

**Disruptive (M)Others:  
Lesbian parenting in Sweden and Ireland**

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## ABSTRACT

A growing number of lesbian women are choosing to have children within the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle. This dissertation research represents a departure from much previous work in this area, with a shift in focus from children of lesbian and gay parents in the UK or North America, to an exploration of the perspectives and experiences of lesbian parents themselves within two particular European contexts. Interviews were carried out with 68 lesbian women in Sweden and Ireland. The role of social and institutional contexts in shaping these women's parenting possibilities, choices and experiences were explored. An important finding of the study concerns cross-national differences in discourses of fatherhood and parenting. Swedish women were far more likely to choose an involved donor than Irish women. The differing possibilities and strategies available to lesbian women illustrate wider assumptions about gender and 'the family'. An examination of the significance of the genetic 'tie' found that heteronormative constructions of biology were both displaced and retained in families with co-parents. The lack of legal recognition of co-parents amounted to a difference in social validation as a parent that was negotiated in diverse ways. The study also explored the concept of gender flexibility among lesbian parents. Participants in this research demonstrated a relative absence of dichotomous gender roles, resulting in a division of labour largely characterised by equality between partners. The reinscription of discourses of gender and kinship by lesbian parents highlights the centrality of symbols such as biology, at the same time that lesbian parents may reconstruct such discourses, creating points of rupture in heteronormative relations. Finally, the study reveals the heteronormative assumptions of the Swedish and Irish welfare states, which lead to these families' efforts to resist socially exclusionary practices in contexts where they are perceived as outside the norm.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Legislative provisions increasingly recognise the proliferation of different family forms. Changes to kinship formation in Western society in recent decades are reflected in the diversity of living arrangements and fertility patterns and have been accompanied by significant advances in terms of both women's rights and lesbian, gay and bisexual rights. The separation of sexuality and reproduction has influenced reproductive decision-making among lesbian women, for whom a lesbian identity and motherhood may no longer appear incompatible. Although lesbians have always been parents (through previous heterosexual relationships), the increasing number of lesbians who are choosing to embark on parenthood in the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle is clearly a recent demographic development. While the body of research and socio-cultural accounts about lesbian parent families suggests that this is a growing family form, reliable figures are difficult to attain and statistical estimates vary.<sup>1</sup> For example, there are approximately fifty thousand lesbian and gay-headed families in Sweden today (RFSL, 1997). Although this figure highlights the existence of lesbian and gay parent families, it is not known how many of these indicate children born within a heterosexual lifestyle or relationship. Nonetheless, the growing number of socio-cultural accounts, increasing visibility of lesbian parents and limited statistical research to date suggest that although this is a relatively recent development, it is nonetheless a rising demographic trend.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patterson (1998) estimates that there are two to eight million gay- and lesbian-headed families in the United States. A more recent estimate by Patterson and Freil (2000) extrapolates from distributions observed in the US National Health and Social Life Survey. Depending upon the definition of parental sexual orientation employed, Patterson and Freil suggest a current lower limit of 800,000 lesbian and gay parents ages 18-59 with 1.6 million children and an upper limit of 7 million lesbian and gay parents with 14 million children.

<sup>2</sup> A Swedish government survey found that younger generation lesbians and gay men were more likely to consider parenthood as part of their future than their older counterparts (SOU 2001: 10). The authors of the report therefore suggest that this group of parents will continue to increase in number.

This research examines the perspectives of lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland<sup>3</sup> who embark on parenthood in the context of a lesbian lifestyle, or those who fall within the rubric of the lesbian and gay baby boom, also known as the ‘gayby boom’. The impetus for the Swedish/Irish context comparison is rooted in my own biography as a researcher. I am from Ireland and previously lived in Sweden for just over a year in 1996-1997, when I carried out research for my M.Phil. dissertation while based at Stockholm University. During my sojourn in Sweden, I became aware of two distinct differences between Sweden and Ireland in relation to sexual politics, parenting and gender equality. The first was the prominent place of lesbian and gay equality issues in the media and political debate in Sweden, compared to Ireland. Registered partnerships (same sex ‘marriage’) had been introduced in Sweden the previous year and there was a sense of momentum regarding queer equality as a result. Swedish media - including television, radio and newspapers - frequently examined lesbian and gay rights issues.

