



<http://researchoutput.csu.edu.au>

This is the Author's version of the paper published as:

Author: L. Du Chesne and b. S. Bradley

Author Address: louise.duchesne@student.griffith.edu.au, bbradley@csu.edu.au

Title: The subjective experience of the lesbian (m)other: An exploration of the construction of lesbian maternal identity.

Year: 2007

Journal: Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review

Volume: 3

Issue: 1

Pages: 25-33.

Date: If applicable

ISSN: 1833-4512

DOI: http://www.groups.psychology.org.au/glip/glip_review/#previous

Keywords: Lesbian, Mother, Construction, Identity

Abstract: This study explored the subjective experience of lesbian co- mothers as they constructed their maternal identity. A purposive sampling strategy of 7 lesbian co-mothers, ranging in age from 35 to 73 years, participated in audio taped interviews. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of data paid particular attention to how co-mothers negotiated constitutive binaries of mother/father in the process of socially constructing their role. The study found that co-mothers position themselves as the same and different, effectively refusing to participate in either/or binary oppositions of mother and father. The greatest opposition to their role often came from within their own family of origin. Through the day-to-day work of discursively creating their maternal identity, lesbian co-mothers are the front-runners of a new form of 21st century family.

The Subjective Experience of the Lesbian (M)other:

An exploration of the construction of lesbian maternal identity

Louise Du Chesne
Ben Bradley

Abstract

This study explored the subjective experience of lesbian co-mothers as they constructed their maternal identity. A purposive sampling strategy of 7 lesbian co-mothers, ranging in age from 35 to 73 years, participated in audio taped interviews. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of data paid particular attention to how co-mothers negotiated constitutive binaries of mother/father in the process of socially constructing their role. The study found that co-mothers position themselves as the same and different, effectively refusing to participate in either/or binary oppositions of mother and father. The greatest opposition to their role often came from within their own family of origin. Through the day-to-day work of discursively creating their maternal identity, lesbian co-mothers are the front-runners of a new form of 21st century family.

The Subjective Experience of the Lesbian (M)other.

During the 1980's a lesbian baby boom began in Western industrialised countries including Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom (Patterson, 2001). By the turn of the century there were between 1.5 million and 5 million lesbian mothers living with their children as a family unit in the United States alone (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Perrin, 2002). In Australia, surveys indicate that 20 per cent of lesbians have children and a further 40 per cent want to have children in the near future (Perlesz & McNair, 2004). In the following pages I focus specifically on the experience and social construction of the non-birth mother or co-mother¹ within planned lesbian families.

This paper adopts a social constructionist approach to explore the ways in which the co-mother is positioned through the language of dominant psychological, social, and legal discourses of mother and family. Social constructionism argues that we construct or create our own identities and position ourselves in the world according to our understandings of particular discourses. A social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with "explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live" (Gergen, 2003, p.15). Descriptions and ideas of the world are considered to create, rather than reflect, reality (Gergen, 1994a; Clarke, 2002). Therefore 'truth' is contingent upon our reading of the world around us, and our interpretation of discourses.

The co-mother is frequently positioned within the language of psychological, social, and legal discourses by being either acknowledged as the mother's partner, but not a mother or parent in her own right, or is rendered invisible, by not being acknowledged at all (Sullivan, 2004; Thompson, 2002). In legal discourses where heterosexuality is institutionalised, the co-mother is often constructed as irrelevant or redundant: a biological stranger, whereas the birth mother is constructed as essential, crucial for the child's development and well being (Dalton, 2000; Thompson, 2002). This is also apparent in psychological and social discourses which mirror legal discourses in the way that co-mothers are challenged to construct their identity within dominant texts that attempt to either erase or defile their claim to the title mother (Sullivan, 2004; Thompson, 2002). Discourses that position lesbian mothers as invisible or unfit to parent can be seen to operate from within a homophobic or hetero-normative worldview. Within hetero-normative discourse 'lesbian' is equated with perverse and deviant sexuality in contrast to 'mother', equated with nurturing and selfless care (Thompson, 2002). I argue that it is important, from a constructionist standpoint, to recognise that binaries such as nurturing heterosexual mother versus deviant sexual lesbian are constitutive and not descriptive. If the constructive nature of the binary is accepted, it then becomes possible to straddle the opposing sides and move between and beyond them (Davies, 1998).

