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The Experiences and Views of Lesbian Parents and Adult Children of Lesbian Parents in Ireland: an Exploratory Study

Aoife Quille

Technological University Dublin

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**The Experiences and Views of Lesbian Parents and Adult Children of Lesbian
Parents in Ireland: An Exploratory Study**

A thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in part fulfilment of the requirements for award of Masters (M.A.) in Child, Family and Community Studies

Aoife Quille

September 2011

Supervisor: Anne Fitzpatrick

Department of Social Science, Dublin Institute of Technology

Declaration

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the **Masters (M.A.) in Child Family and Community Studies** is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Acknowledgments

To all the participants who took the time to meet with me and tell me their story.

To my Supervisor, Anne Fitzpatrick, for her kindness, advice and support.

To my Mum and my sisters Dáiríne and Neassa, who are always there to support me whenever I need them.

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Abbreviations

GLEN	Gay and Lesbian Equality Network
GLSEN	Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education, Network
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
NLLFS	National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study
SES	Socio-Economic Status

Glossary of Terms

For the purpose of this study these terms have been defined as follows:

Adult Child of Lesbian Parents: A person aged between 18 and 25 with lesbian parents.

Biological Mother/Parent: The parent in the lesbian couple who has given birth to the child (McNair, Dempsey, Wise & Perlesz, 2002:49).

Child of Lesbian Parents: A person of any age with lesbian parents.

Co-Mother: Non-biological mother from a planned lesbian family therefore has been involved in the parenting of the child since they were born.

‘Coming out’: The process where a lesbian parent or a child of lesbian parents reveals to people they are a member of a lesbian family.

Disclosure: When a lesbian parent or a child of lesbian parents discloses to someone that they are a member of a lesbian family.

Gay: Refers to men attracted to other men.

Gay Parent: Refers to a gay man parenting a child.

Gay-Parented Family: A family with two gay parents who are men.

Homophobia: The fear or loathing of those identifying as lesbian, gay or bi-sexual, is often accompanied by feelings of anxiety, disgust, aversion, anger, and hostility (McNair et al., 2002:49).

Homophobic Bullying: Bullying of a homophobic nature directed at a child of same-sex parents.

Lesbian: Refers to women attracted to other women

Lesbian Family/ Lesbian-Parented Family/ Lesbian-Headed Family: A family with two lesbian parents.

Lesbian Mother/Parent: A lesbian parenting children, either their biological child or their partner's biological child.

Lesbian-Parented Step-Family: A lesbian family that has been formed in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship.

Member of a Lesbian Family: A lesbian parent and a child of lesbian parents within a lesbian family.

Non-Biological Mother/Parent: The parent in the lesbian couple who has not given birth to the child (McNair et al., 2002:49).

Planned Lesbian Family/ De Novo Family: A lesbian family that has been formed in the context of a pre-existing lesbian relationship.

Same-Sex Family: Refers to either a lesbian or gay parented family.

Same-Sex Parent: Refers to either a lesbian or gay parent.

Step-Mother: Non-biological mother from a lesbian-parented step-family therefore has not been involved in the parenting of the child since they were born.

Abstract

This research focused on the experiences and views of lesbian parents and adult children of lesbian parents. The experiences of the members of lesbian-parented families determined the main areas that were explored. The lack of international and Irish research on the lived experiences of lesbian parents and their children prompted this investigation. The study was conducted using qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The sample consisted of three lesbian parents and two adult children of lesbian parents from two parent lesbian families. The findings highlighted the experiences of the parents and adult children from lesbian-parented families in reference to: the Irish legal context; dealing with disclosure of their family type to others for lesbian parents and their children; sources of support for lesbian parents and their children; lesbian parents and their children in the education system; homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents and the division of labour and the difference in parenting roles between the biological and non-biological mother. Recommendations made in this study included addressing the rights of same-sex families in Irish law, additional support groups for same-sex parents and their children and that further research undertaken with a wider sample including an exploration of the experiences of male gay parents and their children.

Introduction

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study explores the experiences and views of lesbian parents and adult children of lesbian parents in Ireland. The main areas investigated in this study are guided by the experiences of the participants, highlighting its exploratory nature. The experiences and views of three lesbian parents and two adult children of their lives as members of a two parent lesbian family were gathered through the use of qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Although the sample is small, the interviews highlight areas of particular importance in subject matters neglected when researching this minority group. Due to the sample size however, findings from this study should not be taken as representing the general experiences of members of lesbian-parented families. This chapter will begin by detailing the aims and objectives of this study, the rationale for the study will then be illustrated followed by an outline of the study.

1.2 Aims of the Study

The aims of this study are to explore the experiences and views of lesbian parents and the experiences and views of adult children with lesbian parents in Ireland.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The five objectives of this study in relation to lesbian parents and children of lesbian parents are to:

- Determine the experiences and opinions of lesbian parents and the children of lesbian parents with regards to provisions for same-sex families within Irish legislation.
- Explore the experiences and views of disclosing their family type to others for lesbian parents and the children of lesbian parents.

- Identify the type and level of support available to lesbian parents and the children of lesbian parents.
- Investigate the everyday experiences of lesbian parents and children of lesbian parents in the education system.
- Gain an insight into the family dynamics of two parent lesbian families.

1.4 Rationale for the Study

There has been considerable international research examining whether children raised in lesbian-parented families achieve normal social, emotional and psychological development. However, there is a lack of research documenting the actual day-to-day living experiences of the parents and children from these families. This is certainly the case in an Irish context, evident from the dearth of research available on the experiences of lesbian parents and their children. The researcher therefore saw a need for more research to be undertaken in this area, particularly in Ireland.

While there has been little research documenting the experiences of lesbian parents, there has been less research taking a direct account of the experiences of their children as this has mostly been done through the narratives of their parents. For this reason a first person account of the experiences of both lesbian parents and their children is included in this study. It is hoped that for those interested in achieving equal rights and providing services for same-sex families, this study will provide greater knowledge and a deeper understanding of the experiences of lesbian parents and their children in Ireland in order to be able to cater for the needs of these individuals.

1.5 Outline of the Study

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents the literature review. Firstly the formation and prevalence of lesbian-parented families and the Irish legal context with regards to same-sex families in Ireland are discussed. This is followed by exploring the different approaches and experiences of disclosure and sources of support for the parents and children of

lesbian-parented families. Thirdly, the experiences that lesbian-parented families have had within the education system and the homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents is explored. Finally, the division of labour and the difference in parenting roles in these families between the biological and non-biological mothers are examined.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design, the sample and the access and recruitment of participants. The research instrument selected and how it is used to collect data, the ethics, the process of analysis and limitations of the study are discussed.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the study and the main themes and sub-themes that emerged. The findings are categorised under the following six headings: the Irish legal context; dealing with disclosure for lesbian parents and their children; sources of support for lesbian parents and their children; lesbian parents and their children in the education system; homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents at school and the division of labour and the difference in parenting roles between the biological and non-biological mother.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Analysis

In this chapter the findings presented in the previous chapter are discussed in relation to the literature review and the aims and objectives of the study. Following the main themes that emerge throughout the study the experiences and views of the lesbian parents and adult children of lesbian parents are discussed and analysed.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter concludes the findings of the study relating back to the aims and objectives of the study. Additionally, recommendations are made for those interested in attaining equal rights and offering services for same-sex families.

Literature Review

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study seeks to explore the experiences and views of lesbian parents and their children with the purpose of addressing the following research questions:

- What are the experiences and opinions of lesbian parents and the children of lesbian parents with regard to the provision of same-sex families within Irish legislation?
- What are the experiences and views of disclosing their family type to others for lesbian parents and the children of lesbian parents?
- What is the nature and level of support available to lesbian parents and the children of lesbian parents?
- What are the everyday experiences of lesbian parents and children of lesbian parents in the education system?
- What are the types of family dynamics encountered within a two parent lesbian family?

In this chapter relevant Irish and international research and literature is reviewed in order to answer these research questions. Firstly the formation and prevalence of lesbian-parented families and the Irish legal context with regard to same-sex families in Ireland are discussed. This is followed by exploring the different approaches and experiences of disclosure and sources of support for the parents and children of lesbian parented-families. Thirdly, the experiences that lesbian-parented families have had within the education system and the bullying of children with lesbian parents is explored. Finally, the division of labour and the difference in parenting roles between the biological and non-biological mothers are examined.

The main focus of previous research in relation to same-sex families has been the development of the children brought up in these families. Specifically, this is in regard to their social and emotional functioning and psychological adjustment including the study of their gender identity, gendered role behaviour and sexual orientation. By comparing the children of same-sex parents with the children of heterosexual parents previous research concludes that there are no significant differences between the two groups in relation to the above mentioned developmental areas (Goldberg, 2010; Golombok, Perry, Burston, Murray, Mooney-Somers, Stevens & Golding, 2003; Millbank, 2003; Tasker, 2002; Tasker & Patterson, 2006; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Paccione-Dyszlewski, 2008; Patterson, 2006; Patterson & Telingator, 2008; Rivers, Poteat & Noret, 2008; Smith, Newkirk & Gilfoyle, 2008; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). This literature although relevant will not be reviewed as it is not the primary focus of the present study.

Due to the small size of this study and the time restriction in which to complete it, only the experiences of parents and children from female same-sex families have been explored. Therefore the experiences of gay parents and the experiences of their children have been excluded from the study. However some of the literature reviewed includes representation of parents and children from male same-sex parented families as well as female same-sex parented families.

2.2 The Formation and Prevalence of Lesbian-Parented Families in Ireland

There are many different ways in which lesbian-parented families are formed. Some lesbian families are created in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship and ‘for both parents and children in these households family relationships may involve a complex network of both opposite gender and same gender past and present relationships’ (Tasker & Patterson, 2006:4). These can emerge from a number of possible family changes such as separation, divorce, death or re-partnership. This type of family, when a lesbian mother parenting children from a previous heterosexual relationship starts a new relationship with a lesbian partner who becomes involved with parenting, is called a lesbian-parented step-family. A second and more recent type of lesbian family is formed in the light of a pre-existing lesbian relationship which is often referred to as planned lesbian families or *de novo* families (Tasker & Patterson, 2006). The most common way in which this second family type is created

is through donor insemination with a known or unknown donor (Patterson & Telingator, 2008); this however is not regulated in Ireland unlike in other European countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Quinn, 2011). Another manner in which a lesbian family may be arranged is in the shape of co-parenting where lesbian and gay parents may decide to parent together (Dempsey, 2010; Patterson & Telingator, 2008). These diverse family formations are before taking into consideration 'race, class, religion, ethnic heritage, or the possibility that a parenting couple may separate' therefore highlighting the diversity of families with lesbian parents as a group (Patterson & Telingator, 2008:1364; Tasker & Patterson, 2006). In some countries there is the possibility for same-sex couples to adopt however, as expressed by the Adoption Authority of Ireland (cited in Kavanagh, 2009:174), in Ireland single lesbian women and gay men can adopt but lesbian or gay couples are not permitted to adopt as a couple.

The prevalence of lesbian-parented or gay-parented families in Ireland is unknown as there has been no means by which to formulate such statistics. For example in the 2011 Irish census and in previous censuses, there were no specific questions catering for the number of same-sex families to be recorded (Elliott, 2010; Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN), 2011). Unlike in the United States the census is able to provide an estimate of the number of same-sex families. The census carried out in the United States in 2000 reported that there were 297,061 lesbian-parented families residing in the country, though this was thought to be an under-representation of the actual figure (Urban Institute, 2010). However, a 2009 Irish survey entitled 'Burning Issues', completed by 1,237 people, was able to give an indication of the possible number of same-sex families living in Ireland. The survey, examining the main issues facing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people, reported that '1 in 5 women and 1 in 14 men have children; rising to 4 in 10 women and 1 in 6 men amongst those aged over 35' (Denyer, Howard, McEvoy & Ó hUllacháin, cited in Elliott, 2010:32). Furthermore Denyer et al. (2009) stressed the significance of these figures given the failure of the Civil Partnership Act (2010) to protect the rights of parents and children in same-sex families in Ireland.

2.3 The Irish Legal Context

In the Irish Constitution (1937), the family is represented as a heterosexual model and is protected mainly through the institution of marriage (O' Driscoll, Redmond & Valiulis, 2008). This is reflected in the Constitutional guarantee in Article 41.3.1 stating 'The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded and to protect it against attack' (Quinn, 2011:2). This places the children of same-sex parents in a vulnerable position as their parents are not permitted to get legally married, leaving them unprotected under Irish constitutional law. While the children of same-sex parents are particularly vulnerable they are not alone as any children whose parents are unmarried are legally disadvantaged (O' Driscoll et al., 2008). The ways in which the children of same-sex parents are legally unprotected will be discussed in more detail below.

In an Irish report by Elliott (2010), recording the experiences of 11 adult children of lesbian parents between the ages of 18 and 24, participants viewed the Irish Government's treatment of them and their families as unsatisfactory. For example participants felt it was unfair that their parent's relationship is not recognised by the law. When talking about their parent's one participant stated: "They are together twenty-six, twenty-seven years whereas they are not seen as a full family, whereas my best friend's parents who don't speak to each other are" (Elliott, 2010:16).

Ryan-Flood (2009) identifies that in Ireland there is no acknowledgement of the non-biological parent in a legal context. Again this is reflected by the adult children of lesbian parents from the research by Elliott (2010), revealing one of their main concerns to be the lack of legal recognition of the non-biological parent whereby they could not be considered as next of kin. Specifically, the situation where non-biological mothers would have no guardianship or custody rights in the event of biological parents being unable to care for the children.

Another aspect where the non-biological mother is at a legal disadvantage is if a lesbian couple with children break-up, they have to deal with the arrangements themselves, as they do not have the same legal rights regarding access as heterosexual parents. Therefore it is up to the biological parent to decide the level of contact, if any, that the non-biological parent will have with the children (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Goldberg, 2010; Millbank, 2003; Ryan-Flood, 2009).

The Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) (2010:1) recognise that,

The enactment of the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights of Cohabitants Act 2010 is a major reform and provides same-sex couples who register as civil partners with many of the rights and obligations of civil marriage. However, the Act is largely silent on the growing number of children being parented by same-sex couples.