The second major difference concerned the construction of parenting norms in policy and society. I was frequently struck by the number of Swedish men with prams I noticed in shops, neighbourhoods and on public transport. The dual breadwinner model of parenting and emphasis on participatory fatherhood contrasted with the male breadwinner and female caregiver model traditionally more characteristic of Ireland. Two years later when contemplating lesbian motherhood as a PhD dissertation topic, these images returned to my mind and I became curious about the possible impact of different socio-cultural contexts on lesbian women’s perspectives on kinship and equality. In addition, I discovered that although lesbians had a more visible public presence in Sweden, parenting was more explicitly restricted to heterosexuals, as the registered partnership laws clearly stated that all parenting rights - including adoption and access to new reproductive technologies (NRTs) - were prohibited for lesbian and gay people. Ireland in contrast lacked a comprehensive legal framework that expressly excluded lesbians from access to NRTs and at that time there was one clinic that openly provided its services - including anonymous donor insemination - to

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<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation ‘Ireland’ refers to the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland.

lesbian women. I decided to do comparative research between Sweden and Ireland in order to explore how lesbians were embedded in local contexts where social policy and hegemonic discourses endorsed particular family forms. I became interested in lesbian parents' conceptualisations of notions such as motherhood, gender and kinship and how they negotiated these understandings within particular cultural and policy frameworks.

This research represents an effort to situate lesbian parenting within the social policy and historical contexts of two societies with distinctly different traditions concerning support for women's autonomous households, hegemonic notions of 'the family' and lesbian and gay equality issues. Social policy frameworks and cultural understandings of gender and kinship remain central to lesbian parent experiences. The vast majority of previous research has originated in the US and UK. A study of lesbian parenting in Sweden and Ireland therefore challenges the Anglo-American hegemony of previous research and enables further consideration of the extent to which cultural and policy contexts shape lesbian parent narratives.

### **Queer kinship possibilities and the implications of legal recognition**

The increasing acknowledgement of lesbian and gay partnership and parenting is illustrated in recent legislative changes across Europe. Numerous countries have introduced legally recognised forms of same sex partnerships in recent years: Denmark (1989), Norway (1993), Sweden (1995), France (1999), Germany (2001) and Finland (2002). In addition, in December 2002 the UK government announced its intention to publish proposals for 'civil registration' for lesbian and gay couples. However, despite the expansion in recognition of same sex partnerships, these countries do not extend equal parenting rights to lesbians and gay men. Only the Netherlands and Belgium have made marriage gender neutral, therefore extending all partnership and parenting rights in marriage to same sex couples. The Netherlands had previously introduced partnership recognition for lesbian and gay couples as recently as 1998, while a statutory cohabitation provision was open to same sex couples and unmarried heterosexuals in Belgium from 2000. This rise in efforts to formalise lesbian and gay couple arrangements

has been accompanied by changes in the significance of traditional marriage and the increasing popularity of cohabitation. Attempts to obtain equal rights for lesbian, gay and bisexual people in terms of parenting possibilities have been far more contested than partnership recognition. Most of the countries that have introduced registered partnerships for same sex couples have expressly precluded the option of access to NRTs and adoption by lesbian and gay people, firmly demarcating parenting as the last bastion of heteronormative kinship. Lesbian and gay parenting rights discourse often appears to follow a trajectory whereby partnership rights are achieved first and then parenting becomes the primary terrain for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) activism. The recent move to legal recognition of queer relations raises a number of questions: What are the nascent conceptual suppositions about queer kinship that inform the legal regulation of queer familial relatedness? What foreclosures and possibilities do legislative reforms entail? To what extent do these legislative changes herald new forms of interdiction and constraint? How do they affect the discursive landscape of queer kinship?

In a provocative article, Butler (2002) asks 'is kinship always already heterosexual?' She questions the legitimisation of sexuality and queer relationships through the lens of marriage. Noting the vulnerability of queer subjects who are denied formal recognition in terms of exclusion from the associated rights and benefits typical of marriage - including health care benefits and custody of children - she nonetheless underlines the importance of retaining a sense of queer kinship that exists outside the confines of marriage or civil partnership. She argues that to construe marriage as the only terrain within which to consider queer kinship would potentially pathologise other forms of queer relatedness and render them unthinkable and perhaps even unimaginable, ultimately containing lesbian and gay life within a normative framework: '*The life of sexuality, kinship and community that becomes unthinkable within the terms of these norms constitutes the lost horizon of radical sexual politics, and we find our way 'politically' in the wake of the ungrievable*' (Butler, 2002: 40). This questioning of the possibilities that may be excluded from the terrain of kinship is also applicable to a consideration of lesbian parenting. What are the assumptions informing the regulation of lesbian parent families in the recent turn to legal

frameworks? The legislative response has largely constructed lesbian parent families in accordance with a nuclear family model of two ‘married’ residential parents. This therefore overlooks other potential ways of conceptualising kinship within lesbian parent families – such as the existence of more than two parent figures, either through the involvement of co-parents and donors or through polyamorous relationships.