Previous Research

Empirical research carried out among lesbian families over the last thirty years began in response to legislative and judicial decisions in Europe and America where divorcing biological mothers, who were lesbian, were denied custody of their children based on what was considered the best interest of the child (Baetens & Brewaeys, 2001). There has been an assumption within the courts that

¹ I will use the terms co-mother and non-birth mother interchangeably in this paper. The terms co-parent, and non-biological mother are also used by lesbian mothers, and are variously adopted in the psychological literature. This reflects the heterogeneity of lesbian mothers' self-identification, and the diverse ways in which she is constructed within academic discourse.

lesbians and gay men are mentally ill, that lesbians are less maternal than heterosexual women, and that the nature of gay and lesbian relationships leaves little time for child rearing (Patterson, 1995). Until the mid 1970s, the vast majority of gay and lesbian research constructed homosexuals as sick and deviant individuals who were a result of disturbed upbringings (Coyle & Wilkinson, 2002). Despite this legacy of being classified² as an aberrant mental state, studies have not found that lesbian mothers are less maternal, or more mentally ill than heterosexual mothers (Patterson, 1995). Recent evidence finds lesbian couples that parent together divide household labour and child rearing tasks more equitably than heterosexual couples, and report significantly more satisfaction with their relationship (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2004; Patterson, 1995; Sullivan, 2004).

Planned lesbian families, where a child is born within an existing lesbian relationship, are a relatively new phenomenon. Only since the 1990's have the overwhelming majority of children born to lesbian couples been conceived through donor insemination (Millbank, 2002). One of the few clear differences found between planned lesbian and heterosexual families is that the non-birth mother in lesbian families is as much involved in child activities as the birth mother, unlike the father in heterosexual families (Bos et al., 2004; Sullivan, 1996; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, Brewaeys, 2003).

Much of the previous research with lesbian parents has been organised along arguments of sameness or difference. Victoria Clarke (2002) argues that lesbian mothers have been positioned along four dimensions that have informed research and theory regarding lesbian parenting. These dimensions are: (i) the same as heterosexual families; (ii) as different, and therefore deviant; (iii) as different, and therefore transformative; (iv) as different only because of oppression. I argue that through this construction of lesbian mothers as the same or as different to heterosexual mothers and fathers, academic research has perpetuated the homophobic positioning of lesbian mothers by attempting to construct their maternal identity within a hetero-normative mother/father oppositional binary.

Constructing a Lesbian Maternal Identity

This study is concerned with how lesbian non-birth mothers construct their identities, and with their subjective experience of this identity. The role of the non-birth mother is relatively new and there is no ready-made identity for her in Western society. As American researcher Maureen Sullivan (2004), says there is no cultural category non-birth mothers can use to signify their status as parents.

“They are not daddies, though sometimes, as we have seen they are primary bread winners; they are not nannies, aunties or grannies, though often they are presumed to be by strangers. They must write their existence...and thereby invent a sociofamilial category with no guidance ... except for the unsatisfying option of defining themselves in the negative, as “not that”” (Sullivan, 2004, p.158).

² As a result of intensive lobbying, in 1973 the American Psychiatric Society voted to remove homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* (Mendelson, 2003).

Given this lack of cultural signifier for the non-birth mother, I wanted to explore how she is constructed by existing discourses of parent and how she subverts and negotiates these constructions as she creates her own particular role within her family and her culture.

Rationale for the Study & Aims

As yet, there are no published studies that explore the experience of co-mothers in lesbian relationships in an Australian setting. This study therefore aims to explore how Australian non-birth mothers in planned lesbian families experience themselves within a nexus of discourses that position them as deviant and Other. I consider that my role as researcher and my own experiences as a lesbian do influence the research I conduct; therefore I have chosen to adopt a qualitative methodology as the most appropriate approach. Qualitative research allows me to explore the contradictions and conflicts in the subjective experience of my subjects, and to be accountable for my own subjective experience as researcher.

Method

Design & Procedure

The qualitative design of this study is based on a social constructionist framework (Creswell, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

I conducted in-depth interviews with 7 voluntary participants that focussed on obtaining rich detail of their understandings of their experiences as non-birth mothers in planned lesbian families. Interpretation and analysis was continuous and flexible and began with the first interview. Subsequent interview questions and sampling procedures were adjusted to take account of early findings. Each interview was typed verbatim within 48 hours. Each transcript was read a minimum of six times to compile emerging themes, and for a sense of the whole (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

This study was granted Ethics Approval by Charles Sturt University Ethics in Human Research Committee.