Thus the newly introduced Civil Partnership Act (2010) fails to protect children of civil partners in a number of areas (Quinn, 2011). The main areas in this context include tax, inheritance and other areas more directly relating to the non-biological mother such as custody, guardianship, access and health where a non-biological mother may not be considered next of kin for example, in a hospital or school environment (Marriage Equality, 2011). While Quinn (2011) acknowledges that legal recognition of same-sex relationships in the form of the Civil Partnership Act 2010 is a positive development in Ireland it does not provide all the same rights as Civil or heterosexual marriage. This is reiterated by Elliott (2010), stating that under the Civil Partnership Act (2010) children whose parents are civil partners do not have the same legal rights compared to children whose parents are married. Moreover Elliott (2010) notes that the relationship between a child and the non-biological civil-partnered parent is not legally acknowledged.

2.4 Dealing with Disclosure for Lesbian Parents and their Children

According to research, managing the disclosure of their family situation to others is something that lesbian parents and children with lesbian parents inevitably have to deal with (Goldberg, 2010; McCann & Delmonte, 2005; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Tasker & Patterson, 2006; McNair et al., 2002; Perlesz & McNair, 2004). As identified by Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser & Banks (2006), 'coming out is a continuous and multi-generational process in lesbian families' (p.187). Furthermore O' Driscoll et al. (2008) consider how issues surrounding 'coming out' can cause feelings of anxiety and uncertainty for both lesbian parents and their children. In particular for lesbian women who become parents, being 'out' can prove to be more complex as it is no longer at an individual level but includes taking into consideration family relationships for both partners (Tasker & Patterson, 2006).

Members of lesbian-parented families choose to disclose information about their families in different ways, ranging from taking the 'open and proud' approach to choosing to be more private (O' Driscoll, 2008; Perlesz, Brown, McNair, Lindsay, Pitts, & de Vaus, 2006; Rawsthorne, 2009). Through conducting cross-generational interviews an Australian study by Perlesz et al. (2006) explored how the members of 20 lesbian families disclosed themselves in public. A noticeable difference between how members of planned lesbian families and lesbian-parented step-families dealt with disclosure was found, with planned lesbian families tending to use a more open approach. Furthermore the way that the participants involved in this study decided to 'come out' depended on the *actual* situation, for instance disclosure would be dealt with differently in a social setting compared to a school environment.

In Elliott's (2010) research it was shown that adult children of lesbian parents varied in their approach to disclosure about their family situations. While some participants revealed they did not talk openly about having lesbian parents, "I still don't talk about it, about this whole issue. I do when I am around adults, and around my family but around my friends I'm just not comfortable yet" (p.20), others however took a more open approach. Furthermore it was explained by participants from this report that they would have displayed different levels of openness regarding their families depending on their age at the time (Elliott, 2010). This finding is comparable to that of Ray & Gregory (cited in Tasker & Patterson, 2006) noting that the group of five to eight-year-olds from their study were more likely to be open about being from a lesbian family as they were described as 'being less aware than older children of heterosexist discourses defining family' (p.15). Further research indicates that in particular, adolescents with lesbian parents can find it difficult to be open about their family situation with their peers (Rivers et al., 2008; Tasker & Patterson, 2006), however when they are older they find it easier to 'come out' about this fact (O'Connell; Paechter; Van Voorhis; McClain, cited in Perlesz & McNair, 2004:133).

In relation to disclosing information to schools Martin & Ryan (2000) consider that it is in the best interest of the child and their family for a lesbian parent to be open that their child is from a lesbian-parented family. It is recognised that although openness will not eradicate discrimination, maybe even attracting some negativity, 'visibility will create open channels of communication with which to respond to any incident'

(Martin & Ryan, 2000:209). This is reiterated by Goldberg (2010) who maintains that lesbian parents must 'come out' to their children's school and teachers 'to advocate on behalf of their children', although recognises that it is not always an easy thing to do due for fear of the consequences for their children and themselves (p.92). However, Rawsthorne's (2009) research showed the majority of lesbian parent's with school-aged children experienced difficulties when interacting with schools due to 'school cultures' and 'individual staff', no matter what disclosure strategy they used (p.56).

2.5 Sources of Support for Lesbian Parents and their Children

Formal and informal support for lesbian-parented families can come in the shape of, 'support from biological families', 'support from the lesbian community', 'support from the general community' and from 'formal support systems and institutions' (Rawsthorne, 2009:50-54). Moreover formal supports can prove to be very helpful to lesbian families if informal support falls through (Rawsthorne, 2009). There is research to show that having formal support and access to family support can improve family functioning and child well-being in lesbian families (Goldberg, 2010; McNair et al., 2002; Rawsthorne, 2009). Furthermore, as considered by Rawsthorne (2009), 'support from family and community can play a critical role in mediating the potentially adverse effects of discrimination within political and legal systems' for lesbian-parented families (p.46).

The Lesbian and Gay Families study, exploring the support received by lesbian parents with a total sample of 125 women, 67 lesbian parents and 58 prospective parents, reported in the most part lesbian parents experienced 'high levels of acceptance and support relative to their needs within family, friendship and community networks' (McNair et al., 2002:46). Furthermore other studies examining the lives of lesbian-parented families maintain that most children of lesbian parents keep in regular contact with extended family, in particular with grandparents (Fulcher, Chan, Raboy & Patterson, 2002; Patterson, Hurt & Mason, cited in Tasker & Patterson, 2006:10). In the American study by Fulcher et al. (2002) children with lesbian parents and children with heterosexual parents were compared in terms of their relationship with extended family members. There were 80 families that took

part in this study, 50 were lesbian-parented families and 25 were heterosexual families. Findings indicated there was no difference found between the amounts of contact that children had with extended family members between each family type. In stark contrast to this, two Australian studies have reported the breakdown of family support and other informal supports such as friends and the lesbian community once a lesbian chooses parenthood, with grandparents and biological families finding it particularly hard to come to terms with. The first of these studies was conducted by Perlesz & McNair (2004), collecting information from 151 lesbian parents. The second study, with a relatively smaller sample, was carried out by Rawsthorne (2009) exploring the experiences of lesbian-headed families through interviewing 21 lesbian parents from these families. In O' Driscoll et al.'s (2008) Irish study exploring the experiences of lesbian, gay and transsexual parents with a group of five lesbian parents, some lesbian parents also experienced negative reactions from friends and family with them showing concerns for the child and expressing the view that a child needs a father. Goldberg (2010) highlights potential reasons for the lack of support from some family members of lesbians who decide to be parents, including the idea of lesbian motherhood setting off a deep-rooted moral conflict as well as a fear of being 'outed' as a relation of a lesbian women. Rawsthorne (2009) adds that for families 'the formation of a lesbian-parented family challenged the regime of truth not only about what is a "family"', but also what is a "lesbian"' (p.57).

Further findings from the Lesbian and Gay Families study (cited in McNair et al., 2002:46) suggest that overall, children from lesbian-parented families get positive reactions and are well supported from family and friends and generally do not experience many problems with relationships due to their parents sexual orientation. Additionally, the sample of adult children with lesbian parents from the Elliott (2010) study expressed having strong sources of support from friends, family, progressive schools and the LGBT community. These participants stressed the importance of organisations as a source of support for children with same-sex parents where they can meet other children with similar family situations.

2.6 Lesbian Parents and their Children in the Education System

Research has shown that lesbian parents and their children can experience certain difficulties in the education system (Elliott, 2010; Goldberg, 2010; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Martin & Ryan, 2000; O' Driscoll et al, 2008; Perlesz & McNair, 2004; Ryan-Flood, 2009) such as parents finding suitable schools for their children to attend and negative attitudes from teachers at schools. According to Goldberg (2010), in an effort to prevent any negative experiences for their children such as homophobic bullying or discriminatory attitudes some lesbian parents may seek out progressive and diverse schools; where there is better acceptance of difference and a more liberal school philosophy is held. This is consistent with research (O' Driscoll et al., 2008; Ryan-Flood, 2009:97) which found that lesbian parents in Ireland, where most of the schools run by the state are Catholic schools, sought out 'a multi-denominational school or any school perceived to have a more tolerant environment and greater relative awareness of family diversity'. The non-denominational or multi-denominational schools that the Irish lesbian parents who partook in the study by O' Driscoll et al. (2008) sent their children to were all private fee-paying schools. However, as noted by Goldberg (2010) not all families have a choice in where their children go to school, this can be due to a number of possible factors such as the area where they live or not having the financial resources. Therefore this demonstrates where the question of socio-economic status can come into play. That is, higher socio-economic status can be a protective factor from stigmatisation as it can allow lesbian parents to have a wider option of where to send their children to school instead of having state run schools as their only choice (O' Driscoll, 2008).

With regard to the attitudes and actions of teachers, Ray & Gregory (2001) revealed children of same-sex parents felt unsatisfied in the way that their teachers dealt with the homophobia that was being directed at them by other students, with some children even reporting incidences of teachers joining in. However, this study is dated and attitudes of teachers may have improved since then. Similarly other research has shown lesbian parents reporting teachers being non-responsive and reluctant to take action when children with lesbian parents were being victimised by peers, again this research is somewhat dated (Perlesz & McNair, 2004).

Martin & Ryan (2000) suggest that in addressing the needs of same-sex families within schools, measures need to be put in place. These measures would consist of anti-bias training in schools, staff being educated in the area, no tolerance of homophobic attitudes or behaviour, working with outside organisations and changes to school policies and curricula. This year in Ireland for the first time steps were made towards introducing such measures in schools. This came in the form of a week-long training course to confront homophobic bullying in Irish primary schools held in Dublin for teachers and principals from both non-denominational and church-run primary schools (ILGA-Europe, 2010). Not only did this training course have the aim of protecting young children who might identify as LGBT when they are older but also those children from same-sex families (ILGA-Europe, 2010; Educate Together, 2011).

2.7 Homophobic Bullying of Children of Lesbian Parents

Research has found that many lesbian parents hold concerns that their children will get bullied or teased due to their family formation (Goldberg, 2010; Gartrell & Bos, 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2006). This worry could be magnified by the fact that homophobic bullying and teasing of children with same-sex parents is repeatedly used as a case against lesbian and gay parenting (Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004; Goldberg, 2010; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). However, there are several studies that claim that children with same-sex parents are no more likely to be bullied, teased or victimised in comparison to their peers with opposite-sex parents (MacCallum & Golombok, cited in Goldberg, 2010:136; Rivers et al, 2008; Tasker & Golombok, cited in Goldberg, 2010:136). Research carried out by MacCallum & Golombok (cited in Goldberg, 2010:136) in the United Kingdom studied 12 year old children with lesbian parents, single heterosexual mothers and two heterosexual parents and 'found no differences among the groups in terms of mothers' worries about children's relationships at school or children's self-reported experiences of bullying'. Another British study by Tasker & Golombok (cited in Goldberg, 2010:136) questioned adult children from lesbian-parented families on their experiences of bullying when they were younger and found in comparison to adult children with heterosexual mothers they could not recall any more bullying or teasing. Other studies have found that while the likelihood of bullying of children with same-sex parents may not be any

higher, the nature of the bullying or teasing may differ from that experienced by children with heterosexual parents (Golombok, 2000; Tasker, 2002; Tasker & Patterson, 2006; Rivers et al., 2008). These studies suggest that children from same-sex families are more likely to be teased about their own sexuality, especially teenage boys with lesbian mothers.

Significantly, there are studies that imply that at different developmental stages children of same-sex parents experience different levels of victimisation from peers (Gartrell, Banks, Reed, Hamilton, Rodas, & Deck, 2000; Gartrell et al., 2005; Ray & Gregory, 2001). Research by Gartrell et al. (2000) & Gartrell et al. (2005) are part of a series of studies from the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) ‘the largest longest-running prospective investigation of American lesbian mothers and their children’ (National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study, 2011). In Gartrell et al.’s (2000) study, interviewing 150 lesbian parents, 18 % of participants claimed that their five year old children had encountered some kind of discrimination relating to their parents sexuality. By the time these children had reached the age of ten almost 50 % of them had experienced some type of homophobic bullying (Gartrell et al., 2005). However, it should be noted that these studies are somewhat dated and therefore the results gathered might be a reflection of the attitudes of the time.

2.8 The Division of Labour and the Difference in Parenting Roles between the Biological and Non-biological Mother

Whether the role of biological or non-biological mother determines how paid and unpaid work is divided between lesbian parents has been explored in a number of studies, which will be outlined as follows. An American study by Goldberg & Downing’s (2010) interviewed 30 lesbian couples from planned lesbian families examining the ways in which they divide professional work and household work. The findings from this study indicated that while biological and non-biological mothers made different contributions towards paid and unpaid work, it was rare that the work/family roles were governed by whether the partner was a biological or non-biological parent. Findings from a similar study by Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins (2007) revealed 29 lesbian couples, also part of planned lesbian families, divided housework fairly equally, however biological mothers reported doing more child care. This

significant difference in findings between these two similar studies could be a reflection of the three year gap in which they were carried out. Although a Dutch study by Bos, van Balen & van den Boom (2004) conducted at an earlier date, congruent with Goldberg & Downing's (2010) findings, reports 'no differences between lesbian biological mothers and lesbian social mothers with regard to the time they spent on childcare activities and household activities' (p.762).

Nonetheless in the case of these two studies (Goldberg & Downing, 2010; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007), featuring parents from planned lesbian families, the majority of the couples did not see the biological mother as the 'primary' parent. However, in a Canadian research by Nelson (cited in Millbank, 2003:552) examining the lives of 30 lesbian mothers, a difference emerged between how non-biological mothers from planned lesbian families (co-mothers) and non-biological mothers from lesbian-parented stepfamilies (step-mothers), perceived their parenting roles in lesbian-parented families. The findings showed that 'step-mothers saw themselves as having an "auxiliary" role as a parent, rather than being a primary parent' while 'co-mothers, by contrast, shared the care of children and parenting roles evenly with biological mothers' (Nelson, cited in Millbank, 2003:552).