The ‘Other’ is usually invoked epistemologically as the marker of boundaries, the relational opposite who makes hegemonic categories meaningful. On an empirical level the Other is often understood as a non-normative lifestyle or marginalised identity. Previous research on lesbian parenting that operates within these frameworks often neglects the significance of context. Although partnership recognition, adoption and access to NRTs for LGBT people are increasingly part of the legislative agenda in European countries, there has been less debate about diversity among LGBT parent families. How is for example kinship reimagined by the Other and how is the Other embedded within local contexts? In other words, how are lesbian parents’ subjectivities shaped by cultural underpinnings and how do they as agentic subjects negotiate social policy frameworks in formulating their own visions of kinship?

Relatively little is known about the perspectives, choices and relational frameworks of lesbian parents, as previous research (including that used to inform political debate and social policy) has largely focused on the impact of lesbian and gay parents’ sexuality on their children’s development. While children’s wellbeing should be central to any consideration of intergenerational family change, the overwhelming emphasis on the implications for children has obscured the experiences of lesbian parents. Furthermore, arguments ostensibly advocating ‘the best interests of the child’ have often served as a screen for homophobic rhetoric that is premised on the belief that a heteronormative family form constitutes the only acceptable one.

## An interdisciplinary analysis of lesbian parenting

This research study explores lesbian parents' experiences along three axes of analysis: context, kinship and normativity. The most obvious element of this study that pertains to context is the cross-national comparison. There is a dearth of research on lesbian parent families in diverse national contexts, which restricts understandings of the ways in which their narratives are shaped by specific socio-political concerns. In addition, it overlooks the role of social policy in contributing to women's ability to form autonomous households. Much social policy relating to families is informed by heteronormative assumptions. The differing nature of these assumptions in these two countries highlights wider understandings of 'the family'. A cross-national exploration of lesbian parent experience highlights the role of the state in mediating women's economic status and ability to access medical services - such as assisted conception - and kinship possibilities including second parent adoption, or the formal legal recognition of co-parents. However, context refers not only to the cross-cultural dimension of the study in terms of country of residence, but incorporates broader concerns about the significance of place and space. Thus, the exclusion of lesbian parents from specific service providers and their experiences of particular spaces - such as hospitals and schools - are a recurring analytic theme. A contextualised approach to lesbian parenting enables a fuller and more nuanced interpretation of their narratives and experiences.

The second analytical theme explored in this dissertation is that of kinship, or the relational choices and possibilities of lesbian parents. Contemporary research on families often examines the ways in which individuals are continually constructing and reconstructing their intimate relationships. More recently, the role of state legislation in regulating intimate relationships has also been an area of interest. New reproductive technologies and the separation of sexuality and child-bearing facilitated by increased reproductive control potentially render a tectonic shift in our understandings of the role of motherhood in women's lives. Participants in this study are clearly involved in the creation of new family forms, raising interesting questions about the changing nature of familial relatedness and broader interpretations of categories such as 'mother/parent' in

contemporary society. This research addresses the kinship discourses and relational matrices of lesbian parents.

A concern with Otherness and normativity constitutes the third axis of analysis throughout this dissertation. Much theoretical and empirical work on lesbian parents explores the extent to which they are similar to or different from heterosexual parents, particularly in research concerned with the impact of their sexuality on their children. Such research is informed by political context and is often an effort to respond to homophobic assertions that construct a lesbian or gay identity as incompatible with effective parenting. Research emphasising the similarity or normative behaviour of the children of lesbian parents compared to those raised by heterosexual parents has played an important role in improving the situation for lesbian parents in custody disputes with ex-husbands for example and has paved the way for legislative provisions supportive of lesbian and gay parenting. More recent work examines the possibility of lesbian parent families manifesting positive differences, compared to their heterosexual counterparts. For example, it has been argued that lesbian parents may be differentially situated in terms of negotiating traditional inequalities associated with gender such as in the division of domestic labour. Thus, it is suggested that the relative absence of dichotomous gender roles enables a more creative approach to areas of potential inequality, facilitating more egalitarian outcomes (Dunne, 1998a).