Sampling

To meet the selection parameters participants needed to be lesbian and be in a relationship where, together with their female partner, they had planned to have at least one child that the participant's partner gave birth to. Snowball and purposeful sampling approaches were used. I used a purposeful sampling approach to select participants from a wide geographical area to maximise diversity within the data and to enhance possibilities for extrapolation (Silverman, 2005).

Demographic Information

Participants came from two major urban centres and two major rural centres in Australia. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees, their partners, and their children.

Participant	Age (years)	Maternal identifier	Partner	Maternal identifier	Child	Child's age (years)	Residence
Linda	35	Mama	Nancy	Mummy	Rose	2	Sydney
Paola	37	Mummy Paola	Margot	Mummy Margot	April Jesse	6 4	Coastal NSW
Belinda	37	Mama	Carmen	Mummy	Troy	2	Inland NSW
Lily	43	Rabbit	Melissa	Mummy	Sophie	3	Coastal NSW
Jane	73	Spare mum	Claire	Mum	Karla	24	Inland NSW
Rosie	47	Mama	Hanna	Mummy	Pearl	3	Melbourne
Anna	36	Mummy Anna	Cate	Mummy Cate	Jack	3	Melbourne

Results and Discussion

Lesbian co-mothers in this study experienced themselves as both the same as and different to mothers, fathers, and general society. Their interpretation of the ways they are constructed, such as invisible, or deviant, or equal, inform how they negotiate with the world. By questioning what it means to be a mother, or a father, or a parent, these women negotiate the tensions between these categories and ultimately, they challenge existing mother/father binaries by refusing to position themselves as either/or. The women positioned themselves as simultaneously both the same and different within discourses of mother and father.

In this paper I will discuss three manifest themes and one latent theme that emerged from an in depth analysis of the data. These themes are: (i) Waving the rainbow flag: The social construction of the lesbian family; (ii) A bond like no other? - Relationships with family of origin; and (iii) Spare mums and mummies: Same as, and different to birth mother. A latent theme of 'same as and different to' represents a specific underlying dynamic that became apparent throughout the data.

(i) Waving the rainbow flag: The social construction of the lesbian family

Because two-mother families are a relatively new phenomenon, the members of these families are often in a position of educating the community as they introduce and construct their identities in the wider world. Co-mothers in particular are challenged to construct their role as lesbian mothers who have not birthed their child(ren). Birth mothers can choose to rely on their biological link to their child(ren) in their descriptive practice. Co-mothers have no such link, and no familiar category, and therefore are often in a position of creating their socio-familial identity in their interactions with others.

I disclose my sexual orientation about eight billion times more than I ever did before and I don't really have very much of a choice these days [...] Not that I'm saying, you know that we are likely ladies in the closet or anything. I mean we're not, we're out and about lesbians, but there just are these occasions where [...] you just might not feel like waving the rainbow flag! (Laughter) [...] Three weeks after Pearl was born, I was at a meeting and it came up that I'd just had this child and they were saying: "Oh! My God, how are you managing with the breast feeding?" and "You're looking pretty good!" You know. So it's those kinds of things [...] I think it is particular to me, for the non-biological mother. (Rosie)

Rosie describes a shared experience among the co-mothers in this study of the day-to-day construction of her role as a lesbian co-mother. This is often arduous because co-mothers must choose between the consequences of disclosing their sexuality or the consequences of denying their maternal role.

This theme explores how lesbian co-mothers subvert the binary of sameness = normal / difference = deviance. By positioning themselves as both the same as, and different to (dominant discourses of mother), co-mothers straddle the sameness/difference binary. They construct themselves simultaneously as normal members of society and as lesbian mothers. Despite culturally embedded discourses that would construct lesbians as different and deviant, these women actively position themselves as different and the same.

All the co-mothers in this study describe an ongoing process of constructing themselves as normal. Paola addresses the latent theme of constructing herself as both the same as and different to everybody else when constructing her social identity.

It's not about [...] having an S&M dungeon in the attic you know, just a regular family that reads to kids at night, gets them to school, sometimes on time. You know [...] there might be that initial shock and then it's just a process as we were saying before, about engaging with those people, and showing them that we are not scary, we are not, and it just melts away really. It pales into insignificance, which is good. (Paola)

Co-mothers in this study were aware that lesbians are viewed as different (and deviant) in Australian law, and that homophobia is enshrined in legislation.