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter explored the different forms that lesbian-parented families can take and identified the difficulty in obtaining an estimate on the number of lesbian families in Ireland. The ways that lesbian families are protected under Irish law were then researched, particularly the children and non-biological mothers from these families. This was followed by a review of the different approaches members of lesbian families take to the disclosure of their family type to others. Next, the different sources and level of support perceived by lesbian parents and children of lesbian parents were outlined. The considerations that lesbian parents take into account when it comes to choosing schools for their children to attend and attitudes that lesbian parents and their children encounter from individuals at schools was examined. Additionally a discussion of the prevalence of experiences of homophobic bullying for the children of lesbian parents was undertaken. Lastly, ways in which paid and unpaid work is divided between biological and non-biological lesbian parents and how their parenting roles are perceived was examined. The next chapter addresses the methodology used for this study.

Methodology

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The main aims of this study are to explore the experiences and views of lesbian parents and adult children with lesbian parents regarding certain areas directed by the participants. In this chapter the research design adopted for this study is outlined followed by details of the sample and how participants were recruited. Next, the research instrument and how it was used to collect data is described. Consideration is then given to ethical issues followed by an account of the data analysis process and lastly the limitations of the study are discussed.

3.2 Research Design

As this study looks to investigate the experiences and the views of members of lesbian-parented families it is of an exploratory nature. A qualitative research approach was therefore considered to be the most appropriate for the study. As described by Dawson (2009) 'qualitative research explores attitudes, behaviour and experiences....It attempts to get an in-depth opinion from participants' (p.14).

The phenomenological approach was used for this study as it puts a specific emphasise on individual's personal experiences and views (Denscombe, 2010). As depicted by Denscombe (2010), a phenomenological approach to research 'concentrates its efforts on the kind of human experiences that are pure, basic and raw in the sense that they have not (yet) been subjected to processes of analysis and theorizing' (p.94). A disadvantage associated with phenomenological research is that it produces a large amount of data which has to be analysed therefore this approach is deemed to be well suited to a small scale study of this kind (Lester, 1999).

3.3 Sample

The criteria for the sample for this study included lesbian parents and children of lesbian parents from two parent lesbian families. The sample consists of three lesbian parents and two adult children aged eighteen and twenty five. Four of the five participants are female; the single male participant is the son of one of the parent

participants. Two of the three lesbian parents have children that are between the ages of fifteen and twenty five and the third parent has a child that is three years old (see Appendix A for a table of participants).

Originally the focus of this study was the experiences of children with same-sex parents however, due to access and ethical issues it was changed to the parenting experiences of same-sex parents including their accounts of the experiences of their children under eighteen. However the aim of the study shifted again to include the experiences of both same-sex parents and adult children with same-sex parents due to further difficulties encountered in accessing a sufficient number of same-sex parents with younger children. The logic behind this change was that it would be more authentic to get a first-hand account of the adult children's experience what it was like for them growing up in a lesbian-parented family, rather than through the eyes of their parents only. The researcher was unable to access any male same-sex parents or the children of male same-sex parents, therefore the study focused on the experiences of parents and adult children from lesbian-parented families.

3.4 Sample Access and Recruitment

Due to the nature of the topic it was anticipated that there was going to be difficulty in accessing a sample for a number of reasons. There are relatively low numbers of lesbian families in Ireland thus making them a relatively difficult group to reach. Secondly, accessing the sample was also made difficult due to the time frame for completion of the study. Furthermore, the sensitive and personal nature of the study was another possible contributing factor in identifying a sample. From the beginning therefore there was a probability that the sample size would be small, however this allows for a more in-depth insight into the lives of the participants. Nevertheless despite the difficulties in accessing a sample group it was apparent that for the members from this section of the population who partook in this study, their decision was mainly driven by their desire to tell their story. They had an eagerness and motivation to relate their experiences and those of their families in an effort to gain understanding from the general population.

The type of sampling used in this research is purposive sampling, explained by Sarantakos (2005) as a method used by researchers where they purposely select participants who, according to them, are relevant to the study. This type of sampling

is also known as judgement sampling as 'the choice of respondents is guided by the judgement of the investigator' (Sarantakos, 2005:164).

The first step in sample recruitment for this study was to make contact with anyone that could lead the researcher to any possible participants such as authors of recent newspaper articles or reports featuring same-sex families. The relevant LGBT organisations were also contacted, with one LGBT organisation proving to be particularly helpful in identifying participants. They forwarded the researcher's information through e-mail to potential participants who fitted the criteria for this study and as a result, two of the five participants for the study were obtained.

The third participant, who the researcher saw being interviewed on TV with his family, was contacted through the internet and subsequently he agreed to take part in the study. Through this contact the researcher was able to get another participant as he asked his mothers if they would be interested in participating in the study also. This is referred to as "snowball sampling" which is described by Atkinson and Flint (2001) as a method of finding research participants where one participant gives you the name of another possible participant and so on. This method of sampling is commonly used on subgroups of the population that are hard to reach. However, there is the disadvantage that using participants that know each other may produce similar data. The final participant was recruited through personal contacts of the researcher. It should be noted that there is the possibility that some of these participants may have been involved in recent Irish studies detailed in this study.

3.5 Research Instrument

The method that was selected within the qualitative approach was the interview as, according to May (2001:120), interviews give 'rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings'. As this study focuses on the experiences of individuals, the interview was considered to be the best method of gathering data; specifically, the semi-structured interview was used for this purpose. The main advantage of the semi-structured interview is that it allows the person being interviewed to give their point of view and answer on their own terms while giving the interviewer more opportunity for comparability between interviewees (May, 2001). However as stated by May (2001), there are some limitations in interviewing. An example of such a limitation includes the data that is

obtained through the interview process may not be totally accurate as the interviewer could have their own interpretation of the interviewee's experiences. In addition there is the possibility of the data being affected by the biases that the researcher may possess (Sarantakos, 2005).

A number of open ended questions were used when undertaking the semi-structured interviews, as described by Bryman (2008:438) 'the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway on how to reply'. The questions used in the interviews for this study were drawn from the themes identified from the literature review. In addition the interview guide used for the research by O' Driscoll et al. (2008), exploring the experiences of LGBT parents in Ireland, was examined to generate ideas for questions that would be used for this study as some of the topics covered were similar to those of the present study. While in the semi-structured interview, the researcher uses a set of questions or topics to guide them it is unlike quantitative research interviewing, where a script is strictly followed by the interviewer (Bryman, 2008). Therefore in the semi-structured interview the researcher may add questions that were not on the guide so as to get interviewees to elaborate on a topic that is of interest to the researcher and/or participant, allowing the researcher to gather more data where they wish (Bryman, 2008). This illustrates the flexible quality of the semi-structured interview which is not present in the use of a survey or questionnaire (Sarantakos, 2005). The interviews conducted for this study ranged in length from thirty six minutes to sixty two minutes.

For this study two different sets of interview questions were created, one for the parents and the other for the adult children. Additionally for the interview with the lesbian parent with the three year old child a few of the questions were altered to fit her situation. For example, the questions that related to school were changed to questions concerning pre-school. Although the questions were different for the two groups of interviewees the topics covered were, on the whole, similar. First a few background questions were asked, for instance asking them to explain a little about their family situation. These were followed by questions under the main themes of: reactions and attitudes of their extended families; views on the Civil Partnership Act 2010 and Civil Marriage; stigma/discrimination; 'coming out' as a member of a

lesbian family; experiences with schools/pre-school; support and issues concerning the biological mother (see Appendix B for Interview Guide).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

According to Gomm (2008) research ethics ‘refer to rules of morally good conduct for researchers’ (p.298). The four main ethical principles that need to be considered when conducting social research are: to ensure that no harm is caused to any participants, anonymity and confidentiality of study participants is maintained, there is informed consent from respondents and that deception in terms of the way in which the researcher presents their work does not occur (Bryman, 2008). These four ethical principles will now be looked at in more detail in relation to this study.

1. As mentioned above it is the researcher’s responsibility that respondents do not come to any harm, this includes any physical, psychological or legal harm (Sarantakos, 2005). The researcher was conscious that all participants were made to feel comfortable, steps made to ensure this included allowing the interviewee to choose the time, date and place where the interview would take place. In addition all questions were handled with sensitivity especially any questions that may have been particularly personal in nature.

2. As maintained by Sarantakos (2005) a significant part of research ethics is confidentiality, therefore study participants were made aware that they would remain anonymous as no information would be given in the final document that would disclose their identity. Furthermore a pseudonym is used for each participant throughout the study.

3. Written consent was received from each of the interviewees in the shape of a consent form (see Appendix C). A consent form was given to each participant before the interviews were conducted explaining that they had the right to decline to answer any questions and could withdraw from the study at any time if they wished to do so (Silverman, 2010). Furthermore the consent form guaranteed confidentiality regarding information given by participants during the interview process unless anything was divulged that by law, the researcher is obliged to report. These steps ensured that there was informed consent from each participant.

4. Regarding the issue of deception, as noted by Gomm (2004), researchers are ‘subject to a moral requirement to do research truthfully’ and researchers who

‘intentionally falsify research, or have inadvertently allowed expectancy effects or other sources of bias to flaw their judgement’ are not considered to be following ethical practice (p.299).

3.7 Data Analysis

A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews and then each interview was later transcribed (see Appendix D). The data from the interviews was thematically analysed (Gomm, 2004). First, the transcripts were re-read and listened to so that the researcher could gain a better understanding and familiarity with the data. The transcripts were then coded identifying the main themes. Then mind-maps were used to identify the common themes and sub-themes present in all the transcripts as well as any overlapping or unexpected themes that emerged (Lester, 1999). Direct quotations from the transcripts were then placed under the appropriate themes and this was used as the basis to present the data for the ‘Findings’ section of this study (see Appendix E for Sample Data Analysis).

The researcher chose not to use Nvivo to analyse the data as it was felt that there was insufficient time to learn how to competently use this software and due to the relatively small size of the study it was not considered a necessity (Denscombe, 2010).

3.8 Limitations

The limitations of the study include the short time frame to carry out the study which had an impact in relation to accessing a larger sample and the possibility of taking the sample search to a national level. Another limitation is that due to the restricted sample size, these participants may not represent the views and experiences of this section of the population in general.

A further limitation was the fact that the sample includes only female same-sex parents and adult children with female same-sex parents. As a result there is the exclusion of the experiences and opinions of parents and adult children from male same-sex families. Therefore the experiences and views expressed by the participants in this study from lesbian-parented families can not be generalised to all same-sex families as certain experiences and views may differ between members of lesbian-

parented and gay-parented families. However this study may prompt the initiation of more studies of this kind incorporating a wider sample. Additionally the second-hand account given by participants of the experiences of their partners and children is also a limitation of the study.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this study and a description of the sample and how participants were accessed is described. The research instrument is then discussed and how it was used in collecting data followed by the ethical considerations. Then an outline is given of the data analysis process and lastly the limitations of the study are discussed. In the following chapter the research findings are presented a number of themes emerging from the interviews with participants.

Findings

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

The main aims of this study are to explore the experiences and views of lesbian parents and adult children of lesbian parents in Ireland. In order to achieve these aims the phenomenological approach is used to capture the lived experiences of the participants from the study. The main themes that emerged from the analysis of five qualitative interviews, three with lesbian parents and two with adult children of lesbian parents, will be presented under six broad headings: the Irish legal context; dealing with disclosure of their family type to others for lesbian parents and their children; sources of support for lesbian parents and their children; lesbian parents and their children in the education system; homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents and the division of labour and the difference in parenting roles between the biological and non-biological mother. Each theme has a number of subthemes. There were further themes emerging from the data that were of relevance to this study (see Appendix F for the analysis of these themes). However, the six themes that are presented in the findings were the most prominent themes throughout the narratives and most directly related to the aims and objectives of this study.

4.2 The Irish Legal Context

A significant theme which emerged was the participant's opinions on the current legal situation for same-sex families in Ireland. Most notable was the participant's views on the lack of legal protection for the members of same-sex families, in particular for the children of same-sex parents and the non-biological parent.

4.2.1 Lack of Legal Recognition of Children with Same-Sex Parents

A common concern emphasised by the parents and adult children of lesbian parents is the lack of legal recognition of children with same-sex parents in Ireland. James highlights the areas where he as a child of lesbian parents believes he has been discriminated against by, or by the lack of, recognition for his position in Irish legislation:

“Well I have been discriminated against pretty actively in terms of civil partnership and marriage and taxation and inheritance, guardianship rights”

There was an acknowledgement from participants that the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act (2010) is a positive step for Irish society. However they all noted there is still more legislation needed to provide full legal protection for same-sex families particularly for the children involved.

“Civil partnership is a step in the right direction but we should be kind of running towards the right direction rather than just stepping, so I think that Civil Partnership is just to keep gay people quiet, like there you go have that and we are working on the rest of it and so yeah I think that children are the ones that are going to suffer from that ignorance” (Emma)

This parent felt that whether she and her partner decide to get a Civil Partnership in Ireland or not, her children would be left at a disadvantage either way:

“One way or another, the children end up getting completely forgotten in the process. I’m sure if we did get a Civil Partnership it would have considerable negative effects on the children because we would have to make fairly complicated legal arrangements so that their home would remain their home if anything happened to [partner’s name] or to me” (Lynn)

It was acknowledged by the participants with lesbian parents that now they are over the age of eighteen they are in a less vulnerable position compared to children regarding particular legal issues. As James explains, although issues such as next-of-kin and guardianship rights of the non-biological mother may not be the main concern for his family any more, as an adult with lesbian parents there are other concerns to the fore:

“So the implications for me are about inheritance really because my parents are at the stage of their lives where they are planning retiring and they are planning wills and stuff like that. So as the older child of a lesbian couple it is less of an issue [guardianship rights of non-biological mothers] but I am still keen on getting it recognised because I know younger people and I hate the idea of a 4 year old having to live with their grandparents instead of one of their parents if the biological parent dies, its crap”

4.2.2 Lack of Legal Recognition of the Non-Biological Mother

Another concern highlighted by participants is the lack of legal recognition the non-biological parent receives and the potential difficulties this could cause. Emma describes the possible situation where if something had happened to her birth mother when she was a child, her non-biological parent would have not been considered to have any guardianship rights in the eyes of the law:

“I just think that if anything had happened to my Mam, God forbid, I wouldn’t be allowed to stay with [non-biological mother] even though she has raised me more than my Dad and I would be sent down to [County] to live with the rest of my [extended] family... I just think that it would be really unfair if [non-biological mother] would be referred to as a stranger to me, like legally and I think that’s really disgraceful”

Additionally, James talks of the inconveniences that could arise as the relationship between the non-biological mother and her children is not considered next of kin:

“If [non-biological mother] was in hospital for example, then from the legal point of view the hospital has every right to not let me see her outside of visiting hours because I am not ‘family’ quote unquote”

As a non-biological mother this parent talks of the vulnerable position she would be in if she and her partner were to separate as she would not have the legal standing to gain access to the child:

“If we were to separate I would still be able to see [son’s name]... but that is only possible if me and her [her partner] keep the line of communication open... but if we had brought him up together and we broke up and she decided that I was not to come near him then, it’s in her hands then really” (Niamh)

4.3 Dealing with Disclosure of their Family Type to Others for Lesbian Parents and their Children

The participants described the different approaches they took in disclosing their family type to others as well as highlighting the importance of being ‘out’ as a lesbian family. First the views of the parents will be presented followed by the views of the children of lesbian parents.