Queer theory has traditionally celebrated subversive practices. Another dimension of sameness/difference in work on lesbian parenting concerns the ways in which lesbian parents either assimilate or transform heteronormative discourses. This research represents an effort to disrupt the binary polarity in discussions of sameness/difference and assimilation/transformation and explore the interpretive frameworks of lesbian parent experience. In addition, this study takes an intersectional theoretical approach to lesbian parents as gendered sexual subjects, grounded in particular localities. By comparing Irish and Swedish participants, lesbian parents' subjectivities become central to the analysis, rather than comparing their experiences to an implicit heterosexual model. The

comparative analysis also allows for the possibility of specific contexts shaping lesbian parent subjectivities in myriad and complex ways.

In order to address the wide-ranging nature of issues pertaining to context, kinship and normativity, this dissertation engages with literature from a range of disciplines - feminist theory, queer theory, geography, anthropology, sociology and psychology - as part of an interdisciplinary analysis of lesbian parenting. A number of aspects of lesbian parent experience are explored, including reproductive decision-making, the implications of lack of legal recognition for co-parents, the role of biology in mediating kinship, experiences of social and institutional contexts, and gendered understandings of the everyday practices of parenting.

### **Trajectory of thesis**

Theoretical debates and previous empirical research on lesbian parenting have largely been concerned with notions of sameness/difference and the extent to which lesbian parents either transgress or are assimilated into heteronormative modalities. In this dissertation the binary oppositions within this framework are deconstructed and the complex ways in which lesbian parents may strategically subvert or ostensibly reinforce heteronormative discourses are explored. Lesbian parents' agency and negotiation of largely unsupportive contexts are emphasised. The first four chapters set the theoretical and comparative context for the research, followed by four empirical chapters and finally a concluding discussion.

The next chapter examines the connections between feminist theory and queer theory, arguing that lesbian motherhood provides an opportunity for an intersectional queer feminist analysis, in which lesbian mothers' narratives are analysed with reference to their situatedness as gendered and sexual subjects. Feminist theoretical work on motherhood and previous research on lesbian parenting are also outlined.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the comparative context. The significance of sexuality to social policy and vice versa has been largely

overlooked in welfare state analysis. In this chapter, participants' experiences are contextualised within the Swedish and Irish welfare state through an examination of the relative support (or lack thereof) for women's autonomous households and lesbian equality issues. The heteronormative assumptions informing social policy in both countries are examined.

In Chapter Four, the epistemological and ethical questions arising from the research process are explored. An analysis of the methods deployed to locate and recruit participants illustrates the complex ways in which potential participants negotiate different local contexts, particularly in relation to visibility and invisibility as active strategies on the part of lesbian parents. Interviews took place with sixty-eight lesbian participants (forty in Sweden and twenty-eight in Ireland), who were embarking on parenthood in the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle. The larger size of the Swedish sample is an indication of the relative ease with which participants were recruited, compared to Ireland. Irish lesbian parents proved an extremely difficult to recruit population, unlike their Swedish counterparts. The possible reasons for and implications of this reticence on the part of potential Irish participants are explored in relation to ethical considerations in research. The differences encountered between the two national contexts, including particular difficulties in recruitment in Ireland, suggest that the political context for research necessarily informs the researcher's decisions regarding censorship in research.

The next four analytical chapters are concerned with the empirical research findings. Chapter Five examines reproductive decision-making among lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland. The influence of hegemonic constructions of fatherhood and motherhood in the two countries are particularly apparent. Swedish women's emphasis on a known donor reflects the prevalence of a discourse of participatory fatherhood in Sweden, while Irish women's preference for parenting independently of men is illustrative of the genealogy of motherhood in Ireland. The contrasting discourses of fatherhood among Swedish and Irish participants suggest the salience of cultural understandings of kinship to lesbian parents' reproductive choices. The ways in which these normative discourses are also contested and reinvented by participants is explored.