You know before I had Pearl I didn't really know what the adoption law was [...] I didn't really know how discriminatory the law was, even though I'm a lawyer. I mean I assumed it wasn't good. But I didn't know. But now because I've had Pearl I've had reason to look up the Adoption Act [...] and discover that lesbian parents, or lesbians or gay men aren't considered fit and proper people [...] and so we're not able to adopt. So I think that lesbians and gay people's relationship with children goes to the heart of homophobia. It really does. (Rosie)

Being different in the eyes of the law while fighting to assert their sameness was a shared experience for the co-mothers I interviewed. Lesbian co-mothers are faced with legislation and public opinion that positions them within a discourse of deviant otherness. Lesbian co-mothers

maintain their label as lesbian but they attempt to change how they are constructed by redefining themselves with pride, by “waving the rainbow flag³”. The narratives they use to create their place in the world and to protect their children assert that while they may be different, they are still the same.

(ii) A bond like no other? - Relationships with family of origin.

The perceptions [I assume it's the way the n-b mother is perceived, not the nbm's perception] of extended family, society, and culture in constructing the identity of the co-mother is clearly significant. Although an individual may stake out an identity claim such as 'mother', the response of significant others, particularly extended family, affects the validity of that claim (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). The disclosure of sexual identity to family of origin has been described as the “litmus test” of blood ties (Sullivan, 2004, p.127). With the arrival of children the non-birth mother's family of origin does not benefit from the culturally mediated meanings of consanguinity that are available to the biologically connected birth mother's family (Sullivan, 2004). Even so, families of birth and non-birth lesbian mothers both encounter entrenched heterosexism.

All the co-mothers, bar one, experienced negative reactions from extended family (sometimes on both sides) upon the announcement of the impending birth of their child.

Ah well they were pretty horrified. Straight middle class people, [...] My father was really horrified when he heard that Claire was pregnant. He didn't think that was quite right [...].
(Jane)

Her mother said it felt worse than when Hanna's sister, when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. And that it was like a death in the family, it was that sort of feeling of grief, and she had really wished Hanna had mentioned it before she got pregnant and she would have done whatever she could to change her mind. (Rosie)

³ The rainbow flag is an international symbol of lesbian and gay pride.

The vehement reaction of co-mothers' extended family is a reflection of their engagement with hetero-normative social discourses that position lesbian mothers as most deviant, and as bad for children. It is one thing to have a lesbian daughter, but to have a lesbian daughter who herself has children was a difficult proposition for these families.

Only one co-mother in this sample reported that her own mother immediately accepted the child as a grandchild, and afforded her the same privilege and status as biologically related grandchildren.

I was expecting a lot worse but they have treated Rose exactly the same as my brother's children. It's really nice, really nice. Mum's got a shop and she's got the photo of Rose up there and everyone's saying, "Oh who's that?" And, "Oh that's my granddaughter", and, "Oh she looks like you". And all this sort of stuff and that makes her feel terrific too. She just thinks it's great. So there is no difference. (Linda)

Discrimination from family was by far the most common form of homophobia experienced by the women I interviewed, and the most painful. A surprising finding arising from my interviews with co-mothers is that while grandparents may see themselves as such, they do not necessarily see their daughters as mothers. Anna explains her experience of the nuances of extended family relationships.

Because you know my own mum having four daughters and reproduction is such a central, like such a major part of who she is that she felt, she was worried I would be lonely or I would miss out. "That the bond that you have by birthing a child is a bond like no other", as she has quoted several times. But like you know, I don't know, because I'm not a birth mum but I can only say what it's like for [me] is I've been with Jack since he was a little egg and I just love him and I have very strong feelings towards him. So, you know I'm not sure she's been able to step in and understand my perspective either being a non-biological mum. (Anna)

It is difficult for Anna to assert her relationship with her child in the face of non-acceptance from both her mother, and her partner's mother, Julie. In response to my initial question asking whether

she felt validated in her role as non-birth mother Anna had answered yes, that there were no major issues. However when we began talking about her extended family she realised that at times she did feel invisible in her role as co-mother.

