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*Accounting for 'disclosure': Lesbian parents' identity management in home and school contexts.*

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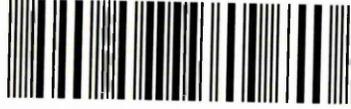
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Accounting for 'Disclosure':  
Lesbian Parents' Identity Management  
in Home and School Contexts

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
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## DECLARATION

This thesis is not one for which a degree has been or will be conferred by any other university or institution. This thesis is not one for which a degree has already been conferred by Sheffield Hallam University. The composition of this thesis is the candidate's own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted by the candidate for another degree, nor has any work undertaken by the candidate as part of a research group been incorporated into this thesis. On the 12<sup>th</sup> July 2011 I confirm the above statements to be true:



## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research explores working-class (educated) lesbian parents' identity management strategies within home and school contexts. Following an evaluation of epistemological debates and social science approaches to theorizing 'self', I highlight the utility of a feminist social constructionist approach to research, and the centrality of language and discourse in the constitution of lesbian parents' subjectivities. This work is informed by poststructuralist, feminist and psychological theories of identity and subjectivity and I take a 'relational approach' to explore ways in which historically and culturally specific ideologies and discourses of sexuality, family and parenting shape lesbian parents' discursive practices and subjectivities.

Seven working-class (educated) lesbian parents from the north-east of England took part in interviews about their lesbian parent families and their interactions with their children, friends, family and school staff to explore how lesbian parents talk about their lesbian parent identity and disclosure/concealment of their sexuality. Specifically, a discursive analytic approach was utilized to explore lesbian parents' accounts for disclosure/concealment of their sexual identity and of their lesbian parenting/families, within home-school contexts. From this investigation I identified a key interpretative repertoire: 'sexuality as a form of knowledge' that the women used to construct homosexuality as normal, dangerous, private and progressive. A key finding from this investigation is the discursive strategy of 'positioning others' within constructions of sexuality. Interactive positioning functioned to rationalize accounts for disclosure or concealment of the women's sexuality at different discursive moments and contexts.

I problematize existing essentialist models of 'coming out' and highlight how disclosure/concealment of sexual identity can be theorized as an 'accountable' activity which acknowledges the synthesis of culture and subjectivity at the point of discourse. This work also acknowledges ways in which class subjectivity can shape lesbian parents' discursive practices in their negotiation of 'difference'.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Autobiography of the question

It has been a combination of events, people and circumstances shaping the direction and development of this research. It began with a period of change when after twelve years service as an overworked and underpaid veterinary nurse I quit my job and took up a place at University in the north-east of England as a mature (thirty year old) student, on a psychology and counselling undergraduate degree course. It was during the next three years, cocooned one could argue, in the romantic humanistic rhetoric of 'positive regard' and 'self actualization' that I began to question my sexuality. My questioning also had much to do with my friendship with Donna that was without doubt heart-breaking (for me at least) and liberating. Donna was an 'out and proud' lesbian, who lived with her partner Liz, and Liz's two daughters. For me, Donna and Liz were an inspiration and an example to me of what being a lesbian parent could be like. When people ask me now why I chose to do this research, one particular moment stands out for me: a telephone call between Donna and a teacher from Christine's (her daughter's) school. Donna explained to me later how the teacher had asked for Christine's mother (Liz) by name and had not been able to understand that Donna was *also* Christine's mother, which had led to the awkward conversation between them that I had heard. Although I initially began my research on parents' educational practices as my topic, it is clear now, that the phone call and hearing Donna's experiences of homophobia from parents at school, and the ways in which she handled sensitive and difficult situations stimulated my interest and left an impression on me, to the extent that I changed the focus of my research inquiry. It was not therefore a coincidence that I was questioning

my own sexuality and taking steps in my own 'coming out' process, when I decided upon lesbian parenting as my area of inquiry, and now, several years later, I cannot see or imagine this research or my personal developments in isolation.

My interest in education research stems from my experiences of school as a pupil and feelings of uncertainty regarding social and academic aspects of my education. It has been through my return to education that I have been able to identify myself within the literature on lesbian lives and 'classed' subjectivities. My parents were from working-class backgrounds and left school at fourteen or fifteen with no formal qualifications. Formal education was unfamiliar territory for my parents and this did have an impact on me. I can't speak for my siblings although I believe personal experiences of education failure have been important in shaping all our lives. I left school with below average qualifications which continued to be a source of disappointment to me for many years.

My experiences of being teased and bullied (about my weight and about being 'like a boy' or lesbian) are key recollections of my time at school, and that had a huge impact on my confidence. I recall one occasion when I was about eleven years old and was shopping for clothes with my mother, the shop assistant lead us to the boys' changing rooms (thinking I was a boy) and I can remember feeling so ashamed and sorry for my mum. From that time, questions about my gender and sexuality have shaped my subjectivity, my understanding of myself and others, and my experiences as a child were carried into adulthood as I tried so hard to become recognized and 'accepted' as a heterosexual woman. I played the part well, particularly in my job as a veterinary nurse, but remained unfulfilled in my work and in my relationships with men. I had become very unhappy during those years and now on reflection I can identify that I was, over a number of years, experiencing blatant sexism and sexual harassment at

work. That is not something I recognized at the time and it has been a long and painful process of exploration to identify it as such and to not blame myself for my lack of awareness. Not only were women treated as objects within that workplace, my lack of academic qualifications became a further source of discrimination which had a negative impact on my confidence. Several years and heterosexual relationships later, and during my time working for an intimidating and sexist man, I saw further education as my way out; I started attending evening classes at my local college and in two years and with further qualifications under my belt I made the decision to leave my job. On reflection it was the best decision I ever made.

It seems obvious to say that as a white, working-class-educated lesbian, I do not (can not) write or speak for all women or for all lesbians. I have not always identified as lesbian and began my own 'coming out' process in my early thirties. I am not a mother, yet my research focuses on the lives of lesbian parents; my own questions about the possibilities of motherhood for myself as a lesbian were also pertinent to my research inquiry. What is life like for lesbians who are also mothers? Is life as a lesbian and as a mother a possibility for me?

A key issue that I was engaged with personally at the outset of this research inquiry - and a theme that is identified throughout my research - was the 'process' and experience of 'coming out' and my desire to know *how* people 'told' their family, friends, and other people less central in their lives - when did you know you were gay? Who did you tell? How did they react? Do the children's teachers know?' and so forth, were questions that I wanted answers to. I anticipated that through this research process I would 'discover' how the women had 'come out' and that I would learn of their positive and negative experiences of disclosure to teachers and other parents within the school context, and family members and friends outside school.

During my research of lesbian lives within academic literature, in fiction and in true stories of lesbians coming-out at various ages, and my growing belief in the psychological and social benefits of 'coming-out': of being 'who you really are', of daring to face the world and no longer hide, and so forth, I came back to earth with a bump during my first interview. I had asked Joanne whether she and her partner Alison had 'come out' to teachers at their daughter's school - her short, sharp response was 'well why should we?' Joanne's potentially innocuous response signalled an important turning point for me, a moment that forced me to question my own motives and values, one which challenged my belief that 'coming out' would eventually - if not immediately - be a positive thing to do; it had seemed so obvious to me up until that point.

I cannot say that I have come to a conclusion regarding the possibility of motherhood for myself, although my longing for answers to my questions has become less troubling. My absorption in the process of this research and in exploring the lives of the women taking part, in addition to increasing my awareness of important social and political issues surrounding feminist research, has given me much more than the answers I was seeking: most important of all, it has taken away the need to achieve perfect harmony within myself. I have always strived to find my ideal self – a self by which every idea, value and opinion held is matched by action. Through this research and my exploration of rhetoric and the power of discourse and ideology within our society, I have begun to experience the freedom of inconsistency within myself and others.

## **1.2 A feminist social constructionist approach**

As I have outlined above, my personal interest and investment in this research have been key motivating factors in my decision to conduct research on lesbian parents, and

are also pertinent to the development of this research. From my perspective as a woman and a lesbian, a feminist approach to research seemed the obvious choice although it is important to note that there are several theoretical and epistemological approaches that can be taken within a feminist framework. What *is* common to all feminist approaches to research is the acknowledgement of partiality in research - this is at the centre of feminist critiques of traditional science. In this section I examine *feminist standpoint theory*, key feminist principles within research and the relevance of a social constructionist approach to feminist research, to provide a rationale for my discourse analysis method (outlined in Chapter 4). I draw on Burr's (2003) 'requirements' for social constructionist thinking and on feminist theory to demonstrate how feminism and social constructionism can be juxtaposed in research that explores (in this case) lesbian parents' lives.

### *1.2.1 Feminist standpoint theory*

Feminists have argued that epistemic androcentrism inherent in traditional scientific research has, "whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically excluded the possibility that women could be 'knowers' or *agents of knowledge*..." (Harding, 1997, p.162) and it is by challenging the constructions of taken-for-granted knowledge that sets feminist research apart from traditional science. It is important to acknowledge here that not all approaches that challenge traditional scientific knowledge production are feminist; many are underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology which challenges the notion of 'taken-for-granted' knowledge in its focus on the discursive construction of knowledge (see below). It is the focus on the *gendered* nature of knowledge that is central to a feminist research framework.

Descartes's proposed dualism between the conscious, thinking mind of the subject and the unthinking mind of the object has been extended and modified in the production of further dualisms that became taken-for-granted within science and European society during and beyond the Enlightenment period<sup>1</sup>. In their association with Cartesian dualisms – for example, male/female, mind/body, rational/emotional, - reason and the rational mind became synonymous with masculinity, subjugating women and demeaning feminist methods of inquiry. Within 'modern' thinking, the emergence of what became taken-for-granted, gendered hierarchical associations is captured by Ramazanoglu & Holland:

In this triumph of dualistic thinking, men are masters of mind, culture and masculinity. It is they who can use reason to master their passions, bodies and objects of knowledge. This positions women as mistresses of passion and emotion, and as closer to nature than are men, in being subject to their bodies. Feminist observations and concepts can be categorized as expressions of feminine passion, or embodiment, rather than as rational, certain or authoritative. Men's naturally superior capacity for rational thought critically distinguishes masculinity from femininity...These dualistic categories of thought are both hierarchical and political (2002, p. 29).

In challenging the superiority of objectivity in the production of authoritative knowledge, a small number of radical feminists placed subjectivity as separate from and superior to objectivity (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). For the authors, “[s]ubjectivity implies partial, personal, intuitive knowledge that comes from the consciousness of a knowing subject situated in a specific social context” (p. 52). Reversal of this dualism, that is, privileging subjectivity as unique to the production of feminine ways of knowing, is rarely taken in contemporary feminist research, as this approach failed to critique the dualism itself and its inherent gendered positioning of subjectivities;

male/female, rational/emotional, mind/body and so forth, where (male) objectivity was seen as superior to (female) subjectivity. This radical feminist approach accepted the gendered positioning of subjectivity as an exclusively female capacity, without challenging the 'inferior' position of subjectivity itself (as constructed through scientific thinking). Later feminists rejected an entirely essentialist view of feminine ways of knowing, to address the inequalities inherent within this dualism highlighting how *all* knowledge produced by women *and* men is partial, local, personal and political; that is, shaped by subjectivity.

Enlightenment thinking positioned the 'knowing subject' or *constituting* subject as central to the production of knowledge. The knowledge produced through traditional scientific research was given its authority on the basis that it was *objective* (in the traditional sense), that is, value-free and impartial. Without objectivity, "according to conventional thought, one cannot separate justified belief from mere opinion, or real knowledge from mere claims to knowledge" (Harding, 1991, p. 138). While social constructionism challenges the idea that observation can uncover 'truth' or valid knowledge, feminists also challenged the claim for 'objectivity' as the gold standard for authoritative knowledge production. Traditionally, scientific knowledge was produced by predominantly white, European, middle-class men *for* white, European, middle-class men, and feminists have challenged the gendered nature of traditional scientific knowledge and raised important questions about the 'impartial and objective' knowledge produced as the result. For Harding, *gender difference* as a scientific resource "leads us to ask questions about nature and social relations from the perspective of devalued and neglected lives" (1991, p. 150). In exploring the social world from women's standpoint, we can produce new and different knowledge that challenges existing malestream constructs.

“Using women’s lives as grounds to criticize the dominant knowledge claims, which have been based primarily in the lives of men in the dominant races, classes, and cultures, can decrease the partialities and distortions in the picture of nature and social life provided by the natural and social sciences” (Harding, 1991, p. 121)

Feminist challenges to malestream authoritative knowledge were influenced by Foucault’s theory of knowledge which repudiates the notion of universal ‘truth’. For Foucault, truth is not a singular reality that can be discovered, truths are constructed:

“[T]ruth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth...truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, not the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, *the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true*; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (1980, p. 131, my emphasis).

Foucault’s theory “suspends...the problematic of epistemic justification” (Fraser, 1989, p. 21). Rather than focus on questioning how we can discover the ‘truth’ and which methods of inquiry will provide the most reliable and valid measures, Foucault (1978, 1980) argued that it is more important, and fruitful, to examine how ways of knowing *become* ‘truths’. Rather than judging between differing versions of truth, Foucault suggests it is more important to examine how particular discourses become dominant and how ideologies and discourses constitute individual subjectivities. Although

Foucault's theory on the production of knowledge has been the catalyst for much feminist research, his work neglects any theorization of gender inequalities inherent within dominant (patriarchal) constructions of knowledge. Marxist and radical feminists have examined structures of inequality between men and women within western societies and highlight the need for a combined focus on patriarchy and capitalism as key sites of women's oppression.

“A struggle aimed only at capitalist relations of oppression will fail, since their underlying supports in patriarchal relations of oppression will be overlooked” (Hartmann, 1979, p. 24).

Where early Marxist feminists focused on capitalist relations as central to the inequalities between men and women, radical feminists argued that patriarchy - a system *independent* of capitalism and class - was central to women's subordination, where “men as a group dominate women as a group and are the main beneficiaries of the subordination of women” (Walby, 1990, p. 3). For Lerner (1986) a broad definition of patriarchy is “the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general” (p. 239).

For feminists, evidence of sexism in non-capitalist societies and historical analysis of early Western societies (e.g. feudal European societies) supports the view that patriarchy pre-dates capitalism. For many feminists, explanations of women's oppression as due to *either* capitalism *or* patriarchy are inadequate. Broadly speaking, dual-systems theorists argue that to focus an inquiry on one and not the other, will lead to an under-theorization of the mechanisms inherent in modern unequal power relations between women and men. Capitalism *and* patriarchy are “present and important in the

structuring of contemporary gender relations” (Walby, 1990, p. 5). It is important to reiterate that the category of ‘women’ is not universal; in addition to gender, experiences of inequality for women will be mediated by age, ethnicity, class and dis/ability.

For Walby (1990) “patriarchy needs to be conceptualized at different levels of abstraction. At the most abstract level it exists as a system of social relations [and] at a less abstract level patriarchy is composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of production; patriarchal relations in paid work; patriarchal relations in the state; male violence; patriarchal relations in sexuality and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions” (p. 20). Despite Pollert’s (1996) critique of dual-systems theories and reductionism in the fragmentation of patriarchy into structures, Walby (1990) justifies her approach arguing that “a broader range of structures should be theorized as part of the patriarchal side of the dual systems” (p. 7) and that “the specification of several rather than simply one base is necessary in order to avoid reductionism and essentialism” (p. 20). Walby’s work on sites and structures of patriarchy is useful here in that it provides starting points for my investigation and enables me to focus on the two relevant aspects of patriarchy in the construction and management of lesbian identities; first, *patriarchal relations in sexuality*, where “compulsory heterosexuality and the sexual double standard are two key forms of this structure” (Walby, 1990, p. 21) and second, *patriarchal relations in cultural institutions*, “institutions which create the representation of women within a patriarchal gaze” (p. 21). In Chapters 2 and 3 I examine patriarchy (particularly in the form of heterosexuality) in relation to the construction of sexualities and in relation to representations of women within the family and in education.

### 1.2.2 (De)constructing knowledge

Although social constructionism as framework for a variety of language-based approaches to analysis within the social sciences has a relatively short history, the disciplines shaping this approach, including linguistics, sociology and philosophy, have their own longer and varied histories. Social constructionists then, take a sceptical view of common knowledge that is unquestioned and accepted as ‘fact’. This approach requires that we examine *how* our shared understanding of our social worlds came into being, and to question the idea that what we *perceive* to exist, *exists* in reality. These challenges are aimed at traditional scientific approaches to understanding the natural world: that through empirical and positivist methods of inquiry, we can discover the truth about natural phenomena.

Although feminist standpoint theorists vary in their expositions of the production of ‘feminist’ knowledge, the work of Dorothy Smith expounds the important difference between on the one hand, women’s experiences as having a direct connection with reality, and on the other, women’s experiences as a *starting point* for feminist inquiry. Smith engages with the idea of ‘tacit knowledge’ “a knowledge of the local practices of our everyday/everynight worlds” and for Smith, this way of knowing “becomes a knowledge only at that point when it is entered into the language game of experience, that is, in the course of telling” (1997, p. 395).

“Experience is a method of talk, a language game, in which what is not yet spoken struggles dialogically to appropriate language sedimented with meaning before the moment in which she speaks...Experience gives direct access to the necessarily social character of people’s worlds; it is in *how* people talk, the categories they use, the relations implicitly posited among them, and so forth, and in what is taken for granted in their talk, as well as in what they can talk about” (Smith, 1997, p. 394).

Smith's claim for 'women's standpoint' is characterised in its privileging of women's *experiences* as a starting point for feminist inquiry. Smith defends criticisms of epistemological privilege, explaining that "[t]he authority of experience is foundational to the women's movement (which is not to say that experience is foundational to knowledge) and has been and is at once explosive and fruitful" (1997, p. 394). I add to this point here by arguing as Weedon does, that experience is not enough – we need to consider where experience comes from, and "how it relates to material and social practices and the power relations which structure them" (Weedon, 1997, p. 8). We need to examine how 'self' and 'culture' imbricate at the point of language and how a 'relational approach' to theorizing 'self' acknowledges both the personal and the political aspects of identity work.

My claim for a feminist standpoint is that my research conclusions will be based, not on women's experiences per se, but on "observations and theory that start out from, that look at the world from the perspective of, women's lives" (Harding, 1991, p. 124). Feminist research challenges 'taken-for-granted' knowledge circulating within our social worlds, to expose its gendered nature and partiality. To examine the impact of patriarchal structures, in relation to sexuality and cultural institutions such as family and education, feminists contend that women and lesbians who are positioned as 'other' (de Beauvoir, 1949) (outside malestream knowledge) can offer a different perspective on social life. Harding (1991), drawing on Hills Collins work, describes the advantages of women's 'stranger' or 'other' position to the production of feminist knowledge. Those immersed in the culture, the 'natives' (as Harding calls them) are those whose "life patterns and ways of thinking fit all too closely the dominant institutions and conceptual schemes" (p. 124). As *strangers to the social order*, women's "exclusion alone provides an edge, an advantage, for the generation of causal explanations of our social

order from the perspective of *their lives*” (p. 125). The concept of a ‘double-other’ position highlights the positions of women who are also placed outside of the dominant social order on the basis of their gender and, for example, their social class or ethnicity. Lesbians are perceived as ‘outsiders’ on the basis of their gender *and* sexuality. Beginning research from a lesbian standpoint then, does not mean that knowledge produced will be exclusively *about* lesbians, “the point is that starting thought from the (many different) daily activities of lesbians enables us to see things that might otherwise have been invisible to us, not just about those lives but about heterosexual women’s lives and men’s lives, straight as well as gay” (Harding, 1991, p. 252). It is the generation of knowledge from the perspective of lesbian lives that enables us to identify how mechanisms of oppression, central to the reproduction of the patriarchal status quo, are constructed and reproduced in our daily lives. For Weedon (1997) “socialist-feminist objectives have profound implications for family life. They include...the abolition of the privileging of heterosexuality, freedom to define one’s own sexuality and the right of lesbians to raise children...” (p. 18).

So far I have examined feminist inquiry in terms of epistemology by examining traditional malestream views of knowledge production, feminist critiques and alternatives forwarded. At this point it seems appropriate to summarise some of the key principles of feminist research which include methodological, ethical, epistemological and political issues. In her discussion of ethical considerations within feminist research, Gesa Kirsch (1999) notes key qualities and characteristics guiding contemporary feminist research. It is these principles of feminist research that I have revisited throughout the entire research process to guide the development of my inquiry, methods and analysis.

- Ask research questions which acknowledge and validate women's experiences;
- Collaborate with participants as much as possible so that growth and learning can be mutually beneficial, interactive, and co-operative;
- Analyze how social, historical, and cultural factors shape the research site as well as participants' goals, values, and experiences;
- Analyze how the researchers' identity, experience, training, and theoretical framework shape the research agenda, data analysis, and findings;
- Correct androcentric norms by calling into question what have been considered 'normal' and what has been regarded as 'deviant';
- Take responsibility for the representation of others in research reports by assessing probable and actual effects on different audiences; and
- Acknowledge the limitations of and contradictions inherent in research data, as well as alternative interpretations of that data (Kirsch, 1999, p. 4).

### **1.3 Overview**

I am interested in how patriarchal constructions of sexuality within the institutions of family and education shape the experiences of lesbian parents within home-school contexts. Feminists and social constructionists take a similar view of 'taken-for-granted' knowledge, emphasizing the need to critique where knowledge comes from and how knowledge is partial, and 'truth' constructed. There is a relatively long history in the development of feminist theory and research on women's experiences and lesbian subjectivity which has supported the challenges aimed at malestream knowledge production, and arguments for a feminist standpoint approach to research that starts from the experiences of women, experiences that are marginalized in dominant patriarchal discourse. Theorizing women's subjectivities requires a focus on language, and a feminist social constructionist approach provides a framework for exploring the discursive production of lesbian parents' subjectivities.

“The explanatory power of feminist theory develops from interrogating the production of categories, their applicability, the experiences of them and from assessing their explanatory adequacy for different groups of women in different relations of power at historically specific times and places. This is how knowledge becomes situated” (Skeggs, 1997, p. 21).

I have used a feminist social constructionist approach in the present study. Lesbian parents’ experience is where my inquiry began, although it was not a search for ‘truth’ about lesbian parenting; instead the purpose of this study was to examine *how* lesbian parents’ talk about their lesbian parent families and the disclosure/concealment of their sexuality within home and school contexts. There is a relatively small amount of research on lesbian parents ‘coming out’ experiences, which approach ‘coming out’ from a realist ontological position, and although a growing number of studies employ a (feminist) social constructionist framework in research on the *rhetoric* surrounding lesbian/gay parenting (e.g. Clarke, 2002a,b; Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004), no study to date has examined from a feminist social constructionist perspective, the rhetoric of ‘coming out’ for lesbian parents. Consequently, this thesis focuses on the broad question: *How do lesbian parents ‘talk about’ the disclosure/concealment of their sexual identity in home and school contexts?*

I consider this question in more detail in section 3.4 and in the two analytic chapters of this thesis (Chapters 5 and 6). Exploring the ways in which lesbian parents talk about and account for disclosure/concealment of their sexuality, might provide some insight into the ways in which normative constructions of family and sexuality and gay-affirmative discourses of the modern homosexual, shape lesbian parents’ arguments for their non-normative identities.

In this chapter I have highlighted my personal interest in this research and the utility of a feminist social constructionist approach to research on lesbian parents’

identity work. In chapter 2 I examine theoretical and epistemological approaches to identity and sexuality within sociology, psychology and feminism, which fall into two broad perspectives: essentialist and social constructionist. I also consider the limitations of 'stage' models of 'coming out' and the potential benefits of theorizing 'coming out' from a social constructionist perspective. In chapter 3 I explore existing theories on motherhood, the family and mother/parent identities (3.1), lesbian and gay parenting (3.2) and sexualities in the context of school and education (3.3), and provide a rationale for my research on lesbian parents' identity negotiation in home and school contexts. In chapter 4 I provide my rationale for the discourse analytic approach and describe the procedures of data collection, production and analysis. My analysis of lesbian parents' accounts is evidenced in chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 7 I argue that traditional patriarchal constructions of the family, motherhood and sexuality and modern pro-gay/lesbian rhetoric, shaped lesbian parents' *accounts for* disclosure/concealment of their sexuality, and the inter-subjective construction of 'self' as a lesbian and as a parent.

**PART II OVERVIEW**  
**THEORY AND RESEARCH**

# CHAPTER 2

## Identity and Sexuality

### Introduction

In this chapter I examine epistemological and theoretical approaches to 'self' and identity that inform my study on lesbian parents' identity management within home and school contexts. To begin, I provide an overview of traditional and contemporary theoretical approaches to identity and 'self' within and beyond psychology, and highlight their relevance to the epistemological position taken in my research inquiry. I outline the limitations of essentialist approaches to theorizing subjectivity and the alternatives forwarded by poststructuralist, Foucault and Bourdieu, and social constructionists within sociology, psychology and feminism. I draw on Margaret Wetherell and Jonathon Potter's work on 'psycho-discursive practices' (Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to highlight connections between cultural ideologies, dominant discourses and the discursive production of 'self'. In the second section, I examine how dominant discourses of sexuality have constructed heterosexuality as the only normal form of sexuality, marginalizing at the same time all other forms, and the impact of heteronormative rhetoric on lesbian and gay men's identity negotiations. Finally, I consider the modern 'gay-affirmative' rhetoric and the pressure on homosexuals to 'come out' and disclose their sexuality, and how shared and conflicting ideologies of sexuality create dilemmas of disclosure for modern homosexuals.

### 2.1 Essentialist approaches to identity

Trait theories approach the individual as possessing specific personalities and characteristics that can be identified through various forms of psychological assessment and measurement. The key notion of the trait theory is that the person is the unit of

analysis and that the personality type or characteristics exist within the individual, prior to or even in the face of social influences: the individual in question will always be *caring* or *extravert* regardless of their social context. From a trait theory perspective then, the idiosyncratic behaviours and personalities of the individual *define* - through space and time - their 'true nature'. There are unsurprisingly, challenges to the trait theory of 'self' on the basis of its aforementioned tenets.

While according to trait theorists, individuals' personality characteristics are 'natural', in role theory the same characteristics are seen as 'social'. Individuals, according to role theorists are acting out socially prescribed 'roles' depending upon the context of their situation and the expectations of others, for example they perform the roles of parent, teacher, student, or counsellor, in their social interactions (Goffman, 1969). The main point of difference between the trait and role theories in theorizing 'self' is that an individual's actions in the former are seen to be expressing their unique personality whereas in the latter they are seen to be expressing the role (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). To clarify then, within trait theory, 'self' is conceived as a 'natural' and fixed characteristic of the individual, which governs their actions. Conversely, and where the 'social' *is* acknowledged as in role theory, the individual is conceived as an actor whose performances are determined by social expectations and roles. Humanistic approaches within psychotherapeutic disciplines acknowledge the notion of 'social selves' as those selves that are performed within social contexts although humanists suggest that there is another 'authentic' self which governs our social performances, and it is this 'true' self that is the focus of humanistic psychotherapy - to discover and nurture the 'real' self as part of the therapeutic process of self-actualization (Maslow, 1998). Together, the theories of 'self' outlined thus far, do not question the existence of the 'self' as it is constructed and are definitive in their theoretical exclusivity. It is the

realist ontological position taken in theorizing 'self' *as an entity* that is challenged in social constructionist approaches to 'self' *as it is constructed* through language.

## **2.2 Social constructionist approaches to identity**

Social constructionist challenges directed at essentialist theories of 'self' are against, in part, the notion of identity or subjectivity that exists prior to society or 'the social' or more specifically that 'self' exists prior to language. In this section I examine key arguments against essentialist theories from within poststructuralism, feminism, psychology and sociology and discuss the problematic of the society/individual dualism that many theorists acknowledge in their proposed alternatives to theorizing subjectivity.

### *2.2.1 Foucault's Subject*

The 'turn to language' signals the shift in focus from positivist and empiricist approaches in science, to study instead language as a key unit of analysis in studying social action: micro approaches to language focusing on speech practices in linguistic analysis and semiotics, and Foucault's early work focused on a macro approach to language, in his study of 'discourse' (my approach to analysis is examined in Chapter 4). A discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) is a discursive representation of meaning, or a *way of talking* about a subject or topic. Foucault identified discourses as being culturally and historically specific, for example, the ways of talking about mothering will differ between different cultures and at different historical periods. The historical specificity of discourse is a central tenet of discourse analysis where the *changes in meaning* about a particular event or topic- as it is represented in discourse – are identified and analysed. Foucault argued that discourses used within a given historical

period, constructed the common sense knowledges or ‘truths’ of that period (1980). Discourses become powerful as they dominate other ways of knowing and over time they come to represent ‘truths’ within societies, or common sense knowledge. Discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, is language *and* practice – it is both what we say *and* what we do (Hall, 2001). While Foucault’s theory of discourse/power and the possibility of ‘reverse discourses’ is useful for feminists in their political/emancipatory aims, it is important to avoid the pitfall of discourse determinism in theorizing social actions by acknowledging the materiality of individual lives; structures of inequality such as class, ethnicity and gender are absent from Foucault’s theories (Ramazanoglu, 1993). Furthermore, Cain (1993) highlights how Foucault’s theory of knowledge does not account for ‘extra-discursive’ experiences or an intransitive relationship - one which exists outside of, or prior to, discourse. The difference here between *experience* and *knowledge* must be considered, as I take a social constructionist approach in the present study, which conceives knowledge as being constructed through discourse not existing prior to it. Experience, some feminists argue, can exist prior to language, and it is the experiences of women that have been *outside* the patriarchal production of knowledge within science. ‘Making sense’ of experience is a discursive activity and results in the production of new or situated knowledge (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

Foucault’s key opposition to traditional scientific claims to ‘truth’ was the centre position given to the ‘unitary, rational subject’ in the course of knowledge production. Foucault argued that subjects are produced by *systems of power* such as ‘the family’ and legal or educational systems. For Foucault “[o]ne has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework” (1980, p. 117). From this perspective, the subject is constituted through social and historical forces, and

knowledge or 'what is known' is produced through discourse, not by the subject who speaks it (Hall, 2001). In theorizing the 'subject' as constituted through systems of power it is useful to consider more specifically, Foucault's view of power within society.

Traditionally within the social sciences, particularly from a Marxist perspective, power has been conceptualised as flowing down in a hierarchical manner; an oppressive 'sovereign' or juridical power, that controlled the movements of those without such power. However Foucault (1980) challenged the traditional view of power on the basis that the 'mechanics of power' or the ways in which power worked within social contexts and between individuals were never analysed. For Foucault, "relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the State" (p. 122). Foucault's concept of power as 'local and productive' challenged the traditional view of power as a negative, top-down, repressive force, which only ever 'says no'; instead, power "needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body" (p. 119).

"In contrast to [Sovereign power] you have the system of surveillance, which on the contrary involves very little expense. There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself" (Foucault, 1980, p. 155).

The relevance of Foucault's critique of power is in the connection he makes between discourse and power. For Foucault, language is central to the production of power within societies and it is through individuals' use of discourses (and practices) that power is exercised. Discourses that are in circulation within society at specific

historical moments, shape (and are shaped by) cultural ideologies and shared social values. It is the impact of ideologies and representations on social actions and social reproduction that I examine next.

### 2.2.2 Bourdieu's theory of practice

In concert with traditional views of the subject as a rational, 'pre-social', *constituting* self, humanists argue that in terms of social action, individuals act independently of social structures; their actions are self-determined and precede social influences (as in the trait theory of self). In contrast, structuralists argue that individual actions are determined by social structures; that subjectivity is *constituted* by social structures (and can be linked to the notion of 'selves' as performers acting out socially prescribed roles). This view is criticised for theorizing individuals as 'social dupes' that are wholly determined by social influences. Many theorists search for a compromise between these opposing views of agency, such as rational choice theorists, Marxists and other poststructuralists. Pierre Bourdieu's work attempts to bridge the gap between humanist and structuralist approaches to theorising social action. For Brubaker, the focus of Bourdieu's work was an attempt to "transcend the antagonism which sets these two modes of knowledge (humanism and structuralism) against each other and at the same time to preserve the insights gained by each position" (Bourdieu cited in Brubaker, 1985, p. 747). As part of Bourdieu's social theory his concept of 'habitus' attempts to bridge this gap, theorizing the incorporation of social structures into individual's subjectivities. For Bourdieu 'habitus' is "understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks..." (Bourdieu, 1977, pp 82-83). An

individual's dispositions - a corollary of societal structures such as family, education, religion and social class - are also shaped by the various social contexts or 'fields' an individual encounters. It is the relational aspect or the view of 'identity' or subjectivity as an inter-subjective and productive activity that is a feature of social constructionist approaches to theorizing 'self'.

### *2.2.3 'Subjects' in psychology*

Gergen (1999) forwards his 'relational' approach to theorizing 'self' as an alternative to traditional essentialist or 'individualistic' views of 'self'. Informed by three schools of thought: symbolic interaction, cultural psychology and phenomenology, Gergen views 'self' 'as an expression of relationship' rather than private and asocial (p. 117). The ways in which the aforementioned disciplines have shaped his work are important and I consider ideas from each of these where they relate to Gergen's approach. A key concept introduced by the American philosopher George Herbert Mead was 'the generalized other' which underpins a symbolic interactionist approach to 'self'. In brief, this concept describes the understanding that we, as individuals, develop in childhood and through adulthood, of others' expectations of our behaviours within specific social contexts and situations. The idea that we perform particular social roles which correspond with cultural expectations emphasizes the relevance of social interaction in the construction of subjectivity although for Gergen, social interactionism does not offer an adequate alternative to individualism, and as I explained earlier, a key limitations of role theories is that "private subjectivity is never really abandoned" (p. 124-5) and the dichotomy of individual/social is maintained within this approach.

The work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky has inspired much theoretical work on child development and on theories of 'self'. His work explored the role of

culture and social processes of interaction – or interpersonal communication – and the process of internalization in shaping ‘self’ development. A key point of departure from traditional approaches to thinking and rationalizing within cognitive psychology was the alternative view that “higher (mental) processes are lodged within relationships” (Gergen, 1999, p. 126). This is important when we consider the notion of accounting, which I explain in more detail later. For now, it is useful to highlight that within our conversations or discursive interactions with others, that our reasoning or justifications for our actions are not constructed privately at that moment in time, they are shaped by our shared cultural ‘common sense’ knowledge, values and beliefs about who we are and what we are expected to be.

A third discipline informing Gergen’s ‘relational self’ is phenomenology. One might assume that key concepts associated with phenomenology such as the study of individual’s ‘lived experience’ and the ‘essence’ of realities, point to an essentialist view of ‘self’ where thoughts, ideas and experiences can be ‘discovered’ within the mind of the individual. However, it is the work of social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz that Gergen identifies as a useful alternative approach to theorizing ‘self’, and that is the identification of language as central to our experience. In other words, our ‘subjectivity’ - our personal experiences and sense of ‘who we are’ - is shaped through discourse. As I highlighted earlier, Bourdieu attempts to bridge the gap between humanism and structuralism in his theory of practice. Gergen’s approach to theorizing ‘self’ has the similar aim of abandoning the binaries of agency/structure or free will/determinism: “we must undermine the binaries in which we find ourselves subject to others’ influence but fundamentally separated” (p. 129). Also underpinning Gergen’s relational approach is Bakhtin’s work, specifically his idea that as individuals we are born into a social context - within which particular cultural and historical knowledge

exists in the form of dialogue. Two key directives emerge from Gergen's relational approach: 'psychological discourse as performative', and 'performance as relationally embedded'. The first identifies that words spoken in interactions with others have functions – this highlights the action orientation of discourse and the effects of discourse on subjectivity. Furthermore, our discursive actions are shaped by the presence of others: we are compelled to act/speak differently depending on our listener(s) and the context of our interactions and what we might hope to achieve in our interactions. Our discursive performances are *always* inter-subjective and purposeful.

Henriques et al (1984) address the problematic dualism of individual/social in theorizing subjectivity, and the tendency within psychology to incorporate 'the social' into theories of 'self' without deconstructing the dualism itself. The key issue for the authors is that despite the utility of de-centring the subject within poststructuralist approaches – which resolves the problematic of individualism – the notion of 'self' as constituted through language does not allow for 'continuity' of identity or the notion of motivation in taking up particular positions within discourses available to us. The authors contend that poststructuralist views of the discursively *constituted* subject "elides the specificity of the construction of actual subjectivities in the domain of discursive practices" (p. 204). This is an important point of departure: the authors problematize individualism (or the unitary subject) *and* discourse determinism (or the subject constituted through discourse) to consider motivation in subjectivity. Henriques et al draw on psychoanalytic theory in their theorization of the subject. Investment or the "emotional commitment, involved in taking up positions in discourse" (p. 205). Psychoanalytic theory is comprehensive and whilst there is not the space to consider theories in depth, I highlight key theorists that have influenced Henriques et al's theorization of the subject in their focus on 'the unconscious'. The authors draw from

Freud's 'drive theories' and Lacan's work on semiotics and his argument that the unconscious develops through our relationship to signs in language (the 'signifier' and the 'signified') and that it is through our development that "the social enters into the formation of the unconscious" (p. 213). Henriques et al. highlight limitations of psychoanalytic theory, particularly the patriarchal framework of the theorization of the subject and the failure to challenge the malestream construction of knowledge, particularly Freud's concept of 'penis envy' in the 'normal' psycho-sexual development of girls/women and biological drives for heterosexual intercourse (see section 2.2) and Lacan's phallogentrism. However, a focus on language in the development of the unconscious is pertinent to Henriques et al's theorization of subjectivity. It is appropriate at this point to consider in more detail the concept of 'gender' in feminist theories of 'self' and subjectivity.

#### *2.2.4 Gendered subjectivity*

Feminist challenges aimed at 'malestream' conceptualisations of the subject have led contemporary feminism in very different directions. Some feminists appropriated the malestream model, "to define an essentially feminine subject in opposition to the masculine subject of modernity" (Hekman, 1995, p. 195). However, many feminist conceptualisations of subjectivity critique the essentialism inherent within the rationalist epistemology, taking instead a social constructionist view of a *constituted* subject, that is, "products of the forces that structure societal institutions" (p. 195). However, this is not to suggest that the individual or subject is *determined* by social structures, but that "the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses..." (Butler, 1999, p. 185). For Butler, gender is not essential or internal – it is not 'who we are', instead it is something that we *do*. The 'signs' constructed as naturally masculine or feminine

'traits' are instead "gestures, enactments, generally constructed, [and] *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (p. 173, original emphasis). Following Butler, Hekman distinguishes between what she sees as the 'dialectical subject' and the 'discursive subject'. The point she makes is important here. Feminists and others who advocate the *dialectical* subject do not reject entirely the idea of a pre-social self - concerned that in doing so they would by default, reject the concept of agency. For Hekman, this "has resulted in borrowing agency from the constituting subject, that is, the attempt to graft agency [in its pre-social form] onto the constituted subject" (1995, p. 202). Moreover, Hekman advocates feminist work which conceives the *discursive* subject and feminist arguments which appear to assuage the problems associated with essentialist notions of identity, and which open the door to an alternative conceptualisation of agency. For the discursive subject - as a constituted subject - "agency and construction are not antithetical. Rather, agency is a product of discourse, a capacity which flows from discursive formations" (ibid). From this perspective, then, agency is not rejected (along with an essential self), it is constructed through discourse. In taking this position, we avoid the pitfalls of structuralism by maintaining agency, and we avoid essentialism by placing discourse as central to the construction of agency. Our identities or subjectivities are constituted through the 'convergence' of the discourses available to us; For Butler, "[t]here is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains 'integrity' prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very 'taking up' is enabled by the tool lying there" (1999, p. 185). We cannot be agents without agentic discourses, and must therefore have agentic discourses available to us. Access to particular discourses is constrained by some structuring

factors, such as social class position, ethnicity, age, gender etc. and these are examined in subsequent chapters. Weedon (1997) states, “[w]e need a theory of the relation between language, subjectivity, social organization and power” (p. 12) and it is important that theorization of lesbian parents’ subjectivities in this thesis can account for the connections between the individual and society.

Feminist theories of ‘self’ explore the ways in which individuals are constructed as ‘woman’ and ‘man’ which from birth are key constructions in the development of ‘self’ and identity. As Wendy Hollway (1984) has highlighted, the ‘otherness’ of women is taken-for-granted in patriarchal thinking where difference between men and women is viewed as natural and unquestionable. Hollway emphasises that “‘man’ and ‘person’ have been synonymous in western, patriarchal thought, as is evidenced by the use of the terms ‘man’, ‘mankind’ and ‘he/him’ as universals” (p. 230). A ‘person’ - as it is constructed in patriarchal thought - is therefore the sum of characteristics attributed to men (characteristics of ‘masculinity’), and women are thus already positioned as ‘other’. Hollway’s account highlights how women’s gendered subjectivity is not individualist or unitary, it is constructed in relation to the patriarchal construction of men and masculinity. Hollway identifies that “because traditional discourses concerning sexuality are gender-differentiated, taking up subject or object positions is not equally available to men and women” (p. 236). Furthermore Henrique’s et al. consider not only the availability of positions within discourse but also the investments or ‘motivations’ to take-up those positions “which confer power and are supportive of our sense of our continuity...” (p. 205). I examine feminist theories of gender and (hetero)sexuality and the concept of heteronormativity in section 2.4).

### 2.2.5 Wetherell's relational approach to 'self'

Wetherell's relational approach to 'self' (2006) is underpinned by a social constructionist framework and focuses on the discursive production of 'self'. Wetherell's (2006) approach challenges essentialist perspectives of identity or identities as 'existing' prior to social interaction: that a personal identity exists within the individual and is relatively fixed and stable over time and place, and a social identity becomes fore-grounded depending on the social context and identification with particular social groups. Despite its 'relational' appearance, 'social identity' within traditional social psychology, remains at the individual level: a *social individualism* conceived by Wetherell as "group memberships stacked inside the individual as social identities" (Wetherell, 2006, p. 66). Also in this work, Wetherell makes an important theoretical distinction between psycho-discursive practices and psychoanalysis. She challenges the idea that 'the unconscious' (drives, identifications and emotions) mediates discourse and practice, and the concomitant problem that such ethereal psychic elements are 'beyond further empirical investigation' (p. 70). Wetherell's alternative 'psycho-discursive practice' is a term she uses to describe everyday discursive practices as 'routines' or a 'method' – a discursive routine that we have used in the past and which works within given moments in discursive interactions. Wetherell (2006) uses the example of Jade Goody in conversation with another 'Big Brother' (reality television show) contestant, where she 'plays dumb', to explain that such discursive practices are "open, accomplished in situ, new for this context but conditioned by past practice rather than say an unconscious drive, a role, or a programmed script" (p. 70). It is the perception of identity as a manifestation of an internal entity that is problematic in essentialist approaches, as this precludes the relevance and importance of discursive interactions with others in the transient and fluid productions of self. Identity, from

Wetherell's 'relational' perspective addresses such limitations in its focus on discursive practices in social interaction and the inter-subjective process of meaning-making. Subjectivity from this viewpoint is a "personal enactment of communal methods of self accounting, vocabularies of motive, culturally recognisable emotional performances and available stories for making sense" (p. 71). Wetherell's practice-based perspective on subjectivity highlights the relationship between 'self' and culture and how identification of psycho-discursive practices or the discourses we use to produce 'selves' can tell us important things about social structure.

### **2.3 (De)constructing ideologies**

An important concept developed within discursive psychology is the *interpretative repertoire*. The difference of repertoires from 'social representations' is forwarded by Potter and Wetherell (1987) although they also stress that this is one component among many in the study of discourse, rather than an alternative: first, unlike social representations, repertoires are not 'ways of talking' about a subject that are specific to social groups, instead "repertoires are available to people with many different group memberships" (p. 156). Second, unlike the search for consistency within social representations theory, discourse analysts search instead for variability. A key point to highlight is that interpretative repertoires are conceived as discursive resources for *accounting* for social actions, and within discursive interactions we use different repertoires to justify and explain our actions as contexts and situations change. There is variability then, within and between individuals' accounts. It is worth introducing at this point the link between variability and ideologies. First, I outline the concepts of ideology, power and discourse and then I return to consider Billig et al's (1988) concept of ideological dilemmas.

Although the concept of ideology is multifaceted and not easy to unpick, it can be described as a set of beliefs and ideas that in everyday society become common sense and more importantly, legitimate knowledge. For Marx, according to his base-superstructure analogy of society, an ideology is generated by – and in the interests of – the ruling classes within the superstructure of that society, and reproduced by all. In Marxism, the ruling classes represent their ideologies to society in ways that suggest they are in the interests of all members of society (but are usually only self-serving interests), that is, “ideologies serve particular interests which they tend to present as universal interests, common to the whole group” (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 79).

Ideologies become dominant in the sense that all or most members of a society or group hold the same ideas and beliefs. When this state of affairs reaches the point where members of that society are unaware (are not consciously aware) of alternative views and beliefs contrary to the status quo, we have what Gramsci termed ‘hegemony’. Abercrombie, Hill & Turner (2000) forward that the role of ideology in winning the consent of dominated classes is more important than political force or coercion, and highlight that “[f]or Gramsci, the state was the chief instrument of coercive force, the winning of consent by ideological domination being achieved by the institutions of civil society, the family, the church and trade unions, for instance” (p. 161).

Although there is unlikely to be – in any society - a state of complete hegemony, the level of consciousness or awareness of alternative ideas and beliefs contrary to the status quo is of significant interest to feminist researchers, for example, awareness of the hetero-patriarchal structure of family within mainstream culture. The relationship between ideologies and the social reproduction of inequalities within a society are expressed in Bourdieu’s concept of ‘symbolic violence’:

“It is as structured and structuring instruments of communication and knowledge that ‘symbolic systems’ fulfil their political function as instruments of domination (or, more precisely, of legitimation of domination); they help to ensure the domination of one class over another (symbolic violence)...” (1979, p. 80).

It is through the mechanism of symbolic violence and the incorporation of dominant ideologies, that the social order of a society is reproduced and legitimated; the social order is accepted without question as just or ‘right’, reproducing the ‘universe of the undiscussed (undisputed)’ or doxa. This concept has some resonance with Marxist theory of ‘false consciousness’ although it seems that the latter allows for some level of awareness (and disregard) for the ideological control one is under. For Bourdieu “the truth of doxa is only ever fully revealed when negatively constituted by the constitution of a *field of opinion*, the locus of the confrontation of competing discourses...” (1977, p. 168). The link then, between discourse, power and ideology is in language and action within (macro) society and at the (micro) level of interpersonal social relations. What individuals say and do is constituted through historically specific discourses and practices, the latter being shaped by the dominant ideologies of that particular culture.

Billig et al. (1988) contend that ideology is not a straightforward set of beliefs, rules for conduct, opinions etc. and that although theorists and philosophers claim to support only one side of the ideological argument, invariably, their discourse will provide the analyst opportunities to identify counter-themes to those that the speaker wishes to espouse. For many, the dilemmatic quality of the ideology is apparent and cause for unease; it is when the *thinker is aware* of the contradictions in terms of values and beliefs held, that they ‘live out’ the dilemma:

Experienced by people in situations in which they must see things from opposing standpoints, so that there is an awareness of the consequences of one line of action for the other, and of their incompatibility for the person concerned. To experience a dilemma is to live out an opposition, so that one is divided upon it in the failure to achieve a resolution (Billig et al. 1988, p. 91).

Ideologies are constructed culturally and historically and in some cases through patriarchal discourses, such as ideologies of sexuality or the family, and are re-produced socially through discursive constructions and practices. As I have outlined above, discourses in a Foucauldian sense are viewed as a global rhetoric used in the constructions of monolithic institutions such as education or family and most importantly, through which individual subjectivities are produced. Repertoires are also rhetorical devices although these are conceived as more 'local' and shaped by personal history. In using the term repertoire the speaker is viewed as having agency or choice over how social actions are constructed and accounted for. The focus on repertoires and the production of 'self' does not neglect issues of power in discursive constructions: "Power is there in the fleeting micro-moments, during the collaborative accomplishment of social life" (Wetherell, 2006, p. 67). A relational approach to identity work in the 'collaborative accomplishment of social life' cannot neglect 'global' discourses. Discourses exist as 'common sense' knowledge and ways of understanding and 'talking about' our social and private worlds that are historically and culturally specific.

To summarize then, so far I have examined various approaches to theorizing 'self' and subjectivity. I outlined essentialist views of the 'self' as unitary and fixed entity which exists prior to social interaction. I identified challenges made against individualist approaches from social constructionist perspectives and alternative theories of 'subjectivity' as socially constituted through language. An important point

to raise here is that social constructionist approaches to 'self' challenge the 'realist' ontological position of role theory and other essentialist models. Social constructionism does not sit alongside these as a further competing model, instead it shows how those models are used to construct 'self' in particular ways, and that more than one model may be used in making sense of 'self' at different discursive moments. It is important to emphasize that language is the unit of study in all social constructionist research although approaches to analysis differ (methods of analysis are discussed in Chapter 4). In the next section I examine specifically how sexuality has been constructed historically and how sexualities are represented and reproduced through discourses and cultural practices.

## **2.4 Constructing Sexualities**

### *2.4.1 Pathologizing discourses of homosexuality*

Early research on male homosexuality and lesbianism can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kitzinger (1987) highlights that through the work of 19<sup>th</sup> Century sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, the lesbian was constructed as sick: 'sexual inversion' (homosexuality) was conceived as a biological defect which interfered with 'normal' heterosexual development. The scientific rhetoric at that time constructed homosexuality (in men and women) as pathological and unnatural. The pathologization of homosexuality in scientific research continued up to the 1970's and was reinforced through discourses emerging from psychological disciplines. Sigmund Freud's theory of personality development emphasises the importance of psychosexual stages of development from birth through adolescence to adulthood: oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital stages. Freud argued that passing through each stage having resolved libidinal conflicts would lead to a

normal healthy personality. However, frustration or overindulgence through needs not being met, for example, a baby not receiving milk on demand or receiving too much feeding from their mother at the 'oral stage', would lead the child to become 'fixated' at that stage. The phallic stage, according to Freud, is the most crucial stage for sexual identity development. At this stage the child's erogenous zone is the genitals and it is their interest in their own and other's genitalia that conflict arises. This conflict, known as the Oedipus complex in boys and the Electra complex in girls, is the child's unconscious desire to eliminate the same-sex parent and possess the opposite-sex parent (assuming of course that their parents are a man and a woman). These conflicts are resolved for the boy through identification with his father following a period of *castration anxiety*. For the girl, Freud was less clear about conflict resolution and although his theory states that the girl identifies with her mother, after a period of *penis envy*, the girl remains to some degree fixated with this stage. Homosexuality in adulthood was, for Freud, the result of fixation at the phallic stage, whereas resolution of conflict at each stage of psychosexual development would result in the 'normal' heterosexual development of the child as they moved into adulthood. It is important to consider that Freud's 'drive' theory of (hetero)sexuality was criticized by feminists and social constructionists for its reductionism and essentialism and the patriarchal assumptions at its foundation. Freud's 'myth of the vaginal orgasm' (that a woman's erogenous zone moved from clitoris to vagina as the woman matured) was later explained by feminist writer Anne Koedt as "men's vested interests in penetrative sexual intercourse" (Walby, 1990, p. 112).

Sexologists of the early twentieth century referred to sexual attraction between women in terms of the transgressing of gender roles and of 'lesbianism' as a sexual perversion resulting from an incomplete psychosexual development in childhood. The

influence of these constructions of homosexuality on contemporary arguments *for* and *against* lesbian/gay parenting is discussed in Chapter 3. It is useful at this point to consider Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978, 1985, and 1986) in three volumes, in which he tracks the history of discourses of sexuality. Foucault observes that "we are dealing less with *a* discourse on sex than with a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions" (1978, p. 33). From this perspective, sexuality is discursively constructed and meanings associated with sexuality are culturally and historically specific: since the eighteenth century multiple discourses of sexuality have come into existence, have grown and been modified in various disciplines including ethics, psychology, medicine and psychiatry. "For Foucault there is no true, hidden sexuality: the truth of sex is a product of discourse and forms of power/knowledge" (Ashe, 1999, p. 103).

Ideologies of sexuality and the discourses in circulation in contemporary western culture are pertinent to the discursive constructions of sexuality for lesbians and gay men and are inextricably linked to the production of sexual selves. Today, it is difficult to imagine sexuality as behaviour alone and not as part of our identity. In *Lesbian History*, Oram and Turnbull emphasise the conceptual challenges in conducting historical research of 'the lesbian' when 'lesbian identity' is a late-twentieth-century concept. "In the past women who loved and/or had sex with other women, or who cross-dressed, or who resisted heterosexuality, *did not necessarily have a language to describe themselves* as lovers of women, or to claim any particular identity based on their sexuality" (2001, p. 1, my emphasis). For Weeks, the notion of homosexuality as an identity was developed from the 'individualisation' of sexual acts and behaviours (Weeks, 1989). Throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, certain sexual acts were criminalised with the "aim of protecting reproductive sex in marriage" (p. 99). For

Weeks, “[i]t seems likely that homosexuality was regarded not as a particular attribute of a certain type of person but as a potential in all sensual creatures” (p. 99). Historically, a patriarchal essentialist view of sexuality is evident within the British criminal justice system, wherein engagement in sexual acts which did not conform to heterosexual sex within marriage were deemed ‘unnatural offences’, a guilty charge resulting in the death sentence prior to the mid-nineteenth century and lengthy incarceration after this period (Weeks, 1989)<sup>ii</sup>. What is important here is that “law was directed against a series of sexual acts, not a particular type of person” (p. 99). It was during the late nineteenth century, through changing medical, psychological and legal discourses that ‘homosexual’ acts became individualised; “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). It is important to note that in Britain lesbianism was never criminalised, due mainly to the silencing of the existence of lesbianism or of the possibility of love and sexual intimacy between women; active sexuality has been assigned to male-masculine identity alone and as such, lesbianism has been unthinkable. Weeks (1989) highlights that in UK Parliament in 1921 Lord Desart opposed provisions against lesbianism commenting:

You are going to tell the whole world that there is such an offence, to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamt of it. I think that is a very great mischief (cited in Weeks, 1989, p. 105).

Furthermore, if lesbianism *was* thinkable, the possibility of female sexual desire and fulfilment, independent of men, was viewed as a threat to the heterosexual status quo. From a feminist social constructionist perspective, “whilst same sex behaviour may have always existed, it seems that an identity as lesbian or gay or, by implication, heterosexual, is historically and culturally specific. Ideas about, and the experience of,

sexuality shift historically” (Richardson, 1997, p. 157). As I discussed above, Freud’s psychoanalytic theories constructed ‘lesbianism’ as pathological: as sexual perversions resulting from an incomplete psychosexual development in childhood, and sexologists of the early twentieth century referred to sexual attraction between women in terms of the transgressing of gender roles (the influence of these constructions of homosexuality on contemporary arguments *for* and *against* lesbian/gay parenting is explored in Chapter 3). The influence of the gender binary in the construction and theorization of lesbian identities is significant; lesbian *butch* and *femme* identities refer to masculine and feminine characteristics as constructed through an essentialist patriarchal view of sexuality.<sup>iii</sup> The classic novel ‘Well of loneliness’ by Radclyffe Hall published in 1928 (and the mixed reactions and press coverage it received) were pivotal in raising the visibility of lesbians in Europe and America. Second wave feminism in Britain during the 1960’s and 70’s, saw the emergence of lesbian separatism (vis-à-vis French radical lesbianism) and political lesbianism. Political lesbians argued for lifestyle choices that were alternative to heterosexuality and constructed their lesbian identities as a political standpoint rather than an innate sexual orientation. Feminist critiques of essentialist patriarchal views of sexuality have shaped contemporary rhetoric on the ‘normative’ construction of sexuality and have opened up opportunities for new ‘progressive’<sup>iv</sup> constructions of sexuality. In the next section I outline research of sexualities within psychology and the social sciences and the growing interest in the ‘management’ of non-normative sexual identities.

#### 2.4.2 *Gender, sexuality and womanhood*

I commented earlier on theories of the ‘self’ and subjectivity and Butler’s critique of gender as an essential aspect of our subjectivity to argue instead that gender is

performative. Feminists argue that the 'gender' binary male/female underpins the construction of 'woman' in opposition to 'man', which, based on patriarchal thinking positions 'woman' as inferior to 'man' - woman as object. Feminists Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Monique Wittig (1997) challenged the 'naturalness' or biological nature of 'woman' arguing instead that we *become* women within patriarchal culture. The malestream view is that women and men are divided by their biological sex and it is this biological difference that predisposes them to become 'masculine' men and 'feminine' women, and also predisposes women to become mothers. Wittig argues that the sociobiological approach to sexuality "holds onto the idea that the capacity to give birth (biology) is what defines a woman" (1997, p. 220) where women are biologically 'driven' to be mothers. This approach reinforces the notion that a woman's sexuality is 'naturally/biologically' *heterosexual* and that women are by nature, mothers.

During the 1970's feminists began to theorize *heterosexuality* as a key patriarchal institution and one that creates unequal power relations between men and women. Essentialist views of heterosexuality emphasise the 'naturalness' of men's sexual dominance over women (and women's 'natural' passivity and subjugation to men), normalising and naturalizing unequal power relations between men and women. The danger of biologist or 'natural' constructions of male sexuality and desire has led to the construction of men as 'not in control' of their sexuality which can be and is used to obviate men's responsibility in cases of sexual abuse and sexual harassment against women (Richardson, 1996, p. 162). Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of *compulsory heterosexuality* describes the consequence of malestream essentialist perspectives on sexuality; to "think of heterosexuality as the 'natural' emotional and sensual inclination for women [and men]" (p. 652).