The importance of context to interpretation of lesbian parents' narratives is explored further in Chapter Six, through a spatial analysis of the social and institutional contexts of lesbian parenting in Sweden and Ireland. The significance of three sites of daily interaction to the shaping of lesbian parent identities are examined: healthcare contexts; child-centred spaces, including daycare and schools; and urban and rural landscapes. The experiences of lesbian parents in these everyday contexts reveal the heteronormative construction of these spaces. The chapter explores participants' efforts to negotiate constraints encountered while maintaining their families' integrity. A consideration of these everyday spheres of parenting activities for lesbian mothers contributes a new dimension to the existing literature on gender, sexuality and space, which has been largely concerned with visibility and the commercial scene. Research findings suggest that an exclusive focus on visibility is inappropriate for theoretical analysis of lesbian parenting spaces. In addition, the research challenges metrocentric constructions of the rural as inherently less supportive of sexual dissidents.

The particular difficulties encountered by co-parents are also noted in Chapter Six, where an absence of social and legal recognition influences their negotiations of diverse contexts. The impact of 'biological asymmetry', or the existence of biological and non-biological relationships in lesbian parent families is considered in greater depth in Chapter Seven, through an examination of the significance of biology to participants' understandings of kinship, motherhood and equality. In particular, the vulnerability of co-parents who do not have a biological relationship to children and who therefore lack formal legal recognition as parents, is addressed as a possible power imbalance in couple relationships. The resignificatory possibilities for biology and kinship within these families are also explored.

The possibilities for reinvention and reinscribing of hegemonic discourses are discussed further in Chapter Eight. The salience of concepts of sameness/difference to theoretical debates about lesbian parenting are outlined. These debates have often assessed lesbian parents and their children in relation to

an implicit heteronormative comparator. The binary oppositions inherent in previous categorisations are disrupted with an exploration of the possibility of gender flexibility within these families. This is addressed through an examination of the division of labour and the pedagogical practices of gender in lesbian participant households.

Finally, the concluding chapter outlines the theoretical and social policy implications of research findings and suggests areas for future research. A reconceptualisation of lesbian 'Otherness' is proposed, with an emphasis on lesbian women's embeddedness within particular contexts. The limits of policies and legislative changes that attempt to integrate lesbian parent families within frameworks that are based on the heterosexual nuclear family are highlighted.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Queering Feminism/Gendering Queer: Theorising lesbian motherhood

Feminist theory and queer theory have often been perceived as parallel, rather than overlapping, paradigms. It is frequently assumed that while feminist theory is primarily concerned with gender, queer theory takes sexualities as its central area of critical inquiry. This chapter addresses the interconnections between the two traditions and argues in favour of an integrated queer feminist analysis as a useful theoretical framework in which to interpret lesbian parenting experiences. Feminist writers have noted the dichotomy between sexuality and motherhood in popular representations. While efforts have been made to acknowledge mothers as sexual subjects in feminist theory, this has rarely been inclusive of lesbian mothers. A queer feminist analysis enables an exploration of lesbian parent narratives in which neither gender nor sexuality are sidelined, but rather the potential for the contestation of gender norms by sexual subjects is addressed. In this chapter, the theorising of sexuality within feminist theory and queer theory is outlined, in addition to feminist theories of motherhood and previous research on lesbian parenting.

#### Sex, gender and sexuality in feminist theory

Second wave Anglo-American feminist work was largely grounded in a conceptualisation of sex and gender whereby gender roles were socially constructed and inscribed on the pre-given sexed biological body. While hegemonic understandings regarding the immutability of biological sex were assumed, the role of nature versus nurture in the formation of gender roles was a source of debate. Feminists challenged essentialist patriarchal perspectives that relegated women and their capabilities to a narrow sphere of domestic activities. The form of these challenges ranged from critical interventions claiming an equality of ability between women and men that was thwarted by social norms – including liberal egalitarian and social feminist approaches to gender equality (e.g. Oakley, 1972; Hartmann, 1981), to those who subverted essentialist notions

and argued in favour of women's particular qualities (Brownmiller 1977; Griffin, 1978). Thus, while normative social roles were contested, understandings of the body as a sexually differentiated binary were unquestioningly accepted as biological 'fact'. In accordance with this line of thinking, feminist theories of lesbian sexuality were often based on essentialist understandings of the body.