4.3.1 The Importance of Being ‘Out’ as a Lesbian Family for Lesbian Parents and Children of Lesbian Parents

The importance of being ‘out’ as a lesbian family was stressed by all participants. In particular, all the parents highlighted how they believed failure to be open about the fact they were a lesbian family would impact negatively on the children as well as for themselves as parents.

“I think if your parents were denying who they were or if there were secret things going on about a relationship or the nature of a relationship, the children would have to bear the burden of that... that would be a very wrong thing to do to the kids and I suppose it would be the wrong thing to do for yourself, to deny who you are” (Lynn)

It was further expressed by some participants that it is important to be ‘out’ as a lesbian family so that same-sex families can become more accepted in society:

“We are never going to change the boundaries of the way people think if some people don’t stand out and be seen” (Niamh)

4.3.2 Disclosure for Lesbian Parents

All the parents within this study appeared to adopt an open approach to being ‘out’ as a lesbian family, as illustrated by the following quote:

“I tend to be a very open person... now usually I get, always I get a good response, so that’s why I guess I continue doing that so I think in a sense I have probably influenced our family a bit in that way... we would never have denied it to anyone asking and we would have usually said it before they asked” (Mary)

The two lesbian step-parents explained that for their family the process of ‘coming out’ was done ‘in different stages’ and that most of the ‘outing’ was already dealt with when they joined the family:

“I guess we had done it in different stages, [Partners name] was already ‘out’ by the time we got together’... they were very much an ‘out’ family and I was ‘out’... so we would have been ‘out’ separately so when we got together we didn’t really have to do any ‘outing’” (Lynn)

“Well [partner’s name] had to deal with that herself, I wasn’t around for that”
(Niamh)

Furthermore Mary explained how she was always open with her children’s schools informing them of their family structure so as to avoid any possible issues that might occur. In contrast Niamh disclosed that her partner did not reveal the true extent of her child’s family situation on the forms to a Catholic primary school they are thinking of sending their son to:

“When she filled in the forms she just wrote that she was a single parent and that she is the Mum, like you know Mum and Dad or relationship status or whatever she just put down single Catholic mother”

However Niamh admits that if the child gets accepted to this primary school that they will have to inform them of their family situation:

“I think that we are going to have to [tell the school] because when they ask who lives at home and you know kids talk... we shouldn’t have to say but we shouldn’t put people in an unprepared position where they have to deal with those questions you know”

4.3.3 Disclosure for Adult Children with Lesbian Parents

The children of lesbian parents described in more detail their experience of ‘coming out’ as having lesbian parents. Both recalled how they dealt with the disclosure differently at the different stages of their lives and how things were more open when they were young children and attending primary school:

“I dealt with it differently throughout my life. Back when I was in England it was always very open, very honest everyone really knew because I was a young kid.... In Ireland initially it was very open, very honest, my brother and I were in the same [primary] school, everyone knew, kids were still at the age that they think that everything is just normal you know the craziest things are just a regular family” (James)

However once they started secondary school they described how they took a more private and cautious approach to whom they told:

“It was years later when I was in 5th year [of secondary school], and from primary school to 5th year that was the first time I had said it [that she had lesbian parents] since primary school” (Emma)

James noted that now that he is at university he is more open about telling people about his family situation. Although he reveals that there are still certain situations where he feels he needs to be more cautious about whom he discloses information regarding his family to, like when he is working at his parents business:

“If I am at work here then I am more guarded about it because they [his parents] are working here too. So it is more of a professional thing, it is their business if they want to tell people, then that’s fine... but from a social point of view I just tell anyone”

4.4 Sources of Support for Lesbian Parents and their Children

Different sources of support were mentioned by the participants throughout the interviews. Family support featured as the most prominent source of support for these participants, other sources of support included friends, the LGBT community and LGBT organisations.

4.4.1 Immediate Family Members as a Source of Support

All the participants mentioned how the members of their immediate family offer support. This participant with lesbian parents accredited his parents as the best source of support for him:

“Over my entire life I’d say my parents [have been my best source of support], they are very good they have been very supportive in a lot that I have done, I have been lucky, I have done fairly well in life so far but even when I have tripped up they supported me all the way” (James)

While this lesbian parent discloses how she has her partner for support in relation to parenting:

“[Partners name] and I talk about it [parenting] a lot, so that’s been very good, we have a good honest relationship where I can tell her ‘they’re [the children] driving me mad’... and she would check in with me and make sure that I wasn’t completely struggling with it” (Lynn)

However another parent revealed how she felt she only had herself and her partner as a source of support with regards to parenting issues and how that can be prove to be difficult:

“I guess I have me, and [partners name] has some other people and I only have [partner’s name] and its hard though, when I want to discuss something with [partner’s name] that she might take offence if she can’t see outside the... you know, role of parent so that can be difficult, so yeah I pretty much talk to myself” (Niamh)

4.4.2 Extended Family Members as a Source of Support

Participants revealed that in general they experienced positive reactions and overall support from their extended family with regards to having a family in the context of a lesbian relationship.

“My extended family were delighted in some ways because they have always known that I have wanted to have children and you know it looked like it wasn’t happening... so my family were really happy that here I was going to have children in my life” (Lynn)

“Very welcoming, our family has just accepted us from the beginning” (Emma)

While on the whole experiences with their families were positive, some negativity was noted by participants:

“It was more an issue of the poor kids are they going to be alright sort of thing and what’s it going to do to them and isn’t it selfish, if there was any negativity, I would of thought” (Mary)

While experiencing positive reactions and support from their own family members two of the parents described how they had difficulties with members of their partner’s family. Niamh described how there is still a lack of support and acceptance from some members of her partner’s family of her, her partner and her partner’s child as a family unit:

“They don’t really recognise us as a family unit at all, some of her family do but a big section of them don’t... some of [partners name] family they probably don’t refer to me, it’s just [partners name] and [child’s name]”

All except one of the participants said they had a family member of an older generation who at first had difficulties understanding or accepting their family situation however later proved to be supportive.

“I think that my grandmother might have had a bit of a hard time with it at first because she is from a generation where that was just never talked about or anything” (Emma)

“My grandfather was alive at that point and he would have been about 94 or 95 and even he, he said something to my mum about “silly girl” or something like that but when we arrived with [child’s name] aged 6 weeks he was lovely, he was wonderful” (Mary)

The adult children of lesbian parents and two of the parents commented on how non-biological grandmothers saw them or their children as their own grandchildren, though it may have taken some time for them to adjust to the idea:

“Like my mother she sees him as a grandson” (Niamh)

“Eventually she came around to it and she was always our Granny but it took a couple of years but it was oh these are my grandkids as well” (James)

4.4.3 Friends as a Source of Support

Whereas having friends as a source of support for parenting was also discussed by the parents the results showed it was particularly important for the adult children with lesbian parents.

“They [her friends] are just constantly, constantly supporting me about it... so I am just really happy that they are so supportive” (Emma)

“I would have used my friends I always use my friends for support” (James)

4.4.4 LGBT Community as a Source of Support

All the participants, with the exception of one parent, mentioned how the LGBT community has proved to be a great source of support for them and their family. For some the LGBT community provided many role models in the form of aunties and uncles and even father figures:

“Really our extended family was the lesbian community in London and the lesbian and gay community in Ireland, so it’s like the kid’s have a load of aunties and uncles in the lesbian and gay community and we have always said to them if you are ever in trouble in a city go to the nearest gay bar and say “my mothers are lesbians, help me!” (Mary)

“Our neighbours across the road from us are these two gay men... and they are like my Dad’s, the two of them like I would see them both as my Dad” (Emma)

4.4.5 LGBT Organisations as a Source of Support

It was found that participants availed of certain LGBT organisations as a source of support. They noted that these organisations are more focused on achieving equality for the LGBT community and had not received support from these LGBT organisations in relation to parenting or family matters. This point is captured by the following quote:

“I think that there are not many [organisations that provide support for same-sex parents], well not with the organisations that I am aware of, it’s not part of their role really... they don’t seem to have a role around family” (Lynn)

Another expressed how she made use of a support group for gay parents however she explains how she felt it did not provide the kind of support she was looking for personally and found it difficult to relate to the other same-sex parents:

“I just wanted to meet other parents and maybe even go on a play date with our kid because we don’t have friends with kids and we certainly don’t have gay friends with kids... also I don’t really relate to a lot of the other gay parents I guess I’m different... I am a lot younger than some of them as well even at 26 you know I also look a lot younger, I am punky and political hhhmm yeah its difficult” (Niamh)

The adult children with lesbian parents talked of how they received support from a particular organisation set up for the children of same-sex parents. Emma remarked on how until she joined this she had not met any other children with same-sex parents:

“Yeah [organisation for children with same-sex parents] that’s pretty much it... but yeah that was in September but previously to that I didn’t know anybody, completely felt on my own or whatever”

4.5 Lesbian Parents and their Children in the Education System:

The findings from the present study indicate that participants did not experience any significant problems with regards to schools due to their family type. However the common topics that surfaced within this theme were parent's choice of schools and attitudes from staff at schools.

4.5.1 Parents Choice of Schools

All the parents talked of their preference in sending their children to schools with a more liberal philosophy where possible.

“We would have at first [sought a school with a liberal philosophy] but in like 1995 there would not have been a lot of schools with a liberal philosophy in [County], there just weren't” (Mary)

Additionally, two of the three parents discussed their reluctance to send their children to Catholic run schools:

“They went to school in [name of area], and in [name of non-denominational school] they tend to celebrate difference and it is very, very open and lots of kids of gay parents go there... we wanted them to have no issues from any small minded religious schools” (Lynn)

“Yeah the school that we want to send him to is [name of non-denominational school], which is a non-religious more relaxed school but unfortunately there is a big waiting list and we are not sure if he will get in, we might have to send him to the school around the corner which is local and Catholic and the area that we live in is lower class [area they live in]” (Niamh)

4.5.2 Attitudes of Staff at School

On the whole attitudes from teachers and principals at schools, and at pre-school for one parent, were perceived as accepting by the parents and adult children.

“Any of the experiences that the kids have had... in school has been really, really positive... teachers have sought them out at school and congratulated them on various... like we have done various stuff [media appearances and campaigns] over the last 3 or 4 years” (Lynn)

Yet two participants questioned the attitudes of principals at school. This parent described how the principal of her children's school welcomed them to the school, though there seemed to be a lack of understanding on his part of the development and well-being of children with same-sex parents:

“He [the principal] was fine, well he was a bit funny actually, he basically said “don’t worry about it you know there are lots of children, lots of disadvantaged children are alright in the end”, well they are not disadvantaged actually!”
(Mary)

While this daughter of lesbian parents disclosed that when a homophobic message, directed at her, was written on a table at school she was dissatisfied with the manner in which her principal dealt with the situation:

“I went to the principal about it [homophobic message] and they took a picture of it and they wiped it off the table and that was pretty much it... if someone had written a racist comment I just think that it would be taken so much more seriously and I feel like there was not much point me even telling the principal”
(Emma)

4.6 Homophobic Bullying of Children with Lesbian Parents at School

A common theme that arose from the interviews was bullying experienced by children with lesbian parents. However the nature of the bullying reported, apart from one incident, was not homophobic but for a variety of other reasons most of which were not indicated in the interviews. First the views of the parents will be presented followed by the adult children of lesbian parent's point of view.

4.6.1 Experience of Bullying from the Point of View of the Parents

Two parents stated that while it was possible their children were bullied for having lesbian parents it was not the main focus of the bullying. This lesbian mother listed the number of factors that she believes contributed to her children being bullied at school:

“Going into... a small rural school, in the middle of their schooling as [child's name] was 6 and [child's name] was 9, being English, [child's name] is half

Asian, being black, not being from the area, not being from [County], not being in the GAA, they experienced huge problems” (Mary)

However Mary acknowledges that they could have been bullied for having lesbian parents:

“But I’m sure they got stuff about us being lesbian but it was only one [factor] out of a lot of them”

4.6.2 Experience of Bullying from the Point of View of the Adult Children

James, the son of Mary, confirms that while he was bullied at school for being English he could not recall being bullied for having lesbian parents:

“I was bullied for being English but never for being the son of lesbians, for kids its quite difficult to grasp onto its like is it a good thing is it a bad thing... there was one time in secondary school when someone said “oh there is the guy with two mum’s” and that was it and I thought is that the best he can come up with... come on be inventive! Beyond that nothing really”

While the other adult child with lesbian parents revealed that she experienced bullying at school to the extent that she had to move school, she was not bullied because she was being raised by two women. She did however describe one incident of homophobic bullying, as referred to previously under section 4.4.2.