Heteronormativity, reinforced historically by the dominant discourses of 'natural' and 'normal' heterosexuality, is pertinent to my analysis of lesbian parents' identity work. Although relatively recent 'gay-affirmative' discourses of sexuality offer homosexuals and their supporters pro-gay/lesbian rhetoric to defend their sexual identities, ideologies of (hetero)normative sexuality continue to shape psycho-discursive strategies and the production of sexual selves, particularly within mainstream contexts. As Carabine suggests, "we as individuals are in the constant process of reassessing, establishing and negotiating our position in relation to the norm" (2001, p. 278). Although lesbians and gay men by definition are positioned outside the norm of heterosexuality, gay-affirmative discourses of sexuality in circulation highlight 'progress' for gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, where homosexuality can be constructed positively, as a sexual preference or lifestyle choice.<sup>v</sup> However, it would be naïve to suggest that new discourses always replace preceding discourses; more often, complementary and conflicting discourses remain in use, some becoming more dominant than others. As dominant discourses determine what 'truth' is at different historical moments, the historical legacies of discourses are central in the interpretation of contemporary narratives and much research of (homo)sexualities takes a specifically discursive or social constructionist approach to the study of sexuality and identity work. 'Coming out' as homosexual is central to the development and negotiations of sexual identities and pertinent to a relational approach to identity, as it is produced through discursive interactions. Disclosure of sexuality is a social action, that is contingent on ones relationship to significant others, personal histories and experiences of coming out and expectations of self and others as they are shaped by the shared cultural values and ideologies underpinning them. Next, I identify research on 'coming out' that is relevant

to my inquiry and lesbian parents' accounts of disclosure in familial and educative contexts.

### 2.4.3 *'Coming Out'*

The sociopolitical context of gay liberation and individual freedom in the 1960's and 70's in America and the UK shaped the popularity of liberal humanist discourse within psychology (e.g. the concept of 'self actualisation' in Maslow's hierarchy of needs) and sparked the generation of psychological models of gay and lesbian identity development. Stage models of homosexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1979) are underpinned by an essentialist approach to 'self' or identity. The most widely-known is Cass's six-stage model which describes six linear stages of homosexual identity development from identity confusion through to identity synthesis. Stage models according to Cohler and Hammack (2007) are influenced by a liberal humanist discourse through which 'coming out' stories are constructed as narratives of struggle and success. This is similar to Plummer's (1995) exposition on the discursive construction of 'coming out'. For Plummer, 'coming out':

Is a tale told by a few at the start of the century and by millions at its end. It tells initially of a frustrated, thwarted and stigmatised desire for someone of one's own sex – of a love that dares not speak its name; it stumbles around childhood longings and youthful secrets; it interrogates itself, seeking 'causes' and 'histories' that might bring 'motives' and 'memories' into focus; it finds a crisis, a turning point, an epiphany; and then it enters a new world – a new identity, born again, metamorphosis, coming out (p. 52).

Gay, lesbian and bisexual people are becoming increasingly and more positively represented within the popular media (Ellis, 2007) with notable increases in the number

of 'out' high-profile individuals and the frequency of their appearances. Coming out it is shaped by liberal humanistic discourses of gay affirmation and is viewed by many gay men, lesbians and their supporters as an act of courage and subversion to the institutionally recognized or 'legitimate' (hetero)normative form of sexuality. I argue that essentialist approaches to sexual identity development are problematic in their conception of 'coming out' as an individualist intra-subjective process of identification with a homosexual identity culminating in a 'disclosure' event. This view does not acknowledge the *negotiation* of sexual identities that non-heterosexuals deal with on a day-to-day basis. I suggest that 'coming out' is not a single event, but is experienced as fluid and continuous. Furthermore, I argue that theorizing 'coming out' as an individual decision-based and internally motivated phenomenon, neglects the inter-subjective context of disclosure and concealment of sexuality and that 'coming out' is experienced and managed differently depending on the context of our interlocutions.

Within different social communities or contexts, coming out has very different connotations and outcomes. By coming out, lesbian, gay and bisexual people face discrimination on the basis of their sexuality from within mainstream social contexts, and/or acceptance from within gay communities and networks.<sup>vi</sup> Negotiating the borderlands where these social fields or communities overlap, often creates tensions and uncertainties about when to or whether to come out at all. The pressure to come out then, as it may be felt within the gay community, can be uncomfortably juxtaposed with the pressure to be seen as 'normal' and therefore accepted within mainstream contexts. Identity construction and management for lesbians and gay men is often discussed in terms of survival strategies, such as *counterfeiting*, *avoiding* and *integrating* (Chrobot-Mason, et al. 2001), *integration* and *separation* (Woods & Harbeck 1991), and 'lesbian performances' and 'heterosexual masquerades' (McDermott, 2006), particularly in

workplace settings. Although the aforementioned research acknowledges that social contexts shape coming out strategies, the concept of identity as internal and fixed remains unquestioned. A realist approach to theorizing 'coming out' precludes exploration of the ways in which 'coming out' is constructed in language. The availability of different and conflicting discourses of sexuality: heteronormative and gay-affirmative, highlights the potential for the discursive production of *selves* that are fluid and often contradictory. Billig et al's (1988) theoretical explication of *ideological dilemmas* is pertinent to the interpretation of accounts for coming out in the present study. I argue that dilemmas of disclosure occur when values are underpinned by socially shared ideologies of normative sexualities *and* progressive lesbian/gay identities. Our socially constructed desire to maintain consistency in our beliefs and values and hence our 'sense of self' becomes problematic, and is manifest in discursive inconsistencies: our 'lived' ideological dilemmas.

## **2.5 Summary: Heteronormativity and the negotiation of lesbian parent identities**

In this chapter I have examined essentialist approaches to identity and how such approaches neglect the construction of identity through language/discourse and the historical and cultural specificity of subjectivity. I also explored alternative social constructionist approaches to identity where *language* is central in theorizing 'selves' and subjectivities. Feminist theories identify heterosexuality as a key patriarchal structure central to the oppression of women. In societies shaped by malestream thinking heterosexuality is constructed and reproduced as the only 'normal' and legitimate form of sexuality, and women are constructed as *naturally* predisposed to become mothers within a heterosexual relationship (preferably heterosexual marriage). The influence of patriarchal ideologies of sexuality were examined in relation to late

nineteenth and early twentieth century pathological constructions of homosexuality and of gay men and lesbians as sexual inverts, the result of biological defects or unresolved psychosexual conflicts in childhood. Patriarchal heteronormativity commands that lesbians, by their non-heterosexual definition, cannot be mothers. It is against this theoretical background that I set out to examine in more detail the constructions of motherhood and sexuality in relation to two key *patriarchal cultural institutions*: ‘the family’ and ‘education’. It is in chapter 3 that I consider how hetero-mother identity imbricates ideologies of the family and I explore research on lesbian parenting and the negotiation of non-normative identities for lesbian parents negotiating home and school contexts.

## CHAPTER 3

### Literature Review

This chapter is structured in three sections: in the first section I examine the construction of mothering and the family and the relevance of these for identity. In section two I explore research on lesbian/gay parenting and highlight the relevance of 'accountability' in identity work, and in the final section I outline research on (homo)sexuality in the school context and highlight issues of 'disclosure' of sexuality and homophobic bullying.

#### 3.1 Mothering and Identity

In this section I explore historical constructions of mothering and identify how through dominant discourses and cultural ideologies of family and motherhood, contemporary constructions of 'good' mothers are discursively (re)produced, and construct at the same time 'marginal' mothers (mothers outside heteronormative constructions) as deviant and potentially dangerous. In the first part, I begin by exploring the close conceptual ties between family, (hetero)sexuality and mothering and how patriarchal constructions of the family subsume the heterosexual married mother to produce the 'normative' and ideal template of family life. Second, I focus on the 'pre-requisites' for 'good' mothering: the personal 'characteristics' and parenting styles identified as 'best practice' and how psychological theories of attachment and 'bonding' between mothers (specifically) and their children has shaped contemporary constructions and ideologies of motherhood. In the final part I consider the impact of 'normative' constructions of mothering on 'marginal' mothers, such as never married and lesbian mothers. I also consider the responsibility of (mainly) mothers in the education of children: in terms of

socialization within the family/home context and also as a facilitator in their children's schooling.

### *3.1.1 Family Matters*

Every time we use a classificatory concept like 'family', we are making both a description and a prescription, which is not perceived as such because it is (more or less) universally accepted and goes without saying. We tacitly admit that the reality to which we give the name 'family', and which we place in the category of 'real' families, is a family in reality (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 20).

Pertinent to my analysis of lesbian parents' identity work within home-school contexts, it is necessary to examine historically the constructions of the family so that we can understand more clearly how dominant discourses shape ideologies of motherhood and sexuality today. Kathleen Gough's (1975) work on the history of family gives a clear indication that although a wealth of research of constructions, functions and compositions of the family exists today, its origins are less well established. Before the period of industrialisation in the West, "most production, whether agricultural, craft or domestic industry, was centred on households" (Jackson, 1997, p. 327). With industrialisation, the shift of labour from the home into the labour market saw the creation of the 'separation of spheres' – the concerns of the early feminist movements, campaigning for equal educational opportunities and equal civil and political rights for men and women (Jagger & Wright, 1999). Early middle-class ideologies of domesticity construct as desirable "[living] in homes which were separated from work, away from the pressures of business..." (Davidoff and Hall, 1987, p. 181). Davidoff and Hall trace ways in which literature on domesticity of that period instructs and informs the middle-

classes “that men would be preoccupied with business, and domesticity had become the ‘woman’s sphere’ (1987, p. 181).

As the spatial and temporal quarantine between the public and private grew, they were ever more identified with gender. A masculine penumbra surrounded that which was defined as public while women were increasingly engulfed by the private realm, bounded by physical, social and psychic partitions. Men, in their privileged position, moved between both sectors. These dichotomies and their association with gender identity, inevitably emphasized hierarchy, the fixing of individual social and sexual place (ibid, p. 319).

The notion of separation between work and home life is a malestream one; middle-class women worked invisibly within the domestic sphere without pay for the benefit of their husbands and other family members, while many working-class women worked both inside *and* outside the home. Within the home, “the importance of religious practice being firmly embedded within the family became more urgent; the earthly family...was an extension of the heavenly family” (Davidoff & Hall, 1987, p. 109) and it is evident that patriarchal relations within religion were reproduced in hierarchies constructed within the middle-class family. Davidoff & Hall’s citation of a family prayer by John Angell James, a mid-nineteenth century minister, highlights the dominant or ‘god-like’ position of the father within constructions of the family:

Every family when directed as it should be, has a sacred character, inasmuch as the head of it acts the part of both the prophet and the priest of his household, by instructing them in the knowledge, and leading them in the worship, of God; and, at the same time, he discharges the duty of a king, by supporting a system of order, subordination and discipline (p. 109)

Historically then, patriarchal constructions of family through discourse have served political interests (see Beck-Gernsheim, 1998; Donzelot, 1997; Erera, 2002; Harding, 1999; Murphy, 2003) where “the support for ‘traditional family values’...provides a rationale for family surveillance and intervention [and] focuses attention on *individual moral solutions* to social problems rather than costly public solutions” (Erera, 2002, p.10, my emphasis). The main agent of the construction of *family* is the state which “aims to favour a certain kind of family organisation and to strengthen those who are in a position to conform to this form of organisation” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 24). The authority of prevailing discourses of the ‘ideal family’ effectively creates ‘deviant’ forms of family, including single-parent, step-parent and gay and lesbian parent families, and has implications for positioning and subjectivity within discourses of family. The ‘supremacy’ of the traditional family form “puts enormous pressure on diverse families to play down their uniqueness and to act like the traditional family, as if this is the only ‘right’ kind of family (Erera, 2002, p. 13). Various discourses of sexuality in circulation today, compete and/or exist together in our constructions of family and parenting and in Section 3.2 I examine the rhetoric surrounding contemporary constructions of ‘family and the impact of these on gay/lesbian parenting. For now, I return to my discussion on historical constructions and ideologies of motherhood: it is often difficult to separate out constructions of family, sexuality and motherhood as they are inextricably linked within our cultural representations of family and ideologies are reproduced through discourses and practices as common sense knowledge. Next, I consider how ‘the mother’ - subsumed within ideologies of the traditional family - is constructed and positioned in ways that are relevant to constructions of mothering and sexuality today.

### *3.1.2 Mother(in)g the family*

Normative discourses of 'the family' construct it as a place of morality and social stability, and a place where children are socialized in the values, beliefs, practices and social networks of their family unit. The commonly held view of the family unit as 'natural': of women being innately heterosexual and maternal, has only helped to reinforce ideologies of the bourgeois, conjugal family as the template of the normal family, with the breadwinning husband and domesticated wife – an ideology that a majority of women, both middle-class and working-class have adopted (Jackson, 1997). Moreover, despite improvements in employment opportunities for some women and their engagement with social activities outside the home, Jackson notes that "the idea persists that a woman's purpose in life is to care for home, husband and children" (p. 328). The ideology of the traditional family has at its centre the mother, and within mainstream constructions, the mother is primarily responsible for, not only the domestic labour required, she is also expected to prioritise the needs of family members, particularly the children, providing emotional labour whenever and wherever it is needed. Within normative discourses of mothering, mothers are constructed as responsible not only for taking care of their children's physical needs and protection, they were also responsible for educating their children and raising moral citizens. The 'good' mother has historically been constructed through a discursive ethic of care and responsibility for others (Liamputtong, 2006, p. 206). McMahon posits that "motherhood is constructed as the expression of women's natural, social, and moral identity – or, rather, the identity attributable to moral women, that is married white women" (cited in Liamputtong, 2006, p. 27). For Phoenix and Woollett (1991) not only is the 'good' mother responsible for her children's 'normal' development and wellbeing, she must also bring up her children in the 'right circumstances':

According to current ideologies, then, the ideal circumstances in which to have and rear children are with mother and father being over 20 years of age (but not too old, that is, not above 40), married before birth and for the duration of childhood. After birth a gendered division of labour should pertain with mothers staying at home with their children while fathers are employed outside the home earning enough money to make adequate economic provision for their wives and children (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991, p. 15).

### *3.1.3 The 'mothering' kind*

Ideologies of the 'traditional' family and mothering are embedded within our cultural consciousness and shape our beliefs, values and expectations of families and mothers today. Modern constructions of mothering and parenting have been shaped dramatically within psychological disciplines, and have incorporated myriad characteristics and practices into the ideology of 'good' mothering. Since the 1960's there has been, within the UK, a plethora of research within psychology on mother-child attachment (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969) which identified the 'mother' specifically as the most important caregiver during a child's early years, and parenting styles (Baumrind, 1967) identified as authoritative, authoritarian and permissive, that were used in the early years of parent-child relationships, and which shaped child development, for better or worse. Such research and theoretical developments were appropriated by medical and caring professions and subsumed within 'best practice' guides and manuals for parenting (Marshall, 1991). In Marshall's analysis of parenting manuals published between 1979 and 1988, six interpretative repertoires were identified, used to construct mothers/motherhood in particular ways: (i) motherhood as ultimate fulfilment, (ii) mother love as natural, (iii) flexible approach to modern mothering, (iv) happy families account, (v) sharing the caring: a family contract and (vi)

the active mother monitoring normality (pp. 68-80). At this point I want to single out the last repertoire identified by Marshall: 'the active mother monitoring normality'. In this account "the responsibility of the mother for monitoring her child's progress is emphasized because it is said to affect the child's future physical, intellectual, emotional and moral development" (p. 80). Clarke (2001) identifies heteronormative ideological constructions of 'appropriate' parenting in arguments against lesbian/gay parenting (Section 3.2). It is arguments *for* 'heteronormative identities' that pro-lesbian/gay parent rhetoric struggles to counter, and in Section 3.2, I discuss 'normalizing' strategies used by lesbian/gay parents and their proponents to construct lesbian/gay parenting, and the limitations (arguably) of these discursive strategies in challenging heteronormativity within the context of family and parenting.

As I have identified, constructions of the 'good' mother incorporates ideal practices and ideal 'maternal' characteristics as pre-requisites for the proper care of children. In her work on the production of a 'caring self', Skeggs (1997) posits "[t]he subject position of caring involves far more than having the 'right' skills: it involves being a particular sort of person. And the attributes of the 'right' sort of person are closely interlinked with wider cultural discourses of femininity and motherhood" (p. 67). Ideologies of the 'good mother' underpin constructions of the bourgeois family "in which the behaviour of women was interpreted in relation to their role as wives and mothers and based on their responsibility, the control of their sexuality, their care, protection and education of children" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 5). Thus far, I have outlined a number of 'characteristics' and practices that define the 'good' mother within traditional ideologies of motherhood. Next I focus briefly on the concept of *morality* in value-based constructions of the 'good mother' and identify links between such constructions and the rhetoric surrounding arguments against lesbian/gay parenting.

### *3.1.4 Marginal mothers*

Hegemonic ideologies of 'good mothers' as white, middle-class, married, heterosexual women creates deviant forms of motherhood: lone and teenage mothers (Smart, 1996; Wilson & Huntington, 2005), working-class mothers (Gillies, 2006), Black mothers (Akanke, 1994; Jackson, 1997) and gay/lesbian mothers (see Clarke, 2000, 2001; Gabb, 2005; Van Voorhis & McClain, 1997). In her genealogical analysis of discourses of 'lone motherhood', Jean Carabine (2001) highlights how, within policy documentation, lone mothers were constructed as 'a problem and a threat' specifically to "the stability of marriage and the traditional family, both of which were seen by the then Conservative government and others, as the backbone and conduit of the nation's morals" (p. 271). It is important to acknowledge that discourses used to construct motherhood, are persuasive, and worked in the aforementioned case to marginalise unmarried, single, and working-class mothers as homogenous and 'deviant': they can be used "to make access to benefits more difficult or conditional" (p. 272) and in this sense they can have 'real' or material effects on individual lives. Carol Smart (1996) also examines how the ideology of motherhood and the discourses used in its construction, place lone mothers - particularly 'never-married' mothers - outside the boundary of 'good motherhood'. Research on 'marginal mothers' identifies the ways in which mothers - who do not conform to normative constructions - are, by definition not 'normal' mothers. Relevant to my research are constructions of sexuality and motherhood and the discursive practices of lesbian parents within the contexts of home/family and education. Thus far, I have focused on ideologies of home and family in the construction of motherhood and in section 3.2 I examine the implications of such constructions for lesbian/gay parenting. For now, I want to explore briefly how education features within 'normative' constructions of mothering and the implications

(experiential and rhetorical) of this on lesbian parenting within the family and in relation to school settings.

### *3.1.5 Mothers and education*

Within the context of children's education in modern western societies, it is ultimately parents (rather than the state) that are responsible for their children's 'social, emotional and educational needs' (David, Edwards, Hughes & Ribbens, 1993). Research of parents' educational practices suggests, it is mothers (rather than fathers) that are encumbered with this responsibility and who 'take on' the majority of educational labour involved in raising their children (Ball, 2003; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Reay, 1998a,b; 2004). It is also argued that parents' educational practices are shaped by 'classed' subjectivities. Reay and Ball (1997) argue that for working class parents "school is frequently associated with powerful memories and images of personal failure [and] that for working-class parents choice can sometimes involve complex and powerful accommodations to the idea of 'school' and is very different in kind from middle-class choice-making" (p. 89). In her research of social class impact on mothers' educational practices, Reay (1999) remarks:

There is an extent to which all women, regardless of social class positioning, inevitably see themselves through middle-class eyes. However, while this constitutes a reassuring process for middle-class mothers because it confirms their normativity, the psychological effects for working-class women are more likely to be damaging (p. 101).

Within the ideology of motherhood and constructions of mothering, mothers are expected to ensure that their children's needs are prioritised and met. For mothers, the responsibility for educating children involves making the right educational choices,

engaging in best educational practices and facilitating their children's social, emotional and psychological development. A key part of children's education that is linked to family and parenting is the moral education of children. The traditional heteropatriarchal family is constructed and reified as the cornerstone of morality: the place where good citizens are raised and essential for the biological and social reproduction of the 'ideal' family. It is a key context in the socialization of children: a place where children learn values, attitudes, and develop a sense of 'who they are' in relation to significant others. For children to be raised in any other family form is seen by the state as a challenge to the heterosexual status quo and a risk to children's 'normal' psychosocial development - most importantly their gender and sexual identity development. A key argument against lesbian/gay parenting is that children of lesbian/gay parents will grow up confused about their gender and sexuality, or at worst they will identify as gay/lesbian themselves (see Clarke, 2001). The notion of a 'right kind of family' is what lies at the heart of the rhetoric *for* and *against* lesbian/gay parenting; arguments that are shaped by dominant 'normalizing' discourses of sexuality and parenting.

In this section I have identified the relevance of ideologies of family and motherhood on contemporary constructions of 'good' mothering, and how normative constructions function to create 'marginal' or 'deviant' mothers. The traditional family: a heterosexual married couple with children is constructed and re(produced) through discourse as the ideal template for family life and although this ideology is not representative of modern families (and as we shall see in subsequent chapters, there are counter-discourses of family in circulation), it continues to shape our cultural consciousness, reinforcing our values, beliefs and expectations about how best to raise our children. In the next chapter I examine research on lesbian and gay families and

parenting and focus my exposition on the rhetoric surrounding arguments for and against lesbian/gay parenting today.

### **3.2 Lesbian and Gay parenting**

In this section I review literature on lesbian/gay parenting that focuses on ‘identity management’ and on the rhetoric for and against lesbian/gay parenting, to highlight the political and personal benefits of recent research and to highlight areas in which further theoretical investigations would be useful. In the first section I examine early approaches that compared gay/lesbian parenting to ‘normative’ heterosexual practices, and the challenges aimed at comparative approaches, which resulted in the development of research exploring gay/lesbian parents and their families in their own right. The ‘turn to language’ signalled important changes in methods used to collect and analyse data in social science and psychological research. This also shaped much work on lesbian/gay parenting, which I also discuss in the first section, particularly the work on pro- and anti-gay arguments identified in current debates on lesbian/gay parenting. In the second part of this chapter I consider research that focuses on lesbian parent identity management within the family context and also the relevance of new conceptualizations of ‘family’ for non-heterosexuals (Weeks et al. 2001) (as practice or activity rather than a structure or institution) in extending theory of lesbian parent identity work.

#### *3.2.1 Examining the rhetoric*

The socio-political context for affirmative research on lesbian/gay parenting was the emergence in Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and North America of a new, more radical form of gay-rights activism inspired by the emphasis within Women’s Liberation and new social movements on human rights. The political aim of activists

within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement was for visibility, legitimacy and equality rather than (in)tolerance and silence. Lesbians and gay men were encouraged to 'come out' and 'be proud' of their gay or lesbian identity and it was a 'gay' identity that was preferred over the term 'homophile' of earlier gay rights movements, to claim recognition and rights, rather than assimilation into the mainstream.

Early psychological research on lesbian parenting conducted in the 1970's was shaped by support for lesbian/gay parenting and set out to provide evidence that there were no differences between those children, that is, having a lesbian/gay parent did not negatively affect children's gender and sexual development or their psychological wellbeing. The most influential study conducted in the Britain was by development psychologist Susan Golombok and colleagues (1983). Their study compared the children of lesbian mothers with the children of single heterosexual mothers, recruited through gay/lesbian and single parent groups. Methods of data collection included interviews and measures of children's psychosexual development using standardized scales to measure degrees of masculine and feminine behaviours in boys and girls respectively. There were no differences found between the groups on scores relating to sexual orientation (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983). However, a number of methodological issues have been raised including the validity of psychological measures and sampling, as most families were volunteers. It was also highlighted that the development of children of lesbians divorced from their husbands and living with lesbian partners were compared to the development of children of heterosexual mothers who were divorced and living without a partner, and in her review of research Patterson (1992) emphasized the importance of separating "the potential significance of maternal sexual orientation from that of mothers' partner status" (p. 1036). In addition to

methodological limitations, and arguably more important, was the challenge aimed at the 'comparison' aspect of research and the measurement of the psychosexual/social development of lesbian parents' children against a heterosexual 'ideal'. Findings from (mainly American) comparison studies were used in support of lesbian/gay parenting, mainly within the judicial system to challenge the rhetoric against lesbian parents' appealing for custody of their children in cases of divorce (Patterson, 1992). Much of this work was concerned with 'proving' that lesbian/gay parents were 'no different from' their heterosexual counterparts and that children of lesbian/gay parents developed 'normally'. The problems and limitations of comparative research have been identified in feminist and social constructionist work (e.g. Clarke, 2001, 2002b; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004; Kitzinger, 1987) which highlights how arguments for lesbian parenting from this comparison perspective is apologetic and defensive: that it acknowledges cultural ideologies and normative behaviours but does not challenge their construction, and treats difference as problematic. Critics of comparative research on lesbian/gay parenting encourage theoretical moves towards research that explores lesbian/gay families in their own right and not the extent to which they mirror or fall short of normative practices set by heterosexual families. This shift in focus has also been influenced by methodological approaches taken in research on lesbian parenting: identified in the 'turn to language' (from positivist approaches) within psychological, feminist and social science disciplines in recent decades and the focus on rhetoric used to support arguments *for* and *against* lesbian parenting.

In recent years, research informed by feminism and social constructionism has examined the rhetoric surrounding lesbian/gay parenting in a variety of interactive contexts including television and radio talk shows, newspapers and magazines and research interviews and focus groups and in existing psychological, social science and

feminist literature (Clarke, 2001, 2002a,b; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, 2005; Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004) where arguments for and against lesbian/gay parenting have been identified. Broadly speaking, the anti-gay/lesbian parenting rhetoric constructs lesbian/gay parenting as inappropriate, immoral and potentially damaging to children, with arguments being shaped by ideologies of traditional family and mothering (outlined in Chapter 3). Clarke (2001) identifies six key rhetorical themes which “represent the primary resources available for attacking lesbian and gay parents” (p. 567): (i) it is sinful and immoral, (ii) it is unnatural, (iii) it is selfish, (iv) children do not have appropriate role models, (v) children grow up confused about their sexuality, or worse identify as gay themselves, and (vi) children in lesbian/gay parented families will be bullied. Clarke (2001) emphasises the endurance of some of these arguments against lesbian/gay parenting and the difficulty in challenging cultural ‘common sense knowledge’ “deeply embedded in our collective consciousness” (p. 567). Clarke also contends that rather than dismissing rhetorical attacks on lesbian/gay parenting as mythical or unscientific, “we need to take these arguments seriously” (p. 568). It is the strength of anti-lesbian/gay parenting rhetoric – which draws on heteronormative discourses of ‘the family’, and that is difficult to challenge – that constructs for lesbian and gay parents an identity which they must justify or account for. Below I provide a brief outline of recent work that identifies pro-gay/lesbian parent rhetoric used by lesbian/gay parents and their supporters within media debates and research literature. It is appropriate at this point to introduce in brief, a key concept within existing research of the rhetoric surrounding lesbian/gay parenting: that of social accountability (Buttny, 1993).

### 3.2.2. Social accountability

I have highlighted how heteronormative constructions of mothering identify the traditional conjugal family as the ideal and only legitimate setting in which to raise children: with ‘appropriate’ parent role models that ensure children’s ‘normal’ gender and sexual identity development, and their psychological and emotional wellbeing. Buttny (1993) states that “to be accountable *to others* arises from the condition that persons can be held responsible or answerable for their actions” (p. 1, my emphasis), and it is lesbian and gay parents who are thus held to account for their non-normative identities. For Buttny, the ‘transformative function’ (that is, transforming others’ negative evaluations) “is the most distinctive feature of accounts as a *discursive practice*” (p. 1, original emphasis). Ideologies of ‘the traditional family’ shape cultural consciousness and the desire within individuals to conform (to some extent) to the norms of that society. In the context of pro-lesbian/gay parenting rhetoric, strategies of ‘normalization’ (see below) are used to persuade the listener that lesbian/parenting is ‘the same as’ heterosexual parenting: that lesbian parenting is not different and/or dangerous. Normalizing discourses of lesbian/gay parenting then, can be useful in ‘heading off’ rhetorical attack by integrating lesbian/gay parenting into the mainstream. Clarke (2000) and Clarke & Kitzinger (2005) identify pro-lesbian/gay parenting rhetoric used in media debates and research interviews and highlight the predominance of affirmative strategies that function to ‘normalize’ lesbian/gay parenting. Next I examine the benefits *and* limitations of ‘normalizing’ strategies identified within current and relevant research.

### 3.2.3 Lesbian/gay parents: held to account

Liberal accounts have been used extensively in support for lesbian/gay parenting, where in the main, lesbian parenting is constructed as ‘the same’ as heterosexual parenting (Clarke, 2002a). It is the minimizing of difference that reinforces “the notion that difference (from the norm) is dangerous and indicative of deficiency and that sameness is safe and desirable” (Clarke, 2002b, p. 212). I take up this political issue again below. Clarke has identified ‘dimensions of difference’ (2002b) used to construct lesbian parenting within the literature and four related ‘normalizing’ strategies (2002a) used in pro-lesbian parenting rhetoric: (i) emphasising love and security: that lesbian/gay families share the same relational qualities as heterosexual families. Clarke emphasises that this is a common strategy and one that is “rhetorically robust in argumentative context” (p. 101) where the importance of loving relationships within the family is unlikely to be challenged; (ii) explicit parallelism and (iii) emphasizing ordinariness: are strategies used to “emphasize the similarities between lesbian and gay and heterosexual families” (p. 102); and (iv) highlighting compensations for ‘deficits’: role models: this strategy is used to assuage fears that children in lesbian/gay families will not have access to ‘appropriate’, that is male/female, role models. This strategy is examined in detail in Clarke & Kitzinger (2005) where lesbian parents used extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) to strengthen their argument: *listing* ‘appropriate’ role models in their children’s lives to assuage fears that their children may be ‘missing out’. Normalizing strategies in this context work, because as members of a society we acknowledge certain values as being central to family life: as Clarke (2002a) suggests, strategies that emphasise love and security and ordinariness “foreground values which our society acknowledges as being central to family life” (p. 108). While normalizing strategies or discourses can be personally beneficial – in terms of defending against

anti-lesbian/gay rhetoric, they are not politically radical or effective of social change. Clarke and Kitzinger (2005) conclude that ‘highlighting compensations for ‘deficits’ might assuage fears that children of lesbian parents are ‘missing out’ and “challenge(s) the man-hating lesbian stereotype” (p. 148) but does not challenge the argument *for* male role models in children’s lives.

As highlighted above, a majority of pro-gay/lesbian strategies work to ‘normalize’ lesbian/gay parenting/families as ‘just the same’ as heterosexual parenting/families. Although this works to guard against anti-gay/lesbian rhetoric, it does not challenge the underlying ‘heteronormative’ assumptions about parenting and family per se. In her review of research on lesbian parenting Clarke (2002b) highlights the constructions within feminist work of lesbian parenting as ‘different and transformative’. Radical feminist arguments for lesbian parenting as ‘different and transformative’ are part of a political agenda to challenge patriarchy and heterosexism within mainstream society. This political rhetoric is intended to ‘make clear’ the positive differences that lesbian parenting can bring: “it is an account of lesbian parenting that is constructed for lesbians by lesbians: to honour, not apologize for, their parenting and to engineer social transformation, not assimilation into the mainstream” (p. 215). It is evident then that ‘signs of resistance’ are identified (Clarke, 2001, 2002a,b; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004, 2005; Ellis, 2007; Gabb, 2001, 2005, Kitzinger, 1987) and many feminists and social constructionist researchers’ acknowledge the need for a more ‘radical’ rhetoric on lesbian/gay parenting. Within existing research on the rhetoric surrounding arguments for and against lesbian/gay parenting there is little evidence of a theoretical exposition on the ‘positioning of significant others’ within constructions of sexuality and the relevance of this psycho-discursive practice in rhetorical debates. Research on ‘positioning’ in discourse explores ‘positioning’ of self

and others within constructions of feminism, gender and masculinity (Dryden, Doherty & Nicolson, 2009; Edley & Wetherell, 1999, 2001; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Seymour-Smith, Wetherell & Phoenix, 2002; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999) and within constructions of social-class (Freeman, 2010), highlighting ways in which *positioning others* within aforementioned constructions imbricates the discursive production of self. I suggest that ‘positioning’ within constructions of ‘sexuality’ and the implications of this in the discursive production of ‘self’ and subjectivity requires further investigation. In the next section I explore some of the research on lesbian parent identity management and the disclosure/concealment of sexuality within the context of family.

#### 3.2.4 Lesbian/gay parenting: Identity work

I outlined in Chapter 2, that research on ‘identity’ and ‘identity development and management’ is approached from different ontological and epistemological positions. Some studies of lesbian parent identity management are underpinned by humanism and social individualism: where identity is understood to ‘reside’ within the individual and is transformed or altered depending on the social context of the person’s interactions: for example, Lynch (2004a,b) emphasises how a majority of lesbian (step)parents in her research had “successfully integrated their lesbian/gay status into their other identities” (2004b, p. 49) which describes identity management as internally motivated and fixed. While some theories of gay/lesbian identity development do acknowledge social interaction, they “conceptualize identity development as an issue for individuals” (Cox & Gallois, 1996, p. 8). While the primary focus of most stage models is the specific *content of* identity, Cox and Gallois highlight that social identity theory is concerned with ‘process issues *about* identity’ (p. 16, my emphasis). To recapitulate my

discussion of identity theories in Chapter 2, like stage models of identity development, social identity theory retains its focus on identity at the *individual* level, where identity work takes place *within* the individual and is shaped by social influences. Wetherell's (2006) relational approach to identity addresses such limitations in its focus on *discursive practices* in social interaction and the inter-subjective process of meaning-making. Research on identity management identifies strategies used by lesbians and gay adults and students within school contexts (Mercier & Harold, 2003; Trotter, 2006; Woods & Harbeck, 1991; Dankmeijer, 1993; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Taylor, 2006) adults within the workplace (Chrobot-Mason et al. 2001; McDermott, 2006; Rondahl, Innala & Carlsson, 2007) and strategies used by young lesbians and gay men in a variety of social contexts (Hegna, 2007; Valentine, Skelton & Butler, 2003). A key aspect of identity work for gay men and lesbians is 'coming out' (discussed in Chapter 2) and it is important to highlight that although many studies on identity development acknowledge the salience of disclosure there is little evidence of research which identifies psycho-discursive practices (particularly constructions of sexuality and parenting and the 'positioning of others' within) used to *account for* disclosure/concealment of sexuality within the family context. In the remaining sections of this chapter I outline some of the work on lesbian/gay identity work and parenting that has approached the subject of disclosure of sexuality, pertinent to my inquiry.

### *3.2.5 Lesbian parenting: negotiating self and family*

A growing body of work has explored lesbian parents' experiences of 'becoming' mothers (Touroni & Coyle, 2002; Lynch, 2004a,b; Gabb, 2005) their negotiation of their lesbian-parent identities within the family context (Gabb, 2005; Hequemourg,

2004; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Taylor, 2009) and the personal experiences and disclosure practices of children growing up with lesbian, gay and bisexual parents have also been documented (Goldberg, 2007; Paechter, 2000; Van Voorhis & McClain, 1997). Tourni and Coyle (2002) employed an interpretative phenomenological approach in their research on lesbian parents' decision-making about having children. A majority were white, educated, professionals and the nine couples taking part had their children within a lesbian relationship. Their analysis revealed three key themes shaping the women's decision-making about having children: perceptions about sperm donors and the biological links to parenting, 'internal factors' such as desire to parent, and 'external factors' such as the impact of the social context. Lynch's (2004a,b) research on lesbian/gay parent step-families focuses on identity transitions and experiences of integration for biological and step parents. Lynch highlights limitations of existing theories on gay/lesbian identity development and highlights the need to consider the experiences of parents who become gay/lesbian (step) parents later in life and parents who 'come out' after adopting a parenting role. While this research highlights the need to incorporate into existing models different identity integration processes, the realist essentialist models of identity remain unchallenged. Hequembourg (2004) explored through a 'grounded theory approach' forty lesbian parents' experiences of parenting either through alternative insemination or adoption. The author suggests that lesbian parent families "encounter problems in their interactions with institutions (e.g. school, the law) due to their incompletely institutionalized status" (p. 739) and forwards three resilience strategies used by the women to manage the aforementioned status: normalization tactics, second-parent adoptions and commitment ceremonies. Strategies of normalization in this research are similar to the research on the rhetoric surrounding arguments for lesbian parenting

discussed earlier (Clarke, 2000, 2001; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005) and Hequembourg (2004) emphasizes that strategies were aimed at assimilation and “not aimed at radically altering...existing structures” (p. 760).

The existing body of work on lesbian parenting focuses on white, middle-class, educated women although recent work explores how lesbian parenting is shaped by ‘classed’ subjectivities (McDermott, 2004; Nixon, 2011; Taylor, 2009). A small number of lesbian parents’ ‘coming out’ experiences within the family context are documented, which focus on ‘coming out’ and the negotiation of ‘lesbian family identity’ (Almack, 2008; Breshears, 2010; Gabb, 2001, 2005). Breshears (2010) explored ‘turning points’ which facilitated lesbian parents’ discourse with their children regarding family identity. ‘Coming out’ to the children was identified as a ‘turning point’ in the establishment of lesbian family identity for lesbian parents with children from previous heterosexual relationships. While this does emphasize the importance of ‘coming out’ for lesbian parents whose children have experienced previous hetero-family identity, the view of ‘coming out’ as an internally motivated ‘single-disclosure event’ is not questioned and ‘coming out’ as a continuous inter-subjective activity is not considered.

While ‘the family’ is a concept that is inextricably linked to traditional conceptualizations of the ‘heterosexual, nuclear family’, more recently within social science literature, new concepts are emerging: much research of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals constructing for themselves new family forms has led to conceptualizations of ‘family’ that are based on *practices* as opposed to structures: Weeks et al (2001) appropriate the term ‘doing family’ rather than ‘being’ a family to describe new ways of constructing intimate and/or kin relationships, and in her theoretical exposition, Finch (2007) argues that “families need to be ‘displayed’ as well as ‘done’” (p. 66). The practice-based approach to conceptualizing family is useful and is comfortably

juxtaposed with my relational approach to theorizing identity. I aim to explore intersections between lesbian parents' psycho-discursive practices and the rhetoric on lesbian/gay parenting and lesbian/gay families. Finch highlights the important identity work involved in communicating to others that certain practices are 'displays' of family life, and that to be 'effective' as family practices, these actions "need to be linked in a sufficiently clear way with the 'wider systems of meaning'" (p. 67) or in other words, linked with culturally shared ideologies and representations of 'the family'. This theoretical work on family is relevant to the rhetoric surrounding arguments for and against lesbian/gay parenting and families, and highlights the need for further inquiry to identify links between 'normalising' strategies used in pro-lesbian/gay parenting rhetoric and 'displaying' families. The emphasis, in Almack's (2008) work on lesbian parent families and specifically the concept of 'displaying' (cf Finch, 2007) is on the practices that have ideological meaning and are understood socially as "'family-like' relationships" (p. 1191-92). Although this is relevant to my inquiry, Almack's work focuses on *material actions* (as described by participants) that communicate *a form of* disclosure. However, the rhetoric on disclosure/concealment for lesbian parents – or their *discursive actions* remain unclear: in my research I investigate the psycho-discursive strategies used by lesbian parents to *account for* disclosure/concealment of their sexuality in the context of family.

Jacqui Gabb (2001) acknowledges the growing body of work on lesbian/gay parents and families but she also emphasise that within existing work, theorization of 'sex/uality in families with children' has been neglected. Her work addresses this absence and emphasises the connections between the rhetoric surrounding lesbian parenting and families and disclosure of sexuality: "when we 'come-out' to our children, and society at large, we necessitate that our maternal and sexual identities be

reconciled” (p. 347). While this may be the experience for many lesbian parents, it is unclear how disclosure within the family might be shaped, by cultural values, traditions, past experiences, and by material realities such as social class, race and age, and so forth.

In this section I have presented an overview of research on lesbian/gay parenting and specifically research on ‘identity management’ and the rhetoric surrounding lesbian/gay parenting. This highlights that ‘normalization’ strategies work against the radical feminist agenda for celebrating ‘difference’ in lesbian/gay parenting. I have reviewed research on lesbian parents’ ‘identity management’ and highlight how many studies approach identity from humanist or social individualist perspectives and a paucity of theoretical work on ‘positioning’ as an important psycho-discursive practice used by lesbian parents in their ‘self fashioning’. While in this section I have focused on ‘family’ as a context for research on lesbian parenting, in the next section I continue my discussion of lesbian parenting in the context of school and consider how accounts for disclosure and for lesbian parenting might be shaped within educative contexts.

### **3.3 Schooling sexualities**

In this section I examine research on schools and sexualities to highlight how heterosexist discourses continue to silence discussion of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities and marginalize LGB parents and families. First I examine the construction of sexuality within education as a ‘dangerous’ subject and the institutional mechanisms of silencing of sexualities within schools. I explore the historical construction of childhood as ‘a time of sexual innocence’ and demonstrate how the construction of sexuality as dangerous is heightened within the context of school, in which teachers are constructed as ideally ‘non-sexual’ gatekeepers of morality. I also consider the impact of Section 28 on sexualities education and the existing confusion about *what* teachers

are permitted to teach children about sex/ualities. Second, I examine research on lesbian and gay teachers' identity work within school context and lesbian parents' interactions with their children's schools and highlight how much of this research focuses on identity management strategies and constructs disclosure as an individual decision shaped by changing social contexts. I then explore Clarke et al's (2004) research on lesbian and gay parents' constructions of homophobic bullying and the rhetoric used in managing stake and accountability. Throughout this chapter I argue that a focused discursive inquiry into lesbian parents' *accounts for* disclosure would contribute to existing research on current debates on lesbian parenting, on lesbian parents' interactions with their children's school and on the rhetoric surrounding homophobic bullying.

### *3.3.1 Sexuality: A dangerous subject*

In contemporary British society, and within the context of children, sexuality - whether it is heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality - is constructed as potentially dangerous, and discussion about sexuality with children is approached with caution by teachers and parents alike. Societal concerns are shaped by cultural ideologies of childhood as a time of sexual innocence and children as sexually innocent. Epstein and Sears (1999) suggest, "not only does knowing about sexuality connote the loss of innocence within the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, drawing on stories about the fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, it also gives rise to fears about the corruption of the young" (p. 1). The construction of childhood as a period of 'sexual innocence' is juxtaposed with the development of compulsory education in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Renold, 2005): children were seen to need protection from the social and working lives of adults and more specifically adult sex/uality and it was within the institution of

education that the risk of the moral corruption of children could be monitored and controlled. In his work on the centrality of language – particularly for teachers of English – in the construction of knowledge of sexuality, Misson (1995) acknowledges that adults' concerns about protecting children's innocence do not diminish as children grow older and the importance of teaching them *appropriately* is foregrounded: in adolescence "adult patterns are seen as being set (and) it is considered tremendously important that the 'right attitudes' are established" (p. 28). Our shared ideologies of childhood and our concomitant desires to protect children from the potentially dangerous knowledge of sexuality reinforce our 'silencing of sexuality' - in terms of what we teach children and in the ways we 'manage' our own sexual identities, witnessed (in the main) within two key cultural institutions: education (examined in this Chapter) and family (see Chapter 4).

Children are curious about and interested in sex/uality: it is something that is constructed and represented in myriad ways within social life, at home, with friends, at school, within religion, and despite the 'silencing' of sexuality within the curriculum, '[s]chools are sites where sexual and other identities are developed, practiced and actively produced' (Epstein & Johnson 1998, p. 2). It is the apparent incongruent juxtaposition of 'school' and 'sexuality' that has led to an increasing body of research on the discursive and practical ways in which educators and students manage sexuality within school (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Paechter, 2004; Renold, 2005). Teachers are often anxious or concerned about answering questions about (homo)sexuality and uncertainty about how to deal with homophobia in school is a common experience among teachers (Epstein 2000). Within schools "teachers' sexual identity is connected to the role of 'moral guardian', setting an example for children and regulating youthful sexualities" (Epstein and Johnson, 1998, p. 123). Sharing knowledge of sexuality with

children is therefore, a contentious pedagogical issue fraught with moral dilemmas about its appropriateness and historically, the ‘policing’ of sexuality in school has been implicit within schools’ structures and daily practices, or within the ‘internal discourse of the institution’ (Foucault, 1978):

On the whole, one can have the impression that sex was hardly spoken of at all in these institutions. But one only has to glance over the architectural layout, the rules of discipline, and their whole internal organization: the question of sex was a constant preoccupation. The builders considered it explicitly. The organizers took it permanently into account. All who held a measure of authority were placed in a state of perpetual alert, which the fixtures, the precautions taken, the interplay of punishments and responsibilities, never ceased to reiterate. The space for classes, the shape of the tables, the planning of the recreation lessons, the distribution of the dormitories (with or without partitions, with or without curtains), the rules for monitoring bedtime and sleep periods – all this referred, in the most prolix manner, to the sexuality of children (p. 27).

The policing of sexuality within school still continues: educational institutions regulate students’ sexuality, but more specifically, as Epstein & Johnson note, it is teachers that ‘bear the responsibility for the de-sexualization of schooling required (however problematically) by government and the dominant sexual culture’ (1998, p.122). The policing of students’ bodies, through regulatory practices such as segregation, ‘is intended to render them docile...the aim of producing docile bodies in school is to give the impression that the body has disappeared completely. A docile body does not interrupt, it does not interfere with the main purpose of educating and producing the sound mind’ (Paechter, 2004, p. 314). Mechanisms of ‘policing’ sexuality are in place to ensure that what children learn within school conforms to the wider cultural

ideologies and mainstream values and expectations: that is, heterosexuality is constructed and reproduced as the ‘norm’ and the only legitimate form of sexuality. It is appropriate at this point to consider the how school policies on sex/ualities within the education system reinforce the silence surrounding knowledge of homosexuality, and the invisibility of homosexual teachers, students and families within the school system.

### *3.3.2 Silencing sexualities: ‘A whole school approach’*

As I have outlined, shared ideologies of family and motherhood and heteronormative constructions of sexuality have shaped our common sense beliefs about what is *appropriate* sex-education for our children. When we also consider that ideologies of childhood ‘as a time of sexual innocence’ are embedded within our cultural consciousness, it is easy to see the dilemma for educators in teaching children about sexuality, a dilemma that is magnified when the subject is homosexuality. Section 28 – an amendment to the 1988 Local Government Act required that a local authority shall not “(a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship” (Section 28 – (1) (2A)). This amendment (repealed in 2000 in Scotland and in 2003 in the rest of the UK) has caused and continues to cause much confusion and uncertainty among teachers, parents and students about the appropriateness of ‘teaching and learning’ about homosexuality, and sexual and family diversity (Adams et al. 2004; Epstein, 2000). One of the arguments against lesbian/gay parenting/families identified in Clarke’s (2001) research – that children will grow up confused about their gender and sexuality and may identify as homosexual themselves - is reinforced within the context of school

where children are taught about the 'science' of biological reproduction and through this, the legitimate social reproduction of the heterosexual family.

The education that children formally receive within school on biological reproduction and heterosex(uality) within 'sex education' and informally through institutional regulations of sexuality: policing sexuality through formal dress codes, gendered segregation, and restricted discussion or expression of sexuality, constructs heterosexuality as the only legitimate and socially accepted form of sexuality. For teachers (gay and straight), the difficulty of bringing discussion of homosexuality to the classroom is reinforced by the vestiges of policy, potent cultural ideologies of heterosexuality and the fear of transgressing boundaries of 'appropriate' pedagogy. Misson (1995) states that within the classroom, "homosexuality is inevitably treated badly, because morality is there to sustain that grand heterosexual narrative" (p. 28). In addition to the uncertainty surrounding formal teaching about homosexuality, teachers (and students and parents) who identify as homosexual also have to negotiate their non-normative identities within the school context and make decisions on a daily basis regarding their disclosure/concealment of their sexual identity.

Lesbian and gay teachers' experiences of disclosure/concealment of their sexuality within the school context have been explored (Epstein, 1999; Sanders & Burke, 1994). Research focusing on 'identity management' highlight a number of strategies used to conceal and/or reveal teachers' lesbian and gay identities in school (Woods & Harbeck 1991; Dankmeijer 1993) highlighting ways in which lesbian and gay male teachers negotiate various forms of heterogendered passing (Renold, 2005). Passing as heterosexual can be achieved verbally through changing names and pronouns when talking about a romantic partner. For Epstein and Johnson (1998) "[i]nsofar as sexuality is legitimately speakable by teachers in the school context, it is domesticated

and oblique (for example, through mention of a partner, preferably a spouse, of the opposite sex)” (p. 132). Woods & Harbeck (1991) take a phenomenological approach to their research on lesbian physical educators, and categorized identity management strategies according to the level of disclosure and concealment of teachers’ sexuality: ‘passing as heterosexual’, ‘self-distancing’ from people and from issues about homosexuality, and taking risks of ‘overt and oblique’ forms of disclosure. Much research on teachers’ identity negotiations in school focuses on strategies or processes of disclosure with little attention given to the rhetoric surrounding progressive homosexual identities and the *pressure* to disclose (much work instead emphasises the benefits of being open about sexuality as a teacher – benefitting the students, self and the whole school). The dilemma of disclosure is evident here – what might be best for the individual (at a given moment) may not be politically effective for lesbian/gay rights.

### *3.3.3 Risking disclosure: Lesbian/gay parents in school*

In her work on ‘(lesbian) family sexuality’ Gabb (2001) suggests “that children, or more precisely the institution of childhood, actually contribute to the construction of *adult* sexuality” (p. 342). For Gabb, the freedom of expression of one’s sexuality is changed when children are present, either transiently when responsible for other people’s children or in a protracted way with one’s own children; importantly “this does not mean that children quash sexuality in the family, they merely affect its form, by enforcing its closeted expression” (p.342). Gabb’s work highlights the changing ways in which sexuality is expressed by lesbian parents within the home. I continue this theme here in identifying ways in which lesbian parents ‘express’ or negotiate their sexuality within the school context.

There is a paucity of research on lesbian parent families negotiating the school context, particularly UK-based research. Research that does exist identifies as a key theme, lesbian parents' concerns about the impact of disclosure on their children. Some studies have explored teachers' attitudes toward lesbian/gay parent families (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000), negotiating disclosure of sexuality (Mercier & Harold, 2003; Ryan & Martin, 2000), and personal experiences of and concerns about homophobic bullying (Adams, Cox & Dunstan, 2004; Trotter, 2006). Despite 'postmodern' approaches to theorizing 'families of choice' and the construction of family as a practice rather than a structure, particularly for LGBT families, the potency of traditional constructions of family continue to shape cultural and individual expectations of families where transgressions of 'normative' constructions are perceived as a threat to the social order. McLeod and Crawford (1998) emphasise that "the perceived violation of traditional gender and family ideologies contribute to the ascription of an 'antifamily' status to gays and lesbians" (p. 218). This 'ascription' is predominant within the heterosexist culture of school where lesbian/gay parents and their children must negotiate their sexuality and address issues of stake and accountability when making decisions about disclosure. Lindsay et al. (2006) examine the impact of different school contexts and identify social and institutional structures that shape lesbian parent families' experiences of schools and identity negotiations therein. Their research identifies strategies used by lesbian parents to construct homosexuality as 'private': a dangerous subject that parents did not want to share and that teachers did not want to discuss. The authors use a grounded theory approach to categorize lesbian parents' constructions of homosexuality as private and disclosure as transgressive, and although their findings highlight the problem of schools' resistance to change, teachers' resistance to change was taken as fact: I suggest that to extend theoretical work on disclosure strategies used by lesbian

parents within school contexts, we examine instead lesbian parents' constructions of homosexuality and their *positioning* of teachers, in their *accounts for* disclosure. Furthermore, Lindsay et al highlight that a minority of lesbian parent families reported "significant school support for their family arrangements" (2006, p. 1072). While this is encouraging, the authors also acknowledge that parents who are actively involved in creating a supportive school environment "tended to have younger children and those born within the relationship" (ibid), which does raise the question of how and indeed *if* lesbians with older children and/or those with children born in previous heterosexual relationships attempt to actively promote an inclusive school environment. Gabb (2005) examines lesbian parents' and their families' visibility within the heteronormative context of school and the changing ways in which parents and children manage their 'lesbian family identity' as children mature, highlighting innocent disclosures from younger children to constructions by teenage children of their parents' sexual identity as 'private' and exclusive to family and certain friends. Taylor's (2006, 2009) work on intersections of class and sexuality in lesbian parenting identifies the 'double deviance' that working-class lesbians often experience in the context of education, where for the women in her study there was "a sense that not only did their sexuality count against them but that their class did too" (2006, p. 447). Taylor highlights that for middle-class lesbian parents in school contexts "difference is claimed and put to use educationally and socially: Working-class parents [however] are often acutely aware of their 'difference' as a division" (2009, p. 115). Lesbian parents' perceptions of their 'difference' from heterosexual parents (as classed and sexual subjects) are likely to shape their *accounts for* lesbian parenting and disclosure of their sexuality in the school context. As I highlighted above, a majority of the small amount

of research on lesbian parents within the school context identifies homophobic bullying as a concern for lesbian parents, it is this body of work that I now examine.

#### *3.3.4 Homophobic bullying in school*

Much of the existing work on LGBT families within school identifies homophobic bullying as a key finding and institutional denial and resistance to the possibility and/or reality of homophobic bullying as a major problem for those attempting to address and resolve problems of homophobic bullying (Trotter, 2006; Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). Authors contend that despite policy on anti-bullying within schools, schools are complicit in the reproduction of heterosexist ideology “that actively works against even the marginal legitimacy of gay families”, 2000, p. 382). Some strategies identified in Mercier and Harold’s (2003) research were lesbian parents’ searches for schools that valued diversity as these were seen by the parents as being “more likely to respond well to lesbian-parent families” (p. 39). Strategies used by parents to make lesbian parent families more visible and to minimize the risks of bullying were also identified by the authors where lesbian parents became involved in influencing attitudes towards lesbian parent families, through changes to the language used in school information packs when referring to families: to include ‘parents’ instead of ‘mother and father’. Strategies of disclosure and concealment were also identified: a minority of lesbian parents reported assertive verbal disclosures to teachers, and a majority of parents used oblique forms of disclosure such as attending parents’ meetings with their partners, or strategies to conceal their lesbian identity. For non-biological parents in Mercier and Harold’s research, remaining invisible as a parent in school was seen as “a way of dealing with the social and legal ambivalence of their place in the family” (p. 42). The authors state that lesbian parents reported concerns about the impact of ‘coming out’ to the school, on

their children, and that “none of the participants reported that their children experienced severe harassment at school”. This is echoed in Gabb’s (2004a) research with lesbian parent families in Britain where bullying was identified as a concern for the children in and out of school but that “most (children) experienced no significant instances of bullying” (p. 22).

In research on lesbian parenting in school contexts there is little attention given to the *rhetoric* of disclosure and the ways in which lesbian parents deal with the dilemma of wanting to be open about their sexuality and wanting to protect their children from bullying. Disclosure is often conceptualized as a process or event and perceived as an individual and internal decision or cognitive process albeit in a social context. Clarke et al (2004) take a different approach to aforementioned research of lesbian parents’ experiences and reports of homophobic bullying: they examine how homophobic bullying is constructed through discourse by lesbian/gay parents and their supporters. I consider their findings in the section below and use this and earlier research to outline the need for further research on the rhetoric of disclosure.

For Clarke et al (2004) ‘lesbian/gay parent’ is arguably a chosen identity: whether lesbians or gay men have children *after* or *before* ‘coming out’ as gay or lesbian. ‘Coming out’ as gay or lesbian is a moment of choice, and in talking about disclosure, lesbian parents become *accountable*. Questions about disclosure are ultimately questions about choice and invoke ‘the spectre of accountability’ (p. 546). For lesbian parents to ‘come out’ within the school context, the risk is manifold: they may fall short of cultural expectations of what a mother *should* be and be viewed by others as dangerous, predatory and a threat to children. As Clarke et al (2004) contend, “lesbian and gay parents are (morally) responsible for the consequences of their choices for their children, and this obviously includes homophobic bullying” (p. 546). It is ‘our’

expectations of others' reactions to our sexuality that shape our choices about disclosure, and our choices change depending on the context of our interactions and our relationships (past and present) with significant others.

In their research on lesbian/gay parents' constructions of homophobic bullying, Clarke et al (2004) identified two different accounts: parents' 'reports of no homophobic bullying' and 'reports of homophobic bullying' the latter functioning to normalize homophobic bullying and both strategies served to "minimize the incidence and the effects of homophobic bullying" (Clarke et al. 2004, p. 536). The authors emphasise the dilemma that the parents face: to report bullying and risk being held accountable, or to report no bullying and risk being dismissed as implausible. The authors demonstrate how lesbian and gay parents deal with this dilemma in their constructions of homophobic bullying, for example, one of their participant's strategies was to 'normalize' bullying which "renders bullying non-accountable" (p. 542). There is a need for further investigation of lesbian parents' constructions of homophobic bullying in their *accounts for* disclosure within the school context. A theoretical focus on lesbian parents' 'accounts for disclosure/concealment' of sexuality, and the discursive strategies used to support their arguments would make a useful contribution to research on the rhetoric for and against lesbian/gay parenting.