Rich (1978) attempted to forge analytical and conceptual links between 'lesbian' and 'feminist', thus emphasising lesbians' situation in society as women. She introduced the concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality', which importantly theorised heterosexuality as a social institution, rather than a personal identity. She further posited the concept of a 'lesbian continuum', or range of woman-identified experience. By situating women on a lesbian continuum, she emphasised the benefits to all women of challenging male domination. She claimed that for lesbians, gender, rather than sexuality, constituted the primary axis of identity. However, this broad understanding of lesbianism as a woman-identified perspective, effectively de-sexualised lesbian identity. Rich's arguments further placed a primary value on gender, rather than sexuality as the basis for revolutionary politics. Thus, heterosexual women (as opposed to gay men) were the appropriate political allies of lesbians.<sup>4</sup> An emphasis on gender over all other aspects of identity precluded the possibility of alliance between lesbians and gay men. The latter were perceived as embedded in oppressive patriarchal social relations by virtue of their gender and therefore unable to share lesbian feminists' revolutionary political commitment to challenging those same social relations of power. Sedgwick (1991: 36-37) suggests that this rendering of gender in terms of feminist commitment enabled an anti-homophobic reading of lesbian desire as quintessentially female, while simultaneously marking gay male desire in a homophobic way as archetypally male. However, Rich retracted this aspect of her argument in a footnote upon the republication of her article in 1986. She then acknowledged '*I now think we have much to learn both from the uniquely female aspects of lesbian existence and from the complex "gay" identity*

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<sup>4</sup> A corollary implication suggests that for example Black women had more in common with white women than Black men. Rich cites the work of Black lesbian-feminist critic Lorraine Bethel to support this argument. This position however obscured the significance of 'race' to women's experiences and the complex allegiances between women and men who share marginalised positionalities.

*we share with gay men*'.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, some lesbian feminists continued to view gay men as recipients of the benefits of male power and therefore unworthy of feminist allegiance. They further argued that as gay men do not form partnerships with women, they were likely to be even more antipathetic to 'women's interests' than heterosexual men (e.g. Frye, 1983; Jeffreys, 1996, 2002). Jagose (1996: 51) suggests that '*the representation of gay men as the epitome of patriarchal values has a regrettably homophobic history in feminist theory*'. She points out that some early gay liberationist thought presents an alternate view by suggesting that gay men may in fact find it easier to challenge a system of male domination that they are less vested in. I would argue that both these views - gay men as patriarchal oppressors or as victims of heterosexual male domination - represent partial standpoints rather than the universal truths that previous authors have often suggested. In addition, these perspectives neglect the significance of 'race'/ethnicity and other marginalised identities within hegemonic power relations by failing to acknowledge diversity in positionality across masculinities.

While Rich constructed lesbians primarily as women and downplayed their sexuality, other radical feminist writers developed theories whereby normative heterosexuality constituted the primary locus of women's oppression. According to this perspective, gender and sexuality become interchangeable. Dworkin (1981) and MacKinnon (1982, 1989) targeted pornography in particular as a site of women's oppression and argued that coercive subordination and sexual domination constituted the categories 'woman' and 'man' respectively. All sexuality therefore became relegated to positions of domination and subjugation, which represented the only social meanings of gender within this theoretical framework. This perspective has been soundly critiqued on a variety of grounds. Firstly, feminists have argued against a sexual victimisation model as the only interpretation of women's sexuality. Secondly, this reading of pornography has been challenged. Feminists influenced by a radical sex tradition have supported pornographic images enjoyed by women and have argued in favour of a diversity of sexual practices that actively utilise notions of power and danger in the pursuit

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Jagose (1996: 50).

of pleasure (Califia, 1981; Vance, 1984). Thirdly, the essentialism of Dworkin and MacKinnon's work has been highlighted, whereby all women are victims and all men are oppressors, thus ignoring women's complicity in frameworks of domination and men's vulnerability according to their differential situatedness in terms of for example, 'race', class, age, (dis)ability and sexuality. In particular, the totalising narrative of sexuality whereby these latter facets of identity are marginalised within gender relations has been strongly criticised on the grounds of for example its inherent ethnocentrism and white-centredness. Numerous feminist writers have highlighted the lack of attention to 'race' and ethnicity within radical feminist essentialism (hooks, 1982; Davis, 1982). Furthermore, by taking sexuality as the paradigmatic locus of women's oppression, work such as MacKinnon's ignored other areas of feminist concern, including but certainly not restricted to, equal pay, childcare and equal political representation.