In fact the things that make me probably angriest are around the little family things that happen, and Mothers' Day I got pretty shitty, I felt pretty crappy and yeah, pretty invisible. You know, I mean Julie knows I'm Jack's other mother and [...] [she] blatantly can't acknowledge it ... And I think that's the tragedy: we all get a bit caught up um with biology, and I'm not Jack's biological mum and I will never be that, but it doesn't matter because I am who I am. (Anna)

It may be worth considering here whether Anna's mother feels that her daughter's claim to the title 'mother', without actually birthing, is a threat to the validity of her own role. Do mothers such as Anna's mother, for whom "reproduction is central", feel that their own identities are threatened by their daughter's attempts to subvert the definition of mother as birther? While Anna's mother has difficulty accepting her as a mother, she does consider herself a grandparent of Anna's son Jack.

Non-birth mothers in this study were trying to position themselves within their unique maternal role, often in the face of opposition from their own mothers who in many cases could only see differences and not similarities.

(iii) Spare mums and mummies: The construction of maternal identity

This theme gets under the skin of lesbian maternal identity formation and explores how co-mothers rub against hetero-normative discourses of mother, and lesbian discourses of butch and femme, as they create roles for themselves within their immediate families. The co-mothers I interviewed all went through a process of negotiating a role for themselves within their immediate family. All the co-mothers used very similar language to describe the strength of their love for their children. Some women use an implicit argument of sameness; saying their bond with their child(ren) is as strong as the bond of the birth mother. Lily describes a very deep love for her child Sophie.

I can't imagine I would feel more connected to Sophie if I was the biological parent. I don't think it would be possible for me to have a deeper connection to Sophie. I just can't see how that could be possible. (Lily)

Paola's experience is the same as Lily's in that she feels her bond with her child could not be stronger.

I didn't find it to be different. I know that's peculiar. But I didn't I just didn't she may as well have come from my loins really. I felt like I had given birth to her. (Paola)

However the women use different relational descriptors symbolically to represent this bond with their child. Lily is very clear that she is Sophie's parent, and not her mother.

I mean I'm not comfortable with the idea of being anyone's mother (laugh). And it's partly about the idea of what is mother and you know I think to carry and actually push someone out, to be the body that gave rise to the baby is a very different proposition to being the one that hasn't. It's partly about what is a mother and I don't identify as a mother, I identify as a parent but not as a mother. Mother is the one who carries you, pushes you out, suckles you, and is your primary carer. That's how it's worked out in this family. (Lily)

Lily says there is a complete erasure of her role.

There's Mother's Day and there's Father's Day, there's no Lily's Day (laugh). So you are erased in a lot of ways. And [...] you are erased in terms of the dominant texts you see around you, however you are inserted in a particular way in all your social interactions [...] Everyone knows I'm Sophie's parent and it's a kind of a generic that's not socially recognised. Is it? (Lily)

Lily attempts to sidestep the mother/father binary by creating a third role of lesbian parent. The adoption of the role of lesbian parent can be seen as an attempt to refuse the mother/father binary, however the cost of this as described by Lily, is social invisibility. Paola works to deconstruct the binary by asserting that there is no difference between mother and father, or mother and co-mother. Unlike Lily, Paola very clearly sees herself as a mother and her children call her “mummy Paola”, and her partner “mummy Margot”. Paola’s definition of mother raises questions about the constructions that are used to define and limit ‘mother’.

Yeah the non-birth mother I just think you know you can't say he is the non-birth father can you really. So why would you call it that? Why would you call it the non-birth or the non-biological you know? You're a parent you're a parent. You could be a mum or a dad or a mum or a mum [...] As I said before I feel like I may as well have given birth to April, I feel particularly bonded [to her]. It's not about biology, obviously, it can't be. It's not my egg! I didn't give birth. So yeah it's just about our relationship [...] So I guess it's about what sorts of things we are attaching to motherhood that we really have to re-look at. Um you know what does it mean: does it mean you give birth? Does it mean you stay at home? Does it mean you go to work? You have to look at that and see what it means. Is it someone who loves you? Someone who does your washing? You know, what is it? Is it someone who plays with you, does craft? I guess it's all of those things and more. (Paola)

In the process of creating roles for themselves in relation to their children and partners, these women have drawn on discourses of the mother and have come up with different interpretations.

Gendered role definitions within the couple relationship also affected how co-mothers constructed their maternal identities. The butch-femme narrative is the most common cultural narrative for the gendered construction of lesbian relationships (Laird, 1999). While it may seem overtly heterocentric, within lesbian culture the butch-femme metaphor takes on a complexity that is beyond being merely imitative of heterosexual gender roles. In lesbian relationships identifying more with one gender, feeling more masculine or feminine, does not necessarily equate with power and privilege (Laird, 1999). Negotiating roles as mothers within a butch-femme cultural narrative was a task met by some of the co-mothers in this study.