In this section I have examined the historical and ideological constructions of sexuality and childhood and research on sexualities and education. The constructions of teachers as 'gatekeepers of morality' and the ideology of mothers as morally responsible for the protection and education of their children highlight the dilemmas facing lesbian/gay teachers and parents within the school and for the latter, home contexts. Finally I argued for the utility of a more focused inquiry on lesbian parents' '*accounts for* disclosure/concealment' of sexuality within the school context:

identification of lesbian parents' constructions of sexuality and their positioning of others within discourse would make a useful contribution to theoretical debates on lesbian/gay parenting and to research on homophobic bullying against children within schools and beyond.

### **3.4 Rationale for the Present Study**

In this chapter I have explored cultural ideologies and discourses of the 'normative' heterosexual family within patriarchal societies and the marginalization of families and parents that do not conform to heterosexual norms. I have also highlighted the emergence of a liberal humanistic discourse of gay-affirmation shaped by the gay liberation movements of the 1960's and 70's in Britain and the USA, the catalyst for the growth of social science research on lesbian/gay lives and experiences, and the development within psychology of theories and models of 'coming out' as gay/lesbian. A majority of the research on 'coming out' explores the experiences of lesbian and gay youth, teachers and employees (Chrobot-Mason et al. 2001; Dankmeijer, 1993; McDermott, 2006; Valentine et al. 2003; Woods & Harbeck, 1991). Within this body of work, and in a relatively small number of studies that explore lesbian parents' experiences (Mercier & Harold, 2003; Ryan & Martin, 2000), 'coming out' is conceived as an internally motivated process of identification 'as gay/lesbian', culminating in a single-event disclosure. I argue that prevalent essentialist approaches to theorizing 'coming out' do not acknowledge the inter-subjective practices of disclosure/concealment of sexuality, and suggest there is a need for a social constructionist investigation that examines 'coming out' *as it is constructed* in discourse.

Recent (feminist) social constructionist research on lesbian/gay parenting focuses on the rhetoric surrounding arguments for and against lesbian/gay parenting (Clarke, 2000, 2001, 2002a,b; Clarke and Kitzinger, 2004, 2005; Clarke et al. 2004). This research highlights how lesbian/gay parents are held to account for their non-normative identity and that ‘normalizing’ lesbian/gay parenting is a key discursive strategy used to minimize difference from their heterosexual counterparts. Although the political benefit of normalizing discourses are questioned by some feminist scholars (Clarke and Kitzinger, 2004) their utility for lesbian/gay parents in ‘heading-off’ anti-gay/lesbian attacks is acknowledged. Studies have examined existing academic literature, transcripts from talk shows and debates on lesbian/gay parenting and from focus groups and interviews within social science research. While this work explores accounts for and against lesbian parenting and focuses on lesbian/gay parents’ negotiations of stake and accountability, existing social constructionist research does not explore the rhetoric on ‘coming out’ and how lesbian/gay parents argue for and against disclosure of their sexual identity. Subjectivity, from a social constructionist perspective is constituted through language, shaped by cultural ideologies, discourse and practice. I argue that by studying lesbian parents’ *accounts for* disclosure/concealment of their sexuality we can gain some insight into how ‘culture’ and ‘self’ imbricate at the point of discourse. In this sense, ‘coming out’ can be theorized as an *accountable activity* rather than the culmination of an internal decision-based process.

Existing research on lesbian/gay parenting rhetoric and ‘identity management strategies’, identifies ways in which lesbian parents negotiate ‘difference’ (of their non-normative lesbian parent identity within heterosexist cultures) both in discourse and in practice. However research on lesbian parenting is predominantly middle-class and

Taylor (2009) has demonstrated how ‘class’ and sexual subjectivities shape lesbian parents experiences within different social contexts. In the school context Taylor identified how working-class lesbians often experience ‘double deviance’ and their ‘difference’ as division. It is evident that a more focused inquiry into working-class lesbian parents’ negotiations of difference is required to gain insight into the ways in which ‘class subjectivity’ shapes lesbian parents’ accounts for their non-normative identities in home-school contexts. Consequently my research question is:

- How do lesbian parents *account for* disclosure/concealment of their sexual identity within home and school contexts?

In my endeavour to answer this question, I employ as discourse analysis approach to identify:

1. Traditional and modern ideologies and discourses of sexuality, family and parenting that shape the women’s accounts;
2. Discursive strategies used to support arguments for (i) disclosure/concealment of sexuality and (ii) lesbian parenting/families;
3. Function(s) of discursive strategies identified, in relation to the context; and
4. intersections of class and sexuality in lesbian parents’ discursive production of ‘self’.

In the next chapter I provide my rationale for a discourse analytic approach. I also describe procedures for data collection and production and for my analysis of interview transcripts and provide biographies of the women taking part.

## CHAPTER 4

### Identity accounts: Production and analysis

#### 4.1 Study Design

As I outlined in some detail in chapters 1 and 2, this research takes a feminist social constructionist approach to exploring lesbian parents' identity management within home and school contexts. Feminist standpoint theory challenges traditional scientific views that the 'truth' about the social world is there to be discovered and that we as researchers can achieve this goal through the application of objective measures. Feminists argue that taken-for-granted knowledge is the product of malestream thinking and that women's experiences are marginalized within patriarchal society. Feminists also argue that knowledge is partial and 'situated' and that subjectivity is socially constituted. As women and as men we see the world in different ways as a consequence of our social positions within a patriarchal culture. By taking a feminist standpoint in the present study, theoretical developments start from lesbian parents' *experience*, to explore patriarchal mechanisms of oppression, such as heterosexuality, from an 'other' or 'outsider' perspective. To identify how lesbian parents' negotiate their non-normative identities within patriarchal institutions of family and education requires exploration of *subjectivity* and how this is constructed through dominant ideologies and discourses of sexuality, family and parenting. To generate meaning and understanding of lesbian parents' experiences it is necessary to employ a qualitative methodological approach in this research. Quantitative methods of inquiry are traditionally associated with controlling social or environmental factors within artificial settings (in the case of experimental research). The positivist and empiricist approaches underpinning much experimental research are also not conducive to a feminist standpoint approach which challenges the notion of 'objectivity' and impartiality in the production of authoritative

knowledge. Surveys are useful for generating descriptive statistics and could be used to explore issues relating to LGBT groups and/or individuals although the opportunity for collecting conversation/language-based data is limited. Questionnaire-based research is often used to generate data relating to individuals' attitudes and perceptions of, for example, homophobia or lesbian parenting. The rhetoric underpinning such approaches can vary: pro-gay or anti-gay sentiment is central to the application of findings and hence to the detriment or benefit of LGBT individuals and/or the LGBT community. While surveys and questionnaires can provide useful data on LGBT people's experiences or the attitudes of heterosexuals toward LGBT people, or personal background information, (I used a short questionnaire to collect background information about the women taking part) the opportunity for generating rich and detailed qualitative data is limited. To be able to generate meaning around lesbian parents' experiences, a more in depth approach is needed. Enabling women to talk about their experiences requires space and time for conversation, and it is within the context of conversation that individuals discursively construct the meaning of their experiences. Conversation can be elicited in a variety of ways which might take place in every-day situations such as talking to friends or colleagues, or in more structured ways as in social science research, through focus groups and interviews. Interviews were chosen as the method for data production in the present study as this offered the women a more 'intimate' or less public environment in which to talk about potentially sensitive issues about their sexual identity and their 'non-normative' identities as lesbian parents. I hoped that conducting interviews with parents in couples or individually would create a 'safe space' for a less 'guarded' conversation. Furthermore, from a feminist social constructionist perspective, the interview method was conducive to the co-construction of meaning between the women involved in the present study, myself included.

## 4.2 Methods of data collection and production

### 4.2.1 Lesbian parents: 'defining' and recruiting

In her research with lesbian mothers, Gabb (2004b) highlights that some parents were reluctant to respond to her request for participants because of her use of the term 'lesbian family'. It is possible that this term implies that all family members identify as lesbian, or that some women in same-sex relationships might not 'identify' as lesbian and are unlikely to respond to such a request. Weeks (1995) highlights how "the discursive construction of categories of sexual subjects is a constant process, and involves a struggle over definitions on a sexual-political terrain that is ever shifting" (p. 94). This struggle over definition is also evident in the tension between Irigaray's "conviction that we must finally end the process of labeling and categorizing and her competing conviction that we cannot help but engage in this process" (Tong, 1998, p. 204).

Defining the term 'lesbian' was problematic for me, did I mean *only* women who have sex with other women, or can women who have never had a sexual relationship with a women, but who define themselves as a 'lesbian' be included in my research? In relation to my research question, it was the fact that that the women *themselves* identified as lesbian that was most important, as it was the negotiation of a non-normative identity that was the focus of my research, not the women's sexual behaviours per se. Women who identified with the label of 'lesbian parent' and in doing so responded to the request for participation were included in my sample pool. In addition, the questionnaire used in this research to collect background information was designed to offer women an opportunity to indicate how they define their sexual identity (Appendix I). It is pertinent to highlight that although my research focuses only on the experiences of self-identified lesbian parents, throughout my thesis I refer to lesbian

parents *and* gay male parents and the term 'LGBT' where it is relevant to existing research that I refer to, and I use the term 'lesbian parents' in reference to the women taking part in this research.

Six of the women in this research were the 'biological' mothers of the children in their care. Two of these women were also 'co-parents'. One woman, Joanne, did not identify as 'a parent'. Terminology regarding the mother or parent status of the non-biological parent is problematic. In academic research, terms such as 'co-parent', 'co-mother', 'invisible mother', 'non-biological parent' and 'step-mother' are used - sometimes interchangeably. In this research, I have used the term 'birth-parent' to describe biological mothers, and the term co-parent to describe the partner of the birth-parent. I could have differentiated between partners living together or apart by using the term 'step-parent' when the partner was living with the birth-parent. However, for clarity I use the term 'co-parent' throughout to describe the women who are partners of the birth-parent. This decision was based on the composition of the families taking part in this research and would be shaped again by families taking part in future research.

#### *4.2.2 Accessing a 'hidden' population:*

Where was I to find 'lesbian parents' to take part in my research? Accessing lesbian participants is a notoriously difficult endeavour and a methodological consideration that has received much research attention (see Browne, 2005; Demo & Allen 1996; Fish, 1999; Gabb, 2004b; Heaphy, Weeks & Donovan, 1998). It is important also to emphasize that I wanted to interview working-class lesbian parents, and decided not to access lesbian networks within the academic community to which I also belonged. This further limited my opportunities for access and recruitment. The first method that I used to recruit lesbian parents to my research was the distribution of flyers and posters

at local gay (friendly) bars and clubs within a large town in the north-east of England, in which I lived. The town is a post-industrial town with high levels of unemployment and poverty although like most towns and cities the demographic background and socio-economic status of individuals varies widely. Lesbian parents' residential location, lifestyle and hence their access to requests for participation is an important consideration. At about this time (which coincided with my own coming out 'process' and my desire to get involved in the lesbian 'community') I responded to a request for involvement in a new local lesbian drop-in group and made contact with the coordinator, Hannah, to enquire about becoming involved. Hannah, who was also a lesbian was keen to support my research and agreed to help me by distributing flyers and spreading the message about my research throughout her lesbian networks. I volunteered as a member of the management committee for Hannah's new LBi women's social group and became a familiar face at drop-in groups and local events. I continued to circulate my request for participants in two local LBi women's drop-in centres and distributed flyers at LBi women's meetings and social events locally (Appendix II). Requests were also placed on websites with links to aforementioned local networks and national networks; 'Pink Parents Online' and 'Stonewall' (Appendix III). I also asked women who worked at the centres to pass on my request to their friends, partners and colleagues and women who used the drop-ins. The utility of snowball sampling techniques to reach lesbian networks and communities is the focus of Browne's (2005) research with non-heterosexual women. She emphasizes that her identity as a non-heterosexual woman 'played a significant role in the recruitment of participants' (p. 50). Through close social networks, women are able to make 'enquiries' about the researcher and assess levels of trust before agreeing to take part. It was over the next six to twelve months that I recruited seven lesbian parents to my

study through local LBi women's networks (Bev, Jan, Marie and Deby), and through friends or partners (Ali, Jo and Carol).

As an 'insider' in this research, that is, I identified as a lesbian from a working-class background, I was in this sense someone whom potential participants knew and could trust. My sentiments were gay-affirmative – this was evident through our discussions and the support events that we attended and as such I was considered as someone to be trusted within the local lesbian community. My working-class background was also important in developing a rapport with some women – our 'social class' was not openly acknowledged and it is possible that some women viewed me as a middle-class academic. For me, class subjectivity is experienced anew in different social contexts. I define myself as working-class (educated) but this is not to suggest I am from a working-class background and have now moved through social space into a middle-class position; instead I am always negotiating the borderland between working and middle-class subjectivity, which can be emotionally painful but also allows me the opportunity to conceive social inequalities from insider *and* outsider positions. My interest in research on working-class lesbians acknowledges the middle-class bias in much existing research in this field and to address the limitations of research on 'city' people (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Binnie & Valentine, 2000) this research draws on the experiences of women from urban and rural areas, who had access to local LBi drop-in centres. This sample does not constitute a representative sample of lesbian parents with children attending schools in Britain although it is hoped that the findings from this study contribute to existing work on lesbian parents to include the experiences of working-class lesbian parents.

#### *4.2.3 Social class and sexuality in education*

In Chapter 3 I highlighted Taylor's (2006, 2009) work and her argument for examining intersections of class and sexuality in lesbians' interactions within various social contexts including, gay/lesbian scene spaces, neighbourhoods and home, and within the context of education. Taylor identifies the 'double deviance' that working-class lesbians often experience in the context of education: a position of 'classed' and 'sexual' subjectivity. It is important to consider the impact of 'classed' subjectivities on lesbian parents' identity work. Within education research, social class is either self-reported or is attributed using markers of academic qualification, and occupation. Based on McDermott's (2004) criteria where social class was attributed using occupation and education, the women taking part in my research were working-class (five) and working-class educated (two)<sup>vii</sup>. Therefore, "[w]omen who had no higher education, were not professionally employed and whose parents were the same were categorised as 'working class'. Women who were university educated and whose parents had no higher education and non-professional jobs were categorised as 'working class educated'" (p. 180). None of the women taking part in this research fulfilled the criteria for the category of 'middle-class', that is, university educated, professionally employed with one of their parents the same. I must emphasize at this point that the difference of working-class experience is viewed as 'difference' and not as a deficiency. I am interested in how working-class subjectivity shapes lesbian parents' identity management and rhetoric on lesbian parenting, not in comparing them to a middle-class 'norm/ideal'. That the women can be described as 'working class' – using the aforementioned criteria – is important in terms of their potentially shared class experiences. As Bourdieu states, "[t]hough it is impossible for all members of the same class (or even two of them) to have had the same experiences, in the same order, it is

certain that each member of the same class is more likely than any member of another class to have been confronted with the situations most frequent for the members of that class” (1977, p. 85). The women’s educational histories although different, emphasise their feelings or concerns about educational failure and of not ‘fitting in’ at school as pupils, which were also similar to my experiences (see section 1.1). While social class was not discussed during interviews, I suggest that the women’s educational histories which can be theorized in terms of social class are important in shaping their constructions of schooling, parenting and sexuality.

#### *4.2.4 Questionnaires*

Short questionnaires (made available in local drop-in centres) were used to collect background information about the women and their families and data from these were used to place subsequent interview narratives in context, i.e. on the basis of their social location, ethnicity, employment and educational backgrounds (Appendix I). Background information was also used to inform my interview questions which were tailored to suit the parent/couple being interviewed (Appendix IV).

Eight women returned questionnaires to me in person, via e-mail and by post<sup>viii</sup> and seven women agreed to be interviewed. Venues and dates were organized and interviews took place in the homes of four women, and three women were interviewed in my home. The women were consulted on their preferred venue to ensure that everyone involved in the research was comfortable with the environment and that the ethical issues of confidentiality, safety<sup>ix</sup> and researcher-participant dynamics had been considered thoroughly.

#### *4.2.5 Interviews*

Interviews with seven women were conducted between November 2005 and October 2006. Two couples preferred to be interviewed together and all seven parents taking part in this research did not want their children present during the interview (I consider the women's decision to not have their children present in the interviews in Chapter 7). Each woman or couple took part in one interview which lasted for approximately one hour. Joanne and Alison were the first couple to take part in an interview. They knew my partner well and it was agreed that the interview would take place with my partner present, in our home. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the interview topic (that is, discussion and disclosure about sexuality and identity) it was important to create as far as possible (and drawing on my background training in counselling) a safe and non-judgmental environment for Joanne and Alison.<sup>x</sup> The first interview lasted approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. This 'pilot' interview produced some rich data and was useful in informing subsequent interview questions and helped me develop a clearer picture of the questions I wanted to ask. This period – between the first and subsequent interviews - was in some senses the period where my interest in parents' educational practices was fine-tuned and focused instead on parents' identity management within the school context. In section 1.1 I highlighted how Joanne's reaction to my question about whether they had 'come out' as lesbians to the staff at their daughter's school, challenged my belief that openness was 'best', that being 'out and proud' was a matter of courage or achieving an 'ideal' self. My values and expectations about visibility and 'pride' were shaped by a liberal-humanistic discourse of 'gay-affirmation'.

My revisions were shaped by Joanne's comment in the first interview. I wanted to know more about the now 'problematic' issue of disclosure and I refocused my

questions on ‘coming out’ within the context of home and school to identify how lesbian parents *spoke about* their ‘coming out’ experiences and decisions. I was uncertain whether Joanne’s construction of her sexual identity as ‘private’ knowledge that need not be shared was unique or whether it would be shared by other lesbian parents. As such, I devised my interview questions (Appendix IV) to elicit discussion around ‘coming out’ to explore how lesbian parents talk about disclosure and/or concealment of their sexuality, in the home and in school contexts. My aim was to examine how lesbian parents talked about their non-normative identity within the context of patriarchal structures within our culture, namely the family and the school. As I was interested in working-class lesbians’ identity work within the context of school and home, I also developed questions on the women’s own educational histories and their experiences of school as pupils, as educational histories are pertinent to women’s educational practices as mothers (Reay & Ball, 1997). The questions were developed then (guided by information from the questionnaires) in relation to three key themes: the women’s previous and current relationships/families, their involvement in their children’s education and schooling, and ‘coming out’ as a lesbian within home and school contexts.

#### *4.2.6 ‘Embodiment in the research-participant dynamic’*

In addition to what Wilkinson (1988) defines as ‘personal’ and ‘functional’ reflexivity as important processes of validation within qualitative research, feminists’ acknowledgement of the relevance of ‘embodied’ reflexivity in supporting the validity of feminist work is also evident (Burns, 2003; Del Busso, 2007; Pitman, 2002). Burns (2003) argues that “if we consider that the self is always embodied and we argue that a feminist methodology involves reflexively locating the self in one’s research, then there

are important consequences for how we theorize that embodiment and understand embodied selves to be implicated” (p. 230).

I was both similar to and different from the women taking part in the present study. The most salient difference for me was not being a mother. I believe on reflection that this was more of a concern for me than it was for the parents taking part. I did not want them to think that I was judging them as parents from the moral high ground of academic inquiry. It is possible that my non-parent status may have lead the women to position me as an ‘unsympathetic listener’ (Pomerantz, 1986) - someone who would not, or could not empathize or understand their experiences and who might challenge their non-normative parent status. I believe that because of my concerns I was willing to defer to their maternal authority – in an effort to *not* be perceived as judging their parental/maternal status or their parenting practices. My concern to foreground their normative parent identity was also shaped by our careful negotiation of ‘dangerous’ lesbian identities in the context of children - this is evidenced and discussed in the analytic chapters of this thesis.

For Burns (2003) “the complexities of ethnicity, class, sexuality, culture, ability and so on, constitute us differently as embodied subjects” (p. 234). Just as the parents taking part had experienced personal struggles with their sexual identities and educational failure, my own classed and sexual subjectivity, shaped our interactions. I felt a connection, a ‘sameness’, in terms of our shared working-class backgrounds. Some of the women had, like me, returned to higher education as mature women and were supportive and enthusiastic about my ‘story’ of returning to education and also about my research on lesbian parents. Bev, who worked in a LGB support group, was keen to contribute and get involved in ‘research like this’ and I got a sense from the women that they believed, as I did, that their contribution would make a difference.

An important point to also consider is the difference of the interview context from the lesbian ‘drop-in’ venues, or the pubs/clubs that we had met and socialized in previously and since our interviews. Interviews took place in either my home or the participants’ homes. My position as a researcher was foregrounded and it is likely that this shaped the women’s perception of me. I felt compelled to make the women feel comfortable and to ‘play-down’ my difference and to not appear the ‘expert’ or in any way superior. My knowledge about lesbian parenting or parents’ educational practices or sexual identities is likely to have differed from the knowledge the women had about the same subjects. Although my knowledge is not superior to the women’s knowledge it is possible that in positioning me as ‘a researcher’ the women responded in ways that differed from our interactions within a ‘friendship’ context. This highlights the artificial context of the ‘social science interview’: although we engaged in conversations which covered a range of topics and my questions elicited lengthy responses from the women, their discourse, their ‘way of talking’ about a particular event or action will have been constructed in a particular way, not surreptitiously, but for the purpose of the context, that is, for the interview – for me and for potential readers of publications or reports from this research. We were involved in the co-construction of lesbian parent identities and it was in our interest *as lesbians* that our rhetoric on lesbian sexuality and lesbian parenting was affirmative. The extent to which this was achieved is discussed in chapter 7.

#### *4.2.7 Transcribing interviews*

The interviews were transcribed within a few days of recording, to ensure as far as possible that the interview itself was fresh in my mind and that the ‘tone’ of the conversation and additional body language and expression was captured in the

transcript. Transcription is an important part of the analysis; interpretation begins within the interview context and continues *during* as well as after the process of transcribing. There are two key approaches to the transcription of language: phonetic and orthographic. Phonetic transcription is focused on the mapping of sounds into symbols and is used in some forms of conversation analysis (CA). As my discourse analytic (DA) approach focused on the meaning-related aspects of language, an orthographic transcription style was utilized and modified to include repetitions, pauses, laughter, sighs, silences, interruptions, and emphasis on words (see Appendix V for transcription protocol). See also Appendices VI and VII for transcription examples. Data produced through transcription was managed using N-Vivo software. I also retained printed copies of the full transcripts which I read numerous times and referred to at all stages of the research process. Coding of the data was guided by methods used in discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and through a lengthy iterative process of reading and cross-checking within and between transcripts I began to note key features pertinent to the identification of the *function* of talk at specific discursive moments. The particular features of discourse that were the focus for the analysis are described in the next section.

### **4.3 Discourse Analysis of interview data**

#### *4.3.1 Rationale for discourse analysis*

The discourse analytic approach taken in the present research is informed by a social constructionist framework, which challenges the notion of objective and universal truth or knowledge and argues instead that knowledge is constructed and that meaning is subjective. There are a number of different language-based analytic methods used within qualitative approaches to research which can be loosely divided as experiential

and critical/political. Discourse analysis falls into the 'critical' category in its approach to data analysis – the key difference of discourse analysis (DA) from other forms of qualitative analysis is the way in which language or talk is viewed and this is based on the social constructionist epistemology underpinning DA. DA views language as 'action' and as constituting subjectivity. Through discourse, our reality is constructed. Conversely, although other qualitative approaches also take language as central to analysis, language is viewed as 'reflecting' reality and is therefore approaching 'self' from an essentialist or realist perspective. The feminist social constructionist approach taken in the present study aims to explore how lesbian parents construct and negotiate their non-normative identities through language/discourse, to identify how subjectivity is shaped by patriarchal structures within society and to identify the functions of discourse within different interactive contexts. Critical discursive approaches to research include conversation analysis. It is important to note that there is not a single approach to analysis that is 'better' than another per se, but that an approach to data analysis must be congruent with the epistemological position taken and the research question to be answered. Discourse analytic (DA) as an approach to data analysis also has several permutations although generally they can be defined according to their focus on language/talk as 'macro' and 'micro' approaches to discourse.

In research informed by Foucauldian poststructuralism, discourse analysis is shaped by a focus on the intersections of discourse, power and subjectivity (macro approach) and is thus shaped by political aims. This approach is often taken in feminist research to explore patriarchal discourses and the discursive construction of gendered subjectivities (although the methods and aims are not mutually exclusive: feminists use a variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research and Foucauldian discourse analytic approaches are employed outside feminist research).

Ethnomethodological approaches examine how meaning is constructed in discourse *between members of a social group* (rather than the constitution of subjectivity through *cultural ideologies*). Conversation analysis (CA) is utilized in research that examines the structure and use of language, including actions such as turn-taking and overlapping talk (Schegloff, 2000). In CA the meaning-making taking place within conversation is viewed as taking place within- and shaped only by, *a given* interaction and not by external social influences or cultural ideologies: the focus is on the *practice* of conversation (micro approach), the patterns of interaction and linguistic conventions and is commonly referred to as a form of discourse analysis (Wetherell, 1998). A key difference between poststructuralist and discursive psychology then, is the focus on ‘discourse’ and ‘talk-in-interaction’ respectively and it is this difference that creates the separation of these approaches into political/critical and non-political/critical. Widdicombe (1995) highlights a concern that feminists are moving away from political motivations for research and are focusing instead on “women’s accounts of identities and experiences in their own terms” (p. 106), and concern over the separation of macro and micro approaches is central to Wetherell’s (1998) proposal for more synthesis in discourse analytic approaches, to bring together ‘self’ and ‘culture’ at the point of discourse.

#### 4.3.2 *Interpretative repertoires*

The identification of what Wetherell and Potter (1988) refer to as an ‘*interpretative repertoire*’ draws on concepts of ‘cultural’ discourse and discursive ‘self’ production – an interpretative device that combines identification of *cultural ideologies* shaping individual’s discourses and constructions, and identification of speakers’ *discursive strategies* of positioning self and others within discourse. The authors define these as

“building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena” (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172). I employ a discourse analytic approach in the present study which draws on poststructuralism and discursive psychology. To answer my research question: ‘How do lesbian parents’ negotiate their non-normative identities within home and school contexts?’ it is important that I identify ‘cultural’ forces shaping subjectivity and also the discursive devices which lesbian parents use to *account for* their non-normative identities within heteronormative contexts. Identifying psycho-discursive practices – that is, interpretative repertoires, constructions, and the positioning of self and others within discourse within women’s accounts will enable me to identify relationships between cultural ideologies and the discursive production of self: our culturally and socially determined ‘self fashioning’ (Wilton, 2004). It is useful at this point to examine key concepts utilized within the discourse analysis approaches taken within critical psychology.

#### 4.3.3 *Subject positions and positioning in discourse*

A key point of departure from a purely Foucauldian approach to discourse, in discursive psychology is the view that subject positions within discourse are not *determined by* discourse, they are taken up, actively, by the speaker and that the speaker’s *accountability* mediates their ‘self’ positioning. This point has particular relevance for the women in my study as lesbian parents must account for their non-normative identities within heteronormative society. Wetherell and Potter (1988) highlight that the term *construction* is used in discourse analysis to emphasise the ‘building’, through discourse, of a concept or event, and that to do this, a speaker is ‘active’ in selecting available discursive resources. A focus on the ‘availability’ of discourses highlights their historical and cultural specificity. “A language culture may supply a whole range

of ways of talking about or constructing an object or event, and speakers are therefore bound to make choices” (Edley, 2001, p. 190). For Davies and Harré (2001) ‘positioning’ is “the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (p. 264). A speaker will construct for example ‘sexuality’ in specific ways in different contexts and will *position others* within those constructions: a psycho-discursive strategy known as ‘interactive positioning’ (Davies & Harré, 2001). Positioning *others* within discourse is also constitutive of the production of self – others can be positioned in opposition to oneself - and identifying the women’s variations in the ‘positioning of others’ in discourse will enable me to identify the *function* of this psycho-discursive strategy at contextually specific points.

#### 4.3.4 *Accounts and accounting*<sup>xi</sup>

It is important and appropriate to explore in some detail here, my view of the data produced through the conversations between myself and seven lesbian parents taking part in this research. It is not the lesbian parents as individuals that I am investigating, but their talk (and my talk) transcribed from our interviews. As Celia Kitzinger (1987) clarifies in her research on the construction of lesbian identity “[t]he research unit of this study is not the individual lesbian, nor her ‘real’, ‘underlying’ identity, but the identity account itself” (p. 90). My focus on identity *accounts* constructed through our interviews is central to my feminist social constructionist framework. Instead of approaching the women’s talk as expressions of their internal and fixed identities, I focus on talk as an ‘identity account’ which enables me to identify cultural ideologies and shared social values that shape the women’s accounts *for* their marginalized lesbian-parent identity. As I highlighted in Chapter 3, in ordinary, everyday social

interactions people are required to provide *accounts for* their actions, which typically include excuses, defences and justifications. Accounts are defined in a variety of ways although two common forms identified are ‘excuses’ and ‘justifications’. Drawing on Austin’s work, Potter & Wetherell (1987) highlight that excuses and justifications differ in important ways: in conversation the former are offered when the speaker acknowledges or accepts that their actions were wrong or inherently bad but denies responsibility; justifications on the other hand recast an apparently ‘bad’ action as good or reasonable and use a variety of discursive strategies to support their argument. For Buttny (1993) the key function of an account is to ‘transform others’ negative evaluations’ (p. 1) and this can be achieved through a variety of discursive strategies including ‘extreme case formulations’ (Pomerantz, 1986) such as ‘everyone was late’, to emphasise the generality of an action: one that was not a personal failing of the speaker alone. Disclaimers are also identified as pre-accounts designed to “ward off anticipated negative attributions in advance of an act or statement” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 77).

Jonathan Potter’s (1996) work on rhetoric and his concepts of stake and interest are also pertinent here. In accounts then, the speaker has something to ‘gain or lose’ - they “have a stake in some course of actions which the description relates to” (p. 124). Potter uses the concept of ‘*stake inoculation*’ to describe the construction of an argument that inoculates against the listener discrediting the speaker’s argument on the grounds that the speaker has a personal interest in having the argument accepted. He uses examples to illustrate this, highlighting that accounts or arguments are more readily accepted if the listener believes that the speaker does not have a personal interest or investment in the argument, particularly if the speaker is described as previously holding opposing views to those which s/he now claimed. In Potter’s example, the

participants (listeners) had to find something “to which they could attribute the cause of his change of mind, and the obvious thing was the factual nature of the arguments themselves” (p. 129). Strategies used to discount stake then are important rhetorical devices used to strengthen the speaker’s argument or rationale for their actions. However, in cases where the speaker’s stake or interest is obvious, ‘*stake confession*’ is an alternative and effective strategy which functions to ‘disarm’ the listener. In this case, challenges aimed at the speaker would be less ineffective. Many examples of stake inoculation and stake confession are, as Potter suggests, subtle, although they are as effective in displaying ‘disinterestedness’ “precisely at a point where it could be a particular issue” (p. 132). It is the context in which discursive devices are used that is central to the interpretation of their function and they can be used within and between discursive interactions to different effect.

#### *4.3.5 Function of discourse*

A key aim of my analysis was to discover the *function* or ‘action orientation’ of the discourse used by the women taking part in this research, to identify what *our talk* is *doing* at specific points throughout our conversations. As I take language as the unit of study, it is the women’s accounts of their lesbian parenting that are the focus of my analysis (see below). In the identification of interpretative repertoires, Wetherell & Potter (1988) highlight the importance of *variability* within accounts as speakers “give shifting, inconsistent and varied pictures of their social world” (p. 171). It is important to highlight here that where there is variability within the accounts of individual speakers, “there is regularity in the variation” (p. 172) and at a more general level (across individual accounts/texts) we can identify patterns of talk. Familiarity with the data is essential to identifying *variation* within talk and my analysis of interview

transcripts was conducted through a lengthy and iterative process of interpretation. Transcripts were read numerous times early in the research process when my approach to analysis was in its development, and were revisited regularly throughout the writing of all sections of my thesis.

It is also important to acknowledge that in identifying discursive practices, that we must not only focus on what is being said and how, but also we must look for what has not been said and consider the implications of this, particularly in relation to patriarchal 'normative' discourses and structural mechanisms of oppression. Misson (1999) considers discursive strategies of heterosexism and intolerance and emphasises that what we *say* and *do not say* are both equally important in such constructions. "If we want to understand a discourse and how it is operating, we need not simply to notice that certain things are not talked about, but to look at the kind of silence, the nature of silence that is there" (Misson, 1999, p. 75). It is important therefore to examine the discursive context of silences and question their function: why do 'speakers' not speak at particular moments in conversation and what functions do their silences serve?

#### **4.4 The women taking part**

##### *Feminist biographies of lesbian parents*

In this section I provide information about each of the women taking part including previous heterosexual relationships and family composition, educational and employment histories and details of their current lesbian relationships. All the women's real names and the names of significant others have been replaced with a pseudonym throughout.

#### *4.4.1 Joanne and Alison*

My partner Fiona introduced me to her friends Alison and Joanne and was, at their request, present during their interview which took place in our home. This contributed to a relaxed and friendly atmosphere and I believe, encouraged Joanne and Alison to talk freely and enthusiastically about Kelly's education and schooling.

Joanne and Alison had been in a relationship for five years at the time of their interview. Both were in their early thirties (with Joanne slightly older than Alison). They each lived in their own home in different towns approximately six miles apart. Alison had been married prior to meeting Joanne, and had one daughter Kelly from her previous (heterosexual) relationship. Kelly was 12 years old at the time of the interview and lived with Alison. Joanne did not disclose previous relationship information and did not have children from any previous relationships. Joanne and Alison described themselves as a family though 'not in the conventional sense as they didn't live together'. They described how their living arrangements actually benefitted them all in terms of spending quality time together in both homes, and also by giving Joanne time-out if she was 'not in a child-friendly mood'. Alison and Joanne spoke of Kelly with love and pride throughout the interview.

Joanne had left school without formal qualifications and had worked in relatively low-paid employment since then. Joanne had been struggling with a disability causing mobility problems for a number of years and at the time of the interview she was unable to work. It was apparent to me throughout the interview that Joanne wanted Kelly to learn the value of money and how to manage money; shaped no doubt by Joanne's employment history and her reliance at the time of the interview on a relatively low income through state benefits.

Alison had a very different educational history from Joanne and although she achieved 'brilliant GCSE's' at school, she had failed her A-levels at sixth-form college, and Alison's concern that her daughter will follow in her footsteps was palpable. At the time of the interview Alison was working for a local government department in a professional role. She had also recently started an Open University degree course and was achieving high marks for her work. Despite Alison's success and achievements she was extremely self-doubting and had very high expectations of herself. It seemed that for both Alison and Joanne, their involvement and interest in Kelly's education was shaped by their desires to prevent her making the same mistakes they perceived they had made.

#### *4.4.2 Denise*

Denise heard about my research from my partner and myself at a local lesbian drop-in centre and was enthusiastic about taking part. Denise was in her late thirties at the time of our interview, which took place in her home. She was separated from her husband and lived with her three children: a twelve year old daughter and two sons aged 17 & 14 years.

At the time of our interview Denise was in the final stages of divorce from her husband who had been abusive throughout their marriage. Denise still bears the physical and emotional scars from their relationship, and her separation and divorce are frequently cited throughout our interview. It is evident from her accounts of family life - as a child and an adult - that her experience of domestic abuse continues to shape Denise's subjectivity.

After her husband moved out of the family home, Denise's girlfriend Leslie moved in and they lived together for 18 months. However, this was a difficult time for

Denise and her children: not only was Leslie's parenting style 'too strict', it was during this period that the children were frequently bullied by local children because their 'mum was a dyke'; the bullying became so upsetting for the family that eventually Leslie moved out.

During our conversation, the tension between Denise's aspiration to teach her children acceptance of homosexuality and her intentions to conceal her lesbian identity for the wellbeing of her children was tangible. The stress of 'living two lives' had health and economic consequences for Denise, who had worked for many years at local services for people with mental health problems and learning difficulties. She loved her work but had recently struggled with stress-related anxiety and had a number of 'black-outs' which had meant leaving her job. Denise relied on money from state benefits and from her husband, who paid for clothes for their children and gave Denise money for 'going out on a Friday'.

Denise's memories of school were coloured by her experience of domestic violence; she recalls feeling exhausted at school having been kept awake at night by her dad hitting her mum, and remembered feeling worried at school about her mum's wellbeing and rushing home at lunchtime to check on her. On reflection, it is unsurprising that Denise's initial response to the subject of school was that she 'hated every minute of it'.

Denise talked about her children with love and she was immensely proud of their achievements at school, and hopeful of their future successes. Denise was also fiercely protective of them and stated repeatedly throughout the interview that ensuring the safety and happiness of her children was her priority. She stated vehemently that she would do anything to ensure their happiness, and that to protect them from bullying she would not live an openly lesbian life until they had left school.

#### *4.4.3 Bev*

Bev heard about my research at a local lesbian drop-in centre and was keen to take part. Bev was in her early forties at the time of our interview, which took place in her home. Bev had been married for 20 years and during that time, she and her husband had two teenage children. Since separating from her husband, Bev lived with her two children in the local area, Louise (aged 16) and Gary (aged 14).

At the time of the interview Bev had been in a relationship with her partner Sian for almost three years. Sian had moved in with Bev and the children for almost a year but as Sian found it difficult 'living around children' they agreed that Sian would move out; although initially Bev was devastated by this decision, she now sees this as a positive step as she can have quality time with both her children through the week and with Sian at weekends when the children stay with their dad. Sian also stayed at Bev's one day during the week so they could all spend some time together.

For Bev, her own childhood had been a struggle. She talked about her sense of isolation at home and school, of her sister dying when Bev was seven years old, of being 'passed around' to stay with extended family; a time when she missed a lot of schooling as her mum kept her off to 'keep her company'. Bev recalls her time at school with mixed feelings: despite a lack of educational resources and support from her parents, Bev managed to complete homework and make progress with her school work on her own. Bev talked about her education with a sense of pride in herself, and that she had 'done quite well considering how much education she had missed'.

Bev had worked as a cook and a volunteer classroom assistant at her children's primary school. During the nine years she worked at the school she coached the school netball team, became a parent leader and was involved in a reading partnership. When both her children had moved up to the senior school Bev enrolled on a University

course to train as a counsellor. Bev was still married and living with her husband at that time, and it was during the next few years that Bev began to question her sexuality and the difficulties she had been experiencing in her marriage. This was a critical moment in Bev's life: a point at which she 'realized' that she was gay and a moment that gave Bev clarity about her future and the strength to change direction.

It was clear throughout the interview that Bev was keen to support others who were struggling with their sexual identity. Bev worked at a local support network for gay people and people questioning their identity and was also involved in a lesbian drop in (where I met Bev) where she helped with organising and running events and groups. Bev was generally positive about the way that gay and lesbian sexuality was becoming more accepted in society and for her, taking part in my research was a way of helping to 'develop the gay community' and to challenge the stigma of homosexuality both in and out of school.

Bev talked about her children with pride: she was proud of their academic achievements at school and equally impressed with their maturity and values. Of particular importance to Bev was her children's acceptance of homosexuality and their determination to support equality and challenge homophobia within their school.

#### *4.4.4 Jan and Marie*

Jan and Marie (in their mid-forties and mid-thirties respectively) responded to my request for participants by returning their contact details to me by post. They heard about my research from their local lesbian drop-in centre leader and agreed to take part. Jan and Marie had been together for three years at the time of the interview and had met at a local community centre where they were both working.

Jan recalled that she knew as an adolescent that she was gay, although she never told friends or family members. Jan explained that she got married because she wanted to have children, and that she 'plodded on' through her marriage until she 'came out' 18 months ago to close family members. Jan had three children within her marriage, two had left home now and the youngest, Sarah (aged 12) lived with Jan and Marie. Marie had one daughter, Jemma (aged 16) who also lived with them. Jan and Marie had been together as a couple for 18 months and were keen to tell me they had celebrated their civil partnership 5 months before their interview.

Jan left school without qualifications and stressed vehemently that she had hated school; she recalled being a loner as a child, spending much of her time alone both at school and in her free time. Similarly, Marie also described herself as a loner as a child. She had only enjoyed school for her involvement in athletics, competing for the school and her home town. Marie had friends at school (mainly boys) and recalled that she knew she was gay at the age of twelve or thirteen but never told anyone at school.

In recent years Jan and Marie were regularly involved in local community groups; a lesbian support network, a mental health support group, and a behaviour education support group that their youngest daughter Sarah was involved with. Jan and Marie were keen to help Sarah in every way they could to manage her 'Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder'. Life could be stressful at home as Marie also struggled with depression and anxiety and coping with their daughter's behaviour problems was hard work.

Jan and Marie had developed a good relationship with Sarah's school regarding her behavioural problems and also the bullying she had suffered in recent times. Jan and Marie had disclosed their relationship to key staff at school and were confident that

the school would always support them in challenging homophobic bullying against their daughter.

Their sixteen year old daughter Jemma would soon be going to college. Jemma had been changing her mind about the course(s) she wanted to take. Despite Jemma's indecision Jan and Marie trust that both their daughters will chose the right career path for themselves and they haven't pushed them in any particular direction except to further their education and learn a trade for their future financial security.

#### *4.4.5 Carol*

Carol heard about my research through a local lesbian drop-in and agreed to take part. She contacted me directly and we arranged for her interview to be conducted at my home during the day. Carol met her current partner at the aforementioned lesbian drop-in and they had been together for a few months at the time of her interview (her partner lived in a nearby town). Carol was in her mid thirties and she lived in a small rural village with her 2 daughters (aged 10 and 14).

Carol 'hated school' as she 'didn't do very well' academically, but she enjoyed sports and concentrated more on that. Carol seemed disillusioned with education generally, describing 'rubbish' schools and colleges that she attended. On her college course, she was the only female in a class of 17, and after experiencing much teasing and bullying, she quit college and went to London, aged seventeen. Carol worked in catering and took on a management role after 2 years, then became a receptionist for a year before moving back to the North East with her husband to have their first child.

Carol had been married to Paul for sixteen years and had been divorced for two years. They had set up a business together when they were married and continued to run it together (from Carol's home) after their divorce. Paul was living in a nearby

town with his fiancé, and had regular contact with the girls. Carol and Paul worked long hours in their business and arranged their time each day to ensure that one of them was at home when the girls returned from school.

Carol was regularly involved with activities at the local primary school in her village. Many of Carol's friends were teachers at the school and knew that Carol was gay. Carol had somewhat reluctantly agreed to join the school's PTA after some persuasion from her closest friend. One of Paul's concerns - about Carol 'coming out' - was that that their children might be bullied at school. Carol had reassured him that *'kids aren't bothered now-a-days'* and assured me there had been no problems with bullying.

Throughout the interview Carol emphasised the importance of her children's happiness and that their wellbeing was her priority. She also described her relationship with them as an equal one and that her daughters were more like her 'best mates'. Carol was keen to support her eldest daughter's passion for sport and had backed her decision to attend a 'sports academy' school in a nearby town. Carol spoke proudly of her daughters' dedication to their school work, although she believed in finding the right balance between work and play, and ensured that her children had time for both.

## CHAPTER 5

### Accounting for disclosure: A will to ignorance

The key psycho-discursive strategy identified within the women's accounts for disclosure/concealment of sexual identity and within their accounts for their 'families of choice' is '*positioning others*' in discourse. The women use this strategy to position significant others within constructions of homosexuality as (i) already knowing, (ii) not wanting to know, (iii) not needing to know, (iv) needing to know and (v) needing protection (although this is not a positioning along the 'knowledge/ignorance continuum', it is relevant here as it has implications for positioning others within the aforementioned continuum – I discuss this form of multiple positioning in the relevant sections). In this chapter I use the five 'positionings' identified above to structure my analysis of women's accounts for disclosure of their sexuality or identity as a lesbian. The women used these strategies most often when talking about 'coming out' as gay or lesbian to their children, to school staff and to a lesser extent to neighbours and friends and other family members. There are subtle differences in the functions of each discursive strategy in relation to the 'recipient' and context of the women's disclosures.

#### 5.1: Positioning others as 'already knowing'

All seven women used the 'sexuality as knowledge' repertoire to position significant others as 'already knowing' about the women's sexuality or lesbian identity. Furthermore, the position of others as 'already knowing' was used analogous with their *acceptance* of homosexuality; the function of this discursive strategy was to *normalize* homosexuality within various interactional contexts. The effect of normalizing their lesbian identity was to silence further discussion of homosexuality. My interpretations

of this strategy are presented in two parts: ‘parents interactions with their children and their friends’, and ‘parents interactions with teachers and school staff.

### 5.1.1 ‘Normalizing homosexuality’

In the women’s talk about disclosure of their sexuality in interactions with their children and their children’s friends, their children were often positioned as ‘already knowing’ about their sexual identity and the function this serves is two-fold: it positions their children as *accepting* of their sexuality and at the same time it *normalizes* their lesbian identity. There are several examples of this strategy at work within the women’s accounts particularly when the women are talking about the indifference that their children have regarding their knowledge of their parent’s sexuality. In the women’s accounts of ‘disclosure’ or of their children’s knowledge of their sexuality, they describe their children’s actions and ‘paraphrase’ them and in so doing, position their children as indifferent to the knowledge of their parent’s sexual identity.

#### EXTRACT 1

- 1 Bev: yeah my neighbours know and, you know an’...my my only, worry is,  
2 erm, being identified by my, my children’s...school friends  
3 CN: right  
4 Bev: and they **do** know you know Gary’s, not friends but, guys he’s at school  
5 with say ‘oh your mam’s a lesbian’ and he just says ‘so what’ now  
6 CN: does he?  
7 Bev: yeah he doesn’t **deny** it or anything erm...but like, in the (local gay pub)  
8 if...if the guy with the little camera’s about I’ve always avoided that,  
9 because Louise’s friends now, are old enough to start, going into pubs and  
10 I, yeah I know that they are going to identify me but, I want I want that to  
11 be done, as not being my fault and Louise coming home saying ‘you got  
12 your picture on the website’, unfortunately I let that slip on Saturday

13 (laughs) and posed with erm, one of the girls whose birthday it was there  
14 was a gang of us (CN laughs) so, I now think I'm now on the [local gay  
15 pub] website...

In extract 1 Bev's statement (line 5) '*he just says 'so what' now*' is an example of the discursive strategy which positions her son as 'already knowing' and more specifically it positions him as 'indifferent' to knowledge of his mum's sexual identity. '*He just says*' is used to make her son's action simple and straightforward. The words 'so what' position her son as indifferent to his peers' comments about his mother's sexuality. Furthermore, by ending the statement with 'now' Bev places her son's comment, and hence his opinion, as having changed over time – suggesting that some form of resolution has been achieved and he is no longer upset by his peers. Following this Bev speaks with pride when she tells me that her son 'doesn't **deny** it or anything' (line 7): it is possible that positioning her son as not *denying* knowledge of Bev sexuality functions as further confirmation that he accepts her lesbian identity.

Managing others' knowledge of Bev's sexuality takes place within the home, and outside the home in different ways and this is relevant in the negotiation of her identity as mother and as lesbian across various contexts. It is evident that for Bev, 'being out' or being visible as gay or lesbian is something that must be managed carefully. In the extract above (line 10), when Bev states: '*yeah I know that they are going to identify me*' she is positioning her daughter's friends as 'eventually knowing' that Bev is a lesbian. She constructs the act of disclosure as something that can be in/appropriate – her friends will *know*, but they should 'discover/learn this' in an appropriate way (that is, not from seeing Bev in a photograph on the pub website). The way in which others know about Bev's sexuality is important and although Bev positions her children as already knowing and she constructs her lesbian identity as

normalized within the family unit, Bev must still negotiate the boundaries of disclosure outside the home where the potential for ‘inappropriate disclosures’ may have negative consequences for her children. Bev is managing the expectations of others - negotiating her identity as a ‘good mother’ and as an ‘out and proud’ lesbian. For Bev, being seen in a gay pub by her daughter’s friends is, for Bev, subversive and potentially dangerous to her normative identity as a parent. However, it can be seen at the end of the extract (lines 11-15), that Bev positions herself as accidentally breaking her own rule of disclosure, ‘*unfortunately I let that slip*’, constructing at the same time, the concealment of her lesbian identity as a performance that is difficult to sustain. The desire to be ‘out and proud’ as a lesbian and to always put the children’s needs first is the ideological dilemma that is lived out by the women across various interactional contexts.

#### EXTRACT 2

- 1 CN: so when did you sort of make that choice, of which school she went to?  
2 Ali: when, I split up with my husband when Kelly was seven and I got with Jo,  
3 and (my husband’s) girlfriend at that time was making her life very very  
4 difficult for us erm, so, at that point I had to move Kelly’s school, because  
5 of circumstances, and because school, out of area wouldn’t take her  
6 because we were out of catchment area, then I had- my only option was  
7 for was for her to go to a catholic school which was a big like (grimaces)  
8 like turn up, being a lesbian, wanting to put my daughter into a catholic  
9 school  
10 CN: yeah yeah  
11 Ali: but I knew that, erm, somebody else had sent their, daughter to that school  
12 who was a lesbian so I thought well, it’ll be alright so, and it turned out  
13 when Kelly got accepted into that school, that Kelly actually turned round  
14 and said that, it wasn’t that bad because- ‘coz one day we pulled up  
15 outside school and I’d never mentioned lesbian to Kelly she knew that we  
16 were together, but we never mentioned the word lesbian (half laugh) and

- 17           we just pulled up outside school one day and she just went ‘oh Sam’s  
18           mum’s a lesbian as well’ I was like ‘oh right, ok’ (laughs)  
19    CN:    ah right yeah so, she knew?  
20    Ali:    she knew yeah  
21    CN:    without you actually telling her?  
22    Ali:    without actually saying the word, she knew, so  
23    CN:    right...and that was easier was it?  
24    Ali:    yeah (all laugh), I mean she knew that we were together but we’d never  
25           actually put, like the label on

In extract 2 Alison defends her choice of sending Kelly to a catholic school as her only option, and constructs her identity as a lesbian as incompatible with her school choice as a parent (lines 6-9). This incongruence is resolved in the second part of Alison’s account (lines 11-25) where she positions her daughter as ‘already knowing’ about Alison’s sexual identity. Not only was her daughter positioned as *knowing* she was also nonchalant about the fact and in a similar way to Bev (extract 1), Alison uses terms such as ‘*just*’ and ‘*oh*’ when paraphrasing her daughter and in doing so, normalizes her lesbian identity. It was important to normalize her identity in this context, particularly in relation to making the ‘right’ school choice for Kelly. A further effect of this discursive strategy in the context of the interview is to silence further discussion of either the details of disclosure or about homosexuality per se. The silencing effect of this discursive strategy is examined further later in this chapter.

### EXTRACT 3

- 1    Marie: Sarah just turns ‘round and says ‘so what’ you know  
2    Jan:    well when we- we sat her down, one, one morning and we said ‘we’ve got  
3           something to tell you’, and er...I said ‘well...me and Marie are not just  
4           friends’ and she went ‘oh I know that!’  
5    Marie: we’d been going out for weeks

- 6 Jan: yeah, and it, you know telly went back on, cartoons (CN laughs) she  
7 wasn't bothered you know so  
8 CN: she knew  
9 Marie: yeah  
10 Jan: 'oh I know that'...it was me who was chewed up! Havin' to sit her down  
11 and tell her  
12 CN: explain it yeah  
13 Jan: and she's just 'oh god I know that' I thought 'oh well' (laughs)  
14 CN: they're more clued up aren't they than you think?  
15 Jan: yes  
16 Marie: the two that live here they have, they've been really wonderful, really  
17 good  
18 CN: that's really good isn't it?

Marie (extract 3) begins the construction of her own and Jan's lesbian identity as normal in positioning their daughter as 'already knowing' about their sexual identity and as indifferent to this (line 1). Jan's account of their attempt to 'come out' to their daughter is constructed as a build-up of tension and preparation surrounding their disclosure (lines 2-4) ending in relief as they position their daughter as 'already knowing' about their lesbian relationship. The moments where Jan and Marie paraphrase their daughter saying '*Oh I know that!*' (lines 4, 10 and 13) and '*so what*' are similarly used by both Bev and Alison. It is evident that this strategy of positioning their children as 'already knowing' functions to construct the women's sexuality as normal. An effect of this is to silence further discussion surrounding the women's disclosure of their sexuality: on a number of occasions where this strategy is used, I do not probe for further information and/or one of us changes the subject.

At one point when Sarah is positioned as 'already knowing' (lines 3-7) simple things (such as watching cartoons) were constructed as more important to Sarah than any discussion about her mum's lesbian relationship. Furthermore Jan and Marie

position Sarah as indifferent to and to some extent irritated by Jan's and Marie's attempted disclosure as entirely unnecessary: Sarah knew and there was nothing more to say. This is exactly the point. Jan and Marie's construction of disclosure as unnecessary, and positioning of Sarah as 'already knowing' and indifferent, functions to normalise their lesbian identities within the family context and to silence further discussion of their sexuality which may be deemed subversive and a threat to their normative parent status. I collude in this repertoire of sexuality as knowledge, positioning Sarah as 'already knowing' or 'clued up' (line 14). This further silences any discussion of *what* it is that Sarah 'knows'. In the context of this conversation about disclosure and their daughter's knowledge of their sexuality and her indifference to this, Marie's final comment '*they've been really wonderful*' and my affirmation (lines 16-18) serve to confirm that Sarah and their other daughter Jemma, are accepting of Jan and Marie's lesbian identities. The function is to normalise their lesbian identity; the effect is to silence further discussion.

#### EXTRACT 4

- 1 CN: yeah, erm...just going back to- when you said you were gonna sit sit them
- 2 down one day and tell them that you were, together, and you got the
- 3 reaction where they knew and- did anything happen after that did they sort
- 4 of come back to you and sort of ask you things or was it just, totally, that
- 5 was **it** over or?
- 6 Jan: Jemma used to, we used to get questions
- 7 Marie: oh we still do
- 8 CN: do you?
- 9 Jan: it's- it was, was more (laughs)
- 10 Marie: We do occasionally off Sarah, er, she'll ask 'can I ask you something?'
- 11 CN: mm
- 12 Jan: yeah

13 Marie: and we [answer] that- as best we can...but, erm, we just basically got on  
14 with, life  
15 CN: yeah, sure yeah  
16 Marie: you know so nothing changed really I mean Sarah 'oh yeah well I  
17 know...I've known ages' and that was it so...we just sat there puzzled  
18 [inaudible]  
19 CN: yeah  
20 Jan: you know coz' we tried to be discreet and, like if (a school friend) stayed  
21 over, Marie (would) get up about, six o'clock half five six o'clock and,  
22 pretend she was getting' off the couch (CN & Marie laugh) before they  
23 were getting up for school, sort of thing you know, or on a weekend coz'  
24 Sarah used to get up first thing an' watch the telly and er...but I think we,  
25 we thought she was a bit daft and she wasn't (all laugh)  
26 CN: sussed you out (laughing)  
27 Jan: ah I know, and back on with the telly so  
28 CN: ah well  
29 Jan: it was like/  
30 Marie: I think it was a few weeks before they 'oh can I ask you sommat?' no but  
31 they've been alright  
32 CN: yeah, and what about, did they say they wanted to tell people at school  
33 or...?

It is clear from my opening questions in extract 4, that I wanted to know more about Sarah's reaction to Jan and Marie's disclosure and that knowing that 'she already knew' wasn't enough, although I temper my probing with a 'get out' option for Jan and Marie to take (lines 4-5): '*or was it just, totally, that was **it** over or?*' so they could take my enquiry back to an obvious and potentially safer conclusion. Jan and Marie were clear in their confirmation that both their daughters had asked and continued to ask questions about Jan and Marie's relationship or sexual identity. However, and although I hold out for more information (lines 5-11) Jan and Marie do not say what their daughter's question were or what their answers entailed. Interestingly, I do not directly ask them

for this information and when Marie (lines 13-14) confirms that they do answer their daughter's questions, she immediately follows this with the statement '*but, erm, we just basically got on with life*'. Here, Marie normalizes their lesbian relationship as being part of day-to-day family life and she continues (line 16) that '*nothing's changed*' and that their relationship is normal to Sarah. Marie positions herself and Jan as 'puzzled' that their daughter 'already knew' about their lesbian relationship. In an attempt to answer an imagined question about 'how their daughter *could* know', Jan (lines 20-25) clarifies that Jan and Marie were not to blame in any way for their daughter's knowledge, as they had 'tried to be discreet'. Jan and Marie are distancing themselves from what might be deemed 'inappropriate disclosure'. When I jokingly suggest that Sarah had 'sussed them out' (line 26) Jan immediately emphasises again how indifferent Sarah was about Jan and Marie's sexuality, recapitulating their earlier account where Sarah is more interested in watching the television. In this context, returning to this account, she constructs their lesbian identities as unremarkable – to normalize their relationship and defend against any suggestion that Sarah's acquisition of knowledge about their sexuality was inappropriate.

Positioning their daughter as 'already knowing' about their sexuality functions to normalise Jan's and Marie's lesbian identity. It is evident from my responses (short affirmations or asking a different question) that positioning others as 'already knowing' and normalising homosexuality in this way has the effect of silencing further discussion about homosexuality or others' knowledge of it.