On the whole participants revealed that the peers of the children with lesbian parents at school were either ambivalent or welcoming of the fact that they had two mothers. Emma commented on the accepting attitudes from her peers in general, with the following quote describing the unexpected positive reaction she received from her peers after a T.V. appearance she made with her two mothers:

“I kind of didn’t realise at the time what I was doing and I left the T.V studio and I was thinking I have just ruined my life. I think I am going to go into school and I am going to be completely like taunted or whatever and everyone, like when I walked into my form room everyone started clapping, they had all watched it”

4.7 The Division of Labour and the Difference in Parenting Roles between the Biological and Non-biological Mother

A final theme, present in all the narratives, was the different roles the biological and non-biological mother played within their family. These roles will be looked at in more detail in relation to their working and parenting roles.

4.7.1 Division of Paid and Unpaid Work between Lesbian Parents

All the parents explained that deciding who was going to work to provide an income and who was going to take on the majority of the childminding was governed by practicality and personal preference:

“[Partners name] said that she didn’t want to look after the children, she said she would kill them so that was all, it was just practical” (Mary)

“[Partner’s name] wants to go to college and be a midwife I have no desire at the moment to do such things... it kind of just naturally fits that I would stay at home and mind him and that she would go to college and after four years she would go to work, so I would prefer to be in that role [child-minding] but if at any point I want to change my mind we can work around it” (Niamh)

4.7.2 Different Parenting Roles of the Biological and Non-Biological Mother

When participants were asked did they think the biological and non-biological mother played different parenting roles within their family all five believed that they did. However all except one said it was not necessarily about the biological link and more to do with the different personalities of each parent, as highlighted by this biological parent while adding that sometimes biology inevitably plays a factor:

“I don’t think it’s about the biology of it, I don’t. I mean it would have been over different times in their life certainly, there would have been a difference because, for example when I was breastfeeding [son’s name]... so that certainly, that’s a different relationship because of biology but overall it’s not about biology it’s about the two different people that we are and it still is” (Mary)

Although this non-biological (step) parent also stated that the different roles that she and her partner play are not simply a case of biological or non-biological mother, she

would consider her partner, and biological mother of the children, to be the definite 'lead parent':

“[Partners name] doesn't [think we play different roles] but I do, I think that when something goes wrong they [the children] go to [partners name], there are kind of some things that she does and some things that I do and I would see it more than she would necessarily but I think that those things happen naturally and I don't know if it is about the natural, the biological and non-biological, she is the lead parent for sure” (Lynn)

Whereas this lesbian step-mother felt that the lack of a biological connection does make a difference in the relationship she has with her son compared to her partner:

“There is a difference in our roles, it's hard, as the biological parent they have a different bond that nobody can force into... especially as a breast fed baby as well, I will never have that experience” (Niamh)

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter the findings from the study were presented. The findings indicate that participants are not satisfied with the lack of legal recognition of same-sex families in Ireland. The importance of being 'out' as a lesbian family and different approaches to disclosure of family arrangements by participants were described. It was also outlined in the findings the type and level of support received by lesbian parents and adult children of lesbian parents. It materialised in relation to schools that lesbian parents and children with lesbian parents did not experience any significant problems. While bullying was experienced by the children with lesbian parents it was not due to their parent's sexual orientation with the exception of one incident. The findings illustrate that participants felt that work and parenting roles divided between parents were not determined by biology, with the exception of one parent who considered her role as parent to be different due to the lack of a biological link to the child. In the following chapter the findings are discussed and analysed.

Discussion

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study aims to explore the experiences and views of lesbian parents and the adult children of lesbian parents. In an effort to accomplish these aims three lesbian parents and two adult children of lesbian parents were interviewed regarding their experiences as members of a lesbian family. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the significance of the findings to the reader. The main themes presented in the previous chapter are discussed in relation to the aims and objectives of this study. These themes are also examined and discussed in the context of relevant literature and research. The findings are discussed under the following six main headings: the lack of legal protection for children and non-biological mothers from lesbian-parented families; different approaches to disclosure of their family type for lesbian parents and their children; family, the LGBT community and LGBT organisations as a source of support for lesbian parents and their children; ideology of Irish schools; homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents and the factors determining the work and parenting roles of biological and non-biological lesbian parents. As this study contains a small number of participants generalising the findings to studies with a larger sample of lesbian parents or their children is avoided.

5.2 The Lack of Legal Protection for Children and Non-Biological Mothers from Lesbian-Parented Families

There is a sense of disappointment and even anger felt by all the participants that same-sex families are not acknowledged within Irish law. This finding is similar to previous studies with lesbian parents (McNair et al, 2002) and children with lesbian parents (Elliott, 2010) that found participants held significant concerns that they and their family are not legally recognised. All the participants from the present study feel that children from same-sex families and non-biological mothers in particular are vulnerable in a legal context in Ireland. The main concerns that participants have on children of lesbian parents and non-biological mothers are the absence of guardianship, custody and next of kin rights. This is consistent with the worries expressed by the children of lesbian parents from the study by Elliott (2010) that if the

biological mother from a lesbian-parented family was to die or desert her children, the non-biological would have no guardianship or custody rights to the children.

One of the non-biological parents highlighted that in the event of her separating from her partner it would be at the discretion of her partner as to whether she would be allowed continued access to the child. This is consistent with current Irish research by Ryan-Flood (2009), where lesbian parents made their own arrangements, a 'moral contract', outlining certain agreements in the case of their separation as they could not rely on the courts to make these arrangements on their behalf. Under Irish law the non-biological mother has no rights to see the children she has co-parented if the biological mother decides against it, not even under the Civil Partnership Act (2010) does she have this entitlement.

Although the adult children with lesbian parents recognised the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act (2010) as progress, they pointed out that there is still no legislation regarding same-sex families under the Act. As expressed by James, "*The argument is always that Civil Partnership wasn't aimed at families it was aimed at the gay and lesbian people themselves which is just naive because it still applies, well we haven't legislated for families so the families aren't families so we go "hello?" we are already here so you might as well maybe do something for the legal point of view*". The sentiments of these participants are reiterated by Quinn (2011:1) stating that 'whilst the passing of civil partnership legislation in Ireland was a cause for celebration', civil partners with children are not legally recognised as a family.

5.3 Different Approaches to Disclosure of their Family Type for Lesbian Parents and their Children

While both lesbian parents and the adult children of lesbian parents stressed the importance of being 'out' as a lesbian family, parents emphasised the need to be open for the sake of the child. This finding is echoed in Ryan-Flood's (2009) study comparing lesbian parents from Ireland with lesbian parents from Sweden, noting that all Irish and Swedish participants held this same belief. Additionally participants from the present study stated that not only would it be detrimental for a child within a lesbian family for the disclosure of the nature of their family make-up to be avoided

but for the parents too. This is recognised by Emma stating, *“It’s not fair on me, it’s not fair on my Mam and [non-biological parent] so I think that’s important to kind of be like “this is my family and that’s that””*.

Two parents revealed that they believed it was best to take an open strategy with schools by telling the staff that they are a lesbian family so as to avoid any difficult situations for them as parents, their children and the teachers involved. In a study by Martin & Ryan (2000) it was found that it benefits the child, their family and the whole school when a lesbian family chooses to be totally open at school. They maintain,

among its many benefits, openness about the nature of the child’s family facilitates free discussion in the classroom about family diversity, encourages children to address a broad range of issues of difference and tolerance, furthers the social integration of a child with sexual minority parents... and elicits the activities of all parents and school personnel who wish to support and promote diversity (Martin & Ryan, 2000:209).

However one of these parents stated that in certain circumstances her partner does not reveal her sexual identity, *“On official forms [partner’s name] won’t fill in that she is gay because she does think that she is discriminated against”* (Niamh). O’ Driscoll (2008) notes that this ‘fear of discrimination’ can have a negative effect on the lives of lesbian and gay people, suggesting this could be the case for lesbian parents and in turn possible negative implications for the children. Niamh also revealed that her partner decided not to inform a potential school for her son of their family arrangement. A possible reason for this lack of disclosure by her partner could be to protect her son, and perhaps herself and her partner, from experiencing potential discrimination from the school. Also of concern could be that if the school knew she was a lesbian mother it could affect the chances of her son getting a place, as the Catholic ethos of the school may not be receptive to the fact that she is a lesbian mother. This lack of openness by this parent reflects current literature (Goldberg, 2010) that suggests while it is advised that lesbian parents are open with schools for the sake of their children, it can prove to be difficult as there is the concern that their children or themselves could experience negative reactions from those at school.

The two adult children of lesbian parents explained that the disclosure of their family situation to others when they were younger and in primary school was more ‘open’

and 'honest' compared to the 'private' approach chosen as they got older and entered secondary school. This fits previous research finding that younger children of lesbian parents tend to be more open about revealing information about their family than older children (Elliott, 2010; Ray & Gregory, 2001). Perlesz et al. (2006) identified the age of children as a key component in how they made decisions surrounding disclosure especially in a school setting, acknowledging that 'the secondary school environment was perceived by children to be less accepting of difference than the primary school context' (p.62).

Furthermore James attributed the private stance he took at secondary school partly to the fact that it was during adolescence "... *and dealing with the coming out area of that [transition from primary school to secondary school], in the first secondary school was more difficult [because], I was a teenager I wasn't too keen on people knowing my business. I told people as I got to know them it was more of a private affair*". James views are reflected in a study by Tasker & Patterson (2006) that suggests adolescents can be more 'secretive and guarded' when it comes to disclosing information regarding their lesbian-parented family, reporting a variety of reasons including the fear of being teased by peers (p.15).

One participant added that he is now at a stage in his life where he feels he can be more open about his family. However he acknowledges that in his work environment, he works with his parents, he is more wary of the amount of information he divulges regarding his family arrangement. This could be due to concerns that information he discloses to others, such as clients or work colleagues, could have negative consequences for his parents or their business and therefore leaves decisions surrounding disclosure at work to them. This mirrors research by Perlesz et al. (2006) showing members of lesbian families censoring their approach to disclosure depending on the type of environment they are in.

5.4 Extended Family, the LGBT Community and LGBT Organisations as a Source of Support for Lesbian Parents and their Children

Evidence from the literature review showed regular contact was kept between children of lesbian parents and extended family, particularly in the case of grandparents (Fulcher et al., 2002; Patterson et al., cited in Tasker & Patterson, 2006:10). Similarly the results from the present study illustrated that all participants

felt they were well supported by extended family members. Furthermore it was revealed by three of the participants that grandmothers recognised their daughter's non-biological children as their own grandchildren. This finding is reflected in research by Gartrell et al. (2000) showing 63% of 85 children had grandparents who acknowledged them as their grandchild. In the present study, this acknowledgement from grandmothers was reported to be specifically in relation to the non-biological grandmother. This finding is in contrast to two American studies (Gartrell & Bos, 2010; Goldberg, 2010) where biological grandparents were considered to be closer to their grandchildren compared with non-biological grandparents. Goldberg (2010) suggest that the non-biological mothers extended family might show less interest in 'their grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, presumably because they felt less connected to a child who was not related to them biologically and/or legally' (p.118). These relatively positive findings from the current study regarding extended family showing their support are at odds with a small number of studies which paints a more negative picture in relation to families being supportive towards lesbian parents. A study by Rawsthorne (2009) stated that 'grandparents and biological families were often shocked and outraged by the formation of a lesbian-parented family' (p.57). Although considering her extended family to be supportive, one of the lesbian parents did recall that if there was any disapproval from family members it would have been in the form of worry for the children's well-being due to them being raised by lesbians. The experience of this participant resonates with a finding from O' Driscoll et al.'s (2008) Irish research where lesbian parents received negative comments from family members in relation to them having children such as "it would negatively impact on the children" and "well a child needs a father" (p.28).

All participants, with the exception of one, cited the LGBT community as a constant source of support for them and their families. None of the parents from the present study mentioned any change in the attitudes of people from within the LGBT community once they were involved in raising a child. On the contrary, the narratives highlighted that the LGBT community provided children with a variety of aunts, uncles and even father figures. This is not in keeping with research conducted by McNair & Perlesz (2004) and Rawsthorne (2009) which concluded that relationships within the LGBT community can become fragmented once a lesbian becomes a

parent. The fact that this was not a finding within this study could be due to the small sample.

LGBT organisations dealing with equal rights for LGBT people in Ireland were identified by participants as a source of support for them and their families. It appears from the findings that there is not an element of support specifically for the members of lesbian-parented families, such as parenting support, within these organisations. These findings are reiterated by a respondent from the 'Burning Issues' survey, addressing issues faced by LGBT people in Ireland, who stated: "I think there are very few supports for lesbian and gay parents and that there is no long term thinking in relation to the needs of the children of gay parents and the supports they might need as a result of having lesbian/gay parents" (Denyer et al., 2009:20). Possible reasons for this could be that there are still relatively small numbers of same-sex families in Ireland and that these organisations do not feel there is a need to provide family or parenting support as part of their role. Alternatively they could feel that it does not take precedence over other matters such as equality for the LGBT community. The children of lesbian parents within this study however did mention the support of one organisation in particular, set up last year, created for the children of same-sex parents. These participants commented how before joining this organisation they did not know any other children with same-sex parents that were not part of their own family, highlighting the importance of such organisations (Elliott, 2010). It was expressed by them how normal it felt when they finally met with other children with same-sex parents, Emma confided "*It was so ordinary like everyone had gay parents and that's the way it is*" and similarly James stated "*and here we are all these kids sitting around and it's like hey we all have weird families*".

5.5 Ideology of Irish Schools

The Irish parents from this present study revealed they had concerns with regards sending their children to appropriate schools. It was expressed that they considered schools with a more liberal philosophy the best option for their children, sharing the views of lesbian parents from current Irish research (O' Driscoll, 2008; Ryan-Flood, 2009). Additionally, it was highlighted by two of the lesbian parents that it was their wish that their children not attend Catholic run schools. They believed there was a

greater likelihood that they would experience problems as a result of having lesbian parents attending a Catholic run school in comparison to a non-denominational school. This finding is concurrent with literature (O' Driscoll, 2008:36) that indicates lesbian parents had reservations about sending their children to 'traditional, same-sex Catholic institutions, where their parental relationship and their family model might not be valued'. One parent in particular expressed the worry that her son would have to attend the Catholic-run school in, as she described it, the 'lower class' area they live in due to the long waiting list for the non-denominational school. According to Bos et al. (2004), peer stigma towards children with lesbian parents is more likely to occur in areas of low socio-economic status (SES). This could explain this parent's cause for worry, as her child could potentially experience more problems from the school in the low SES area compared to the non-denominational school.