For Linda the greatest challenge after the birth of her child Rose was her struggle to maintain her 'butch' role within the relationship and deal with what she felt were feminine feelings of wanting to be a mother.

I just I thought I would be like the baby's father, I would just be like a dad and do what my dad did, go out and do what he did and that's that. But it wasn't like that at all. I had this urge to be with this child all the time. And I just realised that I was a mother; I wasn't a father at all. It was very difficult. I remember I cried every day I left the house for at least a year thinking: is this separation from the baby? It is still so strong in me I can feel it now, feel the emotion rising. But ah it was really, really hard. I hated it ... I couldn't say to Nancy you go to work and I'll stay home, she's not going to have that either. So it was very, very difficult to deal with that sort of stuff. I'd always been thinking I was this butch little number running around playing footy and all of that but it wasn't like that when the baby came. And that sort of caused a few issues between us too ... and also I was crying. Crying? Sheilas cry, you know? All that stuff... it was really confronting. (Linda)

Linda equates emotion and vulnerability with the feminine and with mother. She was forced to reconsider how she had constructed her identity as a "butch little number" by the strength of the 'feminine' feelings she experienced in relation to her child. Those feelings were evident as she spoke to me; I saw tears in her eyes as she talked of leaving her child to go to work.

Linda's struggle to reconcile her new experience as mother with her identity as butch lesbian was also a difficult experience for her partner. Once Rose was born and Linda started to move towards the feminine both Linda and Nancy found their identities, and their relationship under threat.

Well, [...] she [Nancy] had really butch-femme relationships, and I was probably the femmest person that she had ever been out with, by a long way. And ah I think it was very difficult for her because I think she wasn't attracted to that side of me, to that [part of] me wanting to be a mother. That wasn't attractive to her sexually or emotionally. You know and ah, I found that too

within myself. I thought hang on all those you know identifiers are all getting a bit warped now.
God. (Linda)

Here Linda reveals how important it is in her relationship that she maintains her butch role. Nancy had had partners who were more butch than Linda in the past; Linda was the 'femmet...by a long way'. It appears to be a part of their relationship contract that Nancy is femme and Linda is butch, and there is an implication that Linda was only just butch enough to begin with. For Linda and Nancy it was important that despite Linda's new feelings, and her new position as 'mama', they maintain their distinct roles. Linda has refigured her role to encompass seemingly irreconcilable differences; she has integrated what had appeared to her as the paradox of the butch mother. These women have rewritten the butch-femme narrative of their relationship to allow them to maintain their role divisions and to both to be mothers. They are different and the same.

Other co-mothers did not overtly describe themselves as butch or femme but some did identify with fathers both in terms of their role within the family as breadwinner, and in terms of how people outside of the family unit constructed them.

General Discussion

I have borrowed Cheryl Muzio's (1999) clever use of language for the title of this paper. Her play on other mother as "(m)other" beautifully encapsulates the experiences of the co-mothers interviewed in this study. Various described as non-birth mothers, non-biological mothers, co-parents, or co-mothers, the women I interviewed are constrained and limited by language. They are defined in the negative by reference to their lack of biological or birth connection to their child. This implicitly privileges these connections, and renders the woman who did not birth as the invisible other.

Throughout this research project I have struggled with language and have not known the words to name the women I am attempting to understand. [by the way & not for now – you might be interested in the feminist-poet Denise Riley's book "Am I That name?" – or maybe you already know

it]This problem of language is in itself symbolic of the struggle of co-mothers to exist within the pervasive binaries that define dominant discourses.

The latent theme of 'same as and different to' demonstrates how the Australian co-mothers in this sample have recognised the constitutive nature of oppositional binaries. Through continuously positioning themselves as the same and different, as normal and as lesbian, as non-birth and as mother, they have subverted hetero-normative discourses and claimed legitimacy for their roles as mothers and parents.

Non birth mothers in planned lesbian headed families are phenomena unique to this time in history. Very little research has been conducted to explore the experience of lesbian co-mothers. Their social presence, while confronting for some, seems assured and further research is needed to improve our understanding of this maternal role, and this family structure. In particular, further psychological research may have a role to play in improving the legal status, and the welfare, of co-mothers and their children.