### 5.1.2 '*Sustaining ignorance of homosexuality*'

A key strategy for the management of lesbian and parent identities identified in this analysis was the positioning of others as 'un/knowing others'. In the previous section I

explored this strategy and its functions in women's accounts of their interactions with their children and their children's friends. In positioning their children as 'already knowing' the women also construct their children as *accepting* their lesbian identities, thus normalizing their sexual identities. In their accounts of 'coming out' as lesbian within the context of their children's school, the women position teachers and parents and the children's friends as 'already knowing', although they do not position them as having an opinion or judgement regarding homosexuality. Within their interactions with their children the psycho-discursive strategy of positioning others as 'already knowing' functioned to *normalize* homosexuality. I suggest in the following section that in the context of their interactions with school staff, parents and their children's friends, the women's strategy of positioning others as 'already knowing' functioned to *sustain ignorance* of homosexuality. As highlighted earlier, this psycho-discursive strategy was identified primarily in the women's accounts of 'coming' out' and were prompted by my questions about disclosure of their sexuality which are included in the extracts below:

#### EXTRACT 5

- 1 CN: yeah and then, erm, what about the children I mean, did they come out to  
2 friends of their own, like **for you** if you like, did they-
- 3 Carol: erm, I don't know I don't think, they say anything as such, erm, but (their  
4 friends) know 'coz obviously Jackie's (current partner) around all the time  
5 now and, they're very very happy with the situation, and they know we go  
6 out together and like the four of us go out erm so people, I don't know  
7 whether they just see her as mate or what but...but I'm not gonna,  
8 advertise it to everybody probably just for the sake of the kids
- 9 CN: right
- 10 Carol: with it being (town) and with it being such a small village you have to be,  
11 very careful there is a few narrow minded people

- 12 CN: is there?  
13 Carol: well obviously like me and Jackie we go to (local pub) an' that an'  
14 everybody knows in there so  
15 CN: oh ok so what is the atmosphere like in [town] then for like going out  
16 socially  
17 Carol: everyone's fine now I think it's erm, if you get hassle I think it's people  
18 over fifty  
19 CN: really  
20 Carol: oh yeah, kids aren't bothered these days, it's different you see erm, but I  
21 don't think erm, it's the older generation but I- I don't get funny looks or  
22 anything I've had no comments no nothing, so I know there is a few  
23 couples in the village anyway but there's never been any grief, not at all

Earlier in her interview Carol describes how she 'came out' to her children (see extract 26) and she positions them as moving through a short process of upset, resolution and acceptance and as such does not position them as 'already knowing'. In extract 5 (above) Carol positions her children's friends as 'knowing' about Carol's sexuality (lines 3-5) although later (lines 6-7) Carol is not sure *what* it is they know. Part of the strategy of positioning others as 'already knowing' is to silence further discussion about what it is they know. It is not knowledge that offers Carol a powerful position in this discursive context, but a lack of clarity about *what* others know: for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "knowledge, after all, is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power. Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons" (1990, p. 4). It is a 'will to ignorance' (Sedgwick, 1990) (*vis-à-vis* Foucault's 'Will to Knowledge') that shapes Carol's identity work - positioning others' as 'already knowing' and positioning herself as uncertain of *what* they know. Carol is '*not gonna advertise it to everybody probably just for the sake of the kids*' and this makes sense within the context of living in a '*small*

*village with narrow-minded people*' (lines 10-11): Carol must negotiate the boundaries of disclosure in potentially dangerous contexts to protect her children from potentially negative consequences.

#### EXTRACT 6

- 1 CN: so you haven't, if you like 'come out' to anyone at school in terms of  
2 teachers and things, other parents or  
3 Bev: erm...well the **parents know**  
4 CN: yeah, ok  
5 Bev: erm...it's just not kind of **spoke** about  
6 CN: right, yeah...yeah  
7 Bev: ...and, the teach- the teachers know, without it being spoke about you  
8 know...erm  
9 CN: mm...I'm really interested to know how you, how you know that  
10 Bev: just...I don't really know it's just, like their attitude, just, the body  
11 language and their, their sort of knowledgeable  
12 CN: right  
13 Bev: you know?  
14 CN: yeah, yeah  
15 Bev: I don't know if (daughter's) confided in, a support teacher at school or  
16 head of year, when she'd been havin' difficulties  
17 CN: I see yeah  
18 Bev: erm...when they'd been getting bullied, 'because they call my mam gay',  
19 and put two and two together you know

In the women's accounts of disclosure about their sexuality to school staff and parents, the strategy of positioning others as 'already knowing' works to *sustain ignorance* about the nature of teachers' and parents' knowledge of the women's sexuality. The women emphasised that teachers and parents *knew* about their lesbian identity although they also positioned themselves as uncertain about *what* it was that the teachers and

parents knew. In extract 6 Bev emphasises confidently that the teachers and parents at her children's school *know* about her sexuality (lines 3-7), but provides a vague account of *what* they know (lines 10-11) or *how* they know it (lines 15-16, 18-19). Although as a researcher I am legitimately positioned to ask questions in the interview context, it is evident in the example presented here, that I collude in the strategy of sustaining ignorance by confirming my understanding of Bev's account of disclosure and by not questioning them further: to 'ask more' and hence 'know more' about the women's sexuality poses a danger to our joint negotiation of a normative parent identity.

#### EXTRACT 7

- 1 CN: and what about going into the schools, d'you both go in?  
2 Marie: we both go in  
3 Jan: we both go in yeah, the schools know we're like a../  
4 Marie: they know we're together an' that  
5 CN: do they? right yeah  
6 Marie: both of em (schools) now, erm, and, I mean, Jan's been to the parents  
7 evening with me concerning Jemma I've been up to the school,  
8 concerning Sarah  
9 CN: I see, yeah  
10 Marie: erm, we've both had to, when we've had to go in and see, things about  
11 Sarah we've both been up together  
12 Jan: oh yeah  
13 Marie: and so we do, do all that  
14 CN: so did you decide to tell them about you were living together your  
15 relationship, or did it just sort of-?  
16 Marie: actually the kids told them  
17 CN: right  
18 Marie: before we had a chance to (CN and Marie laugh)  
19 CN: ok, yeah...how did that happen then what was-?

20 Marie: well at Jemma's school (CN sniffs) erm, (Jan laughs) one of her teachers  
21 is actually gay  
22 CN: right  
23 Marie: and, basically...I don't know how it came about but Jemma, er, actually  
24 told her I don't know whether it was just somebody to confide in or  
25 sommat like that, so when we actually went up to parents evening, and  
26 (CN sniffs) I introduced Jan as me partner, erm, the teacher turned 'round  
27 an' said 'ah I wondered when you were finally gonna get 'round to  
28 bringing her to see me'  
29 CN: ah right (all laugh)  
30 Marie: 'Jemma's told me all about you'  
31 CN: and yet she (Jemma) hadn't told you she'd said anything  
32 Marie: no and Sarah's been the same up at school as well 'an't she?  
33 Jan: yeah  
34 Marie: erm, (teacher) who runs the (school-based) center erm Sarah has, Sarah's  
35 known her since primary school and, basically she told her

My opening question to Jan and Marie (extract 7) demonstrates the implicit question I was hoping to communicate 'do the teachers know you are gay?' and interestingly Jan interprets my actual question in this way and confirms that the 'school' knows. However at this early point in this extract it is evident that verbalising *what it is* the teachers know is difficult. Jan does not finish her sentence and Marie cuts in to position the teachers as 'knowing' they are together and to silence Jan's account of what the school (staff) know. Positioning others as 'already knowing' functions to negate the need for further clarification or confirmation of what the teachers know. This safety in ignorance is further demonstrated when Marie described how their daughter told her teacher about Jan and Marie's relationship (lines 23-28): '*Jemma's told me all about you*' clearly demonstrates this strategy at work, Marie's account is clear in its message that the teacher *knows*, but remains vague about *what it is* she knows. There is a sense

of relief that their daughter told her teacher about Jan and Marie's sexuality: it negated the need for them to disclose their relationship to school staff. This can be noted in the laughter that follows Marie's comments (lines 18), where there is a sense of understanding the relief of not having to 'come out' shared between Marie and myself. Positioning her daughter and her teacher as 'already knowing' and themselves as uncertain about what they know functions to sustain ignorance surrounding their sexuality: our shared 'will to ignorance' silences discussion that may be deemed dangerous and a threat to the women's normative parent identity.

#### EXTRACT 8

- 1 CN: erm, do you, I mean have you come out to anybody at school, parents or  
2 teachers?
- 3 Carol: erm, my best mate's a teacher at Jenny's school
- 4 CN: at Jenny's school right
- 5 Carol: and I often do, erm like bus trips, for the staff
- 6 CN: oh I see
- 7 Carol: and all- everybody at [town] school knows I am, all the teachers know I am  
8 erm...there's a few parents in the village that know- I've never hid it from  
9 anybody
- 10 CN: no no
- 11 Carol: erm, but erm, we haven't told anybody, of Lisa's mates, but obviously...  
12 when they go up to the senior school next year they're gonna know  
13 anyway but-
- 14 CN: mm yeah true yeah, so how did it come about then, I mean did you decide  
15 to sort of say something to people at school or was it-
- 16 Carol: well obviously Julie's like my best mate
- 17 CN: right yeah
- 18 Carol: erm, like so I've known her and her husband for a long time and erm you-  
19 I suppose obviously you always need somebody to talk to and Julie was  
20 my, brick really

- 21 CN: was she?  
22 Carol: yeah so, and erm an' then there's three or four- like we used to go out  
23 erm, maybe once a month so obviously they were off chasing fellas and  
24 (CN laughs) and I wasn't interested in that bit (smiles) so  
25 CN: so did...you felt sort of comfortable in the school and because of that, you  
26 think?  
27 Carol: yes, oh yes

In extract 8 Carol frequently uses the discursive strategy of positioning others as 'already knowing'. In lines 7 to 8 Carol uses an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) to communicate the level of her openness about her sexuality: '*everybody at school knows*' (line 7), however, 'coming out' in the school context is constructed by Carol as unnecessary as her friend 'already knows'. On three occasions (lines 6, 10, 17) I do not probe for more details. There is an implicit question running through this and several of the extracts: what did you say when you 'came out' to the teachers and parents or children and friends? There are occasions where I do ask this more directly but in the main, I am very careful and rarely probe for fear of causing psychological discomfort. In her statement (lines 7-9) Carol constructs homosexuality as progressive knowledge and positions herself as 'out and proud'. The ideology underpinning this psycho-discursive practice and the tension between this and ideology of the traditional family will be explored in subsequent chapters in my aim to demonstrate how ideological dilemmas are lived out by the women and can be identified in their psycho-discursive practices as they negotiate their identities as lesbians and as parents.

So far in this chapter I have examined women's discursive strategies of positioning others as 'already knowing' about their sexuality and argue that the function of this strategy is to both *normalize* homosexuality and to *sustain ignorance* of homosexuality and that the effect of both is to silence further discussion about women's

lesbian identity and homosexuality per se within their specific discursive contexts. The final extract (extract 9) in this section is presented here as a stepping stone to the next and subsequent sections. This is taken from my interview with Alison and Joanne when they are talking about going to parents' evening at their daughter Kelly's school. In this extract, in addition to the strategy of 'positioning others as already knowing', I identify two further discursive strategies: 'positioning others as 'not *needing* to know' and 'positioning others as not *wanting* to know'.

#### EXTRACT 9

- 1 Jo: but (Kelly) asks, if I will go, erm, with Alison, and er, and I go and it's  
2 it's, it's obvious that when we go, it's obvious when we go, that it's, you  
3 know....by the questions that we ask aren't we you know, 'coz it's all like  
4 'we', like 'we do this'
- 5 CN: yeah, that's really interesting but is it not actually...do you not know- you  
6 haven't sort of come out to any of the teachers or, anybody at the school?
- 7 Jo: but why why should we?
- 8 CN: no I'm not sayin' you should I'm just wondering whether you have or  
9 whether you felt you ought to or?
- 10 Jo: no
- 11 CN: no
- 12 Jo: no I mean/
- 13 Ali: I mean, in so much as like the contact sheet the emergency contact sheet  
14 for the school, erm, there's been a problem over that, erm, again to do  
15 with Kelly's dad, and I went in an' amended it because, there's five  
16 contact names on Kelly's contact sheet and Kelly wanted to make sure her  
17 dad was the bottom one, so I had to go in and write well I'm first and then  
18 there's (Ali's mum), and then there's Jo 'who's Jo?' 'Jo's my partner', so  
19 they know in the office, or someone put family friend I went 'no Jo's my  
20 partner' and like 'family friend' I went 'ok' so, I mean, I've tried that way  
21 but it's not, and it's like why bang your head against a wall if that's the  
22 way...so, but they know that like, what the order of contact is

Joanne begins (extract 9) to explain how the teachers ‘already know’ that Joanne and Alison are lesbians, and she does this by constructing their sexuality as obvious to the teachers (lines 1-4). The obviousness of this is context specific: for Joanne, attending the school parents’ evening to discuss and ask questions about Kelly’s work, as a couple, means that the teachers will know they are lesbians. It is interesting that I want further clarification of their ‘outness’ within the school (lines 5-6) where I ask *implicitly* whether Joanne is ‘out and proud’ and has disclosed her sexuality verbally (as though this were a ‘better’ and ‘bolder’ way). My values and ideologies of ‘living an openly gay life’ were profoundly challenged in this interaction with Joanne and I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 7. Joanne responds with ‘but why should we’ and from this and my analysis of similar accounts from all seven women, I identified a second strategy that the women used within the repertoire of ‘sexuality as a form of knowledge’: positioning others as ‘not needing to know’ about their lesbian identity. By positioning others as ‘not needing to know’ the women construct their sexuality as private and as knowledge that need not be shared. The women use this psycho-discursive strategy to present a ‘reasonable’ and reasoned argument for concealing their sexual identity: if others do not need to know, why would we tell them? (I examine this strategy in detail in section 5.3). At this point in the interview with Joanne her argument is accepted on its merits of reason, and between us we close down opportunities for further discussion of disclosure, although Joanne does return to this particular topic later in the interview.

In extract 9 Alison cuts in to provide an answer to my question of their ‘outness’ as lesbians within the school, and describes her attempt to have the names changed on Kelly’s emergency contacts list at school (lines 13-22). In her account, Alison describes the school staff as resistant to understanding her disclosure and positions them as ‘not

wanting to know' about Alison's sexuality and lesbian relationship (line 20). In section 5.2 I argue that this resistance to knowledge is an example of 'strategic incoherence' (Sedgwick, 1990): in her account Alison positions herself as unable to 'win the argument' and as such she gives up. For Misson (1999) "it is precisely to put the opponent in that no-win situation that the argumentative strategy works. The result is silence" (p. 86).

In this section I have focused on women's discursive strategy of positioning others as 'already knowing' about their sexuality. In the women's accounts of their interactions with their children and their friends I have argued that positioning their own children as 'already knowing' functions to normalize the women's lesbian identity within the family context. I also suggest that in their accounts, the women's strategy of positioning of teachers and parents as 'already knowing' functions to sustain ignorance of the women's sexuality. Although the functions differed depending on the interactive context, the effect of this psycho-discursive strategy was to silence further discussion of the women's sexuality. In the next section, I examine the second discursive strategy identified within the repertoire of sexual identity as a form of knowledge: positioning others as 'not wanting to know' about the women's sexual identity.

## **5.2: Positioning others as 'not wanting to know'**

Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not; it is equally difficult to guess for any given interlocutor whether, if they did know, the knowledge would seem very important (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68).

Three women used the 'sexual identity as knowledge' repertoire to position significant others as 'not wanting to know' about the women's sexuality or lesbian identity. In this analysis I argue that the construction of homosexuality as 'dangerous knowledge' and

the discursive positioning of others as ‘not wanting to know’ functioned to sustain ignorance of homosexuality within various interactional contexts and to silence further discussion of the women’s lesbian identity.

### *5.2.1 Homosexuality as dangerous knowledge*

The women used the strategy of positioning others as ‘not wanting to know’ when responding to my questions about disclosure of their lesbian identity, and was used when talking about interactions with members of their family of origin and interactions with their children. In Extract 10 (below) Carol is talking about her disclosure to her family members and emphasises that her Gran is the ‘*only person we haven’t told*’. In saying this Carol confirms her position (in general) as ‘out and proud’ to almost all of her family. Carol provides a justification for not having told her Gran, ‘*because she’s been ill*’. In this context ‘coming out’ can be seen as an accountable action, that is, Carol was compelled to offer a reasonable explanation for ‘concealment’, which is anathema to the position of the progressive ‘out and proud’ lesbian that Carol has taken up here. In lines (4-5) Carol considers whether her Gran does know and whether other family members told her Gran about Carol’s sexuality. In lines 2-4 Carol suggests that her Gran might know something or have an idea that Carol and her partner are lesbians. Carol concludes: ‘*but she’s never said anything to me*’ (line 6) and positions her Gran as not wanting to clarify her suspicions or know for certain that her granddaughter is a lesbian. Furthermore, Carol positions herself as unable to clarify what, if anything, her Gran knows about Carol’s lesbian relationship. Carol’s account of disclosure at this moment (1-6) highlights ambiguities around disclosure that are evident within all of the women’s accounts and this is an insight that I begin to share with Carol (lines 7-12).

EXTRACT 10

- 1 Carol: yeah, yeah the only person we haven't told is my gran because she's, been  
2 ill and, but my gran's met Jackie and she just-she said 'oh is- is Jackie-  
3 does she work for yer?' I says 'oh no'...but, 'how long've you known  
4 her?' 'so-and-so, and that's it, so whether she she knows or anything but,  
5 all the rest of the family know you see so whether somebody else has said  
6 something but she's never said anything to me
- 7 CN: I know it's funny 'coz it's like, sometimes it's all a big guessing game  
8 isn't it?
- 9 Carol: mm
- 10 CN: sort of like, I dunno, yer yer think people know just through the way that  
11 they're behaving with you
- 12 Carol: yeah yeah
- 13 CN: nobody actually asks or says anything (laughs)
- 14 Carol: no that's right no they daren't yeah, there's a like a fine line and people  
15 don't want to go over it
- 16 CN: do you- do your kids ask you anything now, about your relationship? Do  
17 they actually ask you questions?
- 18 Carol: no erm, Jenny comes in on-in the bedroom on a morning but she always  
19 knocks erm 'can I come in?' erm 'yeah you can come in' and that sort of  
20 thing but she hasn't asked anything yet, but if anyone's gonna ask it'll be  
21 Jenny
- 22 CN: oh will it?
- 23 Carol: oh yeah (CN laughs) yeah she's like the spokesperson for both of them
- 24 CN: right, she's the inquisitive one?
- 25 Carol: yes
- 26 CN: erm...and what, would that be ok with you? You'd answer questions?
- 27 Carol: oh yeah, well they're apparently erm... this term or no next term Jenny's  
28 doing sex education at school so I'm expecting
- 29 CN: oh yes that's that's when it'll start
- 30 Carol: yeah (CN laughs) so I'm expecting that

In her comments (lines 14-15) Carol constructs homosexuality as 'dangerous knowledge', and there is a moral or value underpinning this strategy: that others' do not want to know about the women's lesbian identity because they do not want to become consciously aware of something so abhorrent. In positioning others in this way Carol constructs an "active rejection of exposure to the knowledge of homosexuality" (Misson, 1999, p. 80). In the first part of her comment Carol agrees with my observation that people don't *ask* if we are gay and adds, '*no they daren't*' but Carol doesn't say *why* they do not dare to ask, leaving possible answers hanging, unspoken: for fear of what they'll discover, for fear of causing embarrassment or psychological discomfort, for the fear of getting it wrong and so on. The second part of Carol's comment: '*there's like a fine line and people don't want to go over it*' serves to not only support her previous comment but also to sustain ignorance about the possibilities, consequences and experiences of disclosure. Furthermore, at the next turn in our conversation (lines 16-17) I change my position from wanting to know more *for myself*, and instead I ask whether her children want to know about her lesbian relationship, possibly to ensure that I also do not cross the very same 'fine line' Carol speaks of (a transgression that is more accepted if made by children). I know my boundaries: children are often less clear where these are.

In the second part of extract 10, Carol confirms that her children have not asked her anything *more* about her sexual identity and she continues (lines 18-20) to position her daughter as 'knowing' about Carol's sexuality: '*Jenny comes into the bedroom on a morning*' and Carol also positions Jenny as polite, inquisitive and hesitant about asking or knowing more: '*but she always knocks erm 'can I come in?'*'. At this point in the extract (lines 20-21) Carol positions her daughter as not wanting to know, and suggests that this will change in the future: '*she hasn't asked anything yet...*' and importantly

this confirms that questions will be asked later, *not now*. Again I do not want to cross the boundary of in/appropriate inquiry and I change my question (line 26): I ask Carol *whether* she would tell her children more about her sexuality if they asked, not *what* she would tell them; this offers Carol the option of a safe response, where ignorance of her lesbian identity is sustained.

#### EXTRACT 11

- 1 CN: and (your mum) knew you were together?  
2 Bev: well-  
3 CN: again it wasn't/  
4 Bev: she said to me 'if I thought there was anything going on with you two,  
5 that'd be it Bev that'd be it', she was very old fashioned but with (partner)  
6 it was different and I think, when I look back now it's not, accepting that  
7 I'm gay, it was- she didn't like, my partner and erm, what mam wanted  
8 mam got, she sort of, she ruled with a, rod of iron you know  
9 CN: did she

Earlier in her interview Bev stated that her dad already knows about her sexuality even though she had never *verbally* disclosed this to him. Soon after this Bev talks about her mum and I attempt to clarify (extract 11) what Bev's mum knew about Bev's lesbian identity. As Bev hesitates to answer, I begin to suggest/question (line 3) that her disclosure to her mum was not verbal (in a similar way that her father and other parents at school knew Bev was gay, without it being spoken about), to offer Bev the option of a safe response. In quoting her mum (lines 4-5) '*if I thought there was anything going on with you two, that'd be it Bev that'd be it*' Bev constructs her sexual identity as 'dangerous knowledge' and positions her mum as 'not wanting to know' or at least not wanting confirmation of her suspicions. There is a threat within this statement: that if knowledge of Bev's lesbian relationship was confirmed, Bev's mum would 'reject' her

daughter in some way, or that their relationship as mother and daughter would be irrevocably and negatively changed. Bev concludes this description by constructing her mum as 'very old-fashioned', and in doing this, positions her mum as having traditional values – heteronormative values of the family and of sexuality – which for Bev explains her mum's actions and 'will to ignorance'. In the second part of the extract (lines 5-8) Bev emphasises that her mum acted differently with Bev regarding her current partner and considers the possibility that her mum was not against Bev's lesbian sexuality per se but her choice of partner. It is at this point that Bev goes on to construct her mum as a strict and formidable character who always got her own way. It seems that Bev was attempting to reposition her mum as headstrong and choosy rather than homophobic, possibly to preserve her late mother's memory in a less negative way.

#### EXTRACT 12

- 1 CN: what about your family like your parents and  
2 Denise: parents my mam's a proper catholic so she just doesn't agree with  
3 it so I can't come out to her and my dad, his mam slept with  
4 women so he wouldn't care, but he will tell our mam so I just keep  
5 it from them  
6 CN: yeah yeah  
7 Denise: and with my mam having cancer and really poorly at the moment I  
8 think that's the last thing I should do  
9 CN: yeah yeah..it's not always the right reason is it  
10 Denise: yeah (laughs) I have hinted quite a lot to her and she just says 'ooh  
11 it makes me sick' so I think right she just doesn't wanna know  
12 CN: yeah, so what about your kids then, do they, they're fine with with  
13 your sexuality? Did you tell them like outright?  
14 Denise: I did tell them outright a couple of years ago but then, I've had to  
15 go back over on myself because me, thirteen year old come

16 running in and said 'everyone's calling you a dyke and the only  
17 reason I can cope is 'coz I know they're lying'  
18 CN: ah, right  
19 Denise: and that was me like (zips mouth closed gesture)  
20 CN: ah I see, and that was, (his) friends, was it, that were, saying that?  
21 Denise: erm...it was two of his mates 'round the corner, they were sayin'  
22 'oh your mum's a dyke' and he said 'no she isn't' and he said 'the  
23 only reason I can cope is because I know you're not' so  
24 CN: oh god right yeah  
25 Denise: he said he said 'I just told them you've got lots of lesbian  
26 friends'... he's the he's the worst one out of them

Extract 12 is in two distinct sections: in lines 1-10 we are talking about Denise's disclosure of her sexuality to parents. In a similar way to Bev (extract 11) who constructs her mum as very old-fashioned, Denise also constructs her mother as someone who will not accept Denise's homosexuality '*she's a proper (devout) catholic*', and it '*makes her sick*'. She is already sick with cancer and so it seems therefore entirely reasonable not to come out to her mum – a justification offered by Denise for her concealment of her sexuality. Denise constructs her father as untrustworthy and as someone who would betray her confidence: particularly pertinent to Denise in her careful management of 'dangerous knowledge'.

Denise's first statement in line 10, that she has '*hinted quite a lot*' to her mum is an interesting one, where Denise positions herself as making an effort, of attempting, frequently to disclose her sexuality to her mum. Denise is keen to emphasise her desire to be open as a lesbian: it is important in this moment within Denise's account for 'not coming out' to her mum that she is also seen as 'wanting to be open' as a lesbian, producing herself as a progressive lesbian. Immediately following this self-positioning, Denise constructs her mother as *resistant* to knowledge of Denise's

sexuality/lesbianism. She emphasizes her mother's 'desire for ignorance' (Misson, 1999) positioning her mother as physically repulsed by the idea or knowledge of homosexuality and presents a reasonable argument for not 'disclosing' her sexuality. At this moment in the conversation, and in a similar way to the strategy of positioning others as 'already knowing', positioning others as 'not wanting to know' has the effect of 'silencing' further discussion (lines 12-13). My affirmation confirms the perceived inappropriateness of asking Denise further questions about her disclosure to her mother. I change my line of questioning to ask Denise about her disclosure to her children and I even suggest that this might have been a more positive experience where not only are her children 'fine' about Denise's sexuality, I also offer Denise the position of 'the liberated homosexual' who can be congruent and open and 'tell them outright'!

Denise begins by affirming that she did 'tell them outright' (like a good progressive homosexual should), but then explains why she had to 'go back on herself' (i.e. go back into the closet in the context of her family). This shift is important and highlights how identity work changes within different interactive contexts: earlier in our conversation Denise talks of her openness about her sexuality in other social contexts, but later, when she talks about her children, her desire to be 'open and visible' as a lesbian collides with her desire to 'put the children first'.

Denise accounts for her 'return to the closet' by positioning her son as emotionally upset by homophobic comments from his peers. In lines 16-17 Denise paraphrases her son and in so doing constructs her lesbian identity as something that is so awful it must not be true/real: her son's ability to cope emotionally depends on his ignorance of it and Denise's silence about her sexuality. At this point Denise uses extreme case formulations ('everyone' and 'only', line 16) to emphasize the 'problem' as global and the solution as limited, respectively. Her decision to 'withdraw back into

the closet' is not *spoken* of in the interview context, but communicated to me through Denise's hand-gesture of 'zipping' her mouth closed. In lines 22-23 Denise repeats her account of her son's reaction to teasing and this second account in which her son can only cope because 'he knows' Denise is not a lesbian secures affirmation from me (line 24): I see her dilemma, and I support Denise in her argument for keeping silent about her sexuality: what else could she do?

#### EXTRACT 13

- 1 CN: what did they think of that?
- 2 Denise: they love it [inaudible] they usually like going to [gay-friendly  
3 pub] to play pool so they're cool about being around...like butch  
4 women, feminine women that- doesn't bother them at all as long  
5 as they think **I'm** not
- 6 CN: oh ok
- 7 Denise: I think that's what it is, but they know that I'm close to them all  
8 so, they're fine about that
- 9 CN: yeah, and do they ever ask you things about...
- 10 Denise: I think they don't wanna know
- 11 CN: really?
- 12 Denise: so they don't ask, I've been chatting to- on er erm, 'gaydar' to  
13 these girls and I put them on my MSN and when I put them on the  
14 cam' (daughter)'s straight to the computer to talk to them
- 15 CN: really?
- 16 Denise: and she's sayin' 'can I add yer can I add yer'
- 17 CN: ahh
- 18 Denise: she gets attached to these butch women she also got really attached  
19 to (name)
- 20 CN: right

Prior to extract 13 I confirmed with Denise that her children accompanied her to a social gathering organised by the local lesbian drop-in group and knowing that Denise was not open (or was vague) about her sexuality, I was interested to know more about their interactions in this context. Denise constructs a picture of her children as happy and comfortable around gay or lesbian women. Her children loved the drop-in event and are familiar with and enjoy being in their local gay-friendly pub. Denise maintains this construction of acceptance positioning her children as *'cool about being around...like butch women, feminine women'*. In saying *'butch women, feminine women'* together Denise highlights a contrast and positions her children as not discriminating between women. The context of this extract is important and contrasts with extract 20 (section 5.4) when Denise is talking about her ex-girlfriend living with her and the children, where she constructs a negative stereotype of her *'butch'* girlfriend and positions her children as embarrassed by her *'visibility'* as a lesbian. In lines 4-5 Denise qualifies her previous statement by adding *'that- doesn't bother them at all as long as they think I'm not'*. In this statement and comments in line 10, the different ways in which Denise positions her children in relation to her own sexual identity and other lesbians are evident: she positions her children as *'not wanting to know'* about Denise's lesbian identity, a *'will to ignorance'* that does not extend to Denise's lesbian friends only to herself as their mother.

There is much ambiguity in Denise's account about what her children know about Denise's lesbian identity (lines 5, 7, 10, 12). Denise uses the repertoire of *'sexuality as a form of knowledge'* and employs a discursive strategy of positioning her children as un/knowing others. The lack of clarity in Denise's account is important. Denise positions her children as *'thinking she is not gay'* (line 5) although a short-time later she re-positions them as *'not wanting to know'* (line 10); in both cases nothing

needs to be said: if her children think Denise is not gay, she need not correct them; if they do not want to know, she need not inform them. It is worth noting that my response in line 6 is one of affirmation and no further questioning: I do not ask, and in line 12 '*they don't ask*' and Denise changes the subject. This discursive strategy of positioning others as 'not wanting to know' functions on its merit of reason: to sustain ignorance and silence further discussion.

Immediately following her statement 'so they don't ask' (line 12) Denise goes on to talk about her lesbian social networks on the internet and constructs her daughter as particularly interested in and attached to Denise's lesbian friends (12-19). In this extract it is apparent that Denise constructs her children as accepting of lesbians and of homosexuality per se where Denise is not at the centre of that construction. In the middle part of this extract Denise positions her children as 'not wanting to know' about Denise's sexuality and in the first and final parts, she positions her children, particularly her daughter as interested in and accepting of Denise's lesbian friends. Conflicting ideologies underpin the psycho-discursive practices used by Denise in this extract: Denise constructs her children as 'accepting' of homosexuality in the context of Denise's lesbian friends, but she also positions them as 'not wanting to know' about Denise's lesbian identity. Such inconsistencies are shaped by culturally shared hetero-normative values of family life and mothering, which conflict with modern progressive values of acceptance of sexual difference and gay affirmation. In the next section, I examine the third discursive strategy identified within the repertoire of sexual identity as a form of knowledge: positioning others as 'not needing to know' about the women's sexual identity.

### 5.3: Positioning others as ‘not needing to know’

Three women used the ‘sexuality identity as knowledge’ repertoire to position others as ‘not needing to know’ about the women’s sexual identity. In this section, I argue that the construction of homosexuality as ‘private knowledge’ and/or ‘dangerous knowledge’ and the positioning of others as ‘not needing to know’ functions in two ways: to rationalize concealment of homosexuality and to sustain ignorance of homosexuality. The ultimate effect of this strategy is to silence further discussion of the women’s sexuality. I introduced the discursive strategy of ‘positioning others as not needing to know’ earlier in this chapter in reference to extract 9, and it is important to remind ourselves of the conversation between Joanne and Allison and myself when talking about their attendance at Parents’ Evening at their daughter’s school, as Joanne’s comment made a lasting impression on me, which is evident in the extracts below when I discuss the question of why or if ‘we’ should come out at all.

#### 5.3.1 *‘Homosexuality as private knowledge’*

The women used the strategy of positioning others as ‘not needing to know’ when responding to my questions about disclosure of their sexuality. This strategy was used most often when the women talked about their interactions with their children and with staff and parents at school, although on several occasions this strategy was used when we talked about ‘disclosure of homosexuality’ itself. In extract 14 I begin by asking Denise about her experiences of ‘coming out’ and after my initial leading and relatively closed question (lines 1-2) I attempt to draw more information about reactions to her disclosures. Denise begins to account for the good reactions she has had (line 5) to her disclosures explaining that she makes informed choices about *who* she tells. In lines 5-6 she constructs her sexual identity as private knowledge that has ‘nothing to do with

anybody else', and interestingly she paraphrases an unknown other (line 7) positioning them as critical about Denise's concealment of her sexuality. Denise's retort to this imaginary other is confirmation that (a chosen majority) of other people '*don't need to know*' about Denise's sexual identity. I collude in this discursive strategy with my emphatic affirmation (line 9). In some ways I think I am inspired or encouraged by the conviction of Denise's argument (lines 5-8, 10-11) and following Denise's comments I provide an account which supports this (lines 12-16): I agree with Denise that 'others do not need to know' about our sexuality and I am also searching for more information, an explanation of our shared feelings of pressure to 'come out'.

#### EXTRACT 14

- 1 CN: so would you say generally you're- the experiences of coming out  
2 have been quite good?
- 3 Denise: yeah
- 4 CN: like reactions?
- 5 Denise: but how I see it is, I only come out to people who I **want** to come  
6 out to it's got nothing to do with anybody else what I am or what I  
7 do and people say 'oh well they don't even know you're gay' and I  
8 say 'well they don't need to'
- 9 CN: exactly yeah
- 10 Denise: and I think nobody needs to know unless I'm, interested in them  
11 or, they need to know for another reason
- 12 CN: mm, yeah that's true yeah, yeah, I was- somebody else that I was  
13 interviewing I asked her if she'd come out to any of the teachers,  
14 and her answer to that was 'why should I?' and I thought well fair  
15 enough why should you? and that that's interesting in itself, I  
16 **don't know** why you should
- 17 Denise: that's how I see it I think you don't need to come out to anybody  
18 unless you're interested in them or, there's a reason- they come out  
19 and ask you up front and even then I think well, got nothing- I just

20 say 'it's got nothing to do wi'you' unless I want that person to  
21 know yes I am, then I just say it's got nothing to do wi'you  
22 CN: yeah, yeah...so would would you say that the teachers at school/  
23 Denise: I mean people who are straight don't go 'round saying '**I'm**  
24 **straight**'  
25 CN: no that's right, that's very true, they don't yeah...so d'you think  
26 people- teachers at school would assume that you were straight  
27 Denise: yeah probably, probably because of the way I dress as well, I dress  
28 feminine so  
29 CN: and that doesn't bother you, that's what you want isn't it, for your  
30 kids?  
31 Denise: I don't really care, I don't care what anybody else thinks of me as  
32 long as they- it doesn't affect the kids, I don't care what anybody  
33 else thinks, the only people I want to protect is me kids and if  
34 they're ok about things then I am

In lines 17-21 Denise repeats her argument: she constructs sexuality as private knowledge and positions others as 'not needing to know' about her lesbian identity. As I suggested above, these discursive strategies function to rationalize concealment of homosexuality and silence further discussion. Denise's rational argument continues in her statement (lines 23-24) where she questions the notion that 'straight people don't come out' implicitly asking 'so why should we?' In this sense Denise is questioning the pressure that gays and lesbians face to 'come out' verbally. Denise's account highlights the 'invisibility' of heterosexuality and silence surrounding heterosexuality which reinforces its power: heterosexuality is not questioned because it is not visible; instead it remains unchallenged and reproduced as the sexual norm. Denise rationalizes concealment of her lesbian identity in her juxtaposition of homosexuality with heterosexuality, to gain parity and minimize the relevance of disclosure. This discursive strategy functioned to limit further discussion of disclosure of sexuality,

construct others' knowledge of Denise's sexual identity as unimportant (lines 31-34) foregrounding instead Denise's identity as a mother, in her desire to protect her children.

#### EXTRACT 15

1 Bev: erm, my actual words were- I think they thought I was ill again 'coz I'd  
2 been very ill, and nearly lost my life and er, I said 'look I need to talk to  
3 you, we were living at my dads at the time before.. before I got this house  
4 and, we lived there for six months and I said 'erm, I've been exploring  
5 something' I said, 'before you worry about anything I'm not ill I said I've  
6 been exploring something with myself, and I now feel comfortable  
7 enough and certain enough, er to tell yer, that erm, I now realize that I'm  
8 gay...erm...and that, you know, I have got a partner, and and that partner  
9 is Sian, and Sian had been part of our, social life for quite a while and,  
10 they cried and then it was 'how long's it been going on, did you know,  
11 have you lied to us, blah blah blah' and I I said 'I could- you know I  
12 couldn't dis- discuss this with yer, 'til I was certain I didn't wanna put you  
13 through anything traumatic and then say 'oh well I'm not really it was just  
14 a phase I was going through' erm

In contrast to Denise's account, Bev constructs the disclosure of her sexuality to her children as an important juncture that she prepared her children for (line 2), although she also constructs 'knowledge of her sexuality' as less concerning than the news of illness (line 5). The build-up (lines 1-7) to Bev's account of disclosure is part of her construction of sexuality as dangerous knowledge, knowledge that she must manage carefully. Bev described the effect of her disclosure on her children, where she positions them as hurt and upset by the knowledge of their mum's sexual identity. However, Bev paraphrases her children (lines 10-11) and in doing so positions them as

being upset by Bev's *concealment* of her identity up to this point, not by their knowledge of this.

In lines 11-14 Bev rationalizes concealment of her lesbian identity by constructing knowledge of her homosexuality as dangerous knowledge, disclosure of which must not be premature. Bev was uncertain about her sexuality and until she was certain, she was protecting her children from 'dangerous knowledge' that they may have acquired unnecessarily. She constructs her disclosure as appropriate as she was managing dangerous knowledge carefully with consideration of its impact: she was protecting her children from the trauma of knowing, until she herself was certain and disclosure was appropriate. I discuss Bev's disclosure to her children further in Chapter 6 and demonstrate how Bev's (and other women's) psycho-discursive practices in the context of coming out to their children are shaped by socially shared values underpinned by cultural ideologies of sexuality and of mothering.

Carol had two daughters who were attending the local primary school in their village and her eldest daughter was due to move to the secondary school which was in a nearby town.

#### EXTRACT 16

- 1 CN: d'you know if there's any other erm...parents who are lesbians at any of
- 2 the schools that your children are at?
- 3 Carol: no, I wouldn't know that
- 4 CN: would it make a difference?
- 5 Carol: wouldn't bother me whatsoever
- 6 CN: no I mean would it make erm...let's say (secondary school) I mean,
- 7 would it make it easier to sort of come out there or, have you really no
- 8 reason to?
- 9 Carol: I've no reason to
- 10 CN: yeah

11 Carol: no reason to at all  
12 CN: I suppose if you're not involved in as much with that school/  
13 Carol: yeah that's right, I've no reason to- I don't go out in (local town) or  
14 anything like that so it's not it's not my area sort of thing, erm, no I have  
15 my, section of friends and I stick to that what I know it's easier, it's easier  
16 for me

In my opening question (extract 16) there is an assumption (or hope) that Carol *would* know of other lesbian parents at her daughter's schools: an expectation on my part that lesbian parents within the school context would have 'come out', to each other at least. My search for answers to questions of disclosure (see Chapter 1) for lesbian parents is evident here (lines 1-2, 4, 6-8) and it is clear that when Carol positions herself as 'not knowing' (line 3) and indifferent to knowledge of other lesbian parents (line 5), the opportunity for discussion about disclosure is blocked or silenced (even momentarily as I search for a new line of inquiry). It is evident in lines 6-7 that my question is shaped by the ideology of the 'out and proud' liberated homosexual and the conflicting idea emerging from earlier interviews with Joanne and Denise that 'we' don't have to disclose our sexuality: our sexuality is private knowledge and other people do not need to know. In lines 9 and 11 Carol takes the position offered of 'not having a reason to come out' as a reasonable argument and we collude (lines 12-16) in the discursive strategy of rationalizing or accounting for the concealment of her sexual identity: if we have *good reason* not to disclose our sexuality we cannot be blamed for falling short of the 'liberated homosexual' ideology.

#### **5.4 Positioning others as 'needing protection'**

In this section I examine lesbian parents' strategy of positioning their children as 'needing protection' from dangerous knowledge of homosexuality and also from the

consequences of sharing dangerous knowledge with un/known others. Children and other people such as teachers or parents are positioned as ‘un/knowning’ others and it is the relationship between these positioning strategies that are the focus of this final section of Chapter 5. The women wanted to protect their children from negative reactions of un/known others, such as homophobic remarks or bullying, and additionally for Denise, to protect her children from her husband’s anger and violence against her. Conversely, sharing dangerous knowledge with others was on some occasions constructed as a positive action, where family members, friends and teachers were positioned as ‘needing to know’ so they could support the women and their families and were trusted to negotiate carefully further disclosure and/or concealment of ‘dangerous knowledge’. In some situations, women ‘came out’ to others as lesbian or gay to protect their children; in other contexts they conceal their sexuality to protect their children. These strategies functioned to rationalise concealment *and* disclosure of lesbian identities and their use was shaped by the discursive context and the women’s histories of disclosure with those they were interacting.

#### *5.4.1 Homosexuality as dangerous knowledge*

In extract 17 Denise constructs lesbian parents living locally as irresponsible parents who do not put their children’s happiness and wellbeing before their own. Denise comments that local lesbian parents’ children have gone to live with their fathers and after I prompt for more information (lines 7-8) Denise begins the construction of homosexuality as dangerous knowledge that must be managed carefully: in lines 12-17 Denise positions the lesbian couple as bad parents who ‘*didn’t care about the kids’ feelings*’, who acted inappropriately without thinking about the consequences of their ‘dangerous liaison’.

EXTRACT 17

- 1 CN: yeah? erm, d'you know other lesbian parents?
- 2 Denise: do I know others? yeah lots round here
- 3 CN: yeah, and is that- does that, **influence** you in any way?
- 4 Denise: I've seen them, go through really hard times when the kids have  
5 gone to live with their dads yeah so...I could get them to, do one  
6 of these for yer if you wanted
- 7 CN: ah right yeah, that would be good yeah, definitely, erm, so having  
8 seen them with their children going to live with their dads [?] has  
9 that/
- 10 Denise: that scared me
- 11 CN: scared you?
- 12 Denise: yeah, I think well I'm not gonna go about it the way they did, they  
13 didn't care about the kids feelings they just jumped in it they were  
14 both next door neighbours and they just jumped straight into it and  
15 the kids found them in bed an' that which I think was bang out of  
16 order I think you, protect your kids against things that are, not  
17 normal to the kids
- 18 CN: yeah I see what you mean yeah
- 19 Denise: until they've got used to the idea at least
- 20 CN: yeah yeah, it's a bit much isn't it, erm, and d'you know why they  
21 went with- went to their dads, was it their own choices the children  
22 or was it-?
- 23 Denise: didn't agree with it and, I don't think the parents cared actually,  
24 they just wanted what they wanted and they didn't care about the  
25 kids I think my god I couldn't do that my kids are, they're mine  
26 they belong to me I don't even class them as (husband's)
- 27 CN: really?
- 28 Denise: I class them as- they're **my** kids, and he's their father
- 29 CN: is that right ok yeah
- 30 Denise: yeah, I'm very protective with them (laughs)

In lines 15-16 (extract 17) Denise clarifies her disapproval of their actions, positioning herself in opposition to them: she thought their actions were 'bang out of order'. Denise then supports her view by claiming that 'you' (that is, most people) would disapprove of such inappropriate behaviour and would instead protect their children from '*things that are not normal to them*'. What is not clear at this point is whether Denise is constructing lesbian sexuality per se as 'dangerous' or whether it is *how children learn* about lesbian (sex)uality that she is constructing as dangerous behaviour. This is made clearer in line 19, suggesting that Denise is not against the children knowing, but is against them finding out inappropriately. I agree with Denise in line 20, and then quickly block further discussion about children learning about lesbian (sex)uality inappropriately, to consider instead decisions made about the children going to live with their fathers. Denise continues in lines 23-25 to construct the parents as bad parents who were selfish and did not care about their children. Again, she positions herself in opposition to this construction (lines 25-26) '*I think my god I couldn't do that*', to emphasise the strength of feeling for protecting her children and putting their needs first. In lines 25 to 26 Denise constructs for herself a position of authority regarding her children: the children 'belong to her alone' and she reasserts in line 28 that '*they're **my** kids, and he's their father*'. Denise's insistence that her children belong to **her**, and not their father, reiterates the feeling of fear that Denise spoke of earlier (line 10): the risks associated with not managing 'dangerous knowledge' carefully are too high: not only could her children be upset emotionally, there was also the sense of fear that she would lose her 'maternal authority' (Ribbens, 1993) and position of protector.

The protection of their children was discussed most often in the context of disclosure about their own sexuality and their concerns about the negative impact this might have on their children. Earlier in my interview with Joanne and Alison, I had

asked if their daughter Kelly had told any of her friends about Joanne and Alison's relationship or sexuality and at that point in our conversation Joanne said she didn't know. Later, (extract 18) as Joanne described how Kelly hugged Joanne and Alison in the street as she thanked them for a present, Joanne returned to the question I had asked earlier:

#### EXTRACT 18

- 1 Jo: yeah, both both of us got a hug, never thought anything of it, you know,  
2 so, and I don't think she would have, if anybody at school asked her, I  
3 don't think she would have a problem with, with saying, that you know,  
4 she has, me and Alison at home sort of thing
- 5 CN: would you mind if she did?
- 6 Jo: no...doesn't bother me at all, it it would bother me if she got, bullied for it  
7 erm, because I think I would be the first one that would be at Ali ranting  
8 and raving 'right get down to the school, I want this sorting' you know, I  
9 know I can't physically do that that's not my, place or my role, that's  
10 Ali's role, but erm, I would hate to think she was going to get bullied for  
11 it if it was a case she was gonna get bullied for it then I would want her,  
12 not to say it, for for her, you know and that's protecting her, you know  
13 erm because I don't want her to have to have a hard time, because of the  
14 way that we've chosen to have our lives

In extract 18 Joanne begins (lines 1-4) by positioning Kelly as accepting of their relationship: that their lesbian relationship is normal to Kelly who 'thinks nothing' of demonstrating her affection for her parents in public. At this point Joanne considers how open Kelly would be to school friends regarding Joanne and Alison's relationship and although Joanne suggests that Kelly would be comfortable about telling her friends (lines 2-4) Joanne constructs Kelly's imagined form of disclosure as innocuous in which nothing definitive about their sexuality is shared. The way in which Joanne constructs

this imagined form of disclosure from Kelly is important in that Kelly is positioned as managing ‘dangerous knowledge’ carefully in the school context. It is evident that Joanne’s normative construction of sexuality is not extended to the school context and in response to my question (line 5) Joanne gives an account of why she would not want Kelly to disclose Joanne and Alison’s lesbian relationship to her school friends: that although Kelly can be trusted to carefully manage such dangerous knowledge, this does not extend to school peers or the school context per se, and the risk for negative consequences of disclosure is heightened. It is interesting that although passionate about resolving any problems of bullying at school, in lines 7 to 10 Joanne constructs her potential involvement in addressing issues of bullying as inappropriate: *‘that’s not my place or my role, that’s Ali’s role’*. However, in the context of formal academic learning Joanne takes a position of an involved parent. In this context Joanne positions herself as unable to get involved personally. Joanne uses the term ‘role’ to position Alison (Kelly’s biological mother) as more responsible for resolving problems of bullying which functions to minimize Joanne’s accountability.

The shift from using a normative construction of homosexuality in the context of family, to a construction of homosexuality as ‘dangerous knowledge’ in the school context is important. Knowledge of Joanne and Alison’s sexuality becomes ‘dangerous’ and must be managed carefully outside the home where such knowledge can be abused by unknown others. In lines 13 to 14 Joanne constructs her lesbian relationship as a *lifestyle choice*<sup>xii</sup>, and renounces (momentarily) the ‘ideal’ of normalising lesbianism, to assert instead that her primary concern is to protect Kelly from being bullied. Joanne’s argument for concealment of Joanne and Alison’s sexual identity within the context of school is a reasonable one: Joanne’s primary goal is to protect Kelly from the (potential)

consequences of sharing 'dangerous knowledge' and Joanne's identity as a good parent is fore-grounded and preserved.

Jan and Marie also discussed disclosure of their lesbian relationship in relation to the protection of their youngest daughter Sarah:

EXTRACT 19

- 1 Marie: when we went up to see a teacher to, introduce, when they- Sarah was  
2 getting moved up there (local school) we actually introduced ourselves to  
3 the teacher  
4 CN: did you?  
5 Marie: and said er, we are living together we are partners  
6 CN: right, was there a reason you did that?  
7 Marie: erm, I th-, I think in my case it, if there was any problems with Sarah at  
8 school where, she was gonna get bullied by kids, because of us I wanted  
9 the school to be aware, of the situation...not only that, erm, I had to go  
10 down, on the forms as the next of kin so, it looks a bit odd, 'why's your  
11 dad not down?' or 'why Jan?' you know an' it's- on the form it says what  
12 relationship are you to the child?, so it's so I think in **my** case that's why I  
13 wanted to do it  
14 CN: mm, yeah, just wanted to get it all clear?  
15 Marie: yeah  
16 Jan: yeah  
17 Marie: an' I think that's the same with you?  
18 Jan: yeah just, if there was any problems with the kids 'coz the bullying at the  
19 schools can be quite nasty  
20 CN: yeah, have you had any issues like that?  
21 Marie: with Jemma...no er Jemma's been pretty- all her friends are, cool about it  
22 basically  
23 Jan: oh aye yeah, homos (inaudible) (CN laughs)  
24 Marie: she's got a couple of, friends- well, two lasses in her year, that, are  
25 actually, gay as well and there's a lad who's just come out as well erm

26 Jan: Sarah's case, there was a bit, of bullying but [the teacher] stamped down  
27 on it  
28 Marie: yeah  
29 Marie  
30 & Jan: straight away  
31 CN: really?  
32 Jan: yeah, erm...  
33 CN: and would you have classed that as homophobic bullying I mean was it  
34 related to you two?  
35 Marie: yes it was  
36 Jan: yeah yeah, but it's- basically what it was I mean, we'd had some trouble  
37 wi' these kids, previously they broke into the house so- they go'the same  
38 school as Sarah so then they targeted her for a few weeks but  
39 CN: she [the teacher] sorted that out  
40 Marie: they sorted that out straight away- the schools in this town, I think they do  
41 clamp down on bullying a hell of a lot  
42 Jan: yeah  
43 CN: right

Prior to extract 19 Jan and Marie had been talking about how their daughters had 'come out' for them to teachers at their schools. Marie was keen to inform me that Jan and Marie had also disclosed their relationship to Sarah's teacher (lines 1-5) and in lines 7 to 13 she explains that disclosure of their sexuality was a precautionary measure against potential bullying that could affect their daughter if other children knew about Jan and Marie's relationship. At this point Marie constructs homosexuality as 'dangerous knowledge' that could be abused by others against their daughter and she positions the teachers and 'the school' as responsible managers of such 'dangerous knowledge' of their lesbian relationship. Marie also accounts for this action of disclosure as a way of explaining and clarifying their potentially confusing family constellation and 'next of kin' details. There is no discussion about acceptance of Jan and Marie's relationship

from teachers or school staff regarding their relationship, only that they would be 'aware of the situation' (line 9). In lines 13-16 we collude in sustaining ignorance of homosexuality within the school context: although we all agree that Jan and Marie wanted to 'get everything clear' regarding their relationship, what Jan and Marie actually said, and what the reactions from school staff were, remain unknown.

Jan and Marie construct *disclosure* of their lesbian relationship to school staff as a way of protecting their daughter. Jan reiterates this in lines 18 to 19 and supports their action with reference to the 'nastiness' of the bullying at school: in view of the severity of the bullying problem within the school it make sense to disclose their lesbian relationship to the teachers so they are aware and can intervene if their daughter becomes a victim of bullying.

Jan and Marie are keen to demonstrate that their disclosure was the 'right' course of action and that it has indeed enabled teachers to intervene and stop any bullying against their daughters. When I ask if there had been any bullying, they are quick to emphasise that the teachers put a stop to it immediately (lines 26-30). In lines 33-34 it appears I was bold enough to ask if the bullying Sarah had suffered at school had been as a direct result of Jan and Marie's relationship or sexual identity. After Marie and Jan confirm this (lines 35-38) I immediately reiterate that the 'teacher sorted it out' (line 39) offering support for - and an opportunity for Jan and Marie to return to - their original argument that disclosure of dangerous knowledge was done to protect their daughter from bullying: in this sense I collude in this strategy to construct Jan and Marie as good parents who were doing the right thing for their daughters - and that it was working. In lines 39-43, we confirm Jan and Marie's positions as responsible and caring parents by constructing bullying - and not the disclosure of 'dangerous knowledge' - as a problem that extends to other schools within their town, and one that

the schools are tackling. In this sense, we construct homophobic bullying as an accountable action, and position the teachers (school) as responsible for its resolution. In doing so, we construct and maintain Jan and Marie's normative identities as good parents, vis-à-vis the negotiation of their lesbian identities within the school context.

#### EXTRACT 20

- 1 CN: in terms of...obviously you've said that you want to keep things as  
2 they were for the children, in terms of school/  
3 Denise: and even 'round here where they play, I like their dad to go 'round  
4 the corner and, shout them as well as me so that they see that their  
5 dad's still about  
6 CN: I see  
7 Denise: so they don't call them (bully them verbally) if their dad's about  
8 but when he wasn't about for quite a while they got called  
9 constantly so I'm just trying to make it as easy as possible for the  
10 kids 'coz it's not their fault that I'm...I've decided to come out at  
11 this time (half laugh)  
12 CN: ok right so it's about protecting them, really?  
13 Denise: yeah, everything's about protecting them  
14 CN: mm and that's the same for the school as well  
15 Denise: yeah  
16 CN: right, is there anything that would change that for you? Would  
17 there ever be any situation where that would change?  
18 Denise: if the kids just stopped bullying them I'd be able to, tell them, it's  
19 the other kids that've caused all the hassle I mean we had all the  
20 crying an' that when I first told them and then Leslie (ex-  
21 girlfriend) moved in but it just made it a hell of a lot worse she  
22 ended up havin' to move out because they were getting' bullied  
23 that much  
24 CN: oh I see right, she moved in here?  
25 Denise: yeah, the day their dad moved out which wasn't good  
26 CN: ah right

- 27 Denise: for about a year and a half  
28 CN: ok, that's quite a long time (Denise laughs) so that was a really  
29 difficult time then was it?  
30 Denise: yeah very 'coz she was **out** and proud and she was covered in  
31 tattoos so she was in the garden cuttin' the grass in shorts an' I was  
32 like (with gritted teeth) 'get in, the kids friends are 'round the  
33 corner' so they were sayin' 'mum I can't believe she's gone out  
34 there, looking like that'  
35 CN: right, so  
36 Denise: I don't even think the kids'd be half as bothered if it wasn't  
37 somebody who was butch 'coz if they look butch then people click  
38 on more and, my friends who are gay and they're feminine, the  
39 kids don't turn a hair and they'll say they like them  
40 CN: ah I see, that's interesting isn't it  
41 Denise: yeah

In lines 1 and 2 (extract 20) I reiterate Denise's decision to maintain the appearance of a traditional family unit within the context of school. It is interesting that I use the word obviously: it functions here to normalize and support Denise's decision and I suggest this prompts her to cut in and describe how her strategy for 'keeping up traditional appearances' is extended to the contexts of home and neighbourhood. In line 3 to 11 Denise explains how her strategy for maintaining the appearance of a traditional family unit works to protect her children from bullying and she builds up an argument based on her children's experiences of bullying and name calling to support this. Her sexuality or identity as a lesbian is constructed as 'dangerous knowledge' and Denise positions others (within the neighbourhood) as homophobic others who will abuse this knowledge and use it against her children. Concealing her identity as a lesbian is reasonable in the context of the homophobic bullying the children have previously suffered and in lines 12 to 13 we confirm that Denise's main priority is the protection of her children.

In lines 16-17 I introduce the notion that there are other ways of being, and it is evident that the ideology of the 'out and proud' lesbian is fore-grounded once again. Denise enthusiastically supports my inferred suggestion that she could be open and disclose her sexual identity (lines 18); Denise continues (lines 19-23) to reiterate and support her original argument regarding the bullying from local children, and builds this argument by emphasising the emotional upset experienced by her children when she first 'came out' to them and how this only got worse when her (then) girlfriend Leslie moved in. In lines 30-33 Denise constructs Leslie as a stereotype: a 'butch' lesbian with tattoos who was 'out and proud' – she was visible when Denise was trying to remain *invisible* as a lesbian. Leslie's visibility as a lesbian was an embarrassment to Denise and her children and in paraphrasing her children's reactions (line 33-34) Denise positions Leslie's *openness* as a lesbian as inappropriate and her own re/actions as reasonable and justifiable. In lines 36 to 39 Denise constructs Leslie's 'butch' appearance as 'too obvious' and she uses this to support her argument for not living an openly lesbian life with a partner at this time: the children would be at risk and it is her responsibility as a good parent to protect her children from bullying – especially homophobic bullying. Denise constructs concealment of her lesbian identity within the context of family, and based on her children's previous experiences of homophobic bullying, as a reasonable course of action.