In general, adult children of lesbian parents or lesbian parents did not report having any concern with the attitudes of teaching staff from the schools that they or their children attended. One parent and one adult child of lesbian parents commended on the attitudes of the teachers at the schools, describing them as supportive towards them and the members of their families. Nevertheless the attitudes and actions of two school principals were viewed negatively. In a conversation with a parent, one principal revealed that he held the view that children with lesbian parents are ultimately disadvantaged. Similarly McIntyre (cited in Communities Analytical Services: Social Research, 2009:10) found in her study, examining homophobic bullying from the perspective of teachers, that the teachers were inclined to express concern for children with same-sex parents. This study noted that while teachers said that family dynamic does not decide the quality of a family it was suggested 'sympathy and a desire to protect children from an implied harm dominated teacher discourses' (McIntyre, cited in Communities Analytical Services: Social Research, 2009:10). Another participant disclosed her disappointment when her school principal failed to take appropriate action when a homophobic incident, directed at her, occurred. This finding is reiterated in previous research with children of lesbian parents (Ray & Gregory, 2001) and lesbian parents (McNair & Perlesz, 2004) who found some participants were not satisfied with the way teachers dealt with the occurrences of homophobic bullying and in some cases their failure to take action.

5.6 Homophobic Bullying of Children with Lesbian Parents

A low level of homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents was a finding that emerged from the present study. While no conclusions can be drawn from this small scale study this could be viewed as surprising as, noted by Goldberg (2010), it is a common belief that children with same-sex parents are susceptible to bullying because of their family arrangement. Only one incident of homophobic bullying was detailed in the narratives, experienced by a participant with lesbian parents at school. It was stated by the participants that children from lesbian families generally received positive responses from their peers. It was noted that children of lesbian parents from this study did get bullied for other reasons, such as being English as experienced by one participant, as these may have been more 'obvious' than their family dynamic. The fact that the participants did not report more incidents of homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents could be a reflection of a more open and accepting attitude towards the LGBT community in Irish society. However a wider sample could show homophobic bullying of children with lesbian parents to be more common. This was the case in a study carried out by Gartrell & Bos (2010) finding nearly half of the adolescents had experienced homophobic stigmatisation throughout their lives.

Both of the participants with lesbian parents disclosed that they had experienced bullying by peers at school however they did remark, with the exception of a single homophobic incident, that they were never bullied because of their family dynamic. Similarly the two parents with older children noted that while it was a possibility that their children were bullied at school for having lesbian parents, it would have only been one aspect and not the main focus of the bullying. This is not consistent with previous research that found although children from lesbian-parented families were just as likely to experience bullying as children with heterosexual parents, they were more likely to be teased for reasons relating to their family (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen & Brewaeys, cited in Goldberg, 2010; Rivers et al., 2008). This included being teased about 'having two mothers, having a lesbian mother, not having a father, or being gay themselves' (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen & Brewaeys, cited in Goldberg, 2010: 135).

5.7 Factors Determining the Work and Parenting Roles of Biological and Non-Biological Lesbian Parents

The present study indicates that for parents negotiating who would engage in paid work and who would undertake the majority child care was determined by personal preference and practicality rather than the roles of biological and non-biological mother. These findings are supported by a study by Perlesz, Power, Brown, McNair, Schofield, Pitts, Barrett, & Bickerdike (2010) showing participants making decisions surrounding work/family balance ‘on the basis of couple's preferences and circumstance rather than an assumption that one parent will be the primary child carer’, that parent being the biological mother (p.374). A further finding from this study presents a non-biological parent making the decision to do the majority of the child minding which poses a contradiction to previous research where biological mothers were identified as doing more childcare than biological mothers (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007).

All the participants acknowledge that the biological and non-biological parents within their lesbian families had different roles with regards parenting however this is attributed to their different personalities rather than biology. The biological parent and the two adult children with lesbian parents from the present sample did not indicate that there was a primary parent within their family, with Emma stating “*The two of them [her mothers] play equal roles*”. It should be taken into consideration however that this is the point of view of these family members while the non-biological mothers from the same family might have a different perception. Nevertheless, this is congruent with findings of a study by Gartrell et al. (1999) that indicated that 75 % of 156 lesbian mothers shared child rearing duties and saw themselves as equal co-parents. The other 25% of participants were in agreement that the responsibilities of child rearing were shared, however the biological mother was considered to be the primary parent. This finding is consistent with the present study where the non-biological mothers conveyed that they did not perceive themselves to be the primary or lead parent. One of the non-biological parents did not think that the difference in her interactions with the children in her family was attributed to whether she was the biological or non-biological mother. It could also be considered that the emergence of a primary or lead parent is something that occurs naturally as for instance where there

are two biological parents, such as in heterosexual families. However the other non-biological parent believes that the lack of a biological link between her and the child did make a difference when it came to their relationship. This is in line with the data from Gartrell et al.'s (1999) study and other research (Goldberg, 2010; Ryan-Flood, 2009) that shows non-biological mothers felt there was a difference in their relationship with the children due to the absence of bonding experiences such as breastfeeding experienced only by the birth mother. It could therefore be deduced that although biological and non-biological mothers can be 'equally involved in parenting, a belief in a special or unique mother-child relationship based on the experience of pregnancy' can be evident (Ryan-Flood, 2009:124). The fact that these two non-biological mothers from the present study are from lesbian step-families, could possibly fit into Nelson's (cited in Millbank, 2003) theory that lesbian step-mothers play a supporting role in parenting compared to co-mothers who tend to have a more equal role in parenting to the biological mother.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the main findings of the present study. The discussion shows participants hold concerns in relation to the lack of legal protection in Ireland for children and non-biological mothers of lesbian-parented families. Additionally participant's views on the importance of being 'out' as lesbian families and the different approaches to disclosure that were chosen at different times and in the various aspects of their lives were commented on. This chapter also examined family, the LGBT community and certain LGBT organisations as positive sources of support as reported by the participants as well as the perceived lack of parenting support available from organisations. Parent's preference to send their children to schools with a liberal ethos and questionable attitudes experienced from school principals were put forward. The low level of homophobic bullying experienced by children of lesbian parents as reported in the study was also discussed. Finally, the division of work roles between the biological and non-biological mother being determined by personal preference rather than biology were deliberated on. In the case of parenting roles participants feel that biological and non-biological mothers play equal roles. However it did emerge that non-biological step-mothers perceive their partners to take on the role of primary parent. In the next chapter conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This study used qualitative, semi-structured interviews, as outlined in Chapter Three to capture the experiences and views of three lesbian parents and two adult children with lesbian parents. The phenomenological research approach was adopted to gain an insight into the personal experiences and views of the participants through the study. The aim of the study was to explore the experiences and views of lesbian parents and the experiences and views of adult children with lesbian parents in Ireland. As this was an exploratory study the areas that were investigated were determined by the participant's experiences. However this study had five main objectives in relation to lesbian parents and the children of lesbian parents, which were to:

- 1.) Determine their experiences and opinions with regards to provisions for same-sex families within Irish legislation.
- 2.) Explore their experiences and views of disclosing their family type to others.
- 3.) Identify the type and level of support available to them.
- 4.) Investigate their everyday experiences in the education system.
- 5.) Gain an insight into the family dynamics of two parent lesbian families.

This chapter draws conclusions from the present study while reflecting on its aims and objectives. Recommendations are made in light of the 'Findings' and 'Discussion' sections of the study.

6.2 Conclusion

1.) This study determined that participants held major concerns with regard to the lack of legal recognition and protection for same-sex families in Ireland. This is particularly the case for children and non-biological parents from these families as their relationship is not legally recognised. Consequently, the non-biological parent in a same-sex family has no guardianship, access or next of kin rights to the children they parent. While the Civil Partnership Act (2010) was seen as a positive step for Ireland in recognising the rights for LGBT people, it was criticised because of its failure to give any rights to the children of civil partners.

2.) In this study participants emphasised their views on the importance of taking an open approach and being 'out' as a lesbian parent or a child from a lesbian family. However, under closer inspection it was revealed that there were times when participants were not always open about being part of a lesbian family. This was due either to the fear of discrimination for themselves or another member of their family or, they did not feel it was an appropriate environment to fully disclose their family type. This could imply for the participants that being 'out' in all situations and in every aspect of their lives as members of lesbian families is not always easy or practical. The adult children of lesbian parents described dealing with the disclosure of their family situation to others differently depending on their age and the stage of their lives. The findings suggest that as young children these participants were less aware that their family was different to others and therefore were more open. It seems that a more private approach to disclosure was adopted in secondary school by these adult children. This could be considered to be in the context of normal adolescent development.

3.) This study identified the type and level of support received by the participants. In general, support from their immediate family and extended family members proved to be the most positive source of support. For some extended family members, in particular grandparents, it took some time for them to come to terms with the disclosure but overall they were supportive. Participants stated that certain LGBT organisations had helped in supporting them and their family however these generally related to issues of equality rather than having an element of family support such as

parenting support. Perhaps given the comparatively low amount of same-sex families in Ireland the main LGBT organisations feel they need to concentrate their efforts on achieving equality for the LGBT community rather than providing family or parenting support for same-sex families. A support organisation for the children of same-sex parents was considered by the adult children of lesbian parents to be an important source of support and accredited this organisation for allowing them to meet other children with lesbian parents for the first time in Ireland.

4.) Lesbian parents and adult children of lesbian parents from this study overall did not encounter many difficulties at schools as a direct result of their family situations. However lesbian parents did express a preference to sending their children to non-religious schools with a more liberal ethos, such as non-denominational schools. Due to long waiting lists for non-denominational schools as a result of their general popularity, particularly in certain areas of Ireland, lesbian parents may have no choice but to send their children to state-run Catholic schools. While bullying was commonly experienced by the children of lesbian parents at school, generally they were not bullied for being from a lesbian family. This could be an indication of a more contemporary Irish society where LGBT people are more accepted. For some participants, the attitudes of principals of schools were found to be unsatisfactory. This could highlight the lack of knowledge, understanding and training given to teachers and principals of schools for working with parents and children from same-sex families.

5.) The findings from the present study suggest that the decisions made regarding which lesbian parent would engage in paid work and which parent would take most responsibility for the childcare was based on practicality and personal preference. It was acknowledged that biological and non-biological mothers played different parenting roles in their children's lives however these roles were also found to be derived from the personalities of the parents rather than biology. Furthermore it was found that the biological and non-biological parent had equal roles in parenting although the non-biological (step) mothers did perceive their partners to be the primary parent. A possible reason for this could be the lack of a biological link between the non-biological parent and the child. On the other hand it could simply be

that a primary parent is a natural occurrence whether it is in a same-sex family with one biological parent or a heterosexual family with two biological parents.

6.3 Recommendations

The recommendations from the study are as follows:

- The rights of children and non-biological parents should be addressed in Irish law.
- More parenting support groups dedicated to gay and lesbian parents should be planned. Furthermore the needs of parents with children of different ages should be considered.
- Mainstream organisations should consider the needs of children of same-sex parents or new divisions in existing LGBT organisations set up for these children.
- Pre-service and in-service training of education personnel on issues such as equality inclusion and homophobic bullying.
- Further research examining the lived experiences of same-sex parents and their children, particularly in Ireland, would enhance understanding of their experiences. Due to the small sample size of the present study it is recommended that a study with a wider sample should be conducted nationwide. It is also recommended that this further study include an in-depth examination of gay parents and their children's experiences, as there is a limited amount of international and Irish research on gay-parented families.
- There is the need for more child-centred research, considering the point of view of children from same-sex families and what they identify to be important issues therefore moving away from research that is guided by adult concerns.
- The next nationwide census should have provision for recording gay/lesbian civil partnerships and other information normally required of heterosexual parented families that will give this section of Irish society the same benefits that emanate to others from censuses.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Table of Participants

Parents

	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3
Name	Mary	Lynn	Niamh
Biological or Non-Biological Mother	Biological mother	Non-biological mother, step-parent	Non-biological mother, step-parent
Number of Children	2	2	1
Age of Child/ren	21 and 25	15 and 20	3
Sex of the Children	Male	Female	Male
Family Situation	The children were conceived through donor insemination in the context of a pre-existing lesbian relationship	Has been with her partner for the last eight and a half years and she is involved in the parenting of her two children from a previous relationship. The children's father is actively involved in their lives	Has been with her partner for one and a half years and they parent her child together. Her partner is also involved in a co-parenting situation with a gay man
Family Type	Planned lesbian family	Lesbian-parented step-family	Lesbian-parented step-family

Adult Children with Lesbian Parents

	Interview 4	Interview 5
Name	Emma	James
Age	18	25
Sex	Female	Male
Stage in Education	Currently attending secondary school	Currently attending University
Family Situation	Her biological mother separated from her father when she was three years old, she subsequently started a lesbian relationship where they have parented together since. Her father is not actively involved in her life	This participant is the oldest son of participant 1
Family Type	Lesbian-parented step-family	Planned lesbian family

Appendix B: Sample Interview Guide

These questions were used to guide the semi-structured interviews with the lesbian parents.

Background Information

How many children do you have?

What are the age/s of your child/ren?

Can you tell me a bit about your family situation? (How you and your partner met, how you had the children)

How long have you and your partner been together?

Extended Family

What have been the reactions and attitudes from extended family and friends in relation to your family situation?

Is your extended family involved closely with your life and that of your family?

How have the attitudes of your extended family had an impact on you and your family?

Do you think that your family's acceptance of your sexuality changed in any way once you had children?

Do you think that your family has shown you the same amount of support that they would give if you were a heterosexual family?

Is your extended family 'out' to the wider community that you have a family?

Legal Situation in Ireland

What are your feelings on same-sex couples having the right to marry like heterosexual couples and what implications do you think it would have for you and your children?

