively dissuaded and/or generally discouraged from presenting their households within peer discussions on family diversity. As Jeffrey points out, there is a need to develop curricula on families and homosexuality and there is a ready slot for such teaching to occur:

Jeffrey (15): Homosexuality could be taught in schools. I think it would be a lot better because the children of the younger generation could sort of learn and maybe there wouldn't be as much bullying. [...] I think it should be brought into a natural subject like PSHE where you get taught various things like drugs and sex and things like that and it should just crop up in one of them.

While traditional sex education in schools remains an area of contestation, I suggest that the sexuality education of children from lesbian parent households provides an invaluable—if at times contradictory—supplement to the existing school curriculum. Lesbian mothers' separation from the heterosexual reproductive narrative stops the slippage from sexuality to reproductive sex, illustrating that these two are neither interdependent nor simply framed through the binary (gendered) logic of 'the family'. My research suggests that 'home tuition' in sex/uality education, for children from lesbian parents households, is less a process of direct parental 'teaching' than a consequence of living within an environment where sexuality pervades many aspects of family life. Few parents said that they deliberately instructed their children in issues of sexuality; in contrast most believed that their children were more 'knowledgeable' in this area than peers from heterosexual parent families. This suggests that these children gain their extra 'knowledge' through experience, through the ambient presence of sexuality in their families—as both a topic of conversation and mothers' unspoken sexual identities. In this sense, it is hard to see how the advantages of this 'education' could be shared among all children, but one step would be allowing these children to share their experiences and extra 'knowledge' as part of the school sex/uality education curriculum, within the framework of inclusive family diversity.

Notes

1. Section 28 of the British Local Government Act (May 1988) prohibited local authorities from 'intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality' and 'pretended family relationships' within schools. However, given that local authorities are not responsible for sex education in

- schools, in legal terms, the Act was both nonsensical and almost impossible to invoke (Epstein, 2000). Section 28 was finally repealed on 18 June 2003 by Tony Blair's Labour Government.
2. I do not include gay male parent families in my analysis, though there may well be commonalities, because gay men were not part of my original sample.
 3. The Labour Government has restructured and renamed the department of education many times. It has been the DfES (Department for Education and Science) and the DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) and is currently the DfES (Department for Education and Skills).
 4. In my research I elected to differentiate, where necessary, between 'birth mothers' and 'other mothers'. In doing so I neither imply a hierarchical ordering of the two nor accord any innate privilege to the mother who gave birth to the child(ren). I distinguish between 'birth' and 'other mothers' so that I can look at the particularities of these respective categories. Where differentiation is unnecessary I use the term 'mother' as generic to both parents.
 5. See Gabb (2001a) for an analysis of lesbian parent families and the discourses of love.
 6. I explore the concept of '(lesbian) family sexuality' elsewhere (see Gabb, 2001b). However, there are obviously areas of cross-over between the ideas developed in this earlier theoretical paper and those developed in this last section; therefore I necessarily refer to this previous paper as required.

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