#### EXTRACT 21

- 1 CN: ...you say they've had some sort of, comments and stuff from kids  
2 around the area about, you being gay...how have you handled it  
3 right at that time, what have you done, at that point?  
4 Denise: I actually went on- straight round the corner and said to them 'so  
5 am I gay?' and they were like didn't know what to say and I said  
6 'if I'm gay why am I married?' 'coz that was the best thing for the

7 the kids I was thinking I could've said 'yes I am and it's got  
8 nothing to do wi'you' but I was thinking- but then I went to the  
9 parents and said, 'it has to've come from yous' I said 'children just  
10 don't say 'oh she's a dyke she's got somebody livin' there', so  
11 yous must've said it'\* and they said 'oh, well people are saying  
12 that round here' I said 'well you don't tell your kids, even if you  
13 do know something' I said 'you're supposed to protect your kids  
14 and don't bring them up to, erm judge people'\* and like they  
15 didn't know what to say\* I said 'my kids don't judge anyone I said  
16 I've got lots of gay friends and it's got absolutely nothing to do  
17 with them they know that'  
18 CN: it's what they need to hear though isn't it  
19 Denise: oh I do go mad when I start (both laugh)  
20 CN: I know but it's annoying isn't it...just finding the best way of  
21 handling it's hard  
22 Denise: I'm just glad that we're on the main road, 'coz they don't, get  
23 involved with all these horrible kids round the corner, they're dead  
24 horrible  
25 CN: ah are they?  
26 Denise: yeah, very (laughs) nasty horrible kids  
27 CN: ah right, yeah?

In reference to comments Denise made earlier in her interview, I begin (extract 21) by asking Denise for further details about how she dealt with the homophobic bullying of her children from other children in the neighbourhood. Denise is eager to begin her account and emphasises the speed with which she intervened to challenge local parents (line 4). There is a sense that Denise takes her neighbours 'off-guard' with her direct and challenging accusations, leaving them speechless (line 5). It is evident that Denise had considered being open about her sexuality (line 7) although the consequences of this for Denise were uncertain and inconclusive (line 8) and potentially too high risk. Denise's account continues in her construction of homosexuality as 'dangerous

knowledge' and her positioning of parents living locally as guilty of sharing this dangerous knowledge with their children (lines 8-10). More importantly, Denise accuses the parents of not managing this knowledge carefully: '*well you don't tell your kids, even if you do know something*'. In so doing Denise also positions them as 'bad parents' who are not protecting their children or teaching them values of acceptance (lines 13-14). The parents' silence (lines 14-15) adds further support to Denise's argument that there are right and wrong ways to teach children about homosexuality, and to their position as 'bad parents' who have failed to make the right choices for their children. To reinforce Denise's position as a good parent, she emphasises how her children hold moral values: '*they don't judge anyone*'. Denise does not directly deny 'being a lesbian' to the parents, but remains vague and does not claim her lesbian identity either. In upholding the value of teaching children about homosexuality in the *right* way Denise positions herself as a liberal parent, although claiming a lesbian identity within this context could potentially undermine her arguments and her normative parent status. Although my response to Denise's account is general and vague (line 18) it functions to support Denise in her desire to challenge homophobic abuse from their neighbours. This prompts Denise to emphasise her passion for fighting for justice (line 19) and she positions her children against her construction of local (homophobic) children (lines 22-26) as nasty and horrible.

### Summary

In this chapter I have examined women's *accounts for* disclosure and concealment of their sexual identity. Discursive constructions of homosexuality as 'normal', 'private' and 'dangerous' knowledge and the strategy of *positioning others* as un/knowning others, functioned to rationalize the women's concealment or careful disclosures of their

sexuality, and in a majority of contexts, to sustain ignorance of homosexuality. Ultimately the aforementioned strategies functioned to close down opportunities for - or to silence - discussion of the women's lesbian identities, and to foreground instead their normative parent identities within the discursive context of 'coming out'. In Chapter 6, I examine the women's accounts for their 'families of choice'.

## Chapter 6

### Accounting for ‘families of choice’<sup>xiii</sup>

#### Introduction

As I discussed in Chapter 3, cultural ideologies and heteropatriarchal constructions of the family shape our values and expectations about family and parenting which incorporate moral values concerning ‘the right way’ to raise children. As a consequence of shared and institutionally sanctioned understanding of the ‘ideal’ family as constituting a heterosexual couple raising their children together, lesbian parents who are by definition constructed outside of ‘family’ and ‘parenting’, are ‘held to account’ for their non-normative identity. They feel that they must explain and justify their lesbian parent/family identity and argue for validation as a family and as parents. In chapter 5 my analysis focused on women’s accounts for disclosure/concealment of their sexual identity; in this chapter the focus of analysis is on the women’s accounts for their ‘families of choice’. I identify discursive strategies used to (i) negotiate difference and (ii) manage others’ expectations of lesbian parents. These strategies were used most often when the women were talking about family life and their decisions and choices about living together/apart and the relationships between their partners, their children and themselves within the family context.

#### 6.1 Negotiating ‘difference’ in families of choice

The women talked about the importance of their children’s wellbeing and protection frequently throughout their interviews. These topics emerged when the women were answering my questions about family life in general and how this was different from previous or imagined future families. The women talk about values and good parenting practices. At the time of their interviews the women’s current family composition

(which included living with their lesbian partner, living separately from their lesbian partner, with varying levels of involvement from their children's father) are constructed as being *unquestionably* 'better for the children' than their previous family units. Current and imagined lesbian partnerships are constructed as loving, caring, respectful and egalitarian relationships and as 'appropriate' within the family context where 'dangerous knowledge' about their sexuality is managed carefully. The 'difference' of their family composition in comparison to ideological constructions of traditional families was highlighted by the women in accounting for their families of choice.

### *6.1.1 Normalizing lesbian parent families*

In the extracts below Joanne and Ali, and Bev are providing a rational argument for 'living apart' and accounting for their family compositions. They construct their 'difference' as a family, on the basis of 'living apart' rather than their sexuality which functions to normalize their lesbian parenting and their family identities.

#### EXTRACT 22

- 1 CN: do you feel that you are a family, is that what you'd describe yourselves  
2 as?  
3 Ali: I think we do  
4 Jo: we- **yeah**, we do describe ourselves as a family don't we? it's a bit, we're  
5 not er a conventional, type of family where er, we live together 'coz we  
6 don't live together erm, but that suits us both doesn't it?  
7 Ali: yeah  
8 Jo: well it suits all three of us doesn't it really?  
9 Ali: like just recently like we've had, a few problems with Kelly 'coz she's  
10 hitting like teenage [inaudible] and attitude and so- but we've sat down  
11 together and worked out like- Kelly calls it a contract but it's like I expect  
12 her to do certain jobs at home on a morning and on a night and then, like,

13 she put her ideas of having like one night a week, just me and her time so  
14 she calls it a contract, but but we all sat down together and, and like  
15 worked through it  
16 CN: I see yeah

In extract 22 Joanne describes their family as unconventional in terms of ‘not living together’, not in terms of their sexuality. This has the function of normalising their lesbian relationship: it is constructed as unremarkable and the overall effect is to silence further discussion of it. In lines 5-6 Joanne and Alison begin to search for explanations or justifications for ‘why this works’ (which constructs ‘living apart’ as an accountable action) and in line 8 Joanne confirms that living apart is better for all the family including their daughter. In lines 9-15 Alison describes how as a family they have ‘sat down together’ and worked through some rules about spending quality time together as well as ensuring Kelly does her share of work around the house. It is in line 14 that Alison reconfirms that they are *all* involved in family discussions and addressing any problems that Kelly has, and in doing so positions Joanne and Alison as responsible parents which is not undermined by living apart, instead, the latter is a conscious decision which works for their family: Kelly benefits by having quality time with her mum. Within this extract Joanne and Alison construct an egalitarian relationship with their daughter within which Kelly is heard and treated as an equal within their family unit.

The focus of extract 23 is Bev’s account for ‘living apart’ and that it is better for her children and her partner for them to live separately whilst the children are still of school age.

EXTRACT 23

- 1 Bev: Sian did live with us for eleven month in my other house, but erm, we  
2 thought it was, better if, she went and lived back in her own house, she  
3 lives over at (nearby town) erm...and it works a lot better, it does work a  
4 lot better
- 5 CN: why d'you think that is?
- 6 Bev: erm...Sian doesn't have children and she found it difficult, livin' 'round  
7 children erm...I do have kids so, she didn't understand, what being a  
8 mother was and I sort of didn't appreciate the fact that, she's lived her life,  
9 without kids and I think that was the main, thing, she likes her space an',  
10 she quite likes to do what she wants to do when she wants to do it where  
11 with- when you've got kids in the house, they've all- **always**, first and  
12 foremost erm...and it was, it was spoiling our relationship...I've gotta say  
13 when she said she wanted to move back home I was devastated, and I said  
14 'oh I don't want a long, distance relationship I want a partner that I share  
15 my life with, but then on reflection it was- I've got quality time with my  
16 kids, when they were going off to their dads on the weekend, I had quality  
17 time with Sian and she come over one day in the week it meant that we  
18 were all together so it worked really well and **now**, if I put my hand on my  
19 heart, erm, I don't wanna, **live with her**, while my children are still here
- 20 CN: oh right, yeah
- 21 Bev: you know erm, especially while they're still at school, maybe once (son)  
22 has done his college and, even if he's still livin' at home, and we're still  
23 togeth- if we're still together you know I would like to share, my life with  
24 her and it- in, a living capacity but...
- 25 CN: is that because they would be older, the children, or because they won't be  
26 at school?
- 27 Bev: w- yeah because, they'll be older and, then I won't...I know they'll  
28 always be my kids, but, you know, they're gonna reach a certain age an'  
29 I'll say, 'right now it's time for my life, you fend for yourself, I'm puttin'  
30 myself first now, at the moment my kids'll **always** come first erm but  
31 once they're self, sufficient and and and you know
- 32 CN: sort of responsible for themselves

- 33 Bev: that's right yeah they'll always be my kids and I'll always be there for  
34 them you know but there is a cut off point where I do put my- you know I  
35 need, and I can see where that is you know if (son) goes to college or if he  
36 goes to work and does an apprenticeship, my daughter will- is going to  
37 university after college erm, and once they become self funding, that's  
38 when I say 'it's my time now'
- 39 CN: yeah, and that might be a time when you'd move back in together?
- 40 Bev: yeah coz it's, well I- you know that's what we're gonna do, you've gotta  
41 choice, there'll be a room there for ya, or you can find your own place, but  
42 I'm still always mam, you know

Bev begins (extract 23) by emphasising that although her partner had lived with Bev and her children for almost a year, it was better now that she had moved back to live in her own home in a nearby town (lines 1-4). Following my request for more information about *why* it is better now, Bev constructs their time living together, as a family, as difficult for a number of reasons and in doing so she provides justifications for why living apart is better. Bev begins by constructing Sian as someone who found living with children difficult and who '*didn't understand, what being a mother was*' (lines 7-8). Bev highlights that the main 'problem' was that Sian '*likes her space an, she quite likes to do what she wants to do when she wants to do it*'. It is at line 9 that the incompatibility of Sian's preferred 'independent' way of life and the responsibilities of mothering is emphasised and Bev reiterates the incompatibility by claiming that children (per se) must *always* come first (lines 11-12). In her statement: '*it was spoiling our relationship*' Bev positions herself in contrast to Sian, as a mother who is 'putting her children first': a selfless practice that can not be reconciled with 'doing whatever you want, whenever you want to', providing further support to their decision to live apart. Up to this point in extract 21 the decision to live apart was constructed as a joint one, and it is only at lines 12-13 that the decision about living apart is constructed as

Sian's alone: Bev positions herself as devastated by the news and emphasises her desire to live with Sian and not have a long-distance relationship. There is tension between Bev's desire for them to live together as a family and her desire to ensure that her partner is happy and that she is doing the best for her children. Bev's comments about her emotional upset at the time Sian left, are quickly followed (lines 15-18) by reflection on the benefits of living apart, where Bev can enjoy quality time with her children (and with Sian and the children on occasion), and that Sian and Bev can spend time together without the children, possibly an attempt to assuage the discomfort of living out a dilemma which cannot be resolved. All of the benefits that Bev identifies culminate in her statement and heartfelt claim that family life is better this way (lines 18-19).

In the remaining section of this extract (lines 20-40) Bev's account for not living with Sian is focused on her responsibility for the children while they are still at home and 'especially while they're still at school' (line 21). It is evident that I want more clarification about Bev's comments and I ask for confirmation of this (lines 25-26). In lines 27 to 31 Bev reiterates her argument for 'putting her children first' and within the same extracted moment Bev also constructs her argument for 'putting herself first'. It is evident throughout the remaining section (lines 33-42) that Bev is keen to emphasize that the latter will only happen once the children are 'self sufficient'. Bev's plans to eventually put herself first are justified in her final comment '*but I'm still always mam*': here, mothering is constructed as something *more* than 'putting the children first': despite Bev's future plans to put herself first, she is still a good mother who is always there for her children.

### 6.1.2 Comparing lesbian parent families

In the three extracts below, the women compare their previous heterosexual parent family with their current lesbian families. They account for their lesbian parent family by constructing the latter as 'better than' their previous hetero-families. The women draw on liberal discourses of mothering to emphasise how their children now benefit from more care and attention from both parents and that they are treated as equals within the family, in contrast to the power relations inherent within constructions of the hetero-patriarchal family.

#### EXTRACT 24

- 1 CN: so would you describe yourself then as a lesbian parent? Would you say  
2 that? (directed at Jo)
- 3 Jo: I thought that- I think I would cringe if, I, if I was labelled/  
4 CN: would you?
- 5 Jo: yeah, as a parent 'coz I'm not, as Ali said there I'm not child-friendly at  
6 all but erm, Kelly and my two nephews you know when the sun's shining  
7 I'm bent over, you know 'coz, don't they? and- but the thing is, I have,  
8 from them, they all respect me, if I say something, it goes, and it was  
9 how I was brought up by my step-father, he said if we're going to do- if I  
10 say we're going to do something, it'll happen, it won't be a maybe, it  
11 won't be a blah blah, it'll happen and that's exactly how I am, with Kelly  
12 and my two nephews you know I will try- if I say it's gonna happen, then  
13 I'll try my utmost, to make it happen, so you know she has that trust, in  
14 what we say doesn't she?
- 15 Ali: mm
- 16 Jo: you know, rather than being let down/
- 17 Ali: like if Kelly's going to look for a card she will try and get, a card for Jo  
18 that says 'you're like a mother to me' so Kelly sees her as a, a parent in a  
19 parenting role ... and although Jo says that she isn't child-friendly, Jo's

20 child-friendly when Jo wants to be child-friendly, and when she doesn't  
21 want to be, it's blatantly obvious

22 CN: ok

23 Jo: yeah but that that's good because, that's one of the advantages of us living  
24 apart because of that, erm, so that then, you know Kelly, it doesn't get to  
25 the point where Kelly and I are arguing, with each other you know we we  
26 can have that...

27 CN: space between you?

28 Jo: yeah because I'll say to Ali, I'm not in a child-friendly mood today, so Ali  
29 sort of like limits the time that I have around Kelly or I don't see Kelly at  
30 all do I on that day?

31 Ali: no...I mean yesterday, she was sayin' that 'I haven't seen Kelly for ages'  
32 and it was like 'it was only Tuesday' (both laugh) you know an' it was  
33 like 'Jo's missing Kelly' (all laughing)

34 Jo: so it works for her doesn't it?

35 Ali: mm, yeah and she's had a lot less hassle with us two, as a couple than  
36 what she's had with her dad an' and partners so she's accepted us a lot,  
37 better hasn't she than...

38 Jo: aw she thinks it's marvellous, she does, she thinks it's absolutely,  
39 marvellous it's like, we were just sayin' as we were coming down didn't  
40 we it's like, erm, on a weekend, if Ali hasn't got Kelly, Ali stays at my,  
41 bungalow, on a weekend, but Kelly likes to stay doesn't she, on a  
42 weekend, erm, but on a Saturday night when we, we were sat watching the  
43 TV, Ali and I will sit on the sofa as a couple and Kelly will sit in the, the  
44 chair, you know we'll sit, we'll either, I usually have me, head on you  
45 don't I, fall asleep or summat (laughs) erm, but Kelly doesn't think  
46 anything...

47 CN: she's absolutely fine with your relationship?

48 Jo: not a, not a problem I would say at all has she?

49 Ali: no like I mean when she was younger and we used to stay at yours, I mean  
50 it was nothing for you two to be up in the middle of the night havin' a  
51 midnight-feast on the bed with me asleep (CN laughs) next to you so..

In extract 24 Joanne and Alison engage in a shared construction of Joanne as a reliable, caring and fun-loving parent despite Joanne's initial rejection of 'parent' as a label for herself. In lines 5-14 Joanne rejects a 'parent' identity for herself and emphasises Alison's description of her as 'not child-friendly' yet Joanne goes on to describe her relationships with Kelly and her own nephews as those in which Joanne is trusted and respected. In lines 13-14 Joanne brings Alison into the conversation by positioning them both as parents that Kelly can trust not to let her down and in lines 17-19 Alison is keen to inform me that Kelly sees Joanne as a parent, to the extent that she will buy her a card with 'you're like a mother to me' inscribed. In saying this Alison emphasises the close and important relationship shared by Kelly and Joanne. In lines 18-21 Alison constructs Joanne as a person who is open about her feelings and who will be honest about whether she wants to spend time with Kelly or not. It is not clear whether Alison means this as a compliment or a criticism, but Joanne counters any doubt with an account of the benefits of living apart and of managing her time with Kelly (lines 23-30). At lines 31-33 Alison comments that although Joanne limits her time with Kelly, she misses her after only a short period of time. In saying this she reemphasises Joanne's love for Kelly and as Alison repeats the 'secret' her voice takes on a playful tone. Joanne immediately takes the focus from herself and back to Kelly to reiterate how their family composition works for her (line 34). In lines 35-37 Alison constructs their relationship as being 'less hassle' for Kelly in contrast to Kelly's experience of her father's difficult relationships with partners. Joanne is quick to take up this topic and enthusiastically describes how Kelly enjoys spending time with Joanne and Alison and how relaxed they are together as a family. Joanne describes a typical Saturday night watching the television together and at line 41 she begins to describe how Alison and Joanne sit together 'as a couple' with Joanne often falling asleep on Alison and how

'Kelly doesn't think anything' (45-46). It is evident that I jump in to block (line 47) and rephrase the statement I thought Joanne was about to make – possibly an attempt to avoid the construction of homosexuality as potentially 'dangerous' within the context of family. In her final comments in extract 23 Alison describes how Kelly and Joanne would stay awake at night and share 'midnight feasts' together in Joanne and Alison's bedroom: this foregrounds Joanne as a fun-loving parent and functions to normalise Joanne and Alison's lesbian relationship within the family context by constructing it as unremarkable (49-51).

#### EXTRACT 25

- 1 CN: so her dad doesn't have any contact?  
2 Ali: he doesn't have, regular contact with her he has contact when...  
3 Jo: it's when Kelly wants it  
4 Ali: when Kelly wants it or like this weekend she's up at his mums she she,  
5 she likes to see her grandma at least once a month so, his mum'll, make an  
6 effort to take her down there (to Kelly's dad) and, which Kelly's fine  
7 about because she knows- she...her an' [name] his mum have worked out  
8 that Kelly just gives the signal when, she's had enough, they'll leave so,  
9 then Kelly's more in control over  
10 Jo: so the problem isn't with, as what people always perceive that the  
11 problem's gonna be with the lesbian, partnership, Kelly's gonna be ok  
12 with the er father who's re-married with four children, who are now  
13 calling him dad, you know, that's where she has the problem with er, she  
14 she does not have a problem with us, whatsoever you know, as I say when  
15 she stays at my house, erm, she has a, one of these put-up beds in the front  
16 room now, she's progressed to the front room (laughs) 'coz she has a play  
17 station and things like that you know an' erm, she doesn't have no- the  
18 fact that Ali and I, are in the next room in the, you know, to Kelly, that is  
19 almost just, it's natural to her she doesn't, think there's anything, wrong  
20 with it at all but then again why should there be

21 CN: well exactly, and she was seven was she when you got together?

In response to my opening question (extract 25) about Kelly's father and his involvement in Kelly's life, Joanne is keen to inform me that Kelly is in control of the time she spends with her father. Alison confirms this (lines 4-9) and describes how this works in practice when Kelly is staying with her dad and Grandma at weekends. At earlier and later points in the interview, Joanne and Alison describe the negative influence that Kelly's father has had on Kelly and on Alison in the past, emphasising that Kelly's emotional problems have been caused by her father and his girlfriend. It is evident in extract 25 that Alison continues to construct her ex-husband in negative terms: as lazy – in contrast to Kelly's Grandma who will 'make an effort' to take Kelly to see him (line 6). Alison explains that Kelly and her Grandma have devised a signal system so that Kelly can leave her dad's house whenever she is ready, and in so doing, constructs him as someone whose company she does not want to keep for long (lines 7-9). At this point Joanne cuts in with an impassioned account to provide justification for her later argument: Joanne's statement that '*people always perceive that the problem's gonna be with the lesbian partnership*' (lines 10-11) begins with an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) which serves to undermine the 'culturally shared' argument 'that lesbian partnerships within the context of parenting are problematic'. Continuing the argument along the same lines would be to claim that heterosexual parenting is always positive and it is at this point (lines 11-12) that Joanne uses a further extreme case formulation: '*Kelly's gonna be ok with the er father who's re-married with four children, who are now calling him dad*' to undermine this related claim – constructing it as unreasonable and illogical - within the context of Kelly's father (lines 11-13). In doing so, Joanne's argument is strengthened: it is now reasonable to argue that Kelly has a problem with her dad and his complex family composition and not with

Joanne and Alison. Joanne immediately follows this with justification for her claim that life is better now for Kelly with Joanne and Alison. Joanne emphasises the benefits for – particularly for Joanne in her own home - where she has made specific provisions for Kelly to enjoy her time there - where Kelly has ‘progressed to the front room’ (line 16) where she sleeps and has a games console to hand. In the final part of extract 25 Joanne returns to counter the claims that she highlighted at the start of this extract, to confirm that despite ‘culturally shared negative perceptions’ Joanne and Alison’s lesbian relationship is not ‘problematic’ in the context of parenting: that for Kelly it is natural and ‘she doesn’t think there is anything wrong with it’. Positioning Kelly in this way goes some way to normalising homosexuality. Joanne’s final statement (line 20) blocks further discussion of homosexuality within the context of family and parenting: potential judgments about the normality of their status as parents are deflected by this rhetorical question: I collude in the discursive strategies of normalizing their lesbian relationship and sustaining ignorance of homosexuality within the context of children (line 20): my response is emphatic agreement and to silence further discussion I move the conversation in a different direction.

#### EXTRACT 26

- 1 CN: how did that- how did that feel when you came out to your family?
- 2 Carol: a relief
- 3 CN: was it?
- 4 Carol: oh god yeah, as long as my kids were happy, and my mum and dad were
- 5 happy I wasn’t bothered about anybody else, so, yeah
- 6 CN: and how did that go, what did you do?
- 7 Carol: (sighs) we told ‘em, well we told, told the kids, and my mam and dad,
- 8 about the divorce, all in one day so I got it all out
- 9 CN: big whammy (laughs)
- 10 Carol: yeah (smiles) very big, so it was all out and over and done with

11 CN: and what what was the reaction to that?  
12 Carol: erm...Lisa the eldest one, she was...concerned about what her friends  
13 would say  
14 CN: right  
15 Carol: and I said 'well I aren't gonna tell your friends, are you gonna tell em?'  
16 and Jenny was fine about it she thought it was quite 'cool' erm, and my  
17 mum and dad said 'as long as you're happy...and the kids are happy',  
18 they they were more concerned about the kids and I said 'yeah, they're  
19 fine', so that was it the only people that don't talk to me now is his (ex-  
20 husband) mum and dad that's it, everybody else is fine  
21 CN: right, so it was a, a good outcome  
22 Carol: oh god yeah, I had to, I couldn't I couldn't live a lie any more so I was/  
23 CN: how was it up to that point then for you?  
24 Carol: I drank a lot  
25 CN: did you?  
26 Carol: a lot, er it was, I used to just work and drink, that was it we- the kids were  
27 suffering erm everything else was suffering and it wasn't fair, I just had  
28 to...I had to just be honest to myself, so, so since I've come out it's  
29 brilliant now  
30 CN: excellent, that's good... (CN coughs) erm, so let me think where shall  
31 we...

In the first part of extract 26 Carol constructs her experience of disclosure as a relief, constructing at the same time, the converse of concealment of homosexuality as a tension. In lines 4-5 Carol is keen to emphasise how her family's happiness is her priority and that is all that matters to her. I do not question this and go on to ask Carol how she 'came out' to her family (line 6). In response to my question Carol uses the strategy of 'sustaining ignorance' of homosexuality. Carol confirms that she *told* them (lines 7-8), but she does not elaborate on *what* she told them about her sexuality and instead foregrounds her news of divorce, silencing further discussion of her disclosure. I reiterate the potential impact of her disclosure (line 9) and although Carol is in

agreement regarding the import of her disclosure she also confirms its resolution (line 10) and thus closes down opportunities for further discussion. I do not probe for further information about *what* Carol told her family, to avoid inappropriate inquiry and causing Carol psychological discomfort. Instead I enquire about *responses* to her disclosure: possibly as the latter would be perceived as less of a threat to Carol's normative identity as a parent. In lines 12-18 Carol comments on the responses from her children and her parents. She highlights concerns that her eldest daughter and her parents had, and reassures me that these were quickly resolved.

In lines 22-29 Carol constructs her lesbian sexual identity as her 'true self' and she explains how she could no longer 'live a lie' (of heterosexuality) and that she had to be 'honest to herself'. Carol constructs her previous lifestyle as unhappy and damaging for herself and her children when commenting '*I used to just work and drink, that was it we- the kids were suffering*'. The first part of this sentence is important in the way it constructs Carol as *only* working and drinking and by its omission, not caring for her children, which is confirmed in the second part of the sentence: that the children were suffering. As her children were suffering it was unfair for Carol to remain in the closet and hence, disclosure of her sexuality is constructed as a positive and reasonable action. At the close of this extract Carol reiterates the positive impact that 'coming out' has had, emphasising the difference in herself 'pre' and 'post' disclosure to her family. As Carol constructs her new lifestyle as happier and healthier and one in which her children are no longer suffering, she is re-producing herself now, as a 'better parent'.

### 6.1.3 *Difference as 'dangerous'*

In extract 27 Denise accounts for maintaining the appearance of the hetero-patriarchal family by emphasizing the importance of 'keeping everything normal' for the children.

Denise supports her construction of 'difference' as dangerous (extract 20) when she describes the difficulties she and her children experienced when Denise's now ex-girlfriend Leslie had been living with them.

#### EXTRACT 27

- 1 Denise: er I just want the best for them
- 2 CN: yeah yeah...erm...what about, although you're not particularly
- 3 involved in the school, itself, d'you get involved in what they're
- 4 doing in their education in other ways?
- 5 Denise: yeah, well I go to, there's usually a- they do cross-country and my
- 6 kids are usually in it and me and (husband) always go to
- 7 everything together, if we go to see their work we go together so
- 8 just makes the kids feel really comfortable, so, they're happy about
- 9 him not livin' here now
- 10 CN: are they?
- 11 Denise: 'coz we do so much together with them so they feel comfortable
- 12 and safe like that I say to them [inaudible] but they say 'yeah but
- 13 he's here all the time' so
- 14 CN: still spend a lot of time with him, that's really nice that, mm
- 15 Denise: and if they- they go for Christmas presents- I go an' pick them
- 16 with him so like we get on great
- 17 CN: that's really good
- 18 Denise: not many are like that once you've told- once you've come out to
- 19 them (laughs)
- 20 CN: no...so what do you sort of, visualize then for yourself, in like a
- 21 relationship, d'you feel that you're really- you're gonna wait till
- 22 the children, have sort of left...d'you know what I mean by that?
- 23 Denise: I'm not really sure, I just, think to myself if I meet somebody and I
- 24 really really fall for them then I'll just introduce them to the kids
- 25 and see how things go with them and as a friend and then just say
- 26 I've fallen for them that's what I would say
- 27 CN: yeah yeah

- 28 Denise: I think it would be easier that way round so that they don't get  
29 hurt, they get used to the person [inaudible]
- 30 CN: yeah yeah...so, but in terms of them still being at school it's it's a  
31 problem, d'you feel?
- 32 Denise: yeah 'coz, while they're not old enough to look after themselves,  
33 and stick up for themselves, and I feel like I need to protect them  
34 against what I'm doing
- 35 CN: right, ok
- 36 Denise: I don't want to bring them problems and make them unhappy  
37 while they're only kids I think it's 'coz my childhood was so, I  
38 was so upset all the time I just want to make sure it doesn't happen  
39 to them
- 40 CN: you just don't want them to experience that
- 41 Denise: yeah and the minute their dad started fighting- we never used to  
42 argue [inaudible] but the minute we did I said you're gonna have  
43 to move out I'm not puttin' the kids through it, and he moved  
44 straight out because he agrees, you shouldn't see violence or  
45 arguments I'm really against that
- 46 CN: mm, yeah...and I suppose, havin' that experience it's
- 47 Denise: yeah...definitely
- 48 CN: (coughs) er...so how've friends reacted to, the situation

Prior to extract 27 I had asked Denise about her reasons for choosing the school that her children attended. She mentioned that her sister-in-law worked at the school and was keen that her children had someone to go to if there were any problems and in line 1 she concludes that she '*just wants the best for them*'. Following my question in lines 2-4, Denise describes how she and her (then) husband are both involved in attending the children's school, to see their work or to watch them playing sports. In lines 6-7 Denise states that she and her husband 'always go to everything together': an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) used to emphasise the regularity and range of their involvement in their children's work *as a couple*. She reiterates this in lines 8 to 9 and

gives a clear line of reason: that being involved as a couple '*makes the kids feel really comfortable*'. Denise's final comment at this point suggests that their involvement as a couple is a 'trade-off' to assuage her children's unhappiness over their separation. In lines 11 to 13 Denise reiterates her account and it is evident that I am influenced by this, as I collude in her construction of the 'happy heterosexual family' (line 14), which we continue in lines 15-19, whereupon Denise constructs her husbands' acceptance of Denise's sexuality as a rare value : '*not many are like that*'. It is clear at this point that I want to move the conversation away from Denise's relationship with her husband to find out more about what kind of relationship she wants for herself in the future. I falter in my questioning as I move from an equitable position regarding Denise's plans for a future relationship to one that is shaped by value judgements about the possibility that Denise is 'really going to wait until the children have left' school which I attempt to counter with the suggestion that my question could be misinterpreted (lines 20-22). Denise does not dis/confirm my statement and constructs a future relationship with a partner as knowledge that she would manage carefully in the context of her children (lines 23-26): who might otherwise be hurt (line 29). My expectation that Denise's concealment of her sexuality is shaped by her children still being at school is explicit in lines 30 to 31 where I construct the latter as a problem. Denise colludes in this construction, positioning her children as needing protection from the 'dangerous knowledge' of Denise's sexuality and from the potential consequences of disclosure (lines 32-34). Denise's negative personal experiences as a child (of domestic abuse against her mother and her father's alcoholism) add further support to her argument for the careful management of 'dangerous knowledge': she knows the experience of emotional pain in childhood and will do anything to protect her children from the same (lines 36-39). I respond with a firm affirmation in support of Denise's argument (line

40) which prompts Denise to disclose that she orchestrated the separation from her husband to protect the children from witnessing their ‘fighting and arguments’ (lines 41-45). Interestingly Denise constructs her husband as caring about the children’s needs: ‘he moved straight out’ and ‘agrees you shouldn’t see violence or arguments’. Their family composition is, in these terms, ‘better for the children’. Denise disclosed earlier in the interview how her husband had frequently attacked her physically and at one time so badly that she still wears make-up to conceal a large scar on her face. It seems that *not* living an openly lesbian life is for Denise as much about protecting the children from homophobic bullying as it is about protecting herself and her children from their father’s violent behaviour. I acknowledge her previous negative experiences (line 46) to add further support to her argument, although I shift the focus of our conversation (line 48) to save Denise (and myself) from the discomfort of or perceived pressure for disclosure and to ensure I do not cross the line of inappropriate inquiry within the context of my research.

Immediately prior to the talk in extract 28 (below) I briefly mentioned to Denise about academic research that explores different experiences of being a lesbian parent for biological and non-biological mothers and although I did not ask Denise a specific question, it lead to the following discussion about Denise’s previous girlfriend (Leslie) who had lived with Denise and her children for eighteen months:

#### EXTRACT 28

- 1 Denise: that’s another thing when Leslie lived with me, she thought
- 2 that- she had different views on kids because she got a very
- 3 strict upbringing and obviously she wasn’t happy she used- she
- 4 used to say to the kids ‘take your shoes straight upstairs and
- 5 your bags now’ and I used to say ‘em excuse me’ I said
- 6 ‘they’ve just done a full days work at school they do not want

7 to have to run upstairs and take all their stuff up' I said 'they  
8 want to come in put their bags down, sit down and have  
9 something to eat' 'yeah well that's why they're always like this  
10 and they're doing that and they're doing that, they're taking the  
11 piss out of yer' I said 'they're not' I said 'this is how I am' I  
12 said 'when they go to bed they take stuff up with them' I said  
13 'if they don't well fair enough, I'll do it' I said 'it's no harm' I  
14 said 'if I was at work all day I'd say well yous do this you do  
15 that'

16 CN: yeah so you had your way of doing things and she wasn't, mm  
17 Denise: (coughs) she used to say to them 'wash your plate up behind  
18 yous' where I always do the pots and I was like 'well I'm their  
19 mam, that- I don't expect them to do everything  
20 CN: mm, so that would have- that was quite [inaudible]  
21 Denise: they said she's 'what does she think we are, in the Army?'  
22 that's what they used to say, but my oldest one, he just rebelled  
23 against her completely he said 'she's moved in here, she thinks  
24 she can take over, when we go out she even moves things  
25 round' he said 'even our dad didn't used to say this to us and  
26 that to us'  
27 CN: that's interesting  
28 Denise: yeah...she was [inaudible] and I don't I mean I've never I can  
29 honestly say I've never seen her have a good laugh so she was  
30 completely the wrong personality for me and my children  
31 CN: yeah, and d'you think she tried to take a sort of parent role  
32 when she came in here?  
33 Denise: yeah she even used to say to them 'does anyone want to come  
34 shopping with me' and that and they'd go shopping but they'd  
35 say 'god I'd say can I have this and she used to say no, no, no'  
36 where I'd say/  
37 CN: yeah so she was really strict then by the sounds of it  
38 Denise: yeah, too strict and I just said that's not how I bring me kids up,  
39 the kids are kids and they should have a life they should be able  
40 to have fun, not be told what to do constantly

41 CN: she didn't have kids of her own?  
42 Denise: no  
43 CN: no, right so what was her feeling about the fact that you had  
44 three children, was she ok about that?  
45 Denise: yeah  
46 CN: yeah  
47 Denise: yeah...but she kept saying 'I wish I'd have met yer while they  
48 were smaller' and I said 'well no' because I'd be feeling- I  
49 wouldn't want them brought up the way you think's right  
50 CN: well this is it isn't it  
51 Denise: I said there's not one place- there's not one person's ever not  
52 commented on my kids when they've met them said 'god  
53 they're so polite and good' and I think well, I think I've done a  
54 good job with them myself I don't need somebody else  
55 changing them 'coz if they're miserable then probably they  
56 wouldn't be so polite and well mannered  
57 CN: mm, and that's it it's like someone else just coming in and  
58 deciding that you're doing it wrong is a bit much as well  
59 Denise: yeah, she said 'yer give into them too much' and I said 'well  
60 obviously not because- if I'd brought them up wrong then I  
61 would have had trouble with them' I said '[son's] nearly  
62 eighteen yet I don't have no trouble with him he doesn't like  
63 smoking he doesn't like drinking', I said 'that's great to me'  
64 she went 'well he wants to get a life' and I said 'well that is his  
65 life' I said 'and if he chooses not to drink and smoke then that's  
66 great for me' and she said 'well, [son] he can play out when he  
67 wants' I said 'he does football' I said 'he's obsessed with  
68 football' I said 'and if that's what he's in to at the moment' I  
69 said 'he's only on the green' and then she says '[daughter's] too  
70 clingy to yer 'coz she keeps wanting to be in bed with yer' I  
71 said 'her dad has just moved out' I said 'she's a daddy's girl  
72 she's constantly with him and all of a sudden he's just gone' I  
73 said 'what do you expect from them' and she said 'this is the  
74 perfect time to tell them you're gay' I said 'don't be so bloody

75                   stupid' I thought she's got **her** interests and not the kids and, it  
76                   constantly proved that she was more interested in what she  
77                   wanted from me, than what the kids wanted so that just didn't  
78                   work, just clashed completely

It is important to recapitulate here that Denise constructs her current family unit as 'best for her children' where their father is involved in their lives on a regular basis. Denise maintains the appearance of a traditional family unit in her endeavour to protect her children from homophobic bullying, and from the knowledge of Denise's homosexuality per se (as discussed in earlier sections of this analysis). Her argument for not living an openly lesbian lifestyle is supported further in extract 20 where Denise constructs Leslie's dangerous 'out and proud' lesbian identity as a potential threat to her children's wellbeing. In extract 28 Denise does not refer to the 'problematic' of Leslie's 'out and proud' lesbian identity but focuses instead on the conflicting values they held regarding good parenting practices. In lines 1 to 15 Denise constructs Leslie as an unhappy person, who was strict with Denise's children. Denise constructs Leslie's requests of Denise's children as unreasonable – using *straight upstairs* and *now* to emphasise Leslie's strict manner - and immediately constructs her own parenting practices against Leslie's, as fair and reasonable: *they've just done a full day's work at school*. 'A full day's work' is a sense-giving formulation (Pomerantz, 1986, p. 221) and in this example, a Maximum Case formulation used to create the sense that the children have been working for a very long time, and long enough for it to seem unreasonable to expect them to do further chores at home. In the paraphrased exchanges that follow Denise constructs Leslie as critical of the children's behaviour and critical of Denise for allowing them to behave that way. In lines 9 to 15 Denise describes how she defends herself against Leslie's critical attack. To some extent I

support Denise against Leslie's criticisms (line 16) where I confirm that Denise has 'her way of doing things', although I do not go so far as to accuse Leslie of anything. In lines 21 to 26 Denise paraphrases her children in their criticism of Leslie to add support to her claims that Leslie's behaviour was unreasonable. Paraphrasing her eldest son '*even our dad didn't used to say this to us and that to us*' Denise's construction is taken a step further to emphasise that Leslie's unreasonable behaviour was more extreme than their father's. My response to Denise's comments is somewhat benign (line 27) neither affirmative nor challenging although it works to draw more from Denise regarding her relationship with Leslie. Denise continues to construct herself and her children in opposition to Leslie and thus constructing Denise as having a good sense of humour and a fun-loving relationship with her children. At this point I affirm Denise's comments and support her construction of Leslie as unreasonable in her behaviour: there is some degree of accusation in my statement/question (lines 31-32), *tried* to take (but didn't succeed), a *sort of* parent role (undermining the quality of the role), when she *came in* here (as though uninvited). Together we construct Denise as a good parent who knows what is best for her children. This form of support occurs at various points throughout extract 28 where I affirm Denise's comments providing support and validation for her claims. In lines 47 to 56 Denise continues to construct herself as a 'better parent' than Leslie and uses (in a round about way) an extreme case formulation - 'everyone' comments on how good and polite her children are: if 'everyone' thinks so then she must be doing a good job. I reiterate my construction of Leslie as someone who has 'just come in' and questioned Denise's parenting and reinforce the unreasonableness of such behaviour, all in my endeavour to support Denise in her production of self as a good parent. In the final section of extract 28 (lines 59-78) Denise paraphrases numerous examples of interlocutions between herself and Leslie on the subject of

parenting Denise's children: she presents Leslie's criticisms and her own rebuttals, constructing counter-arguments for her good parenting practices as logical and reasonable. It is interesting to note that in this final section there is a sense of build-up in Denise's construction of Leslie as unreasonable in her ideas about parenting which culminates in the most unreasonable suggestion of all: that Denise should tell the children that she is gay. It is at this point that Denise constructs Leslie as a bad parent who would not put the children's needs before her own, and emphasising that they 'completely clashed' serves to strengthen Denise's position as a good parent who would always put her children first.

## **6.2 Managing others' expectations of lesbian parents**

### *6.2.1 Negotiating 'in/appropriate' behaviours*

In the first part of extract 29, Joanne begins by explaining that as Kelly is an only child, Joanne and Alison must take the responsibility of building Kelly's confidence and teaching her 'life skills' (lines 1-5). In the section of talk immediately following, Joanne provides a justification of their ability to do this well: Kelly's life is stable and that Kelly associates that stability with her parents' lesbian relationship. To provide further justification for this argument, Joanne constructs Kelly's association of heterosexual relationships with 'pain, arguments and hassle' and she explains this association because '*that's what her father's showing her*' (line 9). Constructing Joanne and Alison's lesbian relationship in opposition to this (lines 10-11) supports Joanne's argument that Kelly is benefitting from their parenting.

#### EXTRACT 29

- 1 Jo: I mean Kelly's an only child anyway so you know I mean, she doesn't  
2 have that mixture of like brothers and sisters to get, like bounce off with

3 confidence and, you know she's got she's got to get that from, well from  
4 us really hasn't she, so you know that's- again that's- sayin' about  
5 teaching her life skills, you know and at the moment in Kelly's life, with  
6 that, she sees that, a stable, like stable with stability, in her life, is, a  
7 lesbian couple whereas she sees, things where it's hurt, it's painful, it's  
8 erm, arguments it's hassle, it's, or anything around that is in a  
9 heterosexual relationship, because that's what her father's showing her  
10 you know where, her mum, and who she's chosen as a wonderful partner  
11 (all laugh) erm you know, she's seen that, you know, if somebody's  
12 saying erm you know, callin' lesbians dirty names and that, Kelly can't  
13 understand because, that's not how it is and we were just sayin' in the car  
14 on the way down, that, you sort of like...when Ali said about Kelly seeing  
15 the questionnaire, you sort of like thought, 'oh' you could see in your face  
16 CN: me?  
17 Jo: yeah, because we very rarely, keep things from Kelly do we?  
18 Ali: no  
19 Jo: we're very open with her  
20 CN: right  
21 Jo: erm/  
22 Ali: 'coz the question about whether she was gonna be here, she was like 'so  
23 am I going?' and I'm like 'no, you're not', 'so why aren't I going?' 'coz  
24 you don't need to' (laughs) so she was like 'oh right ok'

The positive tone created thus far in this extracted moment, changes in lines 11 to 12 when Joanne introduces the notion of 'dirty lesbians' as she explains how Kelly cannot understand others' constructions of lesbians in this negative way. Kelly does not understand it because '*that's not how it is*' (line 13). At this point, Joanne and Alison's '*difference*' as lesbian parents is foregrounded and must be negotiated: Joanne is compelled to *account for* their non-normative identity and from this point Joanne speaks "as someone who cannot assume a sympathetic hearing" (Pomerantz, 1986, p. 221). To counter the possibility that I would disapprove of Joanne's account of their openness

with Kelly about their lesbian relationship (line 17), she positions me (in advance) as someone who might undermine this (lines 14-15). The effect of this strategy is to block potential challenges. I am silenced for a short time by Joanne's comment: possibly hurt and surprised by what I interpreted at the time as an accusation. In line 19 where Joanne reiterates their openness with Kelly, I acknowledge this (line 20) and then remain silent: I do not want to cross the line of inappropriate inquiry and to question, seemingly, the appropriateness of Joanne and Alison's behaviour; Alison cuts in to take the conversation in a different direction.

The management of others' expectations of lesbian parents was evident in the women's accounts, particularly when they spoke about their lesbian relationship within the home context and how they 'behaved' with their partner around their children. Within the extracts presented in this section, homosexuality is constructed as 'dangerous knowledge' that must be managed carefully to 'head-off' potential accusations of 'inappropriate' behaviour. The extract from my interview with Denise (extract 30), reminds us of the pressure facing lesbians, gays and bisexuals within modern western societies to 'come out': evident in Denise's narrative of her hopes of meeting a woman who would not mind 'pretending they were friends in front of the kids' (lines 1-9). Finding a partner who will collude in the concealment of their lesbian relationship is something that Denise constructs as desirable but unlikely. She supports this by paraphrasing previous partners and constructing them as putting pressure on Denise to be 'out and proud' within the family context. In line 10, I collude with Denise in her construction of her previous partners as unreasonable in their request for disclosure, suggesting disclosure may be premature and inappropriate in this context. At this point (line 11) I also foreground Denise's identity as a mother and use this to rationalise the concealment of her sexuality by positioning Denise as a responsible

authority on the appropriate disclosure of her sexual identity to her children. It is evident that as I position Denise as an authority on appropriate disclosure, she reassures me that telling the children would not mean that she and her partner would be intimate 'in front of the kids' (lines 13-14): and heads off potential challenges that her behaviour would be inappropriate. I support Denise's line of reasoning regarding her concealment of her lesbian identity in this context (lines 15 and 18): in a society that shares negative stereotypes of gays and lesbians as 'highly sexual and dangerous, especially to children' it makes sense to be careful about how one discloses their homosexuality and manages their identity within the context of children: in our interaction here, neither one of us want Denise's actions to be deemed inappropriate.

#### EXTRACT 30

- 1 Denise: I mean if- I could meet somebody tomorrow and if they said 'oh  
2 that's fine pretending we're friends in front of the kids' I'd be over  
3 the moon but not many people would be  
4 CN: right, right  
5 Denise: I mean they go to their dads on a weekend he has them Friday and  
6 Saturday and I mean, two days a week I could just be myself in  
7 here with them if, that's enough for somebody and just pretend  
8 they're my friend the rest of the week, we can still go out away  
9 from the kids but they're all like 'no, tell them'  
10 CN: isn't it strange that, I wonder what the, urgency is, for them to **tell**  
11 the kids, I mean of all people you should know when the right time  
12 is  
13 Denise: I mean even if I **do** tell the kids I'm still not gonna be, all over  
14 them kissing them in front of the kids  
15 CN: well exactly  
16 Denise: 'coz I didn't do that with their dad, so I'm not gonna do it with  
17 another girl it'd be like '**whoa**' (both laugh)  
18 CN: that's it isn't it

- 19 Denise: I mean I don't mind sittin' next to somebody and givin' them a  
20 cuddle in front of the kids but yeah...I mean even when (ex-  
21 girlfriend) lived here they did think she was just my friend but I, I  
22 used to sit on the floor and she'd brush my hair and things like that  
23 so they knew that we were closer friends and I don't mind them  
24 thinking that and them working it out for themselves but, I don't  
25 want to have to come out and say 'by the way she's my girlfriend'  
26 'coz there's no need to say that to them
- 27 CN: no...but you said that they knew originally and then you sort of  
28 back-tracked a bit, how did you do that? What did you tell them  
29 originally?
- 30 Denise: erm, I said 'I've always, preferred women than men all my life' I  
31 said 'but, I always went by what my mum wanted for me' and  
32 they were saying 'so you're a lesbian then?' I went 'well' I said 'I  
33 still love your dad' and I was like 'I still love your dad but I'm  
34 still, attracted to women' but now (my son) thinks I'm attracted to  
35 women but I'm not gonna do it I think
- 36 CN: ah right yeah, so they sort of understand that you have an  
37 attraction to women but you don't act on it
- 38 D: yeah
- 39 CN: right

In lines 19-26 (extract 30) Denise constructs a picture of appropriate 'disclosure' of her sexual identity and of appropriate ways she would like her children to 'know about' or learn about Denise's sexuality: she constructs her relationship with a partner as a close romantic friendship and an ideological pedagogy of sexuality in which her children learn of Denise's sexuality by noticing Denise's interactions with her partner, wondering, thinking and 'working it out for themselves' (line 24). Interestingly Denise does not position the children as 'not needing to *know*' about her sexuality, instead she positions herself as 'not needing to *tell*' her children. This offers Denise a position within which her silence is reasonable: 'telling' the children may be inappropriate, it is

better that they work it out for themselves. This positioning makes sense when we consider Denise's account of her son's negative reaction to peers' homophobic comments about his mum, and that 'the only reason he could cope was because he knew they were lying'.

In lines 27-29 I return to a question of disclosure, hoping for more information about the words that Denise used when disclosing her sexual identity to her children. Denise constructs homosexuality as dangerous knowledge that she has not confirmed or disconfirmed to her children, it remains unclear and thus unknowable. There are conflicting ideologies underpinning her account, she has always been attracted to women but she positions her mum as responsible for 'sending' Denise along the path to heterosexuality, marriage and a traditional family life. This provides a reasonable argument for not living an openly lesbian life. Denise paraphrases her children (32-35) and positions them as questioning their mum's sexuality, or suspecting she is gay, although Denise's responses to their questions function to sustain ignorance of her identity as a lesbian. In this account of Denise's interaction with her children she is living out the dilemma of wanting to be 'true' in her identity as a lesbian, and to live up to the imagined expectations of her children.

Immediately prior to the start of extract 31 (below) Bev had been talking about coming out to her children and telling her partner Sian that she had done so. In lines 1 to 3 Bev describes how she told her children when the opportunity arose and she constructs the moment as leap of faith where she '*just went for it*' (line 3). In lines 4 to 6 Bev emphasises the positive impact that disclosure has had on her relationship with Sian – a relationship that they can share openly now that the children know they are partners. Within this statement Bev pauses to emphasise that Sian and Bev are not '*in your face, we don't rub it in their faces*' (lines 4-5). The importance of this statement in

its construction of Bev and Sian's relationship as 'appropriate' comes in it's proximity to Bev's following comments that her children often knock on the door of and enter Bev and Sian's bedroom and ask *'what are you watching'*, which also functions to emphasise the ordinariness of their relationship. In lines 8 to 10 Bev describes the scene where all four are laid down or across the bed watching television together and Bev reiterates (lines 10-11) that disclosing her lesbian identity to her children has enabled them to spend time doing ordinary things together. Bev's construction of their close family unit doing ordinary things together is important and is used to distance herself and Sian from negative cultural stereotypes of dangerous and 'inappropriate' lesbian sexuality in the context of children.

#### EXTRACT 31

- 1 Bev: Sian said 'well you've been saying you were gonna do it for a while' I  
2 said 'the moment was there' my dad was out I had the house to myself I  
3 had my children, both of them together erm...and I just went for it you  
4 know and I'm so pleased I did because then it, it means now that Sian and  
5 I, we're not in your face, we don't rub it in their faces but, I now have a  
6 relationship with Sian that, that the kids are comfortable with, you know  
7 erm, I mean quite often, erm, they'll knock on the bedroom door erm,  
8 they'll say 'oh what you watching' and the next minute I've got one laid  
9 across the bottom of the bed and (CN laughs) one up the side of the bed  
10 and there's four of us watching telly upstairs, and if I hadn't've been- you  
11 know come out with them, then I couldn't do that you know and erm like  
12 quite often, I think Louise was...felt like that she was, being, what's the  
13 word I'm looking for?- another woman in the house you know she doesn't  
14 live with me Sian, but erm, Louise had been the woman in my life and of  
15 course, this other woman comes along, and 'am I- is that woman taking so  
16 much away?'- where Gary is fine with it  
17 CN: yeah

18 Bev: my son, but if it had been a **man** in my life, he would have reacted the  
19 same you know he had been the man in my life erm, and then this other  
20 man was coming treading on his territory so, I did have a difficult time  
21 with Louise for a while er, an' even now she she'll be- if we're we're all  
22 having tea she'll come in, and she'll sit right there that- so Sian and I can't  
23 sit together (CN laughs) you know (smiling) and that's fine but quite often  
24 I'll- if we're watching TV I'll say 'come on move coz I wanna sit there'  
25 'plenty of other seats' and I say 'well, when your boyfriend comes in I'm  
26 gonna sit in the middle of you two' 'you like to sit with your partner I like  
27 to sit with mine' 'ok mam, ok' and Gary says 'stop being awful Louise,  
28 shift' you know  
29 CN: ah so they are pretty cool about it now, yeah?

Following Bev's construction of her relationship with Sian as 'appropriate' within the family context (extract 31) in the remaining section of the extract Bev constructs homosexuality as 'progressive knowledge' which her children 'need to learn'. Positioning her children as 'needing to know' about and value homosexuality and homosexual relationships functions to rationalise Bev's disclosures of her sexual identity within everyday interactions with her children.

Pertinent to Bev's construction of homosexuality as progressive knowledge in the latter part of extract 31, Bev positions her daughter as 'threatened' by Sian's presence in their home (lines 12-16). Bev raises the importance of gender here, where she positions her daughter as feeling threatened in contrast to her son who was '*fine with it*' because Bev's partner was not a man. In lines 21-22 Bev's construction of her daughter's difficulty in accepting Sian into the family home, changes from being in the past and short-lived, to being - if not entirely resolved - not a major problem now. Bev describes typical examples of ordinary living to support this (lines 21-28). Bev describes how her daughter will sit close to Bev when they are having tea together with

the intention of preventing Sian and Bev from sitting together. At this point (lines 22-23) I laugh at this comment and Bev follows this with '*you know (smiling) and that's fine*'. These comments and expressions work to construct her daughter's action as understandable and to some extent acceptable. It is in lines 24 to 28 that Bev describes a similar scenario when they are all watching television together in their living room and it is at this point that Bev positions herself as intervening and challenging her daughter's attempts at keeping her mum and Sian apart. Bev paraphrases herself and in doing so highlights her efforts to not only move her daughter to a different seat, but also to teach her daughter to value Bev and Sian's relationship. To support her argument that her relationship with Sian should be valued, Bev emphasises the unreasonableness of her daughter's actions (lines 25-26) and the parity of her partnership with Sian, and her daughter's partnership with her boyfriend (lines 26-27): '*you like to sit with your partner, I like to sit with mine*': statements juxtaposed to defend the legitimacy of her lesbian relationship. In the final part of the extract, Bev comments that her daughter accepts Bev's argument: '*ok mam, ok*'. Moreover, paraphrasing her son '*stop being awful Louise, shift*', confirms that her daughter's actions are understood by her children to have been unpleasant and therefore unacceptable. My final comment (line 29) functions to endorse the children's acceptance of Bev and Sian's relationship, and to validate the construction and disclosure of homosexuality as 'progressive knowledge'.

#### EXTRACT 32

- 1 CN: erm, one of the other things that's come up in other interviews is that
- 2 bullying has been a- an issue, and that's, often you know, created a
- 3 situation where people have had to say something to teachers and that,
- 4 would that ever- has it come up?
- 5 Carol: er no, it hasn't come up yet, that was, one of Paul's concerns he was
- 6 concerned of what happens if the kids get bullied and I says 'yeah but,' as

7 I said earlier on I said it's not kids now-a-days it's the older generation  
8 that- *kids aren't bothered*...they see it all the time on the telly and  
9 everything anyway it's, common- as I say I've had no issue at all  
10 CN: that's great  
11 Carol: and it's been two years now, so I think really it it- if it was gonna  
12 happen it would've happened a long time ago  
13 CN: yeah yeah I would imagine so  
14 Carol: yeah  
15 CN: I think, generally that's been- it's been a really positive kind of reaction  
16 from school friends, in other interviews I've done, their friends have been,  
17 really good or even confided in, in **them** you know the, sons and  
18 daughters have sort of become, I don't know erm...what did somebody  
19 call it, gaydar-by-proxy, a kind of magnet for other children to come to  
20 them and say 'oh', you know 'I think I might be gay' or  
21 Carol: yeah 'can you tell my mam?'  
22 CN: yeah (both laugh)  
23 Carol: well hopefully that doesn't happen but but the thing is I'm always the  
24 mam that- I always have the sleep-overs at my house and I always have,  
25 with both of them they've always had sleep-overs always, kids 'round  
26 ours and they always come for dinner and  
27 CN: ah right yeah  
28 Carol: but, the kids never go anywhere else, they don't go to sleep-overs it's  
29 always at mine  
30 CN: is it?  
31 Carol: it's always at mine  
32 CN: because?  
33 Carol: probably 'coz I'm the only relaxed mam in/  
34 CN: (laughing) right  
35 Carol: they're not daft enough to have six or seven kids in their house at the  
36 same time  
37 CN: oh I see...mm...but you'd be quite happy if they wanted to though/ go  
38 elsewhere  
39 Carol: yeah probably  
40 CN: ...erm...mm (long pause refers to notes)

In my opening question (extract 32) I use the fact that other participants have commented on problems of bullying, to support the relevance of my question and also to create a safe, 'non judgemental', space for Carol to disclose any problems of bullying that her children might have experienced (Lines 1-4). In her comment: 'no, it hasn't come up yet' (line 5) Carol confirms that there have been no problems with bullying although the possibility of this happening still remains. She immediately follows this (lines 5-9) by positioning her ex-husband as the one who was concerned about bullying and she dismisses his concerns in her construction of the younger (modern) generation as accepting of homosexuality in contrast to the older (traditional) generation (Carol also refers to the 'older' generation as being more homophobic in extract 5). She positions kids as 'not bothered' and supports this claim using extreme case formulations: *'they see it all the time on telly'*, *'it's common'* and *'she has had no issues at all'*. I commend her claim (line 10) and Carol goes on to support her argument further by highlighting that 'a long time has passed in which there have continued to be no problems' (lines 11-12). I am enthusiastic in my affirmations (lines 10, 13) and support Carol's argument further, once again using other participants' comments to validate my construction of a supportive ethos that has developed between the women's children and their friends at school (lines 15-20). In reality only Bev, Jan and Marie highlighted that their children were supportive of school friends who were 'coming out' or questioning their sexuality, although I generalise this and in so doing, normalize the children's acquisition of progressive values and acceptance of homosexuality. Carol's humorous retort (line 21) is a response to my potentially idealistic construction of a supportive 'gay community' within school and is followed by Carol's rejection of any suggestion that she might want to be involved in 'counselling' other children regarding their sexuality and coming out to their own parents: *'well hopefully that doesn't happen'*

(line 23) and in doing so protects her normative, and appropriate, parent identity. Although the comment confirms that she does not formally support her daughters' friends, Carol goes on to position them as 'wanting to know' more and emphasises how they *always* want to be at Carol's home to sleep-over and stay for dinner (23-26). Carol uses an extreme case formulation: 'always', to emphasise their preference for spending time at Carol's home and the regularity of their visits. I hesitate in asking Carol for more information (27, 30), but when she repeats this comment (lines 28-29 and 31) I am impelled to ask more directly. Following Carol's answer, there is a sense that I am relieved (line 34) but also disappointed (line 37) that Carol had moved the focus of our conversation away from 'supporting children questioning their sexuality'. Constructing herself as a liberal parent is as far as Carol is prepared to go: allowing her daughters' friends to spend time at Carol's home is one thing, being seen to support them in 'coming out' as gay or lesbian may be a step too far.