What are your concerns about the lack of protection of your family type in relation to legislation in Ireland, in particular the lack of recognition of children?

What worries does your family have in relation to the non-biological mother having no legal relationship with their children?

Would you and your partner ever consider having a civil partnership and what are the reasons for your decision?

Did you ever consider moving to a less conservative country due to the lack of protection and rights that your family would have here or the worry of being discriminated against?

Stigma/Discrimination

Do you feel that you have ever been discriminated against or victimised due to your family formation if so could you describe such an incident for me?

Have you ever experienced any discriminatory attitudes in relation to medical matters?

Do you feel that there is stigma surrounding being a lesbian parent from heterosexual society?

Have you experienced stigma for being a lesbian and being a parent from the LGBT community?

Do you feel that your family type is not represented in a social aspect like in the media (for example on TV) and how do you think this has an effect on your family?

‘Coming out’ for Parents and Children

How did you and your family deal with the issues of ‘coming out’ as a lesbian family?

What do you think is the importance of being ‘out’ for your family?

Do you feel that it is important to be out at all times or just when necessary?

Do you feel that it is important for the child to have control over who knows and does not know that they come from a lesbian family?

Did you or your children feel any worries or fears in ‘coming out’ as a lesbian family?

School

Did you have any difficulty in finding appropriate school for your children to attend?

What type of school did/do your children go to?

Did they or you experience any problems with schools?

Has your child experienced bullying or teasing at school for having lesbian parents?

Where there any other same-sex families in the school that your children attended?

Having Children

Did you have any concerns/doubts about becoming a parent in a lesbian family?

Do you feel that there is a greater need or more pressure to prove yourself as a lesbian parent compared with heterosexual parents?

What have been the benefits of raising children outside of the heterosexual model in your opinion?

Issues for Non-Biological Mother

Do you believe that there are any differences between the biological and non-biological mother in your family in relation to the interactions with your children?

Do you think that the non-biological mother is seen by society as having a lesser role in relation to parenting?

What were the deciding factors when dividing the roles of caring for the children and working to provide an income between you?

Support

What have been sources of support for you in relation to parenting?

Do you find that LGBT organisations are good sources of support for same-sex couples who start a family?

Did you seek or receive any support from any 'main stream' support groups or organisations?

Other

What would you say to someone who says that a child needs a mother and a father?

Was there a conscious decision made that the children in your family have male role models?

If religion plays a part in your life does being a part of a lesbian family affect it in any way?

End Questions

What do you think are the most prevalent issues that face same-sex parents in Ireland?

What does it mean to you as a lesbian to have children?

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Appendix C: Consent Form

Dear Participant,

During the interview you will be asked a number of questions about your experiences as part of a lesbian family. The interview will last about an hour and a digital recorder will be used as the recording device, the data collected in the interview will then be transcribed. Any information disclosed will be confidential unless you reveal issues which I am obligated to report by law such as child protection issues. Quotes may be used in the final text however no information will be given that would disclose your identity as a study participant.

You can decline to answer any questions and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time if you do not wish to proceed.

Please indicate where appropriate by circling one of these sentences:

I am a parent in a lesbian family/ I am an adult child with lesbian parents.

I confirm that I understand the information in this letter and I agree to take part in the study.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your time,


Aoife Quille

Email contact: _____

Supervisors email contact: _____

Appendix D: Sample Interview

Researcher: Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I am going to _____t off with a few basic questions. How many children do you have?

Participant: 

R: And what are their ages?

P: 

R: And can you tell me a bit about your family situation like how you and your partner met and how you had your children?

P: 

R: What have been the reactions and attitudes from extended family and friends in relation to your family situation?

P: 

[REDACTED]

R: Do you think that your family's acceptance of your sexuality has changed in any ways since you had children?

P: [REDACTED]

R: And do you think that your family has shown you the same amount of support that they would have shown you if you were a heterosexual family?

P: [REDACTED]

R: So it would be more the marriage issue than the...

P: [REDACTED]

R: So is your extended family 'out' to the wider community that you have a family?

P: [REDACTED]

R: I know you touched on it there but what are your feelings on same-sex couples having the right to marry like heterosexual couples and what implications do you think it would have for you and your children?

P: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

R: Would you and your partner ever consider having a civil partnership and what are the reasons for your decision?

P: [REDACTED]

R: And if you did that, got married in another country, would you get the rights then?

P: [REDACTED]

R: Oh OK. What worries does your family have in relation to the non-biological mother having no legal relationship with their children?

P: [REDACTED]

R: Yeah

P: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

R: Do you feel that you have ever been discriminated against or victimised due to you family formation and if so could you describe an incident?

P: [REDACTED]

R: Have you experienced any discriminatory attitudes in relation to medical matters?

P: [REDACTED].

R: OK

P: [REDACTED]

R: And did you choose that school particularly because it was liberal?

P: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

R: Do you think that there is a stigma surrounding being a lesbian parent from the heterosexual society?

P: [REDACTED]

R: And do you think that there is a stigma for being a parent from the LGBT community?

P: [REDACTED]

R: OK, do you feel that your family type is not represented in a social aspect like in the media and do you think that it has any impact on the children?

P: [REDACTED]

R: How did you and your family deal with the issues of 'coming out' as a lesbian family?

P: [REDACTED]

R: So would you say that it is quite important as a family to be 'out'?

P: 

R: Do you think that it is important for the child to have control over who knows and who does not know?

P: 

P: 

R: Do you feel that there is a greater need or more pressure to prove yourself as a lesbian parent compared with heterosexual parents?

P: 

[REDACTED]

R: What have been the benefits of raising children outside of the heterosexual model in your opinion?

P: [REDACTED]

R: Do you believe that there are any differences between the biological and non-biological mother in your family in relation to the interactions with your children?

P: [REDACTED]

R: Do you think that the non-biological mother is seen by society as having a lesser role in relation to parenting?

P: [REDACTED]

R: What were the deciding factors when dividing the roles of caring for the children and working to provide and income between you?

P: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

R: What have been sources of support for you in relation to parenting?

P: [REDACTED]

R: Do you find that LGBT organisations are good sources of support for same-sex couples who have a family?

P: [REDACTED]

R: Did you seek any support from any 'main stream' support groups or organisations?

P: [REDACTED].

R: What would you say to someone who says that a child needs a mother and a father?

P: [REDACTED]

R: Was there a conscious decision made that the children in your family have male role models?

P:

[REDACTED]

R: If religion plays a part in your life does being part of a lesbian family affect it in any way?

P:

[REDACTED]

R: Finally then what does it mean to you as a lesbian to have children?

P:

[REDACTED]

R: Is there anything that you would like to add to that?

P:

[REDACTED]

R: Thank you for your time.

P:

[REDACTED]

Appendix E: Sample Data Analysis

Sources of Support for Lesbian Parents and their Children

Family Support

“Whatever their (her parents) reaction was, it was always favourable” (Mary)

“My extended family were delighted in some ways because they have always known that I have wanted to have children and you know it looked like it wasn’t happening... so my family were really happy that here I was going to have children in my life” (Lynn)

“Very welcoming, our family has just accepted us from the beginning but then again I don’t know what my Mam went through because I was only young” (Emma)

“I suppose the extended family has been mostly positive, I think... but it’s difficult to tell when it was so long ago” (James)

“Yeah I don’t think that my Dad understands it really, he has a real old school train of thought but it wasn’t a real issue” (Niamh)

“I think that my grandmother might have had a bit of a hard time with it at first because she is from a generation where that was just never talked about or anything” (Emma)

“My grandfather was alive at that point and he would have been about 94 or 95 and even he, he said something to my mum about ‘silly girl’ or something like that but when we arrived with [child’s name] aged 6 weeks he was lovely, he was wonderful” (Mary)

“It was never really talked about in the open but she was still fine with me when I came and in fact she kind of knew to call me her adopted daughter and then when the kids, when [child’s name] came along she was grand, she and Bernie went to India together when I was pregnant so she obviously, she knew about the pregnancy, I know, and she was fine about that, although probably thought we were a bit foolish” (Mary)

“She [non-biological grandmother] was the kid’s grandmother... she really was the primary grandparent” (Mary)

“Like my mother she sees him as a grandson” (Niamh)

“But I think her [non-biological mother] mother took a while to come around to it and to except us as her grandkids so I suppose that was because the biology wasn’t there in her mind I think initially it was always oh isn’t [parents name] being nice helping out this women with her kids but eventually she came around to it and she was always our Granny but it took a couple of years but it was oh these are my grandkids as well” (James)

“It was more an issue of the poor kids are they going to be alright sort of thing and what’s it going to do to them and isn’t it selfish, if there was any negativity, I would of thought” (Mary)

“When he [biological father] first heard about it, like I was still only 3 but I think I remember years of [Non-biological mother’s name] just getting an awful time off my Dad.. I think that the only problem that [Non-biological mother’s name] has had with it is my Dad” (Emma)

“But the first time that we came, no, must have been a couple of times in fact, (child’s name) was about 5 or 6 months old and he was, you know the way babies start making sounds and they go “bababa” and she would start saying things like “oh dadada where’s your Dada oh you poor little thing”.... And so we started to get a bit pissed off... and [partners name] had a feeling that she was kind of presenting us to the neighbours as in, this is my daughter and this is, she is being so good to this single parent and her child ” (Mary)

“Basically we said we are not going to come home and stay with you any more if you are going to act like this, until you can act properly to the child we are not going to do it... so after about 4 or 5 months of that she accepted us” (Mary)

“My mother interestingly enough was like “do you know what you’re taking on?” and she would say things like “never get involved with a family with children” you know it’s a big responsibility so she was kind of like in a warning phase but I don’t know whether, like it wasn’t in a negative way” (Lynn)

“When I said that my girlfriend had a kid or whatever she [her mother] said like what if you get attached to the kid what if it gets attached to you what happens if things break up” (Niamh)

“They [the children] support each other now at this stage, like we support them as well to some degree and they are able to support us” (Mary)

“Well we talk about it a lot, [partners name] and I talk about it a lot, so that’s been very good, we have a good honest relationship where I can tell her ‘they’re driving me mad’ and she has been very good... and she would check in with me and make sure that I wasn’t completely struggling with it” (Lynn)

“I guess I have me and [partner’s name] has some other people and I only have [partner’s name] and its hard though when I want to discuss something with [partner’s name] that she might take offence if she can’t see outside the...you know role of parent so that can be difficult so yeah I pretty much talk to myself” (Niamh)

“Over my entire life I’d say my parents, they are a very good they have been very supportive in a lot that I have done, I have been lucky, I have done fairly well in life so far but even when I have tripped up they supported me all the way” (James)

“They don’t really recognise us as a family unit at all, some of her family do but a big section of them don’t” (Niamh)

“Yeah, some of [partner’s name] family they probably don’t refer to me, it’s just [partner’s name] and [child’s name] but for like her grandmother and her father yeah they do recognise yeah” (Niamh)

“It’s OK as long she doesn’t bring me along to family events which is why they have fallen out” (Niamh)

Friend Support

“Our friends would have been the major support... I mean you would have had friends who would have babysat” (Mary)

“They [her friends] are just constantly, constantly supporting me about it and its even getting to the point that I don’t even need it they are kind of like ‘[Participant’s name] this is great and everything’ and yeah I know its fine you don’t have to keep saying it like but if they stopped that I think I’d be really upset so I am just really happy that they are so supportive” (Emma)

“I would have used my friends I always use my friends for support” (James)

LGBT Community Support

“I mean as a family we have nothing but support and coming to Ireland, well in fact in London as well, really our extended family was the lesbian community in London and the lesbian and gay community in Ireland so it’s like the kid’s have a load of aunties and uncles in the lesbian community and the lesbian and gay community and we have always said to them if you are ever in trouble in a city go to the nearest gay bar and say “my mothers are lesbians, help me!” (Mary)

“Like I think they should call [area] like [area] gay it’s just like ridiculous we just have like so many neighbours and they is just like so much gay in one area I can’t even take it any more so I think that they are very supportive, we have one in particular our neighbours across the road from us are these two gay men and they are just the campest people you could possibly think of and they are like my Dad’s the two of them like I would see them both as my Dad” (Emma)

“Oh yeah, definitely, we have received support from [organisation] as I mentioned, that on a personal level from the individuals because Bern was part of [organisation] and she sang for [organisation] for years and she also chaired it, she was on the committee and we got some incredible friends from that, people who I feel really close to as well, they are just the loveliest people and we see them as surrogate aunties and uncles and they have been incredible role models for us as well and such fun people so we have got support from [organisation]” (James)

LGBT Organisation Support

“I think that there are not many, well not with the organisations that I am aware of its not part of their role really in [organisation] it’s a very single issue and we are also involved in the [organisation] which is more of more an activism organisation that is looking for equality across all sorts of areas, education, work, socially and [organisation], all those sorts of things. [organisation] is also an organisation so those are the three main organisations but they don’t seem to have a role around family, there are other small organisations that people get involved in, there seems to be quite a lot of women who have had children in the last while and they have formed groups of their own, I am not aware of them but I do know that there are a few. So of the main ones that you would be aware of I don’t think that they have a role” (Lynn)

“I went to a gay parents group that has been recently set up, there have been groups set up before but they never amounted to much in the outhouse and they kind of split the group into different sections... but they kind of want to discuss everything and anything so you can’t really build or form any relationships but I just wanted to meet other parents and maybe even go on a play date with our kid because we don’t have friends with kids and we certainly don’t have gay friends with kids it’s been hard trying to build those like [organisation] is a website that you can use you can create an event and invite people and hope that they come you can facilitate it but ultimately it hasn’t really amounted to anything they also I don’t really relate to a lot of the other gay parents I guess I’m different I don’t know I am a lot younger than some of them as well even at 26 you know I also look a lot younger, I am punky and political hhhmm yeah its difficult” (Niamh)

“Yeah [organisation] that’s pretty much it I don’t think we have actually gone looking for anything we just kind of potter along I don’t think that there is any need for any extra support so it’s there I guess if we do need it but I mean but at this stage we are all really use to it it’s just the way it is now so I don’t think we need any more and like I said my family is just like oozing with support so I think we are just fine, yeah” (Emma)