The use of sameness *and* difference as a constructive device by the co-mothers in this study has implications for how we construct notions of family, mother, and parent in Western society. By constructing their maternal identities through the competing discourses of motherhood, patriarchy and lesbianism, lesbian co-mothers have subverted the mother/father binary construction of the Western family. Much of the previous psychological research has used an argument of sameness to counter attempts to position lesbian mothers as deviant and as bad for children. This study has highlighted the voice of lesbian co-mothers as they construct their maternal identities as the same and as different. In this way co-mothers have stepped outside of hetero-normative discourses of family and begun the work of constructing the discourse of the lesbian mother, a discourse that does not rely solely on its similarities to heterosexual mothering in order to legitimise lesbian parenting.

References

- Baetens, P., & Brewaeys, A. (2001). Lesbian couples requesting donor insemination: An update on the knowledge with regard to lesbian mother families. *Human Reproduction Update*, 7(5), 512-519.
- Bos, H.M., van Balen, F., van den Boom, D. (2004). Experience of parenthood, couple relationship, social support, and child rearing goals in planned lesbian mother families. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 45 (4), 755-764.
- Clarke, V. (2002). Sameness and difference in research on lesbian parenting. *Journal of Community and Applied Psychology*, 12, 210-222.
- Coyle, A. & Wilkinson, S. (2002) Social psychological perspectives on lesbian and gay issues in Europe: The state of the art. *Journal of Community and Applied Psychology*, 12 147-152.
- Creswell, J.W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). California: Sage.
- Dalton, S. (2000). Nonbiological mothers and the legal boundaries of motherhood: An analysis of California law. In Ragone, H. & Winddance Twine, F. (Eds.), *Ideologies and technologies of motherhood race class sexuality and nationalism* (pp. 191- 232). London: Routledge.
- Gergen, K.J. (2003). Knowledge as socially constructed. In M. Gergen & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Social construction: A reader* (pp.15-17). London: Sage.

Gergen, K. J. (1994a). Crisis in representation and the emergence of social construction. In K. J. Gergen (Ed.), *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction* (pp. 30-63). Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Giorgi, A.P., & Giorgi, B.M. (2003). The descriptive phenomenological method. In P. Camic, J. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design* (pp.243-259). Washington DC: APA.

Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N.K. Denzin, & Y.S Lincoln, (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp.191-215). California: Sage.

Hequembourg, A., Farrell, M. (1999). Lesbian motherhood. Negotiating marginal mainstream identities. *Gender & Society*, 13(4), 540-557.

Laird, J. (1999). Gender and sexuality in lesbian relationships: feminist and constructionist perspectives. In J. Laird (Ed.), *Lesbians and lesbian families: Reflections on theory and practice* (pp.47-89). New York; Columbia University Press.

Mendelson, G. (2003). Homosexuality and psychiatric nosology. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 37, 678-683.

Millbank, J. (2002). *Meet the parents: A review of the research on lesbian and gay families*. Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (NSW) Inc.

Miller, W.L., & Crabtree, B.F. (2004). Depth interviewing. In S. Nagy Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice* (pp. 185-202). New York: Oxford University Press.

- Muzio, C. (1999). Lesbian co-parenting: On being/being with the invisible (m)other. In J. Laird (Ed.), *Lesbians and lesbian families: Reflections on theory and practice* (pp.197-211). New York; Columbia University Press.
- Patterson, C. (1995). Lesbian and gay parenting. A summary of research findings. *APA Public Interest Directorate*. Retrieved 20-3-05 from www.apa.org/pi/parent.html
- Patterson, C. (2001). Families of the lesbian baby boom: Maternal mental health and child adjustment. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy* 4(3/4) 91-107.
- Perlesz, A., & McNair, R. (2004). Lesbian parenting: Insiders' voices. *ANZJFT* 25(2) 129-140.
- Perrin, E.C. (2002). Technical report: Coparent or second parent adoption by same-sex parents. *Pediatrics* 109, 341-344.
- Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Smith, J.A. (1999). Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis. In J.A. Smith, R. Harre, & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology* (pp.9-26). London: Sage.
- Sullivan, M. (2004). *The family of woman: lesbian mothers, their children and the undoing of gender*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Thomson, J. (2002.) *Mommie queerest: Contemporary rhetorics of lesbian maternal identity*. Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.

Vanfraussen, K., Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, I., Brewaeys, A., (2003). Family functioning lesbian families created by donor insemination. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 73 (1), 78-