#### EXTRACT 33

- 1 Marie: she's been going out with Louise for about a month and she's been
- 2 starting to take Louise in there and
- 3 Jan: and holding hands with her
- 4 Marie: discretely under the table, like that (demonstrates by holding Jan's hand),
- 5 and they got pulled- er Diane got pulled to one side and they said 'look
- 6 there's been some complaints' you know so, but they said that they were
- 7 kissing they were cuddling they were you know
- 8 CN: making it out like it was really, obvious
- 9 Jan &
- 10 Marie: yeah
- 11 Jan: but they're not that, type of person
- 12 Marie: you know so there's, nowhere in town where you can be yourself
- 13 basically
- 14 CN: that's it isn't it

- 15 Jan: you daren't even, walk down the street, well this street you can coz they  
16 Marie: they know us  
17 Jan: they know us but like walking 'round the town holding hands, you  
18 wouldn't coz you'd...you'd get jumped on an' all, you know...things  
19 shouted at yer, so especially when you've got the kids with yer, you know  
20 Marie: so it is important to us erm, havin' somewhere that you can actually be  
21 yourself, you **can** let your guard down basically, 'coz you're always on  
22 your guard aren't yer  
23 Jan: yeah when we went to Blackpool, you know, it was like a relief just to sit,  
24 you know like this (puts her arm around Marie's shoulders) an', have a  
25 drink where, 'round here you're like that (withdraws from Marie) or  
26 you're stood and you're going, if she happens to put her arm 'round me,  
27 '*behave*' you know, you're looking about, all the time  
28 CN: yeah

At the start of extract 33 Marie is talking about her friends Diane and Louise who have started socialising at a local club in which Jan and Marie also spend time. It is evident that they have discussed this subject before as Jan immediately knows where Marie is going with the story (line 3). Their comments in lines 1 to 12 construct a scenario in which their friends are accused of behaving inappropriately within the local club. They begin by explaining (and demonstrating) how their friends were holding hands 'discreetly under the table' (lines 3-4) and so positioning them as reserved and careful in their displays of affection in a public space. Marie goes on to describe how their behaviour was called into question by staff in the club (lines 5-7), using strategies to construct the complaint as coming from more than one person and paraphrasing the staff member's construction of their behaviour as inappropriate '*they said they were kissing and cuddling*'. I cut in and demonstrate my understanding of this unfair accusation (line 8) offering my validation and agreement that it was unfair. Jan's comment (line 11) positions their friends as not the '*type of person*' that would kiss and cuddle in public -

they would hold hands discretely under the table – but they would not behave ‘inappropriately’. We construct homosexual intimacy as a form of disclosure that must be managed carefully, especially in public spaces where taking such risks ‘to be yourself’ is injudicious. This inequity of careful management of intimacy for lesbians and gays is highlighted in lines 12 to 15 where we complain at the lack of spaces where homosexual hand-holding, kissing or cuddling is deemed acceptable or appropriate behaviour.

The consequences of being seen as a lesbian couple in their home town are described by Jan in lines 16 to 19, where hand-holding would undoubtedly attract homophobic insults and physical attack. Jan’s argument for not holding hands with Marie in public is a reasonable one, supported by knowledge of the consequences of doing so. The comment in line 19 ‘*especially when you’ve got the kids with you*’ can be interpreted in two ways: that the homophobic abuse would increase or, that Jan and Marie would not want their children to be vulnerable to such abuse. Either way, despite their desire ‘to be themselves’ as a lesbian couple, they manage their lesbian identities – they do not want what could be deemed as inappropriate behaviour (holding hands) to have negative consequences for themselves and for their children. In the final section of this extract (lines 20-27) Jan and Marie describe their desire for social places where they can be themselves, let their guard down and relax. Unlike their nights out in Blackpool, the uneasiness they experience in local pubs and clubs is palpable where they are ‘*looking about all the time*’ for disapproving looks or comments, potentially from people they know. Jan and Marie are negotiating their visibility as lesbians within a potentially homophobic environment, and they are also involved in managing their lesbian partner’s expectations of closeness to or distance from one another, within supportive or hostile environments, respectively. The import of this description is that

Jan and Marie are demonstrating the effort involved in the careful management of their 'dangerous' lesbian identities and the 'appropriateness' of their behaviour as a lesbian and as a parent.

#### EXTRACT 34

- 1 CN: but she doesn't mind doing it at all?
- 2 Jo: she loves it, oh she thrives on it, absolutely thrives on it\* there's a book  
3 there, she's there, open a book and Kelly's there
- 4 Ali: but it's getting to the stage now where she's wanting to read, the books off  
5 my, bookshelf, and it's like, 'well that one might be alright' (all laugh)
- 6 Jo: but what about the one she found...under yer (Fiona laughs)  
7 thingy...can't you remember when you moved, she'd moved in and I was  
8 like puttin', like 'oh right what do I do with these ones', them whatsit  
9 ones that you got, that I bought yer
- 10 Ali: the Early Embraces ones?
- 11 Jo: yeah, they don't go on the bookshelf y'see, so and Ali had this, little like,  
12 chair thing with a- the lid came up, and you had your telly on it didn't yer,  
13 so I put the books under there and the telly on it so that- thinking Kelly  
14 wouldn't go in there
- 15 CN: wrong!
- 16 Jo: wrong! 'mam what are these books?' (all laugh)
- 17 Ali: 'you can't read them yet, no not them ones' (all laugh)
- 18 CN: oh so if there's a book she'll find it
- 19 Jo: oh yeah, she'll sniff it out, tell yer she's like a hound dog she sniffs it out  
20 at fifty paces
- 21 Ali: yeah on Friday she said 'can I borrow one of your books for reading in  
22 English today' so I said 'well, that's from the teenage section at the library  
23 you can maybe read that one' 'coz we even go the library and like buy the  
24 books that they sell and stuff so... 'oh I've got the first one in that, how  
25 come you've got the second one in your book shelf', 'well you can have  
26 that to go with your first one then' and
- 27 CN: you really will have a library before you know it

Prior to the start of extract 34 Joanne told me that Kelly helped Joanne's nephews with their homework on a regular basis although Joanne was not sure that her brother appreciated Kelly's help enough, which then lead on to the conversation about Kelly's love of books. In lines 2 to 3 Joanne enthusiastically describes Kelly's love of books: this is part of Joanne and Alison's construction throughout their interview, of Kelly as a good and able student in her academic work with a passion for learning and a love of books especially. Interestingly Alison volunteers comments about Kelly's interest in books that may not be appropriate for her. Alison's comment highlights that Kelly is growing up and that she is developing an interest in learning more about (sex)uality. Alison describes to us how she chooses 'safe' books for Kelly to read (line 5). We all laugh at this point, laughter that continues throughout this extract: possibly used to alleviate our shared discomfort in talking about children's interest in (sex)uality per se. It seems likely that that was as far as Alison was going to take this scenario, evident in lines 6 to 9 when Joanne presses her to recall particular books that Kelly found. Eventually Alison recalls the books although she does not appear to want to comment further at this point (line 10). Joanne's first comment following this (line 11) confirms that Kelly does not have direct access to the books in question, and then goes on to describe the elaborate ways in which they attempted to hide the books from Kelly (lines 11-14). Joanne echoed my humorously spirited comment to confirm that Kelly had indeed found the books. Alison's rejoinder, fast spoken, communicates her sense of urgency that Kelly does not read them yet, and positions her daughter as 'not ready to know' about 'early embraces'<sup>xiv</sup> thus positioning herself as a responsible parent whose actions can only be deemed appropriate. To ensure that Joanne and Alison are not perceived in any way as acting inappropriately, I position Kelly as 'able to find *any* book *anywhere*' (line 18). Joanne builds on my comment (lines 19-20) and in lines 21

to 26 Alison describes how she negotiates with Kelly to ensure that she is reading books that are suitable for her age, reinforcing the appropriateness of Alison's parenting practices. I swiftly change the direction of the conversation to preserve Alison's normative parent identity.

### 6.3 Lesbian parents embracing 'difference'

#### 6.3.1 Homosexuality as progressive knowledge

In this section I continue my analysis of the women's accounts for their lesbian parenting and lesbian parent family. I examine ways in which they negotiate their difference as a lesbian parent when talking about their children's constructions of homosexuality and how they counter negative stereotypes. The women's constructions of homosexuality as 'progressive knowledge' are most common in this context and they position their children as 'needing and wanting to know' about homosexuality. It is important to note that the use of this construction of homosexuality is not exclusive in this context: the women also draw on constructions of homosexuality as private or dangerous to support their argument for the careful negotiation of their lesbian identities, particularly when they talk about supporting children (their own children and their children's friends/peers) in negotiating their own homosexual identity and decisions about 'coming out'.

#### EXTRACT 35

- 1 CN: yeah, and, when you told them, when you did come out to them do you
- 2 still- you used the the word gay, do you sort of see yourself- is that how
- 3 you would describe yourself?
- 4 Bev: yeah, I don't, I don't like describing myself as lesbian **unless**, I'm in the
- 5 group capacity
- 6 CN: oh ok

7 Bev: and then we call ourselves lesbians or Sian (Bev's partner) likes the word  
8 dyke  
9 CN: ah right (laughs) yeah reclaiming it  
10 Bev: yeah, but I I prefer to, to label myself gay  
11 CN: d'you?  
12 Bev: gay woman yeah  
13 CN: gay woman, yeah...what is it about 'lesbian' then?  
14 Bev: erm...it was a word I I couldn't even say up until three year ago really  
15 erm I don't know what it was I think it was the stigma that went with it in  
16 the seventies (both laugh) you know lesbian lesbo lezzer you know it's,  
17 it's quite a cruel-  
18 CN: it's one of those playground taunt names isn't it  
19 Bev: and- I don't know if you're aware in school, erm, the playground word is  
20 if, if somebody doesn't conform to something they're all gay 'oh yer gay  
21 yer gay!' and I mean it comes it spills into the home, and it was amazing  
22 at first like (daughter and son)'d be arguing and they'd be 'Oh yer gay  
23 you!' 'excuse me, that's my label' and it would break the argument up  
24 (CN laughs) and they'd say 'mam don't say that about yourself' 'why? I  
25 am' you know and even now if I have a disagreement with my daughter  
26 she stomps about she'll go 'oh yer gay you' and I'll go 'correct! ten  
27 points' (both laugh) and she goes 'mam, you know what I mean' you  
28 know

In extract 35 I begin by asking Bev what words she used to describe her sexual identity when she came out to her children and to clarify how she 'labels' her sexuality. Bev talks about using the term lesbian (or dyke) when she is 'in a group capacity' (line 4-5, 7-8), suggesting that in any other capacity she prefers the term 'gay woman' to describe her sexuality (9, 12). In her answer to my question about the 'problem' with the term 'lesbian' Bev considers her difficulty with voicing the word until relatively recently and associates this with the stigma and pejorative use of the word in her past (lines 14-17). That Bev states 'in the seventies' places the stigma in the past, although our laughter at

that point suggests that we share knowledge of the stigma and that our experience of it is still with us. This is evident in my response (line 18) emphasising the context and pain of my own experiences in support of Bev's account. In her response (lines 19 to 21) Bev informs me that 'gay' is the current 'playground word' used in schools and that this 'spills into the home'. It is in the remaining section of this extract that Bev paraphrases her interlocations with her children to construct homosexuality as progressive knowledge and produce herself as a 'proud gay woman' who can challenge her children's pejorative language. Bev constructs the children's language as pejorative (lines 20-21) when she states that her children were arguing at the time they were using the term 'gay' as a derogatory name. In paraphrasing her reaction '*excuse me, that's my label*', Bev is not only breaking up the argument, she is 'claiming' the label for herself. Bev highlights that her children find it difficult to understand Bev's motivation for doing so (line 24) and her paraphrased response '*why? I am*' functions to normalise Bev lesbian identity constructing it as progressive knowledge that Bev does not wish to conceal. Bev confirms her resolute position in her account of a similar interaction with her daughter (lines 25-28): the humour we see in the futility of her daughter's attempts to have *her* meaning of the word accepted, and a sense of success for Bev in fostering gay-affirmative values in her children is evident.

In contrast to earlier extracts from Denise's interview in which homosexuality is constructed as 'dangerous knowledge' and where Denise is vague about or silences discussion of sexuality around her children, in extract 36 Denise enthusiastically paraphrases her discussions with her children about concealment of homosexual identity for herself and others, and goes on to describe how she would support her children if they identified as gay or lesbian. My opening line offers a safe space for such a discussion:

EXTRACT 36

- 1 CN: I think it's just nice, that kids can like, **know** that there's op- you  
2 know the option
- 3 Denise: yeah, well that's why I- well I **constantly** say to all of them,  
4 sometimes you don't like gay people because of your own  
5 sexuality I said 'I used to say 'urgh that's disgusting' I said 'but I  
6 knew I wanted to do it' that's what I said [inaudible]
- 7 CN: yeah, you just deny it to yourself yeah, absolutely
- 8 Denise: it's like I was trying my hardest for people not to, see through me,  
9 so I was like 'urgh, I wouldn't dare kiss another lass' and I was  
10 thinking I do it every day (both laugh)
- 11 CN: right yeah
- 12 Denise: but to other people I was constantly, trying to say- like prove to  
13 them that I wouldn't do it, because I knew I **was** doing it strange  
14 isn't it? but then I think well, if that's why me kids have a problem  
15 with it because, I mean, lots and lots of gay men say, 'oh my god  
16 he's gonna be gay him he's gorgeous he's too pretty to be a girl-a  
17 boy, but- and he wanted to wear tights 'til he was seven
- 18 CN: who's this?
- 19 Denise: (son) (both laugh) and he still does these little dances- you know  
20 like he'll get tissues and he'll, jump up and down like a Morris  
21 dancer
- 22 CN: ah yeah (laughs)
- 23 Denise: I laugh my head off, like he just does things like that and then  
24 they'll 'oh you look like a poof [inaudible] (laughs) and I say well  
25 if he's a poof he's a poof, he's still a gorgeous poof aren't yer  
26 (son)
- 27 CN: that's really good that yeah
- 28 Denise: I think, I'll let them know that no matter what they are I'll still  
29 [see] them the same and I really don't care
- 30 CN: ah, that's brilliant

31 Denise: and I've said to all of them, I really prefer you to be straight 'coz  
 32 it's an easier life but if you're gay you're gay and I'll help you  
 33 through it I've always said that to them

34 CN: that's excellent, couldn't ask for more really, I mean, I know my  
 35 nephew he's he's always been accused of being effeminate and all  
 36 of that- he's absolutely fantastic he's a **lovely** person and I think  
 37 whatever whatever, it doesn't matter

38 Denise: it doesn't matter as long as they treat, people well I don't care- or  
 39 if they're treat well, whoever they get with if they treat them well  
 40 then I'm cool about it

41 CN: absolutely yeah, yeah

42 Denise: (daughter)'s been holding hands with her friends walking home,  
 43 things like that, and they're like 'oh my god she's a lesbian mam'  
 44 [inaudible]

45 CN: that's really good actually, I think to react like that

46 Denise: she doesn't care she just doesn't care what people think or say she  
 47 gives her friends a kiss and a cuddle in the street and people are  
 48 saying 'oh have you seen her she's a lesbian' and she goes 'they're  
 49 my friends, **girl-friends'**

50 CN: she sounds like she knows what she's about

51 Denise: oh she- yeah she's got her head screwed on

52 CN: yeah, that's great that

53 Denise: I thought well if she is I'm gonna make it a hell of a lot easier than  
 54 I've had it

55 CN: mm, yeah, yeah that's it, has a lot of impact doesn't it when  
 56 you've been through it yourself yeah...yeah, erm...just going back  
 57 to, you coming out, to people, who who did you come out to first,  
 58 was it friends?

In line 3 (extract 36) Denise uses extreme case formulations to emphasise the frequency and distribution of her sexual pedagogy: she tells *all* of her children *constantly*. Denise continues in lines 3 to 6 to provide more detail about what she tells her children about

sexuality and it is interesting that the focus of her construction is homosexuality as dangerous knowledge and it is this form of knowledge that she seeks to challenge. She constructs her children as sometimes holding negative beliefs about homosexuals and positions herself as someone who is prepared to challenge their assumptions. Denise paraphrases herself in her interactions with her children and others, describing strategies of denial and concealment of her lesbian sexuality (lines 4-5, 9-10, 12-13). In lines 14 to 15 Denise begins to consider that her denial and concealment of her sexuality may be a reason for her children 'having a problem' with homosexuality. There is a sense of retrospection giving an impression that Denise has 'moved on' from earlier practices of denial, and that she is now more open about her sexuality. To reinforce this message Denise begins to talk about her son and how he is perceived by others to be gay and feminine (lines 16-17) and Denise builds on this construction as she describes how her son '*wanted to wear tights 'til he was seven*' and dances (with tissues) '*like a Morris dancer*'. Denise positions those that call her son a poof as being derogatory or hostile and in her response she supports and validates her son: '*well if he's a poof he's a poof, he's still a gorgeous poof aren't you son*' (lines 24-26). This statement and Denise's comments in lines 28 to 29 produce Denise as a caring, supportive parent who will always love and accept her children whatever their sexuality. I am enthusiastic in my affirmations and Denise confirms her position once again in lines 31 to 33, identifying the potential difficulties her children will face if they do identify as gay or lesbian and emphasising the need for Denise's unwavering support. I comment with emphatic praise for Denise's support and continue Denise's positioning of children as 'needing support' with an account of my nephew and accusations against him (lines 34-37). Denise continues this positioning strategy within the remainder of the extract, and also constructs her daughter as confident to deal with homophobic comments from peers

(lines 46-49, 51). In lines 54 to 54 Denise's comment suggests that her support will benefit her daughter if she does identify as a lesbian and in my agreement (lines 55-58) I construct Denise's rationale – based on her personal negative experiences of 'coming out' - for supporting her children, as a valid one.

#### EXTRACT 37

- 1 Bev: ..they both chose not to actually tell their friends erm, but if their friends  
2 asked, or become aware of it then, they would decide then what they were  
3 gonna do from there
- 4 CN: choose carefully I suppose, who they told
- 5 Bev: and it it's quite amazing especially my daughter, in her year at school,  
6 there was at least half a dozen gay people boys and girls and they seem to  
7 go to (daughter)...and they've, you know I said I said to (daughter) 'why  
8 d'ya think they come to you?' and she says 'well...I don't judge 'em mam  
9 and I'm there to support them and blah blah blah' and er I says 'well...I  
10 think they might realize you have an affinity but, in the you- in their  
11 young way they don't realize why, because I'm very- I've had a lot of  
12 input, with her school friends erm and I think they haven't made that  
13 connection you know, we call it gaydar don't we?
- 14 CN: yeah (laughs)
- 15 Bev: erm, and I think it's gaydar-by-proxy
- 16 CN: (laughs) I like that, yeah, ah that's good, yeah, so they just sort of get that  
17 feeling she's safe, to go to
- 18 Bev: and so (daughter) would then come to me and, and she'd say 'oh so-and-  
19 so's got a problem' like, 'her mam's reacted badly when she's she's'- and  
20 I have, well being in counselling as well erm, I have an awful lot of  
21 information from...parents of children who come out and children whose  
22 parents've come out and you know, groups and societies and- and so like I  
23 would say 'oh well' you know 'd'you wanna take this package to school  
24 and'- 'no no 'coz then she'll know, but they know you work with gay  
25 people mam 'coz I've told them, that you work, erm, in an organization at  
26 (town) which is working with gay people' and she's like, it's sort of been,

27 information passed on by, by a middle man you know, and erm...and it's  
28 amazing how...how (daughter) accepts them and they've come to her  
29 CN: it is isn't it, it's really good that, yeah

In her opening comment (extract 37) Bev confirms that her children chose not to voluntarily disclose Bev's sexuality to their friends and that if their friends became aware of this knowledge they would consider how to respond to this, constructing her children as trustworthy recipients of the 'dangerous knowledge' of Bev's sexuality, who will consider when and how to disclose this knowledge carefully (lines 1-3). In my response I support Bev's construction of sexuality as 'dangerous knowledge' that must be managed carefully and in so doing construct this as a legitimate and to some extent expected option (line 4). Bev does not take this option and goes on to describe enthusiastically how a number of gay boys and girls go to Bev's daughter for support. At lines 7 to 9 Bev paraphrases a conversation between herself and her daughter and positions her daughter as a particular kind of person: someone who 'does not judge' but accepts her peers who identify as gay or lesbian (or who are questioning their sexuality), and in doing so, constructs homosexuality as progressive knowledge that her daughter has learned and is using or putting into practice by supporting her friends. In lines 9 to 12 Bev positions school peers as seeing her daughter as someone who will have an understanding about their identity as lesbian or gay. Bev then goes on to explain that they have an affinity with her daughter as they have made an unconscious connection between themselves and Bev in terms of their sexual identity (lines 9-13). In line 15, Bev's comment confirms that the school friends do not go to Bev for support but receive support from Bev indirectly through her daughter (their friend): Bev describes this as 'gaydar-by-proxy' which receives much enthusiastic affirmation from me (lines 16-17) and adds that they go to her daughter because they feel safe, continuing the

construction of her daughter as someone who will have a sympathetic ear. Following my comment, and possibly encouraged by my affirmations, Bev describes how her daughter shares her friends' problems with Bev (lines 18-19). She pauses (line 19) to explain how she gained experience in supporting people who are 'coming out' or questioning their sexuality, through her work with LGBT support groups and counselling services (lines 20-22). In lines 22 to 23 Bev paraphrases a conversation between herself and her daughter in which Bev offers her daughter a 'support pack' of information to take to school for her friends, and immediately follows this with her daughter's rejection of Bev's offer: '*no no 'coz then she'll know*' (lines 23-24) followed with an acknowledgement of disclosure to her friends of less dangerous knowledge: that Bev '*works with gay people*' (lines 25-26). Commenting on her daughter's initial rejection Bev constructs knowledge of her identity as a lesbian as dangerous, emphasising that although her daughter is willing to share knowledge of homosexuality *per se* with her friends and even knowledge that Bev works with gay people, knowledge of *Bev's sexual identity* must be managed more carefully. It seems that for Bev her support for her daughter's friends cannot be too direct and in lines 26-28 Bev describes how information or knowledge about (homo)sexuality is '*passed on by a middleman*': her daughter positioned as the 'middleman' between Bev and the children at school: a position which Bev and her daughter are comfortable with. In lines 27 to 28 Bev's comments emphasize a sense of hope: constructing her daughter once again as holding gay-affirmative values and she completes the construction of her daughter as a beacon for the gay boys and lesbian girls who need support.

#### EXTRACT 38

- 1 Marie: like I say, Jemma's, er, one of her friends at school has, I mean she was,
- 2 in year seven, Jemma's friend when- she'd said, told em that that she was

- 3            gay as well and, all her other friends ‘ahh’ [dismissive hand gesture] you  
4            know throughout the year but Jemma’s always stuck by her and said ‘look  
5            if you need somebody to talk to’ and so they’ve been-  
6    CN:    so she’s sort of like someone they can approach and feel safe with I  
7            suppose  
8    Marie: yeah and then another one of her friends has, recently come out so it’s er,  
9            nothing new to Jemma really is it?  
10   Jan:    no I just sayin’ to Marie ‘god I hope I don’t have a house full o’kids’ ‘I’m  
11            gay, yeah I’m gay’ (CN laughs)  
12   CN:    right, erm...lets see...

The conversation taking place in extract 38 follows on directly from extract 3 (section 5.1) when Jan and Marie were talking about ‘coming out’ to their daughter Sarah and emphasising how both their daughters had ‘accepted’ Jan and Marie’s lesbian relationship. To reiterate their support, Marie describes how Jemma has been supportive of her friend Helen at school who had recently ‘come out’ as gay (lines 1-5). In line 3, Marie uses a Maximum Case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) to position *all* Helen’s other friends as unsupportive and that they had been unsupportive not on one or two occasions but ‘*throughout the year*’ a sense-giving formulation that constructs this lack of support as a long-term problem. In contrast to this construction of Helen’s other friends, Marie positions Jemma as supportive, using a similar extreme case formulation to highlight the longevity of Jemma’s support: she ‘*always* stuck by her’ (line 4) and she also constructs Jemma as someone from whom Helen can expect a sympathetic hearing (ibid). I respond with a clarification of Marie’s construction (line 6) which leads to a further example of Jemma supporting another friend who had come out recently: by constructing the support that Jemma offers to her friends as a regular occurrence Marie reinforces the ordinariness or normalcy of knowledge of homosexuality to Jemma and hence her acceptance of it (this makes sense in the context of our preceding

conversation in extract 3). In extract 38, Jan joins the conversation in lines 10 to 11 and emphasises that she would not want 'a house full of kids' who were 'coming out' or questioning their sexuality. This strategy is similar to the one Carol uses (extract 32) to head-off potential accusations of inappropriate behaviour: that they might be seen to be 'promoting' homosexuality in their efforts to be supportive. It is evident in my response (lines 11-12) that to protect their normative parent identities I move the conversation in a different direction.

#### EXTRACT 39

- 1 CN: can you tell me a bit more about that, the bullying?  
2 Bev: erm...just name calling  
3 CN: was it?  
4 Bev: yeah I mean my son's- there's a...I've got a thing that, with the police at  
5 the moment, he got attacked, just four weeks ago on the way home from  
6 school, erm, but I don't think that was a- homophobic related just think  
7 that was pure bullying but you know they call him, and they used to say  
8 'oh yer mam's a lezzer' and you know stuff like that...and it used to anger  
9 him but now he just goes 'so, what's your mam?' you know I say 'fight  
10 back' you know, 'say you don't know what your mam does in [her] spare  
11 time'- 'no mam, I don't need to stoop that low' ah he's got his head  
12 screwed on  
13 CN: yeah sounds like it, yeah  
14 Bev: and he's totally respectful he would challenge...both of them challenge  
15 teachers, erm...(daughter) especially, they were in drama, and, their group  
16 was doing something about, a homophobic attack they'd put something  
17 together, and the teacher'd said, 'you can't do that because, in school  
18 we're not allowed to, teach you know because of section twenty-whatever  
19 so she come home and she was furious 'coz one of her friends in the  
20 group was gay, one of the lads, and erm, so she said 'mam what's the law  
21 on this?' I said well that's been abolished actually I said erm, it is  
22 encouraged now, you know, the teacher had said he can't even, talk,

- 23 anything about, any kind of gay, issues, so she went back and challenged  
24 him and he looked into it and brought an apology to the class and erm  
25 CN: god that was good  
26 Bev: and (son) challenged one of the teachers, because he **felt** they were being  
27 erm derogatory towards gay people...and he challenged there as well, so  
28 CN: so they're certainly, brave aren't they  
29 Bev: he's not a challenging person (son) he's very erm he's timid and quiet but,  
30 you know at the end of the day, that's his mam they're talking about,  
31 'they're being derogatory around my mam, and her friends'... and then he  
32 defended it  
33 CN: yeah that's really good  
34 Bev: so I was really impressed with that

In extract 39 Bev is initially hesitant in answering my question about the bullying that her son had suffered and constructs this as '*just name calling*'. Following my appeal for confirmation Bev adapts her account in which she constructs the bullying as a physical attack. Bev is keen to highlight that she has doubts about whether the bullying was homophobic (line 6), although immediately she follows this with an account of her son's peers who verbally abuse him using pejorative language (lines 7-8) positioning them as homophobic. In line 8 Bev emphasises that her son *used* to be angry, positioning him as having resolved that emotional issue, and she supports this by paraphrasing her son in his reactions and in his convictions (lines 9-12) concluding that '*he's got his head screwed on*' confirming he has the maturity and emotional intelligence to respond to and cope with the bullying, to the extent that he does not need Bev's advice.

Following my benign affirmation (line 13) Bev goes on to position her children as holding gay-affirmative values to the extent that they will challenge teachers in school. Bev supports this claim with an example of her daughter questioning her

teacher's argument for 'not allowing any kind of teaching/learning about homosexuality in school' (lines 14-18). Describing her daughter as furious when she came home to discuss this with Bev, and that later '*she went back and challenged him*' and that '*he brought an apology to the class*' adds further support to Bev's construction of homosexuality as 'progressive knowledge' and to the affirmative position of herself and her children as advocates of reform. My exclamation (line 25) and commendation (line 28) prompted Bev to describe a similar example in which her son challenged a teacher. Bev states that her son was usually timid and quiet, constructing his challenge as particularly heart-felt. Furthermore, her son '*felt that they were being derogatory towards gay people*': Bev's emphasis on the word 'felt' communicates a sense of 'internalisation' of gay-affirmative values within her son, and also Bev's success in promoting such values.

In this chapter I have explored women's accounts for their 'families of choice' and identified discursive strategies used to negotiate their 'difference' as lesbian parents and lesbian-parent families. Strategies were used to normalize their lesbian parent families, to compare them to heterosexual family experiences, and for Denise, 'difference' was constructed as dangerous. Strategies used to manage others' expectations of lesbian parents were also identified – highlighting how the women defended against accusation of 'inappropriate' behaviour through the management of their lesbian and parent identities. In addition to the constructions of homosexuality identified in Chapter 5, in this chapter I also identified homosexuality constructed as 'progressive knowledge' and the positioning of others as 'needing/wanting to know' and 'already knowing' about homosexuality. In this context the women position themselves as 'progressive' lesbians who are prepared to challenge their children's knowledge of negative stereotypes. The women's constructions of a 'progressive'

lesbian identity were always managed in relation to their normative parent identity, evident in the discursive strategies used to 'head-off' potential attacks against them.

# CHAPTER 7

## Discussion and Conclusions

### Introduction

A discourse analytic approach was employed in this study to examine lesbian parents' accounts for disclosure/concealment of their sexuality and accounts for their lesbian parent families. In this chapter I discuss the findings of my analysis in relation to the research question and four key aims of analysis identified in chapter 3. I also identify strengths and limitations of my study in terms of the methodological framework and the contributions of this work to existing theories on 'coming out' and to research on lesbian/gay parenting rhetoric. For clarity I will begin with a summary of the key findings. I will then consider the findings in relation to the aims of my research, and I will close this chapter with some final thoughts on how far this research goes in providing answers to my research question and opportunities for further research.

### 7.1 Summary of findings

The aim of this research was to identify ways in which a small group of working-class (educated) lesbian parents manage their lesbian and parent identities within home and school contexts. Through a lengthy and iterative process of interpretation of the women's accounts I identified a key interpretative repertoire: '*sexuality as a form of knowledge*' that all the women used to construct homosexuality as dangerous, private, normal and progressive knowledge. It was within each of these constructions that the women *positioned others* as 'un/knowing others' in five ways: as 'already knowing', '(not) wanting to know', and '(not) needing to know', about the women's lesbian sexuality. These strategies of positioning functioned to *rationalize*

disclosure/concealment of sexuality and to sustain ignorance of the women's sexuality. Within the women's accounts for their 'families of choice' I identified strategies used to negotiate difference and to manage others' expectations of lesbian parents/families. The effect of these strategies was to foreground their identities as 'modern progressive lesbians' and their 'normative' parent identities at different discursive moments. I discuss these findings within the context of existing research on lesbian parenting and identity management and argue for a feminist social constructionist framework as a useful alternative approach to theorizing 'coming out'.

## **7.2 Theorizing disclosure/concealment of sexuality**

Much research on lesbian parents' identity management strategies is underpinned by an essentialist or social individualist approach to theorizing self. To recapitulate - 'stage models' of sexual identity development and 'coming out' as gay or lesbian (e.g. Cass, 1979) propose various 'stages' of progression toward synthesis (or integration) of a homosexual identity with other aspects of a person's identity. In stage models, underpinned by a liberal-humanist framework of individual freedom, 'coming out' is conceived as an endpoint or resolution of earlier uncertainties and confusion about sexual identity. While social psychological theories acknowledge that identity development is shaped by social contexts, it retains its focus on identity at the individual level, and the *existence* of 'self' as an internal entity is not questioned. Of the relatively small amount of research on lesbian parents' coming out experiences, most studies are underpinned by an essentialist view of identity. In Mercier and Harold's (2003) research on lesbian parents identity work in their children's schools, a thematic analysis revealed themes of issues important to the lesbian parents, which included 'managing disclosure about sexual orientation'. In their study, the lesbian parents "had a

surprisingly high level of openness and assertiveness” (p. 41) about their sexuality, within the school context. Although the authors acknowledge that this was not representative of all the women in their study and that some parents used oblique forms of disclosure (such as attending meetings in school with their lesbian partner and being visible as a couple), ‘coming out’ is conceived as a decision-based individual activity. In her research on lesbian/gay step-parent families, Lynch (2004a,b) argues for the need to incorporate different identity integration processes into existing models of ‘coming out’ to acknowledge varied family histories and compositions, although the concept of identity as *internal* remains unchallenged. Ryan and Martin (2000) acknowledge that openness about LGBT parents’ sexual identity within the school context can lead to opportunities for discussion within the classroom about family diversity, although it may also invite acts of ‘harassment or negativity’ and they stress the need for improved systems of communication within schools to support LGBT parents and their children. The authors’ conceive ‘coming out’ as a single-event phenomenon: they talk about the benefits of ‘complete openness’ and describe some families as those families ‘who do not disclose that they are sexual-minority parented’ which neglects the ambiguity of disclosure, and the possibility of ‘returning to the closet’ (Sedwick, 1990). Breshears (2010) identified ‘coming out’ as a ‘turning point’ in the establishment of lesbian family relationships research, constructing disclosure as a uni-directional, single-event activity.

My thesis, underpinned by a social constructionist framework and a relational approach to identity, problematizes existing (essentialist) models of ‘coming out’ as a process-event phenomenon and instead conceives ‘coming out’ as a continuous, fluid, contextual and interactive practice: an *ongoing*, ‘accountable’ activity constructed through daily interactions with others in various social contexts. I suggest that accountability regarding ‘coming out’ was two-fold for the lesbian parents in the

present study: they were accountable for disclosure *and* for concealment of their sexuality. Before I discuss the discursive practices identified in my analysis it is useful to consider shared cultural ideologies and discourses shaping the women's accounts, and why I am suggesting that disclosure and concealment are both 'accountable' activities.

The liberal-humanistic discourse of gay-affirmation emerging in the 1970's and 80's shapes our accounts for disclosure/concealment. From a pro-gay rhetorical point of view, concealment is accountable and lesbian parents in this present study offered justifications for their concealment. A pro-gay liberal-humanist discourse shapes our judgements of other lesbians/gays as being more or less 'psychologically healthy' based on their 'outness' or visibility as gay/lesbian and it is evident that the women in the present study were negotiating others' expectations of them as 'out and proud' lesbians. At the same time, heteronormative discourses of parenting, family and sexuality construct lesbian parents' as 'accountable' for their non-normative identity. It is the tension and conflict between these ideologies that makes accounting for disclosure *and* concealment of sexuality necessary.

When answering questions about 'coming out' to their children the women positioned their children and in some cases their children's friends, as 'already knowing' about the women's lesbian identities (section 5.1). Importantly, not only were some children positioned as 'knowing' about the women's lesbian identity, they were also 'indifferent' about this knowledge. In this context positioning the children as already knowing was analogous with acceptance and functioned to normalize the women's sexual identity. Similarly, in their accounts of disclosure in the context of their children's school friends and teachers several women positioned others as 'already knowing' about their sexual identity, although in this context, positioning others as

‘already knowing’ and positioning themselves as *uncertain* of what others know, functioned to sustain ignorance of the women’s sexual identities. It is important to note that these positioning strategies were not exclusive to these contexts and were not used by all of the women. The strategy of positioning others as ‘already knowing’ functioned to *normalize* or to *sustain ignorance* of their lesbian sexuality. The effect was to silence further discussion of the women’s lesbian identity and to foreground instead a normative parent identity and was a powerful rhetorical device used extensively by lesbian parents in the present study.

‘Closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relations to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 3).

I suggest that the aforementioned strategies of positioning which functioned to silence discussion of the women’s sexual identity particularly within the context of school were shaped by classed subjectivities. Taylor (2009) highlights how ‘difference’ for working-class lesbians is often perceived as a division. Classed and sexual subjectivity for some working-class lesbian parents in Taylor’s study shaped their disclosure practices that differed markedly from middle-class counterparts. For middle-class lesbian parents “difference is claimed and put to use, educationally and socially” (p. 115). Working-class parents maintained as far as possible, boundaries between school and home preferring “an opting out, rather than classed – and sexualized – conciliations and arbitrations” (ibid). I suggest that for lesbian parents who are already marginalized within the context of education, *sustaining ignorance* of their sexuality within the school context functioned to minimize their difference (on which they can be judged)

and to foreground instead their normative parent status. Lindsay et al (2006) identified how working-class lesbian parents in their study used strategies to 'conceal' their sexual identity, in their working-class neighbourhoods which were perceived as hostile and intolerant of homosexuality. This is supported in other research on class and sexuality and was pertinent to the women in my research in their reference to *'you have to be very careful there is a few narrow minded people'* (Carol, extract 5). Denise also frequently reported the homophobic bullying from local children and their parents negative attitudes towards Denise. Within unsupportive social contexts it makes sense to sustain ignorance of a lesbian identity.

Constructions of lesbian identity as dangerous knowledge and private knowledge, and positioning others as 'not wanting to know' and 'not needing to know' about their sexuality, respectively, also functioned to sustain ignorance of the women's sexuality and to silence further discussion. Liberal-humanist models of 'coming out' conceive 'concealment' of homosexual identity as a stage of development or a sign of incomplete integration of sexuality with other identities. From a social constructionist perspective, concealment is as important an act as that of disclosure, and both are 'accountable' activities. Positioning others as 'not needing/wanting to know' *rationalizes* the 'concealment' of lesbian identities: if others do not want or need to know then why tell them? As I highlighted in chapter 3, the questions that I asked the women taking part, about 'coming out' were, I suggest, challenging ones that within the interview context raised the 'spectre of accountability' (Clarke et al. 2004). The accountability of *concealment* can be explained by the availability of culturally specific, modern, gay-affirmative discourses of homosexuality creating a social imperative to be seen as 'out and proud'. As lesbians, the women in the present study wanted to be seen (by me) as 'out and proud'. This is evident in comments such as *'I hinted quite a lot'*

(Denise, extract 12) and *'the only person we haven't told...'* (Carol, extract 10). 'Extreme case formulations' were used to emphasize their desire to be out, or the extent of their 'outness' to 'transform' my potentially negative evaluations (perceiving them as closeted) of them (Buttny, 1993).

The women's justifications for 'concealment' highlights the ways in which the women deal with the ideological dilemma of being a 'good' lesbian ('out and proud') and a 'good' parent (a normative identity). As lesbian parents are 'held to account' for their non-normative identity, it is understandable that questions about disclosure of their sexuality were met with much hesitation and resistance. Ambiguity in the women's accounts for concealment/disclosure of their sexuality is evidence of the ideological dilemmas facing the women in their management of lesbian and parent identities. In some contexts, vagueness works to sustain ignorance of non-normative sexuality and foregrounds a normative parent identity. The findings from my investigation support an alternative approach to theorizing 'coming out' that considers lesbian parents' disclosure/concealment of their sexual identity as 'accountable' activities. This approach affords one the opportunity to examine the rhetoric surrounding 'coming out' and how arguments for disclosure/concealment are shaped by conflicting ideologies of parenting and sexuality.

### **7.3 Accounting for 'difference'**

It is important to consider the ways in which family history and composition intersect and shape discursive practices. Six women in the present study had their children within previous heterosexual relationships and had therefore experienced heterosexual relationships and a 'normative' mother/parent identity. Their children had experienced a majority of their lives (at the time of the interviews) within a hetero-patriarchal family

unit. For the women in the present study their identity as a parent was unquestioned in the past and conversely, in their current lesbian parent family context, they are held to account for their parent identity. I suggest that for the parents in the present study, negotiating 'difference' was shaped by their experiences of a 'normative' family status. Accounting for difference is in a sense, three-fold, where the social imperative to justify a lesbian identity is increased for lesbian parents and increased a second time for lesbian parents with heterosexual family histories. Justification for lesbian parenting is likely to be more challenging for parents whose children have lived with their fathers, and have not had to *explain* their family to friends, peers and teachers. Accounting for lesbian parenting in this context is likely to be very different from those of lesbian parents who have conceived their first and subsequent children within a lesbian relationship (see Touroni & Coyle, 2002). Furthermore, to reiterate Misson's (1995) comments in relation to sharing knowledge of sexuality, in adolescence "adult patterns are seen as being set (and) it is considered tremendously important that the 'right attitudes' are established" (p. 28). Lesbian parents in the present study had children aged between 10 and 17 years and it is likely that their concerns of accusations that they are 'teaching' their children inappropriate knowledge about sexuality, are foregrounded when accounting for their lesbian parent family. Denise's strategy of maintaining the appearance of a heterosexual parent family was used to gain social acceptance as a 'parent'. For five women (not Jan and Marie who lived together as civil partners) maintaining appearances as 'single parents' was a strategy used for the same purpose: being a single parent is more socially acceptable in contemporary society than being a lesbian parent. For these women maintaining the appearance of heterosexual or single parenting meant not having to account for being a parent and a lesbian.

The desire for acceptance as legitimate parents is evident in existing research on the rhetoric surrounding arguments for lesbian parenting. Research shows that normalizing strategies are often used by lesbian/gay parents to construct their parenting and families as ‘just the same’ as their heterosexual counterparts (Clarke 2001). It is these normalizing strategies that are used to ‘head off’ attack from those who are against gay/lesbian parenting and families. A key theme identified in research on the rhetoric *against* lesbian parenting was the argument that children of lesbian/gay parents would experience homophobic bullying (Clarke, 2001) and further research highlights strategies used by lesbian/gay parents to counter such accusations (Clarke et al. 2004). Clarke et al (2004) identified that lesbian/gay parents’ reported either no bullying or they acknowledged and ‘normalized’ homophobic bullying. They identified how some parents’ reports of no bullying were modified to acknowledge the possibility of bullying – a strategy used to “manage the dilemma of being heard as implausible versus the risk of being held accountable” (p. 539). This is supported in my study: one parent (Carol) reported no bullying and Bev (extract 39) modified her report of bullying although she remained reluctant to name it as ‘homophobic’. Five women in the present study reported that homophobic bullying was a pertinent issue for them, as an existing or potential problem, and constructed homophobic bullying as accountable. However, they positioned others (teachers, other children’s parents) as responsible for preventing bullying or resolving existing problems (for examples see extracts 21, 19). Also, Joanne (extract 18) positioned their daughter’s biological mother, Alison, as more responsible for resolving problems of bullying, and in so doing, distanced herself from accountability. In summary, in Clarke et al’s (2004) research, lesbian/gay parents reported no bullying or normalized homophobic bullying in their negotiation of stake and accountability. In the present study, lesbian parents reported homophobic bullying

and positioned others as responsible for resolving it, distancing themselves from accountability. Furthermore, in the present study accounts of homophobic bullying were closely linked to strategies used to account for disclosure/concealment of sexuality. Parents positioned their children on many occasions as 'needing protection' from homophobic bullying; either as an existing problem or a potential consequence of disclosure of their sexual identity. This positioning was used to rationalize concealment, to prevent bullying, or to rationalize disclosure to responsible teachers who would carefully manage the 'dangerous knowledge' of the parents' sexuality, who were positioned as responsible for resolving problems if they arose.

Clarke (2002b) and Clarke and Kitzinger (2004, 2005) highlight the utility of normalizing strategies to head-off challenges aimed at lesbian/gay parents, and the limitations of these strategies where 'difference' is constructed as dangerous and lesbian/gay parenting is assimilated into the mainstream. The women in my study managed their children's and others' expectations through their constructions and negotiations of 'difference'. Strategies used to account for their families varied within and between the women, and were specific to the women's living arrangements which varied between the women. Within the women's accounts for their families of choice, I identified ways in which the women negotiated 'difference' and this was used to 'normalize' their family. To account for their lesbian parent families the women used strategies to minimize their difference, using normalizing discourses to construct their family as 'just the same' or for Joanne, their lesbian family was constructed as 'better for their daughter' than a previous heterosexual family.

In parents accounts for lesbian parenting, their negotiation of 'difference' within the school context involved (in the main) strategies that functioned to sustain ignorance of their lesbian identity. This was evident in their accounts for concealment/disclosure

of sexuality and in discussions about their children's friends and peers who were questioning their sexuality. The women had to manage their desire to be seen as liberal and supportive of homosexuality and others' expectations of lesbians as 'dangerous and deviant'. The women used strategies to avoid being seen to be 'promoting' homosexuality in the context of their children's school friends, where their actions could easily be misconstrued by others. This was also evident in some of the women's constructions of 'appropriate' displays of affection for their partner within the family context. Denise and Bev used phrases such as '*I'm not gonna be all over them in front of the kids*' (Denise, extract 30) and '*we don't rub it in their faces*' (Bev, extract 31): 'disclaimers' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) used to head off potential accusations that their behaviour may be inappropriate. Such discursive strategies are shaped by culturally shared negative stereotypes of lesbians and gays.

There was a sense that the women used strategies to close down or silence discussion about their lesbian identity, and used strategies to open up discussion about homosexuality when the women were talking about issues surrounding homosexuality, gay rights, and others questioning their sexuality, rather than 'their own' sexual identity. The difference between women's talk *about* homosexuality per se, and accounting for a lesbian *identity* is evident in the present analysis. This highlights the potential 'danger' attached to constructions of homosexuality when the women were negotiating their non-normative identities. There was more 'freedom' in their talk when they were not at the centre of constructions of homosexuality. When the women constructed homosexuality as 'progressive' it was (in the main) at moments in their interviews when they spoke about teaching children gay-affirmative values and acceptance of difference, when they described how their children challenged teachers about section 28, and letting their children know that being gay/lesbian was not something to be ashamed about. The

different constructions of homosexuality are evidence of conflicting cultural ideologies, shared social values about sexuality, family and parenting that shape our expectations of others. The possibility that the ‘family context’ may be the place for the development of pro-gay discourse of ‘difference’ is a radical concept explored by Gabb (2001) in her theoretical discussion on lesbian family sexuality. Radical feminists propose to embrace the ‘difference’ of lesbian/gay parent families and to emphasize that lesbian/gay parents *are* a threat to the hetero-patriarchal status quo and that this should be viewed positively. Whilst I embrace the possibility of celebrating ‘difference’ for lesbian parents and their families I also consider the experiences of the women in my study and remind myself that perceptions of difference as *division* must be negotiated by lesbian parents from working-class backgrounds which they perceive as hostile and intolerant.

#### **7.4 Research framework evaluation**

Underpinned by a feminist social constructionist framework, this research started from the experiences of women – my personal interests in research on lesbian parenting and the experiences of lesbian parents from working-class backgrounds. The starting points for my inquiry were key sites of patriarchal relations: sexuality and cultural institutions where women are represented ‘within a patriarchal gaze’ (Walby, 1990). I explored lesbian parents’ accounts for disclosure/concealment of their sexuality in the context of home/family and school. The ways in which ideologies and discourses of family, sexuality and parenting shaped the women’s subjectivities was central to a relational approach to theorizing subjectivity, taken in this investigation. Drawing from Wetherell’s theoretical approach to the discursive production of ‘self’ and discourse analysis that acknowledged the importance of historically specific discourses in the

constitution of subjectivity, enabled me to make connections between ‘culture’ and ‘self’. Language, or the women’s talk, was the unit of study in this research. I identified psycho-discursive practices (Wetherell, 2006) used by the women in their accounts: the ‘interpretative repertoire’ of *sexuality as a form of knowledge*, constructions of homosexuality and the women’s strategies of ‘interactive positioning’ (Davies & Harré, 2001). The discursive strategy of ‘*positioning others*’ within various constructions of sexuality, was central to the inter-subjective production of ‘selves’ as parents and as lesbians. The variability in the strategies used within and between women’s accounts, was key to the identification of *functions* of discourse.

Discursive strategies of ‘positioning others’ functioned to *normalize* and/or to *sustain ignorance* of the women’s lesbian identity, and these strategies were effective in closing down opportunities to discuss the women’s sexuality. Constructions of homosexuality as ‘progressive’ were also evident within our talk, and positioning others as ‘needing to know’ about homosexuality functioned to open up opportunities for discussion about homosexuality (albeit transient ones). Conflicting ideologies of normative heterosexuality and gay-affirmative discourses shaped the women’s discursive strategies and highlighted the dilemma facing the women: their desire to be seen as an ‘out and proud’ lesbian, and as a ‘good’ (normative) parent.

My part in the women’s accounts for disclosure/concealment of their sexuality was evident in the analytic section of this thesis. My talk also had functions, which often mirrored those of the participants. I deferred to the women’s maternal authority and colluded in strategies of positioning others. For Wetherell (1998) discourse does not determine our positions in discourse, instead it is accountability that ‘fuels positioning’ in discourse (p. 401). We position ourselves and others within discourse to strengthen our accounts or justifications for action. Our agency is only limited by the

availability of or ease of access to some discourses over others. Within our interview conversations then, the discursive strategies I used functioned to strengthen arguments/accounts for lesbian parenting/families within our inter-subjective discursive production of lesbian parent subjectivities. I have a personal interest as a feminist lesbian, to support the notion of 'difference as positive' in lesbian parenting/families.

Modern 'gay affirmative' discourses of sexuality are inextricably linked to the pressure experienced by homosexuals to 'come out' and disclose their sexual identity to significant others. The pressure on homosexuals to 'come out' is personal, shaped by individualism and the 'right' to personal fulfilment, and political, where 'coming out' is seen as progressive and supportive of lesbian and gay rights. It is evident that my personal 'quest for knowledge' about lesbian sexual identities and my early assumptions that 'being out and proud' was best, and that it *would* be or *should* be the ultimate goal for all homosexuals, were/are shaped by progressive discourses of homosexuality and the increasingly positive representations of homosexuals within our modern culture. It is evident within the interviews with lesbian parents that my emphasis on 'coming out' shaped the women's accounts for concealment of their sexuality - they were compelled to explain their actions.

### **7.5 Ideological dilemmas**

Strategies used differ *between* and *within* each woman's account, temporally and contextually. For example, homosexuality was constructed as 'dangerous knowledge' or 'progressive knowledge' when the women are talking about 'coming out' to their children, or they are emphasising how their child supported a school friend who was questioning their sexuality. Variation in such constructions and positionings, shapes the women's production of self as a parent and as a lesbian in different discursive moments

and contexts. Oppositions or opposing positions were identified within the women's accounts, and for Billig et al. (1988) "the point about them (oppositions) is that they are oppositions intrinsic to how we think of ourselves, oppositions in which each one of the pair is necessary to the meaning of the other, in which neither can survive alone [...]. The same thinkers and theorists (including us all) move freely from one side of an opposition to the other, as practical constraints or the requirements of argument demand" (Billig et al. 1988, p. 55). In the context of accounting for lesbian parenting some parents constructed difference as dangerous in one point within their conversation, and constructed difference as progressive at another. It is not that the person is undecided or is hypocritical, but that they construct their 'difference' as lesbians and as parents according to constraints or demands of the conversation (within a particular social context).

The women position children within this construction of sexuality as 'needing to know', 'wanting to know' and 'already knowing' about homosexuality and demonstrate how their children are learning values and acceptance of homosexuality. The women's constructions of sexuality also position children as needing to learn about sexuality 'appropriately' and the 'will to knowledge' in the construction of homosexuality as 'progressive knowledge' is uncomfortably juxtaposed with the need to 'manage 'dangerous knowledge' carefully within home-school contexts; a juxtaposition which demonstrates the women's *lived ideological dilemma* of wanting to 'put the children first' and 'be proud lesbians'.

The women's decision to not bring their children to the interviews (they were offered the option) may be further evidence of strategies used to sustain ignorance of homosexuality. Although Joanne and Alison had referred frequently to their openness about their relationship at home, including their daughter in the interview was possibly

a step too far. Alison made reference to this within the interview and highlighted that her daughter had wanted to come. In the extract below (taken from extract 29) she is negotiating her identity as an open and proud lesbian and a normative parent identity.

‘coz the question about whether she was gonna be here, she was like ‘so am I going?’ and I’m like ‘no, you’re not’, ‘so why aren’t I going?’ ‘coz you don’t need to’ (laughs) so she was like ‘oh right ok’ (Alison)

## **7.6 Methodological considerations and future research**

The difficulties of accessing and recruiting lesbian participants are well documented (Fish, 1999; Gabb, 2004b). This is because lesbians are by definition a ‘hidden’ population, often uneasy about taking part in research – possibly a consequence of early psychological research of homosexuality as pathological. My endeavour to recruit lesbian parents with working-class backgrounds restricted opportunities for recruitment further. However, I utilized my own friendship networks and networks within two lesbian groups and drop-in centres. It was hoped that my visibility as a lesbian would be the starting point for the development of trust between myself as the researcher and potential participants. The conceptual limitations of labelling were also acknowledged in this research (see chapter 4). Some ‘lesbians’ do not identify themselves with the labels I have used and as such may be excluded from this research. The women were given the opportunity to self-define their sexuality, although the necessity of using some form of labelling when recruiting participants remains problematic.

Seven women responded to my request, by returning a brief questionnaire with demographic and personal/family information. The women’s educational histories and family backgrounds supported by existing theoretical and empirical research of parents’ ‘classed’ practices in education were used to define the women as ‘working-class

(educated)'. However, social class status was not self-defined and in future a more open discussion of class subjectivity between myself and my participants would create further opportunities for exploring intersections of class and sexuality for lesbian parents.

For Joanne, the only non-biological mother in the present study, subjective experiences of social exclusion as a 'social mother' were evident in her accounts for their lesbian parent family. It would be useful in future research to focus inquiry on the differences in *accounts for* disclosure and for lesbian parenting per se between biological mothers and social mothers. Furthermore, is it possible that, interview questions directed at non-biological mothers are phrased differently and I suggest that Joanne's 'social mother' position shaped my questions, in small, but important ways, particularly relating to Joanne's identity as a parent. This may be a fruitful area of inquiry, examining how cultural representations of non-biological mothers shape researchers' questions within the interview context.

The findings from this research contribute to research on the rhetoric surrounding lesbian parenting and offer an alternative approach to theorizing 'coming out' for lesbian parents. Theoretical models of sexual identity development and 'coming out' theorize disclosure as an internal process of reinvention culminating in a single 'coming out' event. I have problematized this 'single-event' conceptualization of 'coming out' and have identified in the present research how disclosure/concealment of sexual identity can be theorized as an 'accountable' activity which acknowledges the synthesis of culture and subjectivity at the point of discourse. The findings highlight how traditional patriarchal discourses and modern gay affirmative discourses of sexuality create a dilemma for lesbian parents in their negotiation of 'progressive lesbian' and 'normative parent' identities. While the findings presented here are not

representative of all lesbian parents, it is hoped that this work will stimulate further academic interest and exploration of working-class lesbian parents' lives.

WORD COUNT: 70,090

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> The European Enlightenment period represents the shift from religious authority, state power and censorship of ideas toward an era of scientific authority and liberalism (freedom of ideas) and has shaped developments in social sciences and feminist epistemological debate.

<sup>ii</sup> "The 1861 Offences Against the Person Act removed the death penalty for buggery (replacing it by sentences of between ten years and life)" (Weeks, 1989, p. 102).

<sup>iii</sup> Today, as an alternative to positioning oneself within the gender binary, 'genderqueer' describes individuals who identify themselves as being outside the gender binary or as both man and woman. This has led to the construction of new lesbian identity characteristics such as 'tomboy femme', 'soft stud', 'fellagirlly'.

<sup>iv</sup> I use the term 'progressive' throughout my thesis and define 'progressive values' and 'progressive knowledge' as those which advocate social reform: in the context of this research, these are anti-homophobic and gay-affirmative values

<sup>v</sup> Although Celia Kitzinger (1987) contends that the development of 'gay affirmative' discourses of lesbianism are far from liberating and 'represent a new development in the oppression of lesbians' (p. vii).

<sup>vi</sup> It is also acknowledged that individuals within gay and lesbian communities may experience discrimination based on their race, class, gender and/or dis/ability, and that within lesbian 'scene spaces' prejudices against certain lesbian identity characteristics, such as 'butch' or 'lipstick' lesbian exist.

<sup>vii</sup> That the women's social class status was not self-defined is discussed in chapter 7.

<sup>viii</sup> One woman later contacted me to withdraw from the research due to her daughter's distress that friends at school might find out her mother was a lesbian.

<sup>ix</sup> For safety, I left details of my whereabouts with my partner when interviewing women in their own home. I also contacted her via text on my arrival and before my departure.