“We have got support from organisations like [organisation] who they were the first ones to get us in touch with the documentary makers and they got us involved in a lot of media work and they trained us a bit in it as well and just keeping us involved in it as well you know and just keeping us feeling like we are wanted and needed and [organisation] have been great as well, they were the ones that set up the research with interviewed children of lesbian and gay couples and then I have spoken at one of their conferences and at a fundraising dinner as well so they are the sort of the main ones really and they have been just great, I suppose it is because we are a public family and we are willing to go on the record and some people are less keen you know but that’s their choice” (James)

Dealing with Disclosure of their Family Type to Others for Lesbian Parents and their Children

Importance of Being ‘Out’

“Couldn’t be any other way, I think it would be a terribly negative thing for children, I think if your parents were denying who they were or if there was secret things going on about a relationship or the nature of a relationship the children would have to bear the burden of that and it would be a terrible thing to have to do to kids like if you were getting children to be complicit in a lie... that would be a very wrong thing to do to the kids and I suppose it would be the wrong thing to do for yourself, to deny who you are” (Lynn)

“I think that it is very important that we don’t hide who we are, to give [child’s name] the sense of shame... I think to hide it or to not be open about it as a family would give him the idea that, not to be comfortable with it and we are never going to change the boundaries of the way people think if some people don’t stand out and be seen” (Niamh)

“I think that it is important to say how it is rather than just being ashamed of it and going oh I am just going to ignore that and hope that it goes away because that’s not fair on anyone, it’s not fair on me, it’s not fair on the person it’s not fair on my Mam and [Non-biological mother’s name] so I think that’s important to kind of be like this is my family and that’s that” (Emma)

“Well the importance for us is that we are an open and honest and public family like, we are a very public family because we have done so much stuff so much media work... I think our openness and honesty has allowed us to do that and not represent but to make the issue wider known and I think it has been a really important part for us... so it is important for us to be open so that we can do that really” (James)

“We are never going to change the boundaries of the way people think if some people don’t stand out and be seen” (Niamh)

Disclosure for Lesbian Parents

“I guess I would have been very open anyways, I tend to be a very open person... so I tend to be a person who’s just quite straight forward and just says stuff. Now usually I get, always I get a good response, so that why I guess that’s why I continue doing that so I think in a sense I have properly influenced our family a bit in that way... but generally speaking because of those things I suppose we would of been fairly out there, we would of never have denied it to anyone asking and we would of usually said it before they asked” (Mary)

“Well [partner’s name] had to deal with that herself, I wasn’t around for that” (Niamh)

“[Partners name] was already out by the time we got together, she was well out... so they were very much an out family and I was out and would have been for several years so we would have been out separately so when we got together we didn’t really have to do any outing” (Lynn)

“On official forms [partners name] won’t fill in that she is gay because she does think that she is discriminated against” (Niamh)

“I would always tell the school when I first went wherever the kids go, were going, I would tell them straight up that they had two mothers, two parents, and these are the two parents, and you are to let them go with her as much as you are to let them go with me” (Mary)

“Well we didn’t necessarily tell them, it wasn’t relevant for them to know” (Niamh)

“I think that we are going to have to [tell the school] because when they ask who lives at home and you know kids talk and they will be like my mum and dad sleep in the same bed well my mum and [participants name] sleep in the same bed or where is your Daddy, my Daddy lives in his house with [biological father] you know people like be like hhhhmmm, we shouldn’t have to say but we shouldn’t put people in an unprepared position where they have to deal with those questions you know” (Niamh)

“When she filled in the forms she just wrote that she was a single parent and that she is the Mum, like you know Mum and Dad or relationship status or whatever she just put down single Catholic mother” (Niamh)

“I am pretty sure there were no big issues because from day one they his [parents] went in and said this is who we are we are the parents of this child and we are both the parents of this child” (James)

Disclosure for Adult Children

“I dealt with it differently throughout my life, back when I was in England it was always very open very honest, everyone really knew because I was a young kid it was difficult to, I hadn’t realised at that stage that my parents weren’t like every other family. In Ireland initially it was very open, very honest, my brother and I were in the same school, everyone knew, kids were still at the age that they think that everything is just normal you know the craziest things are just a regular family” (James)

“When I was in primary school I would tell a few people and I think that other people kind of copped on to it was like two women in the play ground picking me up from school it’s like people aren’t stupid” (Emma)

“When I got to secondary school, because it was moving to a small school of about 100 people to a larger school of about 600 people... and dealing with that, with the coming out area of that in the first secondary school was more difficult it was a large group of people, I became a bit more private I was a teenager I wasn’t too keen on people knowing my business, I told people as I got to know them it was more of a private affair” (James)

“It was years later when I was in 5th year and from primary school to 5th year that was the first time I had said it since primary school” (Emma)

“It was on live television in front of like thousands of people and so it was a huge deal for me and I am so glad that I did it because now everyone knows and I don’t have to keep going through the same old thing” (Emma)

“Then university came along and I just kind of told everyone because it was university and by that stage I just didn’t care at all who knew now I tell people who need to know I tell people who want to know, if people ask questions about my parents I’ll say I have two mum’s” (James)

“It’s more difficult to hide it when I make such a public showing of it because I do blog about it and I tweet about it and I write about it and I appear on TV about it” (James)

“I don’t know if I am at work here then I am more guarded about it because they are working here to so it is more of a professional thing it is their business if they want to tell people then that’s fine but because people are idiots sometimes and I think it is more of a challenge when its business and work and you don’t want people being idiots but for social point of view I just tell anyone” (James)

Appendix F: Data Analysis of Further Themes

Parenting Issues

Parenting Pressures

“One of my concerns was what if things didn’t work out what would I do then you know what I mean and then I had all the same things as a straight person would like am I going to be a good parent am I going to be able to cope” (Niamh)

“I think that the pressure was there but it was from inside me look I was a nurse, I was a children’s nurse, I was a nanny, I worked in a nursery I worked with older kids with drug problems and I cant look after my own kids, it was in my head it wasn’t from other people” (Mary)

“I suppose I have always thought oh god what if the kids turn out horrible and what are people going to think of us and of lesbian parenting you know and I suppose I would of always a bit of a pressure to be coping with it and to be doing it OK” (Mary)

“I think that I am just blessed that they are so good and I am very proud of them and I feel so lucky that are so great because it reflects well on everybody even though it is them that is so fantastic so I don’t know what it would be like to have difficult kids like if they were really troublesome or if they had addiction problems or any of that kind of stuff we are just lucky they are who they are you know” (Lynn)

“Absolutely, there is one issue, which is bad to say, we don’t mind if he is gay but we would rather he wasn’t because it is a reflection on us as parents too, you know ‘gay parents must raise a gay child’... it’s but bad we don’t want people to say well of course he was going to be gay, feed into their ignorance” (Niamh)

Possible Benefits for Children

“Well we think that well hopefully we have brought them up to love women as well... I think that they are lucky in that we brought them up to teach them that women can do everything literary that you don’t need a man around to do stuff and also that men can do anything” (Mary)

“They have had a very broad upbringing, there is a very diverse group of friends that we have, they have a huge amount of interaction in their lives... they are very sociable and I think that has been really good for them and they haven’t been brought up with particular views as well they have been brought up with a very broad view and I think that that’s been very important” (Lynn)

“Being able to have the line of communication open not restrict how you express your feelings things like that, general things that men in our society are not permitted to do its not necessarily acceptable to be affectionate or huggy or to talk about how they feel” (Niamh)

“I think definitely our household wouldn’t be emotionally stifled like we would all sit down and if something is bothering us rather than bottling it up and then getting angry we talk about it” (Emma)

“Directly I don’t know if there are many benefits I mean as a guy raised by women I am more emotionally aware or something but then again as a guy if I was raised by gay parents would that make me less emotionally aware?... I don’t know if there has been any direct benefits by me being raised by a same-sex couple to be honest, I could take that a part though and say that the fact that their personalities are quite open and they are very liberal as well but that’s not really because they are a same-sex couple and I have had great role models and some incredible times and great support from the general community that they are a part of because they are a same-sex couple... yeah I don’t know if there are benefits of having same-sex parents it would be a nice policy if I was to advocate though ‘all lesbians should be mum’s” (James)

Gender Roles

“For the two of us it’s given us the opportunity to be all round parents to try and encapsulate the role of mother and father all in one for both of us, now we would of taken different roles within that and looking at the different roles we would of changed them at different times as well... in defence because we are both women we could be flexible in that way and we could change our roles um there would have been times when [Partner’s name] would have done relating to the kids and I would of done less relating to the kids... so I think because we are not one gender or the other kind of thing” (Mary)

“Yeah whichever way we want, which is lovely from the point of view of knowing that there is a person that is going to pick up the bits that you drop, um if you are too busy or whatever if your roles change but also being able to experience both sexes and like I, I, I like doing practical physical hands on things” (Mary)

“I guess we don’t inflict gender roles I guess is the main thing you know that there are not natural presumptions that there is women’s work and there is men’s work... so I guess he won’t have any of those pre ideas that women stay in the house and that men go out to work or men fix men things around the house or that women sew or you know there are no gender orientated roles everybody does everything that’s the way it is” (Niamh)

“His Dad is a chef as well so his Dad does cooking for a living me and his Mum do the cooking, cleaning, the DIY you know there is no gender roles” (Niamh)

Views/ perceptions held by society

Gay Parents Raise Gay Children

“People use to say are u worried that they would grow up gay and we are like no we are teaching them to love women there is more of a chance that they will turn out straight but then it is like where does sexuality come into it surely there is a chance

that they might be gay well OK but at least they will be gay men that love women”
(Mary)

“They [newspaper] rang me to interview me and he was really needling away and asking if the kids were straight and I was saying well yeah they are but if they were it wouldn’t matter and if they weren’t it would matter either and anyways the headline the next day was “just because we are lesbian doesn’t mean that ours kids are” and that was the headline and I thought that is not nice like it was really, the kids were absolutely outrage, it was terrible” (Lynn)

“Well people do say when you are a gay parent people kind of do like they presume that our kid is going to be gay is a big one and especially because his Dad is also gay” (Niamh)

“Absolutely, there is one issue, which is bad to say, we don’t mind if he is gay but we would rather he wasn’t because it is a reflection on us as parents too, you know ‘gay parents must raise a gay child’... it’s but bad we don’t want people to say well of course he was going to be gay, feed into their ignorance” (Niamh)

“Just because I am raised by two women does not mean that I am like a freak of nature or I am raised to be gay. That is just ridiculous conception of people thinking that I just can’t get over that. Like what about then heterosexual parents then who have gay children like they didn’t raise them to be straight and fail or they didn’t raise them to be gay its just ridiculous I just cant get over that so I think that it is important like I am straight so I think its important for people to see that she hasn’t been raised to be gay I just think that is ridiculous” (Emma)

“People might have seen because I don’t have a father there were issues of sexuality”
(James)

A Child Needs a Father

“The rational kind of explanation to that statement is that they need a role model”
(Mary)

“I think that there are different types of family, yes the child needs love and affection and parenting figures but I think that there are lots of different types of family and we need to acknowledge that I don’t think that they are disadvantaged because they lose a parent or because they have one parent or two parents or three parents” (Lynn)

“How many kids do you know that are being raised by their mother and father and actually live together in this society anymore they are like I see my daddy on the weekend I see my daddy, that’s all pretty normal it’s become the norm it’s sad but it has, or my mum’s boyfriend is bringing me wherever” (Niamh)

“What if the father figure is violent and horrible I think I would any day pick two mothers who are caring, supportive and loving then just to have a Dad who is just like a big black cloud over the room and I think that I would definitely not be the person that I am now if my Mam and Dad stayed together... so those people who say that they need to kind of educate themselves just because somebody does not have a Dad

does NOT mean they are any worse off... I think that if there are two people who care about that child and love that child as their own and you know my Mam I am her child but I am also [name of non-biological mother]'s child, I don't think that it matters what the unit is or what makes up the family once there is a loving family I don't think that it matters at all" (Emma)

"I fundamentally disagree, I think that they it's a myth but it is founded in a little bit of reality, people need male and female role models and you can do perfectly fine without either a mother or a father... people get raised by single parents all the time. As long as there are strong role models both male and female they will be fine, it is the exact same with same-sex families, if it is a couple that are both gay men then they need to have strong female role models and a couple whose both lesbian women they need to have strong male role models you always need to have that because there is no doubt about that and no one has ever tried to deny that. But you don't need to have a father figure you really don't its absolute rubbish and all the literature says the same" (James)

Children Need of a Male Role Model

"In our family their Dad is very involved so they see themselves as having three parents but also we have lots of friends who would be in and out of their lives who would take time to talk to them so they have a lot of male figures that they would look up to and respect and a lot of female figures within their extended family and amongst our friends so they have lots of influences but they have the primary one of their own father" (Lynn)

"No there wasn't... like he [biological father] was going to be involved he was always going to be able to see his son his son was always going to know who he was... I don't think she worried about male role models her brother and all that are around and so yeah he would have had some men in his life" (Niamh)

"I don't think that there was a conscious decision I think that my Mam just kind of knew that we have an extraordinary family and that she always knew that there would be [male role models] and also I think that she also just presumed that my Dad would be in my life... I don't think that she ever said we are going to move to a place where there is men who are going to look after us and whatever. I think that she just knew that there would always be people there and I am really close to my Granddad, both of them and so I think it was known that there were going to be people there for me and I probably have enough male role models to last me a life time so I think that she pretty much knew that was going to happen" (Emma)

"Yes, absolutely, from the start, most definitely, like [parents name] was a social worker in London so she has seen how families can go and [parents name] is just, she was a nurse and they both knew from the get go that you have to have both male role models and female role models and they also weren't arrogant enough to pretend that they would be the ideal role model. They have provided plenty of other ones there was a definitely a conscious decision to provide male and female role models, definitely yeah" (James)

“No, no, I wouldn’t, because I would believe in human role models rather than male role models, but it just happened and I am glad that it happened. Now they happened to be mainly gay men but they have seen the full spectrum from um someone called Sissy to the biggest male you know so they have seen the full spectrum of masculinity”
(Mary)