<sup>x</sup> Being non-judgemental within a counselling setting is contested on the basis that counsellors bring to the therapeutic dynamic their own values. What I attempted to do throughout the interviews was to create a space in which the women were listened to, heard and encouraged to follow their own lines of thought on topics being discussed, and reassured by me that their experiences and discussion of them were valid.

<sup>xi</sup> I use the term 'account' in two ways: I use 'account *of*' to describe in general terms the talk/text produced in describing events or concepts. I use 'account *for*' to describe women's discursive strategies used to justify or 'account for' their non-normative identities

<sup>xii</sup> Lifestyle choice vis-à-vis an essentialist discourse of lesbianism.

<sup>xiii</sup> I use the term 'families of choice' to acknowledge the variation in family constellations including Bev, Joanne and Alison's decisions to live apart, and Denise's accounts for maintaining the appearance of a hetero-patriarchal family unit, although to maintain the flow of writing, I also use lesbian-parenting/families where appropriate.

<sup>xiv</sup> 'Early Embraces' (Elder, 1996) is an edited book containing women's stories of their first lesbian experience

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# APPENDIX I

## Lesbian-parent families and school education - Questionnaire -

Thank you for your interest in this research. In this questionnaire you are asked to provide details about your family and other personal descriptive information such as your age and the name of the town in which you live etc. The information that you provide will remain confidential.

### About you:

1. Your name: \_\_\_\_\_ (you do not need to provide your surname)

2. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you live? (you only need to provide the name of the town and county in which you live):

3. Town \_\_\_\_\_ County \_\_\_\_\_

4. Ethnic group – please indicate how you define your ethnicity:

**Please  
tick**

- |    |                                      |
|----|--------------------------------------|
|    | <b>White</b>                         |
| W1 | British                              |
| W2 | Irish                                |
| W9 | Any other White background           |
|    | <b>Mixed</b>                         |
| M1 | White & Black Caribbean              |
| M2 | White & Black African                |
| M3 | White & Asian                        |
| M9 | Any other mixed background           |
|    | <b>Asian or Asian British</b>        |
| A1 | Indian                               |
| A2 | Pakistani                            |
| A3 | Bangladeshi                          |
| A9 | Any other Asian background           |
|    | <b>Black or Black British</b>        |
| B1 | Caribbean                            |
| B2 | African                              |
| B9 | Any other Black background           |
|    | <b>Chinese or other ethnic group</b> |
| C1 | Chinese                              |
| O9 | Any other ethnic group               |

5. In this research I have used the term **lesbian** parent. What term do you use to describe your sexuality/sexual identity? Please tick all that apply:

- Lesbian                       Gay   
Bisexual                       Non-heterosexual   
Queer                       Homosexual   
Don't use any   
Other (please specify)  \_\_\_\_\_

6a. Please tick **one** of the following regarding your employment outside the home:

- Employed full-time                       Employed part-time   
Self-employed                       Not employed outside the home   
Other (please give details):  \_\_\_\_\_

6b. Please provide some information about your current or previous employment, i.e. your job title and description:

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7. Please indicate the levels of education at which you have been a pupil/student (**please tick all that apply**):

- (a) Secondary education / School   
(a) Further education / College   
(b) Higher education / University

8. How did you hear about this research?

Please tick  
all that  
apply

- LBWN (Middlesbrough)  
LBi Northeast  
Pink Parents On-line  
Stonewall (parenting) website  
From a friend, colleague or partner  
Other (please specify):

**You and your family:**

9. Please provide the following details of your family:

- (a) Do you have a partner?
- (b) Do you currently live together?
- (c) How many children are there in the family? \_\_\_\_\_
- (d) What are their ages? \_\_\_\_\_
- (e) Are there any other adults in the family? (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

(f) Please add any other information that will help me get a clear picture of who is in your family:

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10a. Is your partner also taking part in this research?

**Please circle one:**            No            Not applicable

10b. If your partner is taking part, would you like to be interviewed together or individually?

**Please circle one:**    Together    Individually

**NB. If you have circled 'together' please return both your questionnaires in the same envelope.**

11a. Will your child/ren be present during the interview?

**Please circle one:**    Yes            No

11b. If yes, please provide any guidance you feel I will need concerning the conduct of the interview e.g. level of disclosure of your relationship.

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**School Information**

12. Please indicate the type of school your child/ren attend(s):

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| State Comprehensive School <input type="checkbox"/>      | State Faith School <input type="checkbox"/>              |
| Private/Independent School <input type="checkbox"/>      | Beacon School <input type="checkbox"/>                   |
| City Technical College <input type="checkbox"/>          | Academy School <input type="checkbox"/>                  |
| Special School <input type="checkbox"/> (state/private)* | Nursery School <input type="checkbox"/> (state/private)* |
| Other (please specify) _____                             |  |

\* Delete as required.

**Contact and confidentiality:**

So that I can contact you to arrange an interview time, please provide some contact details. This information will be kept confidential. No other members of the research team will have access to your questionnaire(s).

Please provide a contact telephone number where I can reach you, including area code as required \_\_\_\_\_ or a mobile number if you prefer

What day of the week and time of the day is it most convenient for me to contact you on the number(s) you have provided?

Alternatively, you can provide an email address where I can reach you:

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire and for agreeing to take part in an interview. Please send your completed questionnaire(s) to the following address:

Catherine A Nixon  
Research Student  
Centre for Education Research  
33 Collegiate Crescent  
Sheffield Hallam University  
Sheffield  
S10 2BP

## APPENDIX II



### Calling all parents!!

If you are a lesbian parent with children attending school in the North East, you are invited to take part in a PhD research project.

Would you be willing to spare an hour to talk about your experiences relating to your children's school and education?

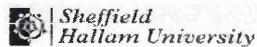
There is a short questionnaire to complete and an interview that lasts about 1 hour.

Lesbian parents' experiences are not represented within current research - your voices need to be heard!

Confidentiality is ensured.

If you would like further information please contact me at  
[Catherine.A.Nixon@student.shu.ac.uk](mailto:Catherine.A.Nixon@student.shu.ac.uk)  
or call 07913 889161

Many thanks, Cath.



## APPENDIX III

### Request for research participants

My research explores the experiences of lesbian parents who have children attending schools in Britain. Current research of parents' educational practices and experiences relating to their children's schools is not representative of lesbian parents and their families. This research aims to bring lesbian parents' voices to the debates on issues of schooling and education and to challenge the traditional concepts of 'family' within this area of research. Interviews for this project focus on lesbian parents' experiences in relation to their child/ren's school and education in general. I am particularly interested in interviewing lesbian parents living in the North of England and I encourage women from various social, ethnic and economic backgrounds to take part, so that diversity among lesbian parents' experiences as well as similarities may be highlighted.

**If you would like to take part or you require further information please contact me at [Catherine.A.Nixon@student.shu.ac.uk](mailto:Catherine.A.Nixon@student.shu.ac.uk) or telephone 07913 889161.**

There are 3 steps involved in taking part:

- Step 1 is a short questionnaire for you to complete and return to me, providing information about yourself and your family.
- Step 2 is an interview which can be carried out in your home, at the University or an alternative venue on which we both agree. You might be a single-parent or a couple and in the latter case, interviews can be carried out individually or as a couple. Also, you may want your child/ren present during the interview or you may prefer a more private conversation - which ever you feel most comfortable with. The interviews will be recorded and will last about 1 hour.
- Step 3. The method I'm using in this research requires that I analyse interview data throughout the data collection period (which may be up to 12 months). If it is convenient for you, I would like the opportunity to return to you - in person, by 'phone or via email, to extend our discussion if necessary.

#### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2004) and Sheffield Hallam University will be followed closely to protect those involved in the research. If you agree to take part in this research please be assured that all the information you provide will remain confidential and a pseudonym will be used in the research to protect your identity.

**If you would like to take part or you require further information please contact me at [Catherine.A.Nixon@student.shu.ac.uk](mailto:Catherine.A.Nixon@student.shu.ac.uk) or telephone 07913 889161.**

## APPENDIX IV

### Interview Schedule

#### Participation and ethics

- Thank the parent for taking part and for completing the questionnaire (show them the questionnaire for verification).
- Explain the interview procedure
- Discuss ethical issues with them (e.g. informed consent, right to withdraw, confidentiality and their identifier code).
- Discuss how the information they provide will be used and answer any questions they have before continuing with the interview.

#### Introductory questions

- Establish how they heard about the research (see Q8)
- Can you tell me why did you decide to take part?

#### Lesbian (parent) Identity & family life

1. Discuss their self-selected label (re: sexuality) why have they chosen that?
2. What about their identity as a parent or mother? [Establish how they 'became' a lesbian parent family if possible] so find out if they are a birth-, co-, or step-mother/parent?
3. Can you tell me about some of your first 'coming out' experiences? If applicable – can you tell me about the reactions from family and friends?
4. Refer to Q11b and if appropriate – what led you to tell [child's name] about your sexuality/being a lesbian? OR can you tell me why you decided not to tell [child's name] about your sexuality?
5. What are your feelings about being a lesbian parent? Do you know other lesbian parents? How has that influenced you as a lesbian parent?

#### Community

6. What does community mean to you? Which networks are most important to you and why? – (could be mainstream or gay).
7. Do you belong to/feel part of a lesbian community or network? (depending on response) – how do you feel about that?
8. What do you think of the gay scene in this area? What about other areas?

#### Education

Before we talk about your child/ren's education, I'd like to get an idea of your own experiences of school and education in general –

9. Can you tell me a little bit about your own experiences of school? Did they go on to FE and/or HE? - check with Q7

*(From Q12 establish the kind of school their child/ren go to, location and name)*

10. How was it decided that [child's name] would go to [school name]?

- [depending on breadth of previous answer] –
11. Who was involved in the decision?
  12. Was this decision made within a previous relationship?
  13. Did other parents/friends influence your choice?
  14. Were you considering any other schools at that time?
  15. What was it about that school that attracted you?
  16. Were/are you happy with that choice?
17. Since [child's name] started school, in what ways would you say you (and your partner) are involved in his/her education?
18. [depending on previous answer] How did you decide on those particular roles/responsibilities etc.? [Use prompts if necessary – who goes in to school, e.g. school events, open days etc. and at home – e.g. signing homework books etc.]
19. Do you feel there is a **parent** community/network at your children's school – is that important to you?

### *Interactions with school/education*

20. If appropriate - I asked earlier about your friends and family's reaction to your 'coming out' – what choices have you made about disclosing your sexuality/lesbian identity at school? (to teachers, other parents?)
21. [If they have 'come out' at school] – would you tell me a little bit about that? – what led to that decision? How did you feel at the time and later? [If they haven't 'come out' at school] – can you tell me what led you to that decision – and can you imagine any situation where that decision might change?
22. Are there other lesbian parents/teachers in the school?– and/or do they have contact with other lesbian parents/teachers? Has this been influential in their relationship with their children's school?

- **Close interview and thank parent(s)**
- **Clarify what the next steps will be – confirm whether they are willing to be re-interviewed at a later stage (get contact details)**
- **Confirm the participant's identifier code and their right to withdraw**

# APPENDIX V

## Transcription protocol

All identifying names/details to be changed

Short pause (comma)

Long pause (...)

Change of topic within a sentence (-)

Interruption (/)

My affirmative noises or comments (yes, mm) whilst participant is speaking (\*)

Words spoken loudly or with emphasis (**in bold**)

Words quietly spoken or whispered (*in italics*)

Body language (described at appropriate point in the narrative)

Indicated in parenthesis any (sighs) or (laughter) etc.

## APPENDIX VI

PhD interview with 'Denise' (38)  
(13.12.05) 1hr. (venue – Denise's home)

CN: one of the first things I just want to say is that this is confidential, so I won't be discussing what you tell me with anybody, and that includes (my partner)

Denise: right

CN: ok, erm, there's some broad areas that I want to ask you a few questions about, one of them's family, and your sort of understanding of family, the other area is your sexual identity, and the other area is education and your children's schools, so three broad areas

Denise: right

CN: because I've sort of being looking at all this sort of...literature and I've been reading about this for like, over a year now, there might be things that I ask you that you're not prepared for, and you don't want to answer, so just say

Denise: I'll answer anything (laughs)

CN: well if you don't feel comfortable say... 'I'll answer a different question or move on' or something, and I'll just move on...yeah the name- when I sort of write this up at the end your name obviously will be changed, so I'll think of a wonderful name for you (both laugh) and erm you won't be sort of identifiable in that way, ok

Denise: right

CN: erm, so...I'm just tryin'a think what else there is to tell you about that, just if if you decide that you wanted to take any of the information that you've given me **out**, let me know

Denise: no as long as me name isn't on it I don't care what it says (laughs)

CN: well that's fine that's great yeah, erm...ok so, just to start with then, when you think of your family, who do you think of?

Denise:...mostly me children

CN: right

Denise: yeah

CN: does your ex-partner come into that, 'coz you've put here (I refer to questionnaire) about adults in the family you've put father I just wondered if that's sort of

Denise: I still feel he's part of the family because his kids [?] still dead close to him

CN: right, but you don't live together then, he doesn't live here?

Denise: no no

CN: right ok then...erm, and all your children live with you?

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah, ok...ok...is your ex, is it your ex-husband?

Denise: he's still my husband

CN: he's still your husband, right ok, so is your husband involved with the children, a lot?

Denise: yeah every day

CN: is he?

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah, so how does that work then, d'you sort of

Denise: he's great about everything\* he's fine about my sexuality and everything

CN: is he?

Denise: so we get on great yeah

CN: yeah, so how did it come about then that you sort of- did you come-out to him an'...was that how it

Denise: well I'd been out to my friends\* since I was about thirteen

CN: ah right

Denise: but, I got married an' everything for the wrong reasons\* to please the family an' everything and, my son kept saying that at school 'everyone keeps asking me why I'm called [his surname] instead of [Denise's surname]' and just things like that I thought I'm hurting the kids so, and then when I had another two I thought I can't [?] with a different name so I ended up just getting' married

CN: I see, yes

Denise: but I could've coped with that until, later on he started drinking and being abusive and hittin' me again so

CN: mm

Debby: I just said 'I want you out and by the way I'm gay'

CN: mm, and how how was that

Denise: he said he knew

CN: ah right yeah...so, what about a sort of gay community have you had sort of, links with gay communities

Denise: oh yeah since I was thirteen

CN: since you were about thirteen

Denise: yeah

CN: so where abouts and who?

Denise: in Middlesbrough and all the night clubs pubs I've always been out so\* but nobody's ever said a word to my family or him

CN: right ok

Denise: nobody said a word about me being gay until, he moved out

CN: ah right

Denise: seems quite strange

CN: what about your family like your parents and

Denise: parents my mam's a proper catholic so\* she just doesn't agree with it\* so I can't come out to her and my dad, his mam slept with women so he wouldn't care, but he will tell our mam so I just keep it from them

CN: yeah yeah

Denise: and with my mam having cancer and really poorly at the moment I think that's the last thing I should do

CN: yeah yeah..it's not always the right reason is it

Denise: yeah (laughs) I have hinted quite a lot to her \* and she just says 'ooh it makes me sick'\* so I think right she just doesn't wanna know

CN: yeah, so what about your kids then, do they, they're fine with with your sexuality? Did you tell them like outright?

Denise: I did tell them outright a couple of years ago but then, I've had to go back over on myself because me, thirteen year old come running in and said 'everyone's calling you a dyke and the only reason I can cope is 'coz I know they're lying'

CN: ah, right

Denise: and that was me like (zips mouth closed gesture)

CN: ah I see, and that was, her friends, was it, that were, saying that?

Denise: erm...it was two of his mates 'round the corner, they were sayin' 'oh your mum's a dyke' and he said 'no she isn't' and he said 'the only reason I can cope is because I know your not'\* so

CN: oh god right yeah

Denise: he said he said 'I just told them you've got lots of lesbian friends'... he's the he's the worst one out of them

CN: is he?

Denise: [son] just keeps sayin' he doesn't like many of my friends\* so he's probably thinking, well he'll know but he doesn't say nothing, [?] 'boys are ugly, boys are this boys are that', and I never say things like that to her so that's her own phase

Phone rings

CN: are you leaving it?

Denise: (nods) I'll switch it off

CN: it's alright if you wanna

Denise unplugs the phone

CN: erm, so what about erm, your husband in sort of like school terms sort of, involvement in school with the kids or anything like that?

Denise: he's involved in absolutely everything with them\* what it- I think it's a lot easier for the kids\* me living my life like this I think, why should the kids be hurt...my life's changed I shouldn't change theirs\* so I try and keep it as normal as possible for them\* I even go to the school with him to pick them up so

CN: with with your husband?

Denise: yeah

CN: right ok

Denise: I think if I can keep it as normal as I can until they've left school then I can be open around them\* I just don't want them upset I mean, (youngest son) was already upset when we split up and (daughter) she wouldn't go to school or anything and,

crying all the time\* so I think if I can just keep it, normal as possible their life until they're sixteen

CN: how long ago was it that you split up?

Denise: six years

CN: six years right, and has that been hard then to do that, to keep it, in that sense

Denise: it's been easy in family life\* but in myself, I think it's very hard\* I feel like I can't get in a relationship because, I can't keep, them as a friend on one way and then as soon as I'm away from here, they're not my friend\* and that's very hard

CN: yeah [?] what about your sort of, family- your original family, d'you have any brothers and sisters?

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah, do they know about your sexuality?

Denise: One of my sister's does and she was cool about it but [?] 'she's making you ill I think you could get back with (husband)' oh why would you tell me to go back to him I've just opened my heart to you and told you I'm gay\* they must think I can just 'well you've done it this long, just get back with him'

CN: mm mm...no sometimes it almost like they don't really quite believe it isn't it (both laugh) you know what I mean, you tell them an' they sort of go 'ah right' and then it's- they don't, get it but, yeah...my sister was a bit like that when I told her she was fine like 'oh yeah whatever'you know, and then a bit later on it's like 'oh so you really are then?' as if you're not quite sure

Denise: I think it's coz I split up with (girlfriend) erm, that they don't think- they must think 'oh she just wanted a go' (laughs) I'm sure that's what they're all thinking coz they're all saying 'oh you're getting on great with (husband) aren't yer', I said well I always have

CN: yeah...so is- what would you say about the social life at school, d'you have much contact with people at school sort of outside school time, with other parents or anything?

Denise: no

CN: no

Denise: no I keep myself to myself\* when it comes to my friends

CN: yeah? and do you think that's because of your sexuality or?

Denise: no it's- I only I only like to go out with people who I know well

CN: right, erm, and in terms of the schools that they're at, did you choose the schools for specific reasons or?

Denise: yeah because it was better education up there

CN: right, right...which one is it that they're at?

Denise: Nunthorpe

CN: Nunthorpe, oh right...so how long have they been at those schools?

Denise: erm...they went to Ormesby Primary and then I moved them from St Pious into Ormesby Primary because of bullying\* and then they've gone straight up to Nunthorpe

CN: oh I see right ok, so what was the bullying about?

Denise: just some lad used to hit (youngest son) constantly every day, bust noses and things

CN: yeah?...and are they enjoying the schools that they're at now?

Denise: yeah\* yeah they're both doing very well on their exams an' everything

CN: are they? mm

Denise: (daughter)'s a brainbox anyway so (both laugh)

CN: so tell me a bit about them again, their ages?

Denise: (oldest son)'s coming up eighteen, (youngest son) has just turned fourteen and (daughter)'s twelve

CN: ah I see (daughter's) the youngest...right, ok...yeah, erm...so, in terms of...obviously you've said that you want to keep things as they were for the children, in terms of school/

Denise: and even 'round here where they play, I like their dad to go 'round the corner and, shout them as well as me so that they see that their dad's still about

CN: I see

Denise: so they don't call them if their dad's about but when he wasn't about for quite a while\* they got called constantly\* so I'm just trying to make it as easy as possible for the kids 'coz it's not their fault that I'm...I've decided to come out at this time (half laugh)

CN: ok right so it's about protecting them, really?

Denise: yeah, everything's about protecting them

CN: mm and that's the same for the school as well

Denise: yeah

CN: right, is there anything that would change that for you? Would there ever be any situation where that would change?

Denise: If the kids just stopped bullying them I'd be able to, tell them, it's the other kids that've caused all the hassle\* I mean we had all the crying an' that when I first told them and then (ex-girlfriend) moved in\* but it just made it a hell of a lot worse she ended up havin' to move out because they were getting' bullied that much

CN: oh I see right, she moved in here?

Denise: yeah, the day their dad moved out which wasn't good

CN: ah right

Denise: for about a year and a half

CN: ok, that's quite a long time (Denise laughs) so that was a really difficult time then was it?

Denise: yeah very\* 'coz she was **out** and proud and she was covered in tattoos so she was in the garden cuttin' the grass in shorts an' I was like (with gritted teeth) 'get in, the kids friends are 'round the corner' \* so they were sayin' 'mum I can't believe she's gone out there, looking like that'

CN: right, so

Denise: I don't even think the kids'd be half as bothered if it wasn't somebody who was butch\* 'coz if they look butch then people click on more and, my friends who are gay and they're feminine, the kids don't turn a hair and they'll say they like them

CN: ah I see, that's interesting isn't it

Denise: yeah

CN: 'coz it's about, image, as well isn't it

Denise: yeah yeah

CN: sort of, appearance huh...and I mean teachers at school and that, they would be nobody that you'd feel comfortable just, sort of talking to about

Denise: no

CN: or whether it- I mean I don't even know if you think it would be necessary, does it ever feel necessary to say anything at school, to, you know to teachers

Denise: the teachers don't even sort the fighting out \* they're not good at all at sorting things out at school

CN: so you don't feel that you could trust them/

Denise: the head did at Ormesby Primary, he had a word with (daughter) when her dad moved out he said 'if you ever want to talk to me about anything you can' \* and she just went and sat in his office for nearly a full day, just chattin' and sayin' 'well I wish our dad still lived with me' and stuff like that

CN: oh that was nice of him yeah

Denise: yeah so they- they're a good school like

CN: yeah?...yeah, erm...just sort of talking about education in general, what's your, own experiences of school?

Denise: ...*I hated every minute of it*

CN: did you?

Denise: yeah

CN: mm...because-?

Denise: 'coz I was too tired 'coz my dad was a alcoholic and has us up all night hittin' our mam (half laughs)\* so I was absolutely exhausted most days at school

CN: right...I see

Denise: I just wanted to go home to make sure me mam was ok\* I used to go home at lunch time

CN: did you?

Denise: yeah

CN: mm...god, must have been hard

Denise: it was

CN: was that from an early age then?

Denise: yeah\*from from the minute we were born

CN: did you have many friends at school?

Denise: loads

CN: did you?

Denise: yeah\* I've always- liked [?] to socialize with people

CN: right, so d'you know people from school then that you still see?

Denise: yeah

CN: here?

Denise: yeah

CN: oh that's good

Denise: everywhere I go, no matter where I go\* I know everyone

CN: so you've been- you were born around here?

Denise: er, North Ormesby

CN: oh yeah, mm

Denise: and brought up in Thorntree where all my friends lived [?]

CN: oh that's good then yeah

Denise: (coughs)

CN: so what d'you reckon to the gay scene then in Middlesbrough?

Denise:...it's terrible (both laugh) there's isn't one, two pubs and a night club\* the night club's rough-as

CN: (laughs) yeah...so, what d'you tend to do, socially, d'you go out with-?

Denise: I, I usually go to the straight bars that are gay-friendly

CN: I see yeah

Denise: like Lloyds and The House\* and I go'the oak 'coz I feel comfortable in there 'coz I know everybody in there\*...but I don't like Annie's it's very clickey and\* it's just not a good atmosphere in there

CN: yeah...mm...I keep going backwards and forwards here, going from education to sexuality...erm

Denise: (laughs) it's like my brain so just keep it up I'm ok

CN: oh good (both laugh)

Denise: I jump from one thing to another

CN: oh well we're alright then we're on the same wavelength (both laugh) erm... what's your expectations of school, for your children, what do you want from education?

Denise: well for a start I want it to be a safe environment for them, coz' he has come home with a black eye (?) before\*...and there was also, paedophiles tryin' to grab the kids in the school grounds, and the police were there for two weeks

CN: really

Denise: yeah, got the woods joined onto the field

CN: so, safety is quite a big issue then?

Denise: yeah, and with it being so far away from my home as well I need (inaudible)

CN: yeah, right, so...it being that far away, do they get the bus and-

Denise: they get the bus there, and (husband) always picks them up every tea-time for me

CN: ah does he?

Denise: yeah\* he always makes sure he's back for them or, I give them, the bus fare just in case, that if he isn't there you jump straight on a bus

CN: oh well that's that's good isn't it, and he brings them here?

Denise: yeah, erm, he usually stays for his tea with them

CN: ah right

Denise: yes like, we're still quite close

CN: yeah it sounds like you've got a good, good relationship

Denise: yeah, I've got a good relationship with him, better than when he was living here (laughs)

CN: that's often the case isn't it

Denise: yeah yeah, I mean he does even ask me 'oh d'you like her is she your type?'

CN: does he?

Denise: yeah (both laugh)

CN: oh so he's really ok about it, that's that's really nice that...and has he got a part, er someone?

(inaudible on tape)

Denise: he's still besotted with me

CN: is he

Denise: but he says 'I know it's not gonna happen but I just, could never feel that way about anybody else'

CN: ah right...that must be difficult as well

Denise: yeah

CN: god

Denise: especially when I've got (ex-girlfriend) saying the same thing (laughs)

CN: yeah...so do you still see (ex-girlfriend) then?

Denise: (laughing) yeah

CN: ah right ok

Denise: but he even cooks us the Sunday dinner me and (ex-girlfriend) (laughing)

CN: oh right oh ok, aw, that's nice, that's nice

Denise: he says 'well (ex-girlfriend) may as well stay for her dinner (?) cook a spare one (both laugh)

CN: ah it's nice that he's ok though isn't it?

Denise: yeah

CN: it must help

Denise: well he even, put a front door an' everythin' on for me (?) he's just, he says, 'as long as I'm happy, 'coz he knows he's made me very unhappy\* and he says 'as long as your happy, that's good enough for me but if anybody hurts you then, I'll stop, won't see you as much'

CN: mm, well...sounds like you've got your own little bodyguard (both laugh)...erm, did, what's your husband's name?

Denise: (husband's name)

CN: (husband's name) did (husband) have like, did you both choose the school that, the kids are at

Denise: yeah yeah

CN: how did you come to that choice?

Denise: well my daughter (name) she wanted to go to the one over the road\* er but, we heard bad reports about it constantly and, he (husband) said 'there's no way, he said I'd rather after, pack in work and take her to school and bring her back from that one\* than send her there where, she's not gonna get an education and\* you don't know what the hell's goin' on in that school\* so

CN: and was there anything specifically about **that** one, that you've sent them to that you you liked?

Denise: well for a start (husband's) sister-in-law, is a teacher there\* so she could keep an eye on them if there's any problems they can go an' speak to her\* and, I just think that, since (son) went there he has really come on\* where (daughter)'s very bright anyway so I think well, she's bound to come on a lot

CN: right

Denise: er I just want the best for them

CN: yeah yeah...erm...what about, although you're not particularly involved in the school, itself, d'you get involved in what they're doing in their education in other ways?

Denise: yeah, well I go to, there's usually a- they do cross-country and my kids are usually in it\* and me and (husband) always go to everything together, if we go to see their work we go together so\* just makes the kids feel really comfortable, so, they're happy about him not livin' here now

CN: are they?

Denise: 'coz we do so much together with them\* so they feel comfortable and safe like that\* I say to them [well you get back together?] but they say yeah but he's here all the time so

CN: still spend a lot of time with him, that's really nice that, mm

Denise: and if they- they go for Christmas presents- I go an' pick them with him so\* like we get on great

CN: that's really good

Denise: not many are like that once you've told- once you've come out to them (laughs)

CN: no...so what do you sort of, visualize then for yourself, in like a relationship, d'you feel that you're really- you're gonna wait till the children, have sort of left...d'you know what I mean by that?

Denise: I'm not really sure, I just, think to myself if I meet somebody and I really really fall for them then\* I'll just introduce them to the kids and see how things go with them and\* as a friend and then just say I've fallen for them that's what I would say

CN: yeah yeah

Denise: I think it would be easier that way round so that they don't get hurt, they get used to the person [?]

CN: yeah yeah...so, but in terms of them still being at school it's it's a problem, d'you feel?

Denise: yeah 'coz, while they're not old enough to look after themselves, and stick up for themselves, and I feel like I need to protect them against what I'm doing

CN: right, ok

Denise: I don't want to bring them problems and make them unhappy while they're only kids\* I think it's 'coz my childhood was so, I was so upset all the time I just want to make sure it doesn't happen to them

CN: you just don't want them to experience that

Denise: yeah\* and the minute their dad started fighting- we never used to argue [?] but the minute we did I said you're gonna have to move out I'm not puttin' the kids through it, and he moved straight out because he agrees, you shouldn't see violence or arguments\* I'm really against that

CN: mm, yeah...and I suppose, havin' that experience it's

Denise: yeah...definitely

CN: (coughs) er...so how've friends reacted to, the situation

Denise: my closest friend has fell out with me, \* haven't had anything to do with her since she found out, 'coz she said 'you've kept it from me I can't believe' but she- I knew she wouldn't understand anyway so\* that's why I kept it from her\* but obviously I was right because, we haven't spoken since\* ...all I think is well she isn't a true friend\* I would have stood by her no matter what she'd done even if she'd committed a murder (laughs)

CN: ...and they're losing out as well aren't they

Denise: but the best laugh is, she is knocking about with a, really really butch girl, she's all over with her now\* so some people think it was [?] yeah (laughs)

CN: yeah yeah, that's quite possible isn't it

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah...erm, what about other friends and family?

Denise: they're all great, my sister-in-law she's known everything all along, and she keeps it from my brother, he [?] I'm sure she's gay\* but now he's saying to her 'oh shut up y'dyke' because of me so\* ...she comes to all the gay bars with me an' everything\* so she's fine why should he worry (laughs)

CN: yeah exactly yeah...I mean is there any- d'you have much involvement with other family members-?

Denise: I don't bother with my family, I see my mam- well I'm on the phone to my mam every day, if I don't see her\* and I do all sorts for her still\* make her as comfortable as possible 'coz I know she's not going to get better so, I've just been and bought her a new mattress an' everything\* ...to make her comfortable\*...and I'm the one with the least money and it narks me because I think, they know what she's been through all our lives you'd think they'd try and look after her now\* she protected us as much as she could\* but they're all loaded compared to me I'm the one with no money and I seem to buy [?]

CN: and you're the one looking after her...so where is she your mum?

Denise: Thorntree

CN: oh is she, yeah, right...d'you know any other sort of, I mean would you class yourself as a- I mean, this research I've had a lot of problems with saying 'lesbian parent' 'coz people just don't like the label

Denise: yeah I don't care yeah yeah

CN: is that what you would call yourself?

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah? erm, d'you know other lesbian parents?

Denise: do I know others?\* yeah lots round here

CN: yeah, and is that- does that, **influence** you in any way?

Denise: I've seen them, go through really hard times when the kids have\* gone to live with their dads\* yeah so...I could get them to, do one of these for yer if you wanted

CN: ah right yeah, that would be good yeah, definitely, erm, so having seen them with their children going to live with their dads [?] has that/

Denise: that scared me

CN: scared you

Denise: yeah, I think well I'm not gonna go about it the way they did, they didn't care about the kids feelings they just jumped in it\* they were both next door neighbours and they just jumped straight into it and the kids found them in bed an' that which I think was bang out of order\* I think you, protect your kids against things that are, not normal to the kids

CN: yeah I see what you mean yeah

Denise: until they've got used to the idea at least

CN: yeah yeah, it's a bit much isn't it, erm, and d'you know why they went with- went to their dads, was it their own choices the children or was it-?

Denise: didn't agree with it and, I don't think the parents cared actually\*, they just wanted what they wanted and they didn't care about the kids\* I think my god I couldn't do that\* my kids are, they're mine they belong to me\* I don't even class them as (husbands)

CN: really?

Denise: I class them as- they're **my** kids, and he's their father

CN: is that right ok yeah

Denise: yeah, I'm very protective with them (laughs)

CN: oh yeah...I mean what what...you say they've had some sort of, comments and stuff from kids around the area about, you being gay...how have you handled it right at that time, what have you done, at that point?

Denise: I actually went on- straight round the corner and said to them 'so am I gay?' and they were like didn't know what to say and I said 'if I'm gay why am I married?' 'coz that was the best thing for the the kids I was thinking I could've said 'yes I am and it's got nothing to do wi'you' but I was thinking- but then I went to the parents and said, 'it has to've come from yous' I said 'children just don't say 'oh she's a dyke she's got somebody livin' there', so yous must've said it'\* and they said 'oh, well people are saying that round here' I said 'well you don't tell your kids, even if you do know something' I said 'you're supposed to protect your kids and don't bring them up to, erm judge people'\* and like they didn't know what to say\* I said 'my kids don't judge anyone I said I've got lots of gay friends and it's got absolutely nothing to do with them they know that'

CN: it's what they need to hear though isn't it

Denise: oh I do go mad when I start (both laugh)

CN: I know but it's annoying isn't it...just finding the best way of handling it's hard

Denise: I'm just glad that we're on the main road, 'coz they don't, get involved with all these horrible kids round the corner, they're dead horrible

CN: ah are they?

Denise: yeah, very (laughs) nasty horrible kids

CN: ah right, yeah?

Denise: but they were laughing at my kids 'coz they were sayin' 'you wouldn't dare-you daren't even swear' I said 'of course they dare, I said I'm not there so, they dare, they just don't want to'

CN: yeah, yeah

Denise: I mean if they, they probably do now an' again when somebody's really upset them but they wouldn't do it in front of me\* and if I found out I would go mad with them so (laughs)

CN: yeah...did you- when, we were in the drop-in, one time, were were your kids there?

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah

Denise: yeah

CN: what did they think of that?

Denise: they love it [?] they usually like going to the Princess Alice to play pool\* so they're cool about being around...like butch women, feminine women that- doesn't bother them at all as long as they think **I'm** not

CN: oh ok

Denise: I think that's what it is, but they know that I'm close to them all so, they're fine about that

CN: yeah, and do they ever ask you things about...

Denise: I think they don't wanna know

CN: really?

Denise: so they don't ask, I've been chatting to- on er erm, 'gaydar' to these girls and I put them on my MSN and when I put them on the cam' (daughter)'s straight to the computer to talk to them

CN: really?

Denise: and she's sayin' 'can I add yer can I add yer'

CN: ahh

Denise: she gets attached to these butch women she also got really attached to (name)

CN: right

Denise: did you here about her? (laughs)

CN: I think it's just nice, that kids can like, **know** that there's op- you know the option

Denise: yeah, well that's why I- well I **constantly** say to all of them, sometimes you don't like gay people because of your own sexuality\* I said 'I used to say 'urgh that's disgusting' I said but I knew I wanted to do it\* that's what I said [?]

CN: yeah, you just deny it to yourself yeah, absolutely

Denise: it's like I was trying my hardest for people not to, see through me, so I was like 'urgh, I wouldn't dare kiss another lass' and I was thinking I do it every day (both laugh)

CN: right yeah

Denise: but to other people I was constantly, trying to say- like prove to them that I wouldn't do it, because I knew I **was** doing it\* strange isn't it?\* but then I think well, if that's why me kids have a problem with it because, I mean, lots and lots of gay men say, 'oh my god he's gonna be gay him he's gorgeous he's too pretty to be a girl-a boy, but- and he wanted to wear tights 'til he was seven

CN: who's this?

Denise: (son) (both laugh) and he still does these little dances- you know like he'll get tissues and he'll, jump up and down like a Morris dancer

CN: ah yeah (laughs)

Denise: I laugh my head off, like he just does things like that and then they'll 'oh you look like a puff [?] (laughs) and I say well if he's a puff he's a puff, he's still a gorgeous puff aren't yer (son)

CN: that's really good that yeah

Denise: I think, I'll let them know that no matter what they are I'll still [see] them the same and I really don't care

CN: ah, that's brilliant

Denise: and I've said to all of them, I really prefer yous to be straight 'coz it's an easier life\* but if you're gay you're gay and I'll help yous through it\* I've always said that to them

CN: that's excellent, couldn't ask for more really, I mean, I know my nephew he's he's always been accused of being effeminate and all of that- he's absolutely fantastic he's a **lovely** person and I think whatever whatever, it doesn't matter

Denise: it doesn't matter as long as they treat, people well I don't care- or if they're treat well, whoever they get with if they treat them well then I'm cool about it

CN: absolutely yeah, yeah

Denise: (daughter)'s been holding hands with her friends walking home, things like that, and they're like 'oh my god she's a lesbian mam' [?]

CN: that's really good actually, I think to react like that

Denise: she doesn't care\* she just doesn't care what people think or say she gives her friends a kiss and a cuddle in the street and people are saying 'oh have you seen her she's a lesbian' and she goes 'they're my friends, **girl-friends**'

CN: she sounds like she knows what she's about

Denise: oh she- yeah\* she's got her head screwed on

CN: yeah, that's great that

Denise: I thought well if she is I'm gonna make it a hell of a lot easier than I've had it

CN: mm, yeah, yeah that's it, has a lot of impact doesn't it when you've been through it yourself yeah...yeah, erm...just going back to, you coming out, to people, who who did you come out to first, was it friends?

Denise: yeah

CN: was it? yeah

Denise: yeah we all went to Blackpool for a, erm, somebody's birthday\* and this girl's [?] kept looking at me all the time, and they're saying 'oh she fancies you she thinks you're gay' and I just went 'I am', and they were all like 'urgh'\* [?] I'd already met that girl the year before so I thought 'she's gonna say something' [?] gonna have to (both laugh)

CN: so would you say generally you're- the experiences of coming out have been quite good?

Denise: yeah

CN: like reactions?

Denise: but how I see it is, I only come out to people who I **want** to come out to\* it's got nothing to do with anybody else what I am\* or what I do\* and people say 'oh well they don't even know you're gay' and I say 'well they don't need to'

CN: exactly yeah

Denise: and I think nobody needs to know unless I'm, interested in them or, they need to know for another reason

CN: mm, yeah that's true yeah, yeah, I was- somebody else that I was interviewing I asked her if she'd come out to any of the teachers, and her answer to that was 'why should I?' and I thought well fair enough why should you? and that that's interesting in itself, I **don't know** why you should

Denise: that's how I see it I think you don't need to come out to anybody unless you're interested in them or, there's a reason- they come out and ask you up front and even then I think well, got nothing- I just say 'it's got nothing to do wi'you'\* unless I want that person to know yes I am, then I just say it's got nothing to do wi'you

CN: yeah, yeah...so would would you say that the teachers at school/

Denise: I mean people who are straight don't go 'round saying '**I'm straight**'

CN: no that's right, that's very true, they don't yeah...so d'you think people- teachers at school would assume that you were straight

Denise: yeah probably, probably because of the way I dress as well, I dress feminine so

CN: and that doesn't bother you, that's what you want isn't it, for your kids?

Denise: I don't really care, I don't care what anybody else thinks of me as long as they- it doesn't affect the kids, I don't care what anybody else thinks\* the only people I want to protect is me kids and if they're ok about things then I am

CN: mm, I see yeah, yeah, erm...does (husband) have any involvement in like school work and stuff like **after** school or anything like that?

Denise: he would if he could

CN: would he?

Denise: (laughs) I mean they'll say to him 'oh dad are you gonna help me with my maths?' and he goes 'oh my god, that's your mum's department'

CN: (laughs) ah right, ok yeah...mm

Denise: but even though he- I don't even think he done any exams at school 'coz he was like a hooligan\* but he still makes sure the kids do their homework he's like- 'have you done your homework?' first words that come out of his mouth\* 'you don't go on the computer 'til your homework's done' so he just- he wants them to do better than he did

CN: yeah yeah, oh I know/

Denise: and if they get good grades he always gives them some money and takes them out and things\* yeah

CN: ah that's nice yeah

Denise: he always makes sure they get something for doing well\* and if he gets a letter saying they've got detention then he'll keep them in and off the computer\* he says 'right, they're not allowed on the computer and you're not allowed out'

CN: yeah yeah, but yeah, I see, so he's quite, keen for them to do well

Denise: yeah (coughs)

CN: erm...mmm...I don't know if there's anything- just wondering I mean d'you have- would you say that you have, links with the gay community other than, Middlesbrough?

Denise: yeah I go to Newcastle quite a lot

CN: oh right yeah...what about erm, other sorts of- I'm thinking of the internet and things like that, do you...?

Denise: [yeah I do I go on there] I'm meeting a lass from Newcastle off there

CN: oh right yeah, so is that how you meet people?

Denise: well no I've only just gone on it

CN: oh ok

Denise: about three month ago\* but I'm vary wary I don't tell anybody nothing private about me, unless I'm interested in them and I'm one-to-one and not in the chat room where other people can see what I'm saying

CN: yeah, ofcourse yeah

Denise: I don't give them- I don't put a picture on, I give them a private picture once I've talked to them quite a lot\* and it's usually somebody from far away, not somebody who can turn up at the door (laughs) 'coz I don't really know them\*... and this girl's invited me and (friend) down to Scotland\* next week so

CN: that's far away enough

Denise: yeah (both laugh) unless you've got a bag packed to come back (both laugh)

CN: you're getting worried then are you? (both laughing)...so is that important to you then to keep it quite separate, from, family?

Denise: well I don't mind if if, they come here and stay here or anything\* as long as, they just keep it, like as friends in the house where the kids are

CN: yeah yeah...erm...sort of, there's one sort of thing- I mean obviously you've said they're your kids- do you ever see yourself, because you've separated, do you ever see that you're a single parent, or do you always feel like you're, in a, partnership with your..

Denise: single parent

CN: do you?

Denise: yeah

CN: you do right, ok...and how does that feel compared to what you felt before, when you were together?

Denise: I felt a lot safer\* when he lived here

CN: safer in what way?

Denise: I just felt more secure, about myself as well

CN: did you?

Denise: yeah, feel a bit insecure as I am now because, I feel like I can't even just be myself anymore

CN: mm

Denise: havin' to watch what I'm sayin' on the phone in case the kids are listening an' \* where I could have said anything about me being gay or anything if- while he was livin' here because the kids wouldna took it serious

CN: yeah, sort of almost become real now

Denise: mm

CN: mm, yeah (sniffs)...that's really hard that I- you've just reminded me of when- before I'd told my mum that I was gay and it was like **every** conversation I was monitoring **everything** I said

Denise: yeah, it's so hard\* in the end I'm thinking 'what did I say to them?' trying to think what to say for the best an'

CN: and where's this gonna lead?

Denise: yeah (laughs)

CN: what you gonna ask me after that and oh

Denise: yeah and I'm panicking on the phone I can even feel myself going hot\* thinking please don't keep asking these questions because I can't answer them properly\* and

then they sayin' 'what do you mean?' on the other end of the phone [?] and I'm saying 'yeah yeah, well the kids are sat here now' (both laugh)

CN: and you don't realize how like/

Denise: it's like living a double life

CN: it is, it really is like that

Denise: I feel like I'm living two lives now, the only time I'm myself is when I'm out of this house

CN: really?

Denise: but when I'm in here I feel like I'm still, like a, little straight mum (laughs)

CN: ah I see, yeah, it's tiring as well isn't it, like exhausting, thinking, two different ways

Denise: well it doesn't help with me blacking out with stress

CN: well no, so you've got...what's sort of going on

Denise: erm, they said it's a type of fit but, it's brought on by stress

CN: is it?

Denise: yeah, soon as I'm stressed I have blackouts and fits

CN: yeah? is that just recent or has that been-?

Denise: since I was havin' a carry on with him before he moved out\* I had me first one I had a fit at work and fell down the stairs\* and then I ended up getting' finished from work and then by the time he moved out, I had **all** the debts **all** the bills and I was livin' off fifty pound a week\* so, I was tryin' to pay everything out of that fifty pound\* I got in debt up to me eyeballs, but, I've done it all myself, I've struggled and I've just paid it all off

CN: have you really

Denise: yeah the only things I've got left is, my bank loan, and my visa, and my overdraft but I've nearly finished my overdraft so I only have two more payments

CN: that's brilliant that

Denise: I struggled and I- but I did it I, I got everything up to date

CN: I take my hat off to you

Denise: I had [eight] catalogues and I paid them all off- first thing I done's every single penny- I even made clothes\* I was making clothes for my friends tops an' that an' selling them (laughs)

CN: god that's excellent

Denise: yeah, anything I could to make money I did it

CN: that's brilliant yeah

Denise: I got all the debts paid off very quick

CN: that's really good, ha, but you did feel safer at that- financially then, when you were together

Denise: yeah

CN: and now it's not so-?

Denise: no

CN: right, but what about/

Denise: [?] it's a lot better now, 'coz I've got my money sorted out and I know what I'm what I'm entitled to spend myself and what needs paying first [?] most important

CN: so you're more in control then?

Denise: yeah I have got control of my money again now

CN: does that feel good?

Denise: yeah\*...plus he does help me- he didn't at first because Wendy had [?] that's one thing he is stubborn about, 'if anybody moves in with you then, my money stops for you' \*...which is fair enough because then he can get on with his own life\* is how he's thinking

CN: mm, would he still provide money for the kids, or does he mean that, is that what he means?

Denise: erm, no he'd still give, me money for the kids but, I always ask him to buy them things

CN: oh ok, yeah

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah

Denise: I mean he does give me like thirty pound- he usually just gives me thirty pound to go out with on a Friday\* and that helps me because it's not goin' outta my money\* so he does that and buys the [?] if they need a pair of trainers\* or jeans or shoes he just buys them straight away for them

CN: does he, right

Denise: he's really been good\* which I couldn'a done without that but that's what's helped me get, all my debts paid off

CN: I see yeah

Denise: he said 'well you need a night out, look at the state of you, I've made you ill and I know it's my fault'

CN: oh well that's- yeah, at least he's recognized that, yeah

Denise: yeah...it went to America with his ex-girlfriend when I was pregnant with [son]

CN: did he really, oh god

Denise: yeah (laughing) I've been to hell and back with him, I have to wear scar cover every day 'coz he bit all my jaw-line and said er 'nobody else will want you now' \* that was when he was taking drugs and drinking\* but then before he married me, he's dropped everything- he didn't go out of his house for, eight years, with his mates- ones that didn't drink, and he was like a different person\* as soon as I started working nights constantly, he just went off the rails [he was saying?] we never see each other

CN: ah I see, god that's tough that

Denise: mm, but I've always paid the mortgage myself\* even though it's in joint names I've always paid the mortgage myself and he said to me 'I'd never ever take half the house off you because, I haven't put anything into it' which is good- but when he moved out of here I gave him loads of furniture and stuff that he needed\* I mean I had a big table and chairs brand new and I said 'oh you can have that' like- we get on better as friends

CN: yeah, it's amazing isn't it, really is...erm, I mean, although you say you felt sort of safer as, **a couple**, did you- do you feel differently as a **parent** now, do you think you **parent** your children differently?

Denise: I think I'm a lot more...I think I'm more strict

CN: ah right, yeah?

Denise: I wasn't at first because I felt so guilty that he moved out of the flat I let them run riot I let them do anything\* get anything, but now I've had to put my foot down 'coz they were getting like so that 'oh why why should I?' and I thought no they don't do this to their dad, they're not gonna do it to me

CN: mm...so you changed, sort of changed a little bit/

Denise: yeah 'coz I was very soft with them and he used to be like '**do it now**' and they'd do it

CN: ah I see...so he would do most of the disciplining d'you think?

Denise: yeah

CN: and you've sort of taken a bit of that on, ah that's/

Denise: but even now I just pick the phone up and say 'can you have a word with [son]' I put [son] on and he'll say 'do what your mam says **right** now' and he's still, behind me a hundred percent

CN: mm, oh that's good isn't it

Denise: yeah...I said if I'd known it was gonna be this easy I'd have done it [?] (both laugh)

CN: yeah...so d'you think- what d'you think will happen when your kids have left school, d'you think they'll want to do more education?

Denise: [son's] at college plumbing

CN: oh is he, ah right, which college?

Denise: erm, Longlands

CN: right...is he enjoying that?

Denise: yeah he loves it, he's very it's- he's very quiet and shy, so he needs to- he doesn't go out the house [?] goes anywhere no he's very quiet (laughs)

CN: yeah, what about the other two?

Denise: but he's not as bright as them two like sometimes, he he's slightly dyslexic as well 'coz I had tests done for him, 'coz he was finding his homework very hard he said, 'I can't, I can't read something and know what, the answers are but if somebody says it to me then I do'\* so I said 'oh I'm gonna get you tested [doctors?]

CN: so reading words was the thing

Denise: yeah he couldn't work out in his head what it meant when it was wrote down\* they said 'oh he's slightly dyslexic' so [?] behind, if I'd known before- he was in his last year, if I'd known before then they maybes he'd have been, quicker with things

CN: mm...but it's not about intelligence though is it, being dyslexic, just a- it's not a

Denise: he's still not as intelligent as them two anyway\* no

CN: so do they know what they want to do?

Denise: [son] wants to go in the Army\* and [daughter] wants to work with severe learning disabilities and mental illness, like I did

CN: so are you, wanting to get back into that yourself

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah, where did you work?

Denise: er, Convent House, Hillview, d'you know- he works for Mesmac, and then he went from there to Mesmac...I've worked at all different places

CN: have you...with mental health people?

Denise: yeah

CN: I bet that's really rewarding

Denise: I love it, I used to bring them home for their teas (both laugh) I used to say 'does anybody want to come to our house for their tea?' (CN laugh)...(husband) used to be sat here going 'oh my god' [inaudible] (laughing) I had one of them sat crying 'coz he wanted [son's] football socks so [son] took them off and give him them

CN: (laughing) oh god

Denise: but they used to love it, I mean, I think treat them the same way as you treat any adult and I used to let them stay up where, they all, when I went in they were all puttin' them to bed and I used to say 'oh I'll put them to bed if they wanna go'\* I'd let them stay up I used to take videos in like The Wizard of Oz they used to love that (CN laugh) I used to take all the kids videos in and we'd sit up with cocoa and watch em I think well, they're still adults why should they go to bed\* I did have quite a lot of bust ups with people over that\* they said no it's my shift and this is how I deal with them, and they used to absolutely love me (CN laugh) I used to take them to the pub (laughs)

CN: oh why not

Denise: I used to say if they wanna go'the pub they can they can have a shandy, doesn't hurt their medication yeah

CN: I bet they got a hell of a lot out of it as well, just doing something, ordinary

Denise: yeah...one of them couldn't speak (name) he just used to look up for yes down for no and he [inaudible] (laughing) when he new we were going out, getting excited\* you have to make their lives happy [?] I know a lot of people who say they're caring but they're bloody not

CN: that's right isn't it, just do the/

Denise: [?] you do have to care to be in this job if you don't you shouldn't b

CN: I agree with you, I think it takes/

Denise: I mean him I had to pour like, er bits of larger into his mouth drooling it was all going over and he was jumping up and screaming in the girl who was with me said 'oh my god I feel so embarrassed' I went 'well wrong job'\* and I went to town on her, and she was saying 'well he's slaver I said 'excuse me' I said 'he can't speak he's not deaf and he's not daft'\* like (smiling) (laughs)

CN: god yeah...I think people don't realize what it involves, so they get into it's like woah, this isn't for me or

Denise: I couldn't believe she said she was embarrassed I thought well people can see that they've got mental illness and they're disabled and this yer- I thought I can't believe that you're embarrassed about bringing them to hear exactly what's going on

CN: yeah, but them being outside of their place is possibly what she was, about

Denise: but this man was looking all the time and I went 'what you looking want some?' but they were all laughing and the the more I was saying things \* the more they were laughing\* and I went to [name] 'he's dying for a wheelchair' (CN laughs) and he was laughing his head off, nearly tippin' up

CN: they probably don't hear that very often (being supported)

Denise: anyway the woman from behind the bar came over and she went marvelous she said\* you kept yer cool you put people straight especially I was disgusted\* anyway the lass [?] her job in the next day

CN: did she...oh well that's probably the right thing isn't it...erm...I think them all, all the questions I didn't think we'd get through...is there anything you thought I might ask you that I haven't

Denise:...erm nothing I can think of

CN: no...'coz a lot of the research that has been done with lesbian about...erm, the differences that biological mothers have compared to like see what I mean?

Denise: yeah

CN: or/

Denise: that's another thing when (ex-girlfriend) lived with me, she thought had different views on kids\* because she got a very strict upbringing and ob

wasn't happy she used- she used to say to the kids 'take your shoes straight upstairs and your bags now' and I used to say 'em excuse me' I said 'they've just done a full days work at school they do not want to have to run upstairs and take all their stuff up' I said 'they want to come in put their bags down, sit down and have something to eat' 'yeah well that's why they're always like this and they're doing that and they're doing that, they're taking the piss out of yer' I said 'they're not'\* I said 'this is how I am' I said 'when they go to bed they take stuff up with them' I said 'if they don't well fair enough, I'll do it' I said 'it's no harm' I said 'if I was at work all day I'd say well you do this you do that'

CN: yeah so you had your way of doing things and she wasn't, mm

Denise: (coughs) she used to say to them 'wash your plate up behind you' where I always do the pots and I was like 'well I'm their mam, that- I don't expect them to do everything

CN: mm, so that would have- that was quite [?]

Denise: they said she's 'what does she think we are, in the Army?' that's what they used to say, but my oldest one, he just rebelled against her completely\* he said 'she's moved in here, she thinks she can take over, when we go out she even moves things round' he said 'even our dad didn't used to say this to us and that to us'

CN: that's interesting

Denise: yeah...she was more bubbly and I don't I mean I've never I can honestly say I've never seen her have a good laugh\* so she was completely the wrong personality for me and my children

CN: yeah, and d'you think she tried to take a sort of parent role when she came in here?

Denise: yeah she even used to say to them 'does anyone want to come shopping with me' and that and they'd go shopping but they'd say 'god I'd say can I have this and she used to say no, no, no' where I'd say [Denise's dog starts barking]

CN: (laughing) the beast, yeah so she was really strict then by the sounds of it

Denise: yeah, too strict and I just said that's not how I bring me kids up, the kids are kids and they should have a life\* they should be able to have fun, not be told what to do constantly

CN: she didn't have kids of her own

Denise: no

CN: no, right (dog still barking) so what was her feeling about the fact that you had three children, was she ok about that?

Denise: yeah

CN: yeah

Denise: yeah...but she kept saying 'I wish I'd have met yer while they were smaller' and I said 'well no because I'd be feeling- I wouldn't want them brought up the way you think's right'

CN: well this is it isn't it

Denise: I said there's not one place- there's not one person's ever not commented on my kids when they've met them\* said 'god they're so polite and good'\* and I think well, I think I've done a good job with them myself I don't need somebody else changing them\* 'coz if they're miserable then probably they wouldn't be so polite and well mannered

CN: mm, and that's it it's like someone else just coming in and deciding that you're doing it wrong is a bit much as well

Denise: yeah, she said 'yer give into them too much' and I said 'well obviously not because- if I'd brought them up wrong then I would have had trouble with them'\* I said '[son's] nearly eighteen yet I don't have no trouble with him he doesn't like smoking he doesn't like drinking', I said 'that's great to me' she went 'well he wants to get a life' and I said 'well that is his life' I said 'and if he chooses not to drink and smoke then that's great for me'\* and she said 'well, [son] he can play out when he wants' I said 'he does football' I said 'he's obsessed with football' I said 'and if that's what he's in to at the moment' I said 'he's only on the green'\* and then she says '[daughter's] too clingy to yer 'coz she keeps wanting to be in bed with yer' I said 'her dad has just moved out' I said 'she's a daddy's girl she's constantly with him and all of a sudden he's just gone'\* I said 'what do you expect from them' and she said 'this is the perfect time to tell them you're gay' I said 'don't be so bloody stupid' I thought she's got **her** interests and not the kids\* and, it constantly proved that she was more interested in what she wanted from me, than what the kids wanted\* so that just didn't work, just clashed completely

CN: and with her being very out as well she probably wanted you to/

Denise: and then she constantly tortured me and questioned me, every single day- I spent about ten pounds a day on texts, just answering questions, 'has he been round?' erm 'has he took a days [?] did you go with him did you do this did you do that?' \*Who've you spoke to, what did they say, well what did you say to that? That's what I got constantly\* absolute- well I did me- I worked, even my counsellor said and the doctor said 'if you don't get rid of her you're gonna really really be that far down you are not gonna get back up, they said you didn't even have these big fits until you got with her, so she's the cause of them

CN: stressing you

Denise: said it's very stressful, having a split up with a husband and kids that are crying for them every day without somebody like her telling you this is when you need to come out\* she absolutely tortured me and then she even threatened to kill me in the car, she was driving one day, she said erm, she was driving like a maniac and she was- I said 'look I want you to move out' and she was going '*no I'll just kill us both*'...and she was

driving like a maniac and she had to stop behind a car and I just jumped out the car about thirty mile an hour\* I thought 'oh my god she's gonna kill me'

CN: god that's scary

Denise: it was, and I thought 'oh my god, what am I doing I'm best off with him' (laughs) he never tried to kill me even when I come out to him (laughing)

CN: sounds like she had a lot of issues

Denise: yeah...but she still won't move on

CN: so what she doing- are you still seeing her though?

Denise: I'm trying to cut her off- I was trying to be her friend but obviously it's not going to work\* she still questions everything 'oh who's gonna be there?' this person that person

CN: she's very possessive

Denise: yeah, too possessive, and I can't live like that

CN: it's not healthy though is it

Denise: no, I want I want to meet somebody who's like me I'd go and, they've got their friends that we can both go out separately and together, and there's **no** hassle no questioning of 'who did you talk to well what did they say well oh yeah she fancies you that's why you-' that's constantly...and I thought I can't be doin' with that, but I said 'even my husband didn't used to question me so why the hell should I, have it off you?'

CN: no...well that's great, thank you

Denise: thought you were going to ask me some really intimate things (laughs)

CN: no no not that intimate

Denise: thought oh god what have I got into?

CN: no just talking about sexuality and sexual identity [inaudible]

Denise: I am quite open about it me and...even my counsellor said 'you know **exactly** what you want and you know what you're doing but, it's doing it because of the kids that's the only problem you've got'\* she said 'I can see that you're really strong minded and you know exactly what you're doing and, what's for the best'

CN: yeah, it's just a bit of a barrier isn't it really

Denise: I mean if- I could meet somebody tomorrow and if they said 'oh that's fine pretending we're friends in front of the kids' I'd be over the moon\* but not many people would be

CN: right, right

Denise: I mean they go to their dads on a weekend he has them Friday and Saturday and I mean, two days a week I could just be myself in here with them if, that's enough for somebody and just pretend they're my friend the rest of the week, we can still go out away from the kids\* but they're all like 'no, tell them'

CN: isn't it strange that, I wonder what the, urgency is, for them to **tell** the kids, I mean of all people you should know when the right time is

Denise: I mean even if I **do** tell the kids I'm still not gonna be, all over them kissing them in front of the kids

CN: well exactly

Denise: 'coz I didn't do that with their dad, so I'm not gonna do it with another girl it'd be like '**whoa**' (both laugh)

CN: that's it isn't it

Denise: yeah, I mean I don't mind sittin' next to somebody and givin' them a cuddle in front of the kids but\* yeah...I mean even when (ex-girlfriend) lived here they did think she was just my friend but I, I used to sit on the floor and she'd brush my hair and things like that so they knew that we were closer friends and I don't mind them thinking that and them working it out for themselves\* but, I don't want to have to come out and say 'by the way she's my girlfriend' 'coz there's no need to say that to them

CN: no...but you said that they knew originally and then you sort of back-tracked a bit, how did you do that? What did you tell them originally?

Denise: erm, I said 'I've always, preferred women than men all my life' I said 'but, I always went by what my mum wanted for me' and they were saying 'so you're a lesbian then?' I went 'well' I said 'I still love your dad' and I was like 'I still love your dad but I'm still, attracted to women' \* but now he thinks I'm attracted to women but I'm not gonna do it I think

CN: ah right yeah, so they sort of understand that you have an attraction to women but you don't act on it

Denise: yeah

CN: right

Denise:...but then I said 'oh don't worry yer dad knows' I said 'he thinks it's great' but then I [?]

CN: well shall we wrap it up then

(Husband enters the room)

H: hello

CN: hello

Denise: just doing an interview

H: you didn't phone me- oh sorry am I in the way

(CN & Denise laugh)

END OF INTERVIEW

## APPENDIX VII

PhD Interview Interview with 'Bev (44)  
(27.02.06) 1hr. 15 mins (venue – Bev's home)

CN: erm, so the questions really are in three broad areas em, one of them is your identity, your lesbian- a lesbian identity sexuality, the other one is about the community that you live in and, what community means to you, and the other area's about the school that your children go to

Bev: ok

CN: ok, erm...so first of all...you found out about this research through the drop-in (LBWN) didn't you?

Bev: yeah I did yeah

CN: yeah and what what sort of made you think 'oh I'm gonna take part in that'

Bev: erm...I suppose because..I'd like to think that...I'm helping the development of the community, erm...sexuality's moving forward now from how it was in the 70's and the 80's and now it's becoming more, socially acceptable, and I think by doing things like this, it'll only increase the, the growth of that really

CN: yeah, right, so it's the the, lesbian gay community that you-

Bev: yeah and also the support for my children, erm...yet I'm out to everybody erm...my dad knows even though it's not verbalized\* but my children have found it difficult erm disclosing to their friends at school because of the peer pressure and,\* the stigma that goes with it, and I think if we make it more.. erm, socially aware, in schools\* then it'll be easier for for children with gay parents\* to to be more, open and, and they'll be more socially accepted really

CN: yeah yeah, so they they struggle with that?

Bev: yeah\* the- they had a lot, erm, before I come out to anybody obviously people are very astute at\* at other people- at people's behaviour and erm, my son was in the junior's then, and my daughter had just started the senior school and they got an awful lot of.. bullying an' \* there was a lot of stigma around me being gay and, they went really through hell

CN: really

Bev: yeah, erm/

CN: so so just, take me back then from, you said to me earlier on that you had been married for twenty years

Bev: yeah twenty years

CN: so, how did everything change and how did you come out and/

Bev: erm...I'd been experiencing for a number of years, erm..difficulties in my marriage and I didn't know why I...erm...my ex-partner, erm, his behaviour wasn't acceptable really\* but at the time I was in a..a very scared place where it was, 'you've made your bed now lie on it'\* erm, and I didn't know whether the way I was feeling, which was...erm..I wasn't interested in sex basically\* anymore with him or with anybody else\* and it **never ever** occurred to me that...I might be interested in women\* I sort of put a block on, all my- I called myself asexual I think\* erm..I put a block on all my erm intimate feelings and everything

CN: yes, right

Bev: erm...I'd been in therapy for a couple of years supporting my son, who'd been going through quite a traumatic time\* erm...and during my therapy in the exploration of myself..erm...I started training myself\* and on the first weekend of, my training, erm..I actually met somebody\* that..I sort of hit it off with straight away\* and my life turned 'round just like that erm\* from that day forward erm...I knew I didn't need to be in my marriage anymore\* I didn't want to be in marriage and I'd I'd, gained the strength then,\* to move on and realize what direction I wanted to go in

CN: I see

Bev: erm..and that's how it happened

CN: that was quite a profound change

Bev: yeah\* that was my first ever experience of a feeling, towards another woman\* and it was so strong\* it was almost like..you know when the light goes on and you realize [?]

CN: like a big wake up call kind of thing

Bev: yeah yeah

CN: wow that that's really interesting that...and that was through the counselling, in Newcastle was that

Bev: yeah yeah that was through my training, course yeah\* yeah it was a **very** big change in my life

CN: yeah I can imagine, so then what what did you, did you tell people close to you and?-

Bev: erm, no not really, I I suppose I.. there was I think my best friend I told\* and that was it\* erm, because of the nature of the relationship erm...the woman that I was having a relationship...didn't, she had a family as well,\* she had been in a long marriage\* erm, and it was new to us **both**, \* and..so it was sort of a denial to everybody else\* we were just mates and that's how it was

CN: I see, and did that go on for a long time like that?

Bev: it it did yeah it went on for nearly two years\* erm, and then, she finished that relationship she finished our relationship, erm...I was quite devastated but\* and I turned to my sister and said to her, 'will you come out with me? I need- there's like places I need to'- I needed to go and meet people\* so we went on the scene in Middlesbrough\* and erm...the first time I went out with her, I met up with erm a girl I used to go to school with\* and we were friends at school and she says to me 'what are you doin' in 'ere?' (both laugh) I said 'exactly the same as you' and like now we are **best** buds now you know\* erm, any- an' I started socializing on a weekend\* or any other functions, that she was going to I'd tag along,\* and I've met my present gay partner then\* and we've been together...three years, next week

CN: wow, that's great yeah

Bev: so, I told my children eventually

CN: right

Bev: erm...and it- they found it difficult at first\* and I said 'I'm still mam,\* I still love you the same as I did, and I hope that, you know\* you still love me...but I'm sorry, I'm too young, not to do, what I want to do for the rest of my life\* and this is how it is\* erm, I'll support you as best I can' and...

CN: and did that take a while for them to-

Bev: it did they were very- they both cried and cried and I said... 'if you had to make a list, what would be the top of the list, why you're cryin'?\* so I said this individually to them both\* and both of them said.. 'what our friends'll think...it's not you mam'\* erm...you know they both said 'we still love you you're still the same mam\* but we've already been through, you know a heck of a lot at school and an' when this comes out then, then we're gonna go through it all again\* and I said to them 'well you have the choice whether you tell your friends or not but you need to let me know your choice, so that I can support yer'\* and they both chose not to actually tell their friends\* erm, but if their friends asked, or become aware of it then, they would decide then what they were gonna do from there

CN: choose carefully I suppose, who they told

Bev: and it it's quite amazing especially my daughter, in her year at school, there was at least half a dozen gay people\* boys and girls\* and they seem to go to (daughter)\*...and they've, you know I said I said to (daughter) 'why d'ya think they come to you?' and she says 'well...I don't judge 'em mam and I'm there to support them and blah blah blah' and er I says 'well...I think they might realize you have an affinity but, in the you- in their young way they don't realize why, because I'm very- I've had a lot of input, with her school friends erm\* and I think they haven't made that connection\* you know, we call it gaydar don't we?

CN: yeah (laughs)

Bev: erm, and I think it's gaydar-by-proxy

CN: (laughs) I like that, yeah, ah that's good, yeah, so they just sort of get that feeling she's safe, to go to

Bev: and so (daughter) would then come to me and, and she'd say 'oh so-and-so's got a problem' like, 'her mam's reacted badly when she's she's'- and I have, well being in counselling as well\* erm, I have an awful lot of information from...parents of children who come out and children whose parents've come out and\* you know, groups and societies and- and so like I would say 'oh well' you know 'd'you wanna take this package to school and'- 'no no 'coz then she'll know, but they know you work with gay people mam 'coz I've told them, \* that you work, erm, in an organization at Hartlepool which is working with gay people\* and she's like, it's sort of been, information passed on by, by a middle man you know,\* and erm...and it's amazing how...how (daughter) accepts them and they've come to her

CN: it is isn't it, it's really good that, yeah

Bev: sorry if I got off the beaten track

CN: no no it's fine, I'm fascinated...do you, when you came out to your children did you use any labels, to describe yourself?

Bev: erm, my actual words were- I think they thought I was ill again 'coz I'd been very ill, and nearly lost my life and er, I said 'look I need to talk to you, we were living at my dads at the time before.. before I got this house and\*, we lived there for six months and I said 'erm, I've been exploring something' I said, 'before you worry about anything I'm not ill\* I said I've been exploring something with myself, and I now feel comfortable enough and certain enough, er to tell yer, that erm, I now realize that I'm gay\*...erm...and that, you know, I have got a partner, and and that partner is (name), and (partner) had been part of our, social life for quite a while\* and, they cried and then it was 'how long's it been going on, did you know, have you lied to us, blah blah blah' and I I said 'I could- you know I couldn't dis- discuss this with yer, 'til I was certain I didn't wanna put you through anything traumatic and then say 'oh well I'm not really it was just a phase I was going through'\* erm

CN: yeah, it was very brave

Bev: it was very very difficult\* and then I text (partner) and said 'oh god I've just told the kids' (laughing)

CN: she wasn't she didn't know you were gonna do it?

Bev: she said 'well you've been saying you were gonna do it for a while' I said 'the moment was there' my dad was out\* I had the house to myself I had my children, both of them together\* erm...and I just went for it you know\* and I'm so pleased I did because then it, it means now that (partner) and I, we're not in your face, we don't rub it in their faces\* but, I now have a relationship with (partner) that, that the kids are comfortable with, you know erm,\* I mean quite often, erm, they'll knock on the

bedroom door erm, they'll say 'oh what you watching' and the next minute I've got one laid across the bottom of the bed and (CN laughs) one up the side of the bed and there's four of us watching telly upstairs, and if I hadn't've been- you know come out with them, then I couldn't do that you know\* and erm\* like quite often, I think (daughter) was...felt like that she was, being, what's the word I'm looking for?- another woman in the house you know she doesn't live with me (partner)\* but erm, she, she had been the woman in my life\* and ofcourse, this other woman comes along, and am I- is that woman taking so much away- where (son) is fine with it

CN: yeah

Bev: my son, but if it had been a **man** in my life, he would have reacted the same\* you know he had been the man in my life\* erm, and then this other man was coming\* treading on his territory\* so, I did have a difficult time with (daughter) for a while\* er, an' even now she she'll be- if we're we're all having tea she'll come in, and she'll sit right there that- so (partner) and I can't sit together (CN laughs) you know (smiling) and that's fine\* but quite often I'll- if we're watching TV I'll say 'come on move coz I wanna sit there' 'plenty of other seats' and I say 'well, when your boyfriend comes in I'm gonna sit in the middle of you two'\* 'you like to sit with your partner I like to sit with mine'\* 'ok mam, ok'\* and (son) says 'stop being awful (daughter), shift' you know

CN: ah so they are pretty cool about it now, yeah?

Bev: well, you know, been on holiday together and/

CN: have you?

Bev: yeah\* (partner) did live with us for eleven month\* in my other house, but erm, we thought it was, better if, she went and lived back in her own house, she lives over at Hartlepool\* erm...and it works a lot better, it does work a lot better

CN: why d'you think that is?

Bev: erm...(partner) doesn't have children\* and she found it difficult, livin' 'round children\* erm...I do have kids so, she didn't understand, what being a mother was\* and I sort of didn't appreciate the fact that, she's lived her life, without kids\* and I think that was the main, thing,\* she likes her space an', she quite likes to do what she wants to do when she wants to do it\* where with- when you've got kids in the house, they've all- **always**, first and foremost\* erm...and it was, it was spoiling our relationship\*...I've gotta say when she said she wanted to move back home I was devastated\*, and I said 'oh I don't want a long, distance relationship I want a partner that I share my life with\*', but then on reflection it was- I've got quality time with my kids, when they were going off to their dads on the weekend, I had quality time with (partner)\* and she come over one day in the week it meant that we were all together\* so it worked really well and **now**, if I put my hand on my heart, erm, I don't wanna, **live with her**, while my children are still here

CN: oh right, yeah

Bev: you know erm, especially while they're still at school, maybe once (son) has done his college and, even if he's still livin' at home, and we're still togeth- if we're still together\* you know I would like to share, my life with her and it- in, a living capacity but...

CN: is that because they would be older, the children, or because they won't be at school?

Bev: w- yeah because, they'll be older and, then I won't...I know they'll always be my kids, but, you know, they're gonna reach a certain age an' I'll say, 'right now it's time for my life\*', you fend for yourself, I'm puttin' myself first now,\* at the moment my kids'll **always** come first\* erm\* but once they're self, sufficient and\* and and you know

CN: sort of responsible for themselves

Bev: that's right yeah\* they'll always be my kids and I'll always be there for them (CN coughs) you know but they is a cut off point where I do put my- you know I need, and I can see where that is\* you know if (son) goes to college or if he goes to work and does an apprenticeship, my daughter will- is going to university after college\* erm, and once they become self funding,\* that's when I say 'it's my time now'

CN: yeah, and that might be a time when you'd move back in together?

Bev: yeah coz it's, well I- you know that's what we're gonna do, you've gotta choice, there'll be a room there for ya, or you can find your own place, but I'm still always mam, you know\* so, that's

CN: yeah, and, when you told them, when you did come out to them do you still- you used the the word gay, do you sort of see yourself- is that how you would describe yourself?

Bev: yeah, I don't, I don't like describing myself as lesbian **unless**, I'm in the group capacity

CN: oh ok

Bev: and then we call ourselves lesbians or\* (partner) likes the word dyke

CN: ah right (laughs) yeah reclaiming it

Bev: yeah, but I I prefer to, to label myself gay

CN: d'you?

Bev: gay woman yeah

CN: gay woman, yeah...what is it about lesbian then?

Bev: erm...it was a word I I couldn't even say up until three year ago really\* erm I don't know what it was\* I think it was the stigma that went with it in the seventies (both laugh) you know\* lesbian lesbo lezzer\* you know it's, it's quite a cruel-

CN: it's one of those playground taunt names isn't it

Bev: and- I don't know if you're aware in school, erm, the playground word is if, if somebody doesn't conform to something they're all gay\* 'oh yer gay yer gay!' and I mean it comes it spills into the home, and it was amazing at first like (daughter and son)'d be arguing and they'd be 'Oh yer gay you!' 'excuse me, that's my label' and it would break the argument up (CN laughs) and they'd say 'mam don't say that about yourself' 'why I am'\* you know and even now if I have a disagreement with my daughter she stomp about she'll go 'oh yer gay you' and I'll go 'correct! ten points' (both laugh) and she goes 'mam, you know what I mean' you know

CN: so it's about, what is it for them, somebody that's going against, sort of like...?

Bev:erm, what you mean the playground talk, well when we were at school it was erm...well it was awful really, I mean we used to say divvy all the time but, we used to say mong\* we'd say 'aw yer mong' you know meaning like, whatever\* erm but they've progressed

CN: so it's just used in the same way?

Bev: yeah in the eighties it was the Brookside thing dick-head,\* and now it's gay

CN: yeah, coz my nephew uses it all the time

Bev: yeah\* but I don't think it, it's not used as, the actual, meaning of the word gay

CN: which is probably better that way isn't it

Bev: yeah, but it alw- also helps make it socially acceptable, 'coz if somebody calls you gay then you're used to hearing it all the time

CN: you mean if they're using it but it's not about the sexuality of the person yeah

Bev: but it's a word that to the ear, is easy on the ear\* I mean I remember sayin' knackered to me mam, me mam was very very strict, we lost her just over ten year ago\* and it was 'don't use that word, that is a swear word' you know 'you don't use that' and that was in the, in the eighties\* and erm, I was horrified the first time I heard her say 'eeh I've gone from top to bottom and I'm knackered' and I said 'mam I thought you didn't use that word' but it's like it becomes socially acceptable doesn't it you know...so gay is like

CN: it feels more comfortable with you?

Bev: yeah

CN: yeah...erm...you've just said you lost your mum a couple of years ago, and your dad knows, but you've never/

Bev: I've never said to dad 'dad, (partner)'s my partner and I'm gay',\* but he knows\* you know it's, where's (partner) this an', like 'oh we're going on holiday, you (partner) and the kids' and, and I know all his friends know, because, he's best friends with my, ex-mother and father-in-law who I'm still very friendly with\* and she come out and asked me last year\* 'is there something going on with you and (partner)?' I said 'yeah they is yeah', I would have denied it had I not told my children\* but the kids know- it might have been the year before that actually, and erm, and I know fine well she'll've gone down the club and said 'yes, Bev is a lesbian' you know\* and, I think out of respect to me dad they probably don't talk about it in his company\* but erm, I mean, the whole of the area knows, you know\* it's, wh- when I first come out and, you know I'd I I'd go to a pub and say 'oh well you've heard the rumours about me?' '**yeah we've heard** them blah blah' I said 'well it's **true**'... '*oh, oh right*' you know I don't know how people- it's

CN: is this locally?

Bev: yeah\* yeah, so I know dad knows\* erm...and, like I say, I'm out to everybody except me dad, verbally

CN: right

Bev: and me mam, (sniffs) I met (partner) the day before my mam went in hospital for her...to have half of her lung removed\* erm...and I didn't contact her for a week after that 'til we- mam got over her operation\* and then she come back as strong as an ox and\* I introduced (partner) to our mam, and she **loved** her to bits, she really did get on well with her, erm...where, my previous partner erm, she didn't like her\* 'coz I run round after her an'\* you know she sh- she said 'there's something about her I don't like her'\* but (partner) she absolutely/

CN: and she knew you were together?

Bev: well-

CN: again it wasn't/

Bev: she said to me 'if I thought there was anything going on with you two, that'd be it Bev that'd be it', she was very old fashioned\* but with (partner) it was different\* and I think, when I look back now it's not, accepting that I'm gay, it was- she didn't like,\* my partner\* and erm, what mam wanted mam got, she sort of, she ruled with a, rod of iron you know

CN: did she

Bev: yeah\* her word was god and there was no going against it\* but like you know I was quite amazed at how she did take to (partner)

CN: yeah

Bev: so

CN: must've made it easier though, to know that she/

Bev: well that was in the March and then we lost her in the August\* erm...and (partner) come'the hospital\* every day with me\* and she was there to support me you know so

CN: what about other family, have you got other sisters and brothers

Bev: I've got a sister\* (name) our kid, she knows, she, yeah, and she's cool with it \* yeah...erm, my best friend who I...not long after I started erm, seeing (partner), erm...I said 'oh we'll have to tell Sue, so erm we went up to the house and it was in the summer we were having a, a sitty-out in the garden with a couple of bottles of wine, and after I'd had a few glasses o'wine I said to (partner) 'I'm goin'the toilet so will you tell them please?' (both laugh) and when I come back she said 'they're cool with it' Sue said 'we knew we were just waiting for you to tell us'

CN: so you've had good reactions from a lot of people

Bev: yeah, and we go on holiday with them\* and the four of us go out as like two couples, you know\* and Bill loves it 'coz he's surrounded by women\* that's Sue's husband\* and er, we really lay it on thick with him like, him being the only man and blah blah blah\* I said 'we should compare notes sometimes Bill, and he loves it he really does he loves it

CN: that's really nice that you get on like that...(coughs) erm...how does it feel being a mum now, as to what it was when you were married?

Bev: erm

CN: now that you're in a same-sex relationship, has it changed at all?

Bev: yeah it has, erm...when I was married...I was very very unhappy, but I always, had the support of of their dad\* erm...which took a lot of pressure off me if I was feeling unwell or whatever...and I don't know whether it's about being in a same-sex relationship...or whether it's just about being a single parent\* but...sometimes I just crave for, someone to take the responsibility of being a mam away from me\* even if it's for only, three hours if I'm feeling, pretty crap you know\* erm\* and (partner) doesn't, erm, doesn't see that need because she's not a parent\* and she's you know she would never say 'right come on I'll take them away for a couple of hours and give yer'- \* so I don't have that support\* and I think, probably it's about, being a single parent rather than a gay parent

CN: is it

Bev: yeah I really think

CN: I see yeah

Bev: erm...if, if I was in erm a straight relationship...erm...I don't really know because I, from leaving my marriage it's something I've never done so, I couldn't-\* I sort of I can't differentiate with it- single parent gay parent thing\* erm, if I lived with my partner, then I could probably compare it better

CN: yeah that's true, yeah ofcourse

Bev: but we don't live together

CN: there's too much difference isn't there with the/

Bev: yeah...and when she did live with us, it was, before my children knew\* erm...so they weren't aware

CN: that's interesting yeah...yeah I can see that, it's difficult to separate the two isn't it really

Bev: yeah

CN: mm, ok well can I talk to you a bit about community then?

Bev: yeah

CN: what what does community mean to you?

Bev: erm...pretty segregated really, I have, my community is the gay community\* erm, I'm part of this Just Women group now that we've formed\* and over the past, well since October really, we've had **such a fantastic** social life\* erm, we've been, to quite a few gay events\* organized by the group, and we really, it's something that I I've looked for quite a few year now\* erm...being part of a social group, of people in the same position as me\* so, that feels like that's **my** community\* erm...although I must say within that then it's still segregated because, the majority, of the community don't have children

CN: right

Bev: so I still feel like, a bit of a, an odd-bod really\* coz within our social group there's only, three of us have children\* ...erm...and then I look at community...as in...my family home life community\* which is, the people 'round here\* erm...and at first, I didn't feel like I fit in\* I felt like I was a, bit of a sore thumb\* but now as, as I've become more open with my sexuality\* erm...I just feel like joe-public now

CN: d'you?

Bev: yeah my neighbours know and,\* you know an'...my my only, worry is, erm, being identified by my, my children's...school friends

CN: right

Bev: and they **do** know you know (son)'s, not friends but, guys he's at school with say 'oh your mam's a lesbian' and he just says 'so what' now

CN: does he

Bev: yeah he doesn't **deny** it or anything\* erm...but like, in the Oak if...if the guy with the little camera's about I've always avoided that, because (daughter's) friends now, are old enough to start, going into pubs\* and I, yeah I know that they are going to identify me but, I want I want that to be done, as not being my fault and (daughter) coming home saying 'you got your picture on the website', unfortunately I let that slip on Saturday (laughs) and posed with erm, one of the girls whose birthday it was there was a gang of us (CN laughs) so, I now think I'm now on the Oak website\* but erm, yeah\* the community, it is two different communities

CN: so it's the gay community and **this**, your **home** community if you like?

Bev: yeah

CN: right, and you feel like you belong in both?

Bev: yeah I've got a foot in both camps but my heart, lies with- I'd never go to the pubs 'round here now\* when I go to (partner's) on a weekend\* er, we go to a pub in Hartlepool which is just a regular, erm, 'Rover's Return' pub\* and we're totally accepted an' everyone loves us to bits\* an' they know that we're a couple an'\*, but over here...I don't go out 'round, 'round the local pubs, I only go into town

CN: oh ok yeah

Bev: erm

CN: is that because you've been out and you haven't liked it or?

Bev: no it's because I **prefer** the company of the people up there (Hpool)\* it's not to do with being gay it's, you know it's the community I'm in is\* the people I wanna be with\* I do go 'the quiz occasionally\* at the pub up the road an', you know if somebody's, I've been the club with my dad or we'll go the Beacon, you know if I have a bar meal but, I don't enj- that's not my choice\* that's not my first choice\* erm...I do like to socialize in the gay community

CN: mm...but- and because you've said obviously you're involved with this group is that im- sort of, become, stronger then, in the last few months?

Bev: sorry-?

CN: that that feeling of being part of, the gay community in Middlesbrough

Bev: oh yeah

CN: stronger?

Bev: definitely yeah, one hundred percent because, we go out as a collective group now\* where before we were in our little tiny groups there was, maybe three or four of us\* in **all**- in little groups, now we go out and it's one big group

CN: (laughs) right

Bev: and it's it's great because...(sighs) what I've realized, in in the gay community is, we have young people, and old people and people in the middle\* and we're all...one group

CN: mm

Bev: when you go, wh- when I've, been in erm, in a social group 'round the local pubs it's- you all tend to be of the same age group

CN: ah that's true

Bev: unless your family, come out with yer, in which case it's different age groups, (coughs) when I worked at the factory...we'd go out in a group, of different age groups\* but even then...they were more, selective around people the same age\* but but in our group it's, people of all ages you know

CN: ah right, yeah, it's very inclusive then isn't it then, in that sense

Bev: yeah I'm usually the granny of the group (CN laughs) but, you know the youngsters of the group don't treat me any different

CN: no, that's it

Bev: and I don't look at them as, you're only a kid such and such\* we're all gay women together\* and we all have one thing in common\* and we're all equal\* you know

CN: ah that's really good that, so there's more of a respect there d'you think?

Bev: yeah yeah, and an acceptance as a **person**, rather than, the age you're- the\* the age group that you belong to\* you know, I think in, experiencing the predominantly most of my life as a straight person\* your social group is...is erm, selected by age group

CN: *I'd never thought of it like that*

Bev: yeah, but, when- when yer in the gay society, your social group is- is is, chosen by your sexuality\* regardless of age\* and that's well that's personally how I

CN: that's how you see it

Bev: yeah\*...I could take- my daughter's just coming up to the age now where, erm, I'll shortly be introducing her to coming to the pub\* erm, getting her prepared for her adult life\* and she keeps sayin' to me now 'mam when can I come out with you and yer friends' she's met all my friends\* they all come to my birthday, well- when my dad was there we were havin' a meal, and my kids were there, and this, group of **twelve gay**

**women** turned up in a straight pub in Eston (CN laughs) [?] 'ahh no' just totally outing myself you know to my dad but, he **loved**- he said 'you've got a fantastic \* group of friends' you know

CN: excellent

Bev: I forgot- I've lost me train of thought

CN: just that she wants to come with you

Bev: and and taking her into Middlesbrough\* erm, in the gay scene\* is, fine\* and I'd sooner do that than take her 'round\* just the regular pubs 'round here,\* because she'll be more socially accepted\*, you get a lotta disabled people, that come in the, the gay, society because it's more,\* acceptable, not because they're gay\* I have a few friends erm, who are deaf\* and they, they come an'- into the gay, pubs because, their disability is more ac-acceptable\*, because it's a-about minority groups

CN: ah that's really interesting

Bev: erm, disabled people,\* because it's- they're more accepted in in er in that community\* so it is a very very...acceptable community to be in

CN: and then, you'd feel, you'd rather her- your daughter be introduced into that, **first** if you like?

Bev: yeah because, she's erm, I feel like I'll introduce her, into adult life in a safe place\* erm she has a boyfriend she has, she's had a boyfriend for a couple of years now,\* erm...she knows her sexuality at the moment\* I think her boyfriend'd be very jealous, in case people fancied her\* he's very very insecure, around my friends\* fancying her yeah, and erm...so that would be, that would be the problem you know...yeah I think it's sort of...she'd be treat with kid-gloves A because, it's my daughter\* and B, because, that's, you know, we get our, we call them don't we- well in our group, baby- just chickens baby-dykes you know

CN: that's it yeah (laughs)

Bev: and we do look after them we introduce them gently into our society,\* and support them and guide them so, it doesn't mean my daughter needs to be gay to be- she's more, she's more supported and cared about and guided and

CN: ah that's really nice that

Bev: an' I- I feel she would be safer, in that environment

CN: yeah yeah, I can see that...you've got that gay community in Middlesbrough, do you associate with any other gay communities anywhere else?

Bev: erm...(sighs) we went through- there was er four of us- well (name) and her erm my partner and another girl went through to Scarborough\* went it was the er Scarborough Pride\* and we done a bit of networking there\* erm, I was part of the group

at Hartlepool\* called Hart Gables\* I was counselling for them\* voluntary, and my partner was the chair there, we've since parted company erm...and it was predominantly men\* yeah, so no we don't really\* oh erm...through our...'come out and play' event at the uni erm, we got hooked up with quite a few people from Newcastle\* and, some have kept in touch\* and then, we have erm...(name) from Newcastle\* she networks a lot with us\* so

CN: yeah, what about the internet and stuff, d'you like use that?

Bev: I don't I know a lot of the group, especially the single girls, they go on gaydar\* an' other sites but erm\*...no I I don't er, I've got my social group an' an' my family life and I- I don't particularly have time for- *plus I'm not very computer literate* (both laugh)...I go on the internet erm, I'm interested in, gay holidays and gay-friendly, bed and breakfast places\* I'll search for that but erm\* not for like friendship groups or anything like that

CN: yeah yeah mm, so would you say that your, gay community is is, what you describe as the gay scene, or not

Bev: yeah\* it is because, we go in the Oak we go in Annie's and very occasionally, get dragged into Cassidy's (both laugh) and now the, like a Tuesday night, well most night's in the Crown I think I've never been there\* but yeah it is the scene\* I socialize on the scene more than anywhere else\*, erm it's just a- such a friendly place you know\* you don't even have to know anybody to- you see em three times in the pub and then that's it you become friends with them\* where you can go out 'round the doors here and you see people week after week after week and they never speak to you\* 'coz you just go in the pub but in there y- and then you know-\* it's very erm, ah what's the word?, tactile\* it's very tact- it's very huggy\* cuddly feeling- lovin' (I laugh) you know, erm\* friendly community\* I mean you do get- you do get your problems\* but that's in any, any culture or society isn't it

CN: yeah, but when you, when you were at the erm...the counselling you met, somebody there

Bev: yeah

CN: and they- that wasn't the scene

Bev: no

CN: d'you know what I mean it's like another, kind of network but

Bev: well it was- it was our learning it was our,\* training, but there was a lot of gay people there

CN: that's what I mean, it's like still had like a gay community kind of thing but not, as a scene, community

Bev: yeah\* yeah there was quite a few of the counselors\* erm, were gay\* the trainers from the Guild were gay, erm...

CN: do you keep in touch with anybody from there?

Bev: erm I don't now 'coz I've just I've gone on like a two year sabbatical from them\* because I've been poorly but erm...\* my ex-partner and I are best mates now,\* she's gone back to being straight now (laughs)

CN: has she?

Bev: yeah\* erm...but we we contact every week you know we have a...hour- two hour conversation on the telephone, \*occasionally we meet up for coffee\* erm...I was in Blackpool an'- for New Year, about four year ago, and, met up with one of my training colleagues\*...erm, he didn't even know I was gay (CN laughs) and we met in one of the clubs at New Year there\* you know, but, I think at- what happened is we got more confident in ourselves we\* we disclosed to the group about our sexuality\* and yeah there was a\* good percentage

CN: yeah, erm...so comparing like Middlesbrough gay scene to Newcastle [?] what d'you reckon, d'you prefer Middlesbrough?

Bev: I like, there's **more** at Newcastle,\* there's more venues, but because it's a bigger place,\* people are more segregated

CN: ah right

Bev: where in Middlesbrough, people say, the scene's crap 'coz you've only got two pubs and one club\* but **because** of that everybody knows everybody\* and it's a very **friendly**\* nucleus that we all

CN: yeah you all know each other because it's so small?

Bev: yeah

CN: yeah right

Bev: so I- that- it's like livin' in a village as opposed to a town

CN: I'm with yer, yeah

Bev: are you warm enough by the way?

CN: yeah I'm ok yeah, are you? (both laugh)...ok I'll go onto education, just before I ask you about like your children's school, what's your feeling about education like from your own experiences when you were at school yourself, what what was it like, how did you feel about school?

Bev: regarding education or sexuality?

CN: well anything just just generally what was your feeling about being at school...did you enjoy school?

Bev: ...I didn't think I enjoyed school until I left school

CN: right

Bev: erm, but I had a lot of happy times at school, I had a, I had a very rough childhood\* erm, and my mam used to keep me off school, to keep her company\* so I had a bad school record\* but for all I had a bad school record I was in all the, the A classes and all the top classes\* and really done quite well considering how much education I missed

CN: I see

Bev: erm\*...but...(sighs)...compared with today's education...lots of things were overlooked, things you know erm...I think kids of today are very supported very understood\* in their individual needs\* we were a collective in the seventies\* and, if you didn't conform that was it\* they didn't look at the reason why your behaviour was like it was or,\* where **now**, everything's looked into\* and...I feel, years ago (coughs)...if you weren't up to a certain standard...you were just left by the wayside, you just were washed down the stream, I was fortunate that, I look at myself as quite individual, erm, all the people in my...A class that I was in, were from...predominantly, of wealthier families\* erm, with a **regular**...family background\* two parents\* you know, and and erm, whose parents- whose parents worked and\* they didn't come from like the council area and erm...yes my- we we didn't live in a council house but, I missed a lot of schooling and, my parents never went to er, parents evenings\* and I done the Duke of Edinburgh award they never come to the presentation, but I felt like, I kept my head above water, and kept myself in that,- I should have been, according to statistics, washed along the wayside

CN: yeah I see I see

Bev: 'coz we had erm, we were the first comprehensive year...and I was grammar stream\* and then there was obviously the old secondary modern stream\* and I kept meself in the grammar stream,\* when really I should'a probably, ac- you know, I didn't slip through the net

CN: how d'you think you did that, I mean, you must've got support from somewhere, or d'you think you just felt you were doing it yourself?

Bev: erm...I had a very...strong character, when I was seven my sister died\* and I was quite passed around my nanna to my auntie and I went to school in Manchester for a while an', I felt from that, that particular year in my life, I...I learnt how to fend for myself

CN: I see, yeah

Bev: erm, and look out for myself,\* I didn't have erm...I thought it was, normal at the time but when I look back I didn't have...a **secure**, parenting\* I never knew which bed I was gonna sleep in on a night if it was gonna be at, my parents home or my nanna's home\* and if it was at my nanna's, erm, my mum was one of twelve kids\* if I got put to

bed and somebody else turned up unexpected I might be lift out of that bed and put into this bed

CN: really, god

Bev: so it was- I didn't have a grounding,\* so I felt like...I always looked out for myself,\* and I th- and that's just havin' a strong will I think\* kept my head above water,\* erm...\* yeah 'coz I didn't have, the educational support from my parents\* homework was always done, on my own,\* if I needed to go' the library then I would have to go on my own and research on my own and\* quite often get into trouble at school 'coz they don't realize that, in **that** stream you should be doing this and you should be able to achieve that\* not knowing that well I didn't have an encyclopedia or, I didn't have the bus fare to go' the library or, I wasn't **allowed** to go anywhere after school 'coz I had to go to- straight to my nanna's,\* so I I wasn't understood,\* had I been in the other- the secondary modern, then they would have understood that\* but being in, in the A stream\* it was expected that, I come from a regular family an'

CN: you were getting support [?]I see yeah, erm...so just going on to the school that your children have been to or are still at, how did that choice of school come about?

Bev: erm

CN: which school are they at?

Bev: erm they were at Eston Park, d'you want- (son) is still at Eston Park\* (daughter's) at St Mary's College, I'm just gonna have to, can we have a five minute break?

CN: of course you can yeah

(interview is stopped for 5 mins)

CN: yeah

Bev: yeah how did I choose the schools? when I was in my other house, erm we were literally, four doors away from, the infants school\* and...erm...we had a playgroup there so they went, from two year old\* I started them like at- we used to go to like a mother and toddler group there,\* and, the site of the school it was a separate infants school and a separate juniors it wasn't primary,\* and it was lovely very, small close knit\* and erm I become a, a school helper,\* I've done that for nine year, so we went from a small infants school, to a small junior school which was- from Teesville infants to Ravensworth junior school, and again that having the infants school attached,\* you know it was very, close knit\* erm at the time, when (daughter) come to choosing erm, a senior school, we had the big Gillbrook school\* and we had Eston Park,\* now Eston Park was just going through a change with the headmaster, he'd been there two year, and out of the whole of the league tables, Eston Park was bottom

CN: ah right, ok

Bev: Gillbrook was the school where everybody wanted to go to, but it was a very very large school, erm...there was, a at Gillbrook every class was full to capacity, at Eston

Park, some classes there was only nine and ten students,\* now (coughs) there was a handful of parents that used to go in and be school helpers\* and we all visited both the schools, and we all come back, with the same, feeling that we we liked Eston Park\* because it was a small school,\* the head, was doing a fantastic job of turning, things 'round, and going from a small infants to a small juniors, we felt, it had the same feeling\* as them schools where Gillbrook was a **huge**, military-run, organization, so...we took a gamble and there was five,\* originally, from (daughter's) year, that chose Eston Park\*...two years down the line, which was when my son come to go...erm...they were turning people away\* and Gillbrook couldn't fill up their places,\* and em, it's just now just last month, got the status of em...it's a specialist school now, where they have to make, so many, thousands of pounds an', so they just they **just** gained this specialist statement a couple of weeks ago, and what a fantastic choice we made\*, erm my daughter, erm, two A-stars six As two Bs and a C

CN: that's fantastic

Bev: speaks for itself\* you know\* erm, so that's how I chose

CN: so you you chose that...with the other parents if you like that were looking at the same time?

Bev: well no because we're very individual

CN: oh ok

Bev: erm, we'd come away (daughter) chose the school

CN: did she, right

Bev: I wanted her to go to that school\* but I wanted her to have a choice,\* I do strongly believe if she'd chose Gillbrook I'd have said 'sorry no you're not going to Gillbrook' (CN laughs)\* but she chose that, because she liked the feeling of it\* she's a kid who erm...she she's very erm...intelligent\* very wise, and said 'mam I know all my friends are going to the other school, but this school's for me' she chose that on her own, none of (daughter's) friends went, to Eston Park, the other children that went, were kids from the other class, they weren't even like (daughter's) friends\* I must say they're best mates now all of them\* so she was very very brave

CN: she was, very

Bev: at at eleven years old to to break away from a whole friendship group, and er... yeah and the other parents chose as well, because it was- m-meeting individual needs,\* we knew that the, head was looking at, increasing the, improvements\* so it was a hundred and ten per cent that they were puttin' in, because they needed to, improve

CN: of course yeah

Bev: and being small classes

CN: they got some, good a- one-to-one, almost

Bev: yeah and, believe it or not after the year some of- some, children from, the other school got transferred

CN: did they?

Bev: yeah\* yeah

CN: that was a good choice then?

Bev: it was, it was\* and now she goes to St. Mary's college\* for exactly the same reason\* erm, the Prior College at Guisborough she went up to, and she hated it 'coz of the vastness of it the size of it, St Mary's is, a very very small college

CN: mm, ah there's something about it isn't there?

Bev: yeah

CN: that sort of, community feeling

Bev: yeah

CN: I like that...that's nice

Bev: and so I think we're gonna have trouble with the university because it will be so vast compared to what she's used to but, but she'll have the maturity to go with that as well

CN: you always find your little place in the uni as well don't yer?

Bev: yeah

CN: you don't usually use most of it...erm, so that was obviously you were still married at that point

Bev: yeah

CN: when you were choosing that

Bev: yeah

CN: and was your husband involved in that

Bev: erm...

CN: was he sort of

Bev: yeah yeah

CN: who was predominantly involved?

Bev: me

CN: were you? yeah

Bev: I done all the organizing of everything he worked,\* erm I must- he was good with the kids, he was a good dad he used to...take them, on a Sunday he'd take 'em 'the park on his bike or to- 'round the cemetery to feed the squirrels\* he was, very educational towards them,\* he liked- if we went 'the beach he'd take them 'the rock pools an', show em what was what you know,\* and he'd do creative things with them\*...I must say when we separated that stopped\* and you know I'd've lost my house in a bet that, he would never ever...treat his kids like he treats them now, because he was such a good dad when we were together\* but I think that was a rebel against me, because he **knows**...that my soul is my kids, my kids before anything, erm, so by hurting them he hurts me, you know

CN: he's not involved with them at all?

Bev: well...he, he u- he has them on a weekend if they wanna go, (son) quite often doesn't wanna go\* but he does nothing at all with them\* doesn't take 'em to the shops he's- he doesn't take 'em to the pictures, he doesn't take 'em on holiday, he does nothing, in fact when they go up he goes out with his new wife\* so there's no interaction with them,\* and (son) is so desperate for that, he wakes up every day thinking his dad'll change,\* and he's put him through so much it's unbelievable

CN: that's so hard isn't it

Bev: but erm,\* I mean my daughter just said to me the other week she- they they rebelled when- 'coz I finished the marriage,\* they hated me, because their life becomes so, different, but she just said to me the other week you know the way dad is 'coz he doesn't give them a penny,\* no pocket money nothing, and I struggle 'coz I'm on a, I'm on a benefit I'm on incapacity benefit\* and erm, she said, 'you know mam when I'm rich when I've got me good job, and you- you know you've helped me through all this education, does he think that I'm gonna be sayin' here dad have a treat he said- and she was **always** for her dad, always, [?] she said to me erm, 'you are the one who'll benefit mam you know' so

CN: it's nice that she recognizes that isn't it?

Bev: yeah yeah

CN: yeah, yeah...I've just got there's about five questions here that we've answered we've done those so (laughs) erm...oh yeah, since erm...both of your children started at which ever schools they were at, **how** have you been involved, in the school

Bev: oh wow, this is a question that might take all day (CN laughs)...I started when (daughter) was two, but we used to go to a playgroup at the church, and, a lot of the people from there then went onto the playgroup at the school, erm, before (daughter) started nursery, she could read...\* I'd taught her to read\* erm...she was ver- w- she was very advanced erm...really it hindered her in a way 'coz she got s-s she got erm...

(sniffs) a- put to one side\* you know\* and when she started nursery, erm, they used to have... volunteer classroom assistants\* you know, so I started in the nursery and o'course, with the technique that I had with (daughter) I become like a parent leader and I done a shared reading course\* and- so for nine years from (daughter) starting school, to (son) leaving... junior school, I've been a classroom- a voluntary classroom assistant and, like everything from well I done the the reading partnership and I got my certificate in that, erm, the school approached me and asked me if I'd, train an' become a paid-\* but then I didn't want to because I felt then it wouldn't be as enjoyable 'coz I'd **have** to go 'coz it would be my work\*erm,\* going on trips and\*...organizing, fundraising\* just being in school every day doing- in the in the junior school I used to take the P.E. lesson

CN: did you?

Bev: the teacher was there\* erm obviously for legal reasons she had to be,\* erm but I was a netball coach I had a netball team

CN: ah right

Bev: at at the school

CN: yeah

Bev: so I'd take the lesson as- with the teacher there just\*...making sure I done the warm ups and the cool downs and we had an after school club\* and a netball team, we won a few trophies and that\* so I was really like, **part** of the school\* staff really\* you know I had my own cup in the staff room (CN laughs) and it wasn't, like a once a week thing it was five days a week

CN: was it?

Bev: yeah\* I'm, I am a cook an' I, I said, when I was in the, the infants, something I regret I written this book, erm, we got a brand new kitchen for the kids over at, at the infants, and, we had equipment so we had, six bowls and six spoons we had six aprons and\* we had disposable hats an', where somebody went in and cooked and showed 'em how to make a cake, I took them in groups of six and, we all had a- we all had our own bowl, so we would all make individual things

CN: oh I see yeah

Bev: and I written this book, erm it was...(sniffs) it was individual cards recipe cards, and erm...it had simple, recipes written on it\* and on the back, I'd I'd done this thing and it was called er tips for helpers\* er, for example, we're gonna make a sponge- some sponge cakes erm, so we put the margarine in the bowl, and get the kids to acknowledge the, the solidity of it\* you know, then you cream the margarine\* it's changing texture\* add flour, cracking an egg some kids had never seen a raw egg\* what happens when you crack an egg, you've got a yolk and a white yeah? what happens when you mix it up where's the yolk gone,\* you know and I written all this on the back of every- and I had about, twelve recipes that- and I'd, when you're making pastry when you put your flour and your fat, and you rub it together and your change in texture how it becomes from like a powder to a sand and,\* and Ofsted took it away\* yeah they took it away I

don't know what they done with it and they were really impressed [?] I never kept a copy\* and the teacher that that got that she kept it in her classroom when I moved to the juniors, has retired now\* but that could've been my claim to fame I'm sure I could've got that, in print

CN: got a copyright

Bev: yeah

CN: yeah, sounds like it...so how- you were going in every day, what happened, did you stop going in as regular?

Bev: erm, I used to go in every day and then, erm I got a job\* I went back to cooking\* but it was full time work it was really difficult my son was three my daughter was five, but then erm, for a while, I just used to go in on a Friday 'coz it was my, half day on a Friday, erm

(analogue tape stops)

CN: I'll just turn this over, sorry carry on...the other one's going

Bev: erm, but my, my job didn't last long and and they closed down so I went back to going regular again\* and erm...(daughter) went to the, senior school\* and I didn't really wanna become involved 'coz, I **felt** she needed to find her own feet 'coz when you're in school all the time...they don't find their own way you're always there

CN: mm, keep coming to you

Bev: yeah

CN: yeah, that's interesting

Bev: erm, (daughter) didn't do it so much but (son) did\*...erm,

CN: so did that change then, for the senior school- did you not

Bev: I didn't go in the senior school I just kept at the juniors with (son)

CN: I see

Bev: and then when (son) left\* that was it\*...then I went to uni and did my own training\* change of career\* erm, but it was because of that that I got on my uni course

CN: was it, ah

Bev: yeah because it was on the merits of being a classroom assistant\* and erm, 'coz I didn't have the qualifications but it went on, life experience-stroke-qualifications\* so you know\* really come in useful for me to to access my course so

CN: and what about the senior school, have you felt that you wanted

Bev: they did approach me and ask me if I'd go in and do the netball and stuff

CN: did they, mm

Bev: but I didn't want to\* I went a couple of times to the youth club,\* there's a voluntary-\* but, (daughter) was growing up and, you know she was, starting to mature and I- if I was there it would, it would prevent her doing things that she might do if I wasn't there

CN: yeah, oh I understand

Bev: you know the interaction with her friends an'...gettin' interested in boys and such like so I withdrew for that for her sake really

CN: yeah yeah I can see, yeah, erm...I was just...going back to your partner, even though your partner doesn't live here with you and the children, is she involved at all in anything to do with their schooling or education?

Bev: no

CN: no no

Bev: she comes when it's erm...prize giving or, if (daughter's) she went- done a few talent competitions and what 'ave yer\* you know, that kind of function she'll come over then with us

CN: will she?

Bev: yeah\* so you know the- in the school they know that...sort of...well they, probably think that she's my friend but, to me I'm quite obvious that she's my partner but\*, but she is connected to me, like, regarding that yeah

CN: right right ok erm...[?]

Bev: I go off at a tangent

CN: oh no it's me I'm I'm thinking 'I should've put that one up there' (laughs) erm...so you haven't, if you like 'come out' to anyone at school in terms of teachers and things, other parents or

Bev: erm...well the **parents know**

CN: yeah, ok

Bev: erm...it's just not kind of **spoke** about

CN: right, yeah...yeah

Bev: ...and, the teach- the teachers know, \* without it being spoke about you know...erm

CN: mm...I'm really interested to know how you, how you know that, how you how you

Bev: just...I don't really know it's just\*, like their attitude, just, the body language and their, their sort of knowledgeable

CN: right

Bev: you know?

CN: yeah, yeah

Bev: I don't know if (daughter's) confided in, a support teacher at school\* or head of year, when she'd been havin' difficulties

CN: I see yeah

Bev: erm...when they'd been getting bullied, 'because they call my mam gay', I put two and two together you know\*

CN: can you tell me a bit more about that, the bullying?

Bev: erm...just name calling

CN: was it?

Bev: yeah\* I mean my son's- there's a...I've got a thing that, with the police at the moment, he got attacked, just four weeks ago on the way home from school, erm, but I don't think that was a- homophobic related\* just think that was pure bullying\* but you know they call him, and they used to say 'oh yer mam's a lezzer' and you know\* stuff like that\*...and it used to anger him but now he just goes 'so, what's your mam?' you know\* I say 'fight back' you know, say you don't know what your mam does in [your] spare time- 'no mam, I don't need to stoop that low' ah he's got his head screwed on

CN: yeah sounds like it, yeah

Bev: and he's totally respectful he would challenge...both of them challenge teachers, erm...(daughter) especially, they were in drama, and, their group was doing something about, a homophobic attack they'd put something together, and the teacher'd said, 'you can't do that because, in school we're not allowed to, teach\* you know because of section twenty-whatever\* so she come home and she was furious\* 'coz one of her friends in the group was gay,\* one of the lads, and erm, so she said 'mam what's the law on this?' I said well that's been abolished actually\* I said erm, it is encouraged now, you know, the teacher had said he can't even, talk, anything about, any kind of gay, issues, so she went back and challenged him and he looked into it and brought an apology to the class\* and erm

CN: god that was good

Bev: and (son) challenged one of the teachers, because he **felt** they were being erm derogatory towards gay people\*...and he challenged there as well, so

CN: so they're certainly, brave aren't they

Bev: he's not a challenging person (son) he's very erm he's timid and quiet but, you know at the end of the day, that's his mam they're talking about, 'they're being derogatory around my mam, and her friends'\*... and then he defended it

CN: yeah that's really good

Bev: so I was really impressed with that

CN: I bet, yeah erm...d'you know, sort of any other, gay parents then at, either at the school or, in your social life?

Bev: erm, in the in the group yeah\* yeah, erm... there's three of us in our group...erm...and at school, I know parents of, gay st-, gay pupils\*...erm, but I don't know not in school I don't know any other, gay parents

CN: I mean, does it have any impact to know other women who who are gay and have children, I mean do you have any conversations about how it is for you an' about having kids and being gay?

Bev: yeah yeah, it's nice to have, it's (laughs) I suppose it's no different than...somebody that's been diagnosed with havin' cancer talking to somebody else in the same boat\*, you feel like, you're not alone\* and yeah we do we do confer an'\* erm...one of my closest friends she has three children, they're younger than mine\* erm, and we'll talk and I'd say 'oh', you know 'how did they accept this?' and she- she sort of said 'oh does it get any better?' and you know\* so we do- sort of empathic towards each other really you know

CN: yeah bit of er, support

Bev: and the the other person, erm, her son, lives with his dad and she has him every other weekend I think\* so, erm, that's totally different for her 'coz when she has him, she just becomes a fulltime mum that weekend because she hasn't got him the rest of the time

CN: ah that's different

Bev: but erm, yeah we talk about stuff and about this thing that's going on, on the twenty-fifth of March an' she you know she would've brought her son with her, and I would've taken my son\* 'coz children are welcome and they were gonna play their guitars together but\* she has to go on a training course now so she's not coming

CN: ah right, yeah, ah it is nice though isn't it to to have that

Bev: yeah

CN: support for each other if you like, yeah (sniffs) erm...

Bev: it's difficult when we erm, when we socialize an', and when we're doin'- we're doin' a, boxing- er April Fool's day dip at Redcar, an', one or two of the the committee members wanted to get the gazette involved\* and I had to say 'well...can't do it'\* my children and my dad\* you know

CN: yeah, you've gotta consider them as well haven't yer

Bev: yeah, and and photo- like I say photographs and stuff like that\* I mean I went on the radio, when (name) was on the Radio Cleveland did you hear it\* em, they didn't actually, put my bit on\* erm...but I I come forward 'coz she needed somebody who, who could talk\* erm...and I said my name was (name), but that was it\* I wasn't prepared to disclose my surname or, anything, because, at the end of the day I've gotta **always** consider my kids an'...except I had a blip on Saturday which I'm really annoyed about (both laugh) because we were taking photographs amongst ourselves and, it was 'pose for this other photograph' and it was [?] a lot of it was the guy who does er, the website\* and I never thought to say to him please don't put that on you know I mean the drinks had flowed [?]

CN: oh I'm sure they'd forgive you that one wouldn't they (laughs) yeah erm...*let's see if I've missed any questions out here*, is there a parent community at your school, at the school that your daughter's at- that your son's still at?

Bev: yeah yeah

CN: are you involved in that?

Bev: no I'm not like I said I was up until they went to seniors\* and, I think erm, a lot of the time- 'coz my son has been bullied right the way through school\*, an' I I'm quite convinced that it was, thinking that he gets preferential treatment 'coz his mam was in school helping\* erm, or being a wuss 'coz your mam's in school or whatever\*, but I I chose that once they went to seniors\* that that would be **their** space for them

CN: I see yeah

Bev: so senior school, no\* I go to all the the meetings\* all the parents evenings an', you know anything to do with, production or anything\* but I don't go in as a

CN: as a helper

Bev: yeah

CN: but what about your children's friend's parents are you involved **out** of school with any of them or?

Bev: no again I used to be\* in the juniors you know we'd go to quizzes together an', we'd go to each others houses for coffee an' that but no I withdrew completely\* and, it

coincided with because (son) is just in, year ten now\*and I've only been out five year\* and it coincided with that and I totally withdrew from, from my normal everyday society

CN: ah yes, that makes sense

Bev: so it was- it come at the same time as them going to senior/

CN: a lot of changes happened at the same time

Bev: yeah yeah, and I'd started my training course and, I was well on in therapy and making a lot of life changes myself so\* you know becoming aware of different things an', probably puttin' my guard up,\* more than I needed to because it was new to me

CN: mm mm...so d'you think just generally and just to sort of finish off do you feel that, issues about, gay families, gay parenting and things like that **are, more** talked about, **in** schools now?

Bev: yeah definitely

CN: d'you?

Bev: yeah\* just by erm (daughter's) experiences\* I mean (son) hasn't had them kind of experiences, but erm, from, from year...eight nine\* you know, (daughter), erm people confided in (daughter), that they were gay before they'd come out to other people an' erm, felt that she could talk to them an'\* and as they progressed through to year ten and year eleven, they got confident and they come out to parents they come out to- in school\* which is really difficult,\* but because of, their bravery, it's becoming more socially accepted, the more that people come out, the more that people will say, 'yeah we have a gay community in school' you know so

CN: it's brilliant really

Bev: hats off to them they're doing a grand job and-\*, making erm, gay education, in the- two thousand and tens and twenties a lot easier

CN: that's right, yeah...well at the moment that that's everything that I've got, here an' if that's, if there's anything that you think I've missed out that you were expecting?

Bev: I've got- there's nothing no- there's one thing that I don't know if you can use at all but\* when I was at school, I was taught by a lesbian teacher

CN: were yer?

Bev: and and she was out at school\* and she got a hell of a lorra stick for it\* and erm I'm, she's the, one of the directors of the Guild of the university, where I done my training

CN: ee really?

Bev: yeah, it was very strange to meet up with her again, and she always had an affinity with me at school\* and I believe she probably\* was aware of something, even as far back as then\* that I wasn't aware of\* she remembered me, above all my school friends\* 'coz when I started at the Guild, I reintroduced myself to her 'coz I felt that it was only polite that she knew, that I knew of her past life\*, er and she remembered me\* so that spoke volumes really\* but she had a **hell** of a tough time at school

CN: I bet she did

Bev: you might know her she's from Saltburn\* (name)

CN: no

Bev: (another name)

CN: yeah I know (name) I know **of** her

Bev: yeah, well (name and name) are partners

CN: ah right yeah

Bev: and erm, they're both the directors of the Guild where I done my training\* so it is a very small [?] small world

CN: it is isn't it

Bev: she was right proud, erm, I didn't tell anybody, erm, and then, when (name), she wrote a book (name)\* erm, and when it was her book launch she announced to the people at the book launch, erm, that I was one of her former students\* yeah and I felt so proud then

CN: ah that's lovely

Bev: yeah

CN: ah that's really good

Bev: so we did survive

CN: yeah (laughs) oh well (name) thank you, very much for this

Bev: you're welcome, if there's anything else I can help you with

CN: well, you know if I can come back, if there's anything I've- I need to go over again- if that's alright, I won't take up two hours (laughs)

Bev: I'd be interested when you, when you've finished when it is at the stage where it's made public\* 'coz er, I am interested in- well, predominantly, my books are theory I don't, I'm just getting into reading... little little stories now\* you know

CN: oh no I mean, theory is obviously it's my, interest as well, and methodology...no  
I'll er, I'll let you be one of the first to know when it's ready

Bev: good good

END OF INTERVIEW