MacKinnon (1982: 515-516) clarified her position when she wrote that '*Sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism*'. In her view, the binary opposites intrinsic to hegemonic gendered power relations resulted from the normative construction of heterosexuality. She further suggested that the terms sex and gender could be used 'relatively interchangeably' (p. 635). Rubin's (1984) work attempts to challenge what she identifies as this 'definitional fusion' (p. 33). In response to the development of radical feminist work (including MacKinnon's), in which sexuality was conceptualised as a product of gender, Rubin (1984) suggested that feminism should be centrally concerned with gender, rather than sexuality, which in her view was more appropriately an 'autonomous' domain (p. 34). She therefore critiqued feminist theories that had conflated gender and sexuality by locating sexuality as the site of women's oppression. Thus, while Rubin was in favour of feminism critically addressing sexual inequalities within the context of gender relations, she argued that minority sexualities such as sadomasochists, prostitutes and LGBT people were best explored within a separate paradigm. Butler (1997) has pointed out that Rubin's work represents an attempt to challenge the foundational categories of feminist work that conflated gender and sexuality. However, Rubin's strategy of separating gender and sexuality to distinct spheres of theoretical focus, has '*taken on implications that could not have been foreseen*' (Butler, 1997: 14). For example, feminism came to

be seen by many as an inappropriate terrain for a critical analysis of sexuality, whereas Rubin's point was rather that it was neither the only nor always the most appropriate location for a critical analysis of a variety of sexualities, just as Marxism was neither the only nor necessarily best framework for understanding gender relations. While Rubin's point that sexuality cannot be reduced to gender and vice versa remains salient, her theoretical position was taken up by lesbian and gay studies scholars, who interpreted lesbian and gay studies as the most proper domain for work specialising in 'sexuality'. Thus, the extensive range of minority sexualities included in Rubin's work was ignored in a focus that reduced sexuality primarily to the two categories of lesbian and gay (e.g. Abelove et al, 1983).

According to Butler (1997: 18), the development of a separate lesbian and gay studies had problematic foundations. She argues that a '*characterization of feminism as an exclusive focus on gender*' - an important premise in this new discipline - misrepresents the genealogy of feminist intellectual history in several ways: firstly, it assumes that a radical feminist theory of sexuality is representative of feminist theory generally, rather than treated as one position within the history of feminist thought. Secondly, the significant body of anti-racist work within feminism, including contributions by Black feminist, postcolonial and Third World writers is overlooked and considered irrelevant to the 'proper' focus of feminist academic inquiry. Numerous feminist writers have highlighted the impact of racism on the experiences of Black women and have criticised early feminist work for neglecting to acknowledge and analyse the salience of 'race' (hooks, 1982; Davis, 1982; Lorde, 1984a; Hill-Collins, 1990). As Jackson and Scott (1996: 18) point out, '*Historically, white men's "protection" of "their" women has existed side by side with their gross exploitation of black women.*' Radical feminist theories in which sexuality is construed as an effect of gender, fail to address the sexual exploitation of black women and differential situatedness of black men compared to white men, highlighted in Black feminist contributions. Thirdly, MacKinnon's particular account of gender and sexuality is interpreted as representative of feminist work generally and the strong opposition to her work within feminism is ignored. In addition, gender is reduced to biological sex and the history of the sex/gender

distinction within feminism is excluded. Furthermore, the significance of gender to the normative performance and regulation of sexuality is ignored. Thus, Butler suggests that '*the sexual contestation of gender norms is no longer an "object" of analysis within either frame, as it crosses the very domains of analysis that this methodological claim for lesbian and gay studies strains to keep apart*' (p. 19). The ways in which gender performativity is constituted through heteronormativity are therefore overlooked. Finally, Butler notes that the differences and dialogical debates between feminists who utilise the category of gender in their work and those who work within a sexual difference framework are erased.<sup>6</sup> Butler therefore argues against a separate paradigm in which the important analytical connections between gender and sexuality are no longer critically interrogated by scholars.

### *The social construction of sexuality*

While feminist theory interrogated the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality, the social construction of sexuality was also being explored from a variety of perspectives. McIntosh (1968) addressed the way constructions of homosexuality as 'deviant' were necessary to the normalisation of heterosexuality. This notion of the ontological relationship between hegemonic and marginal identities would later become central to queer theory. Weeks' (1977) work also represents a significant contribution. He addressed the

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<sup>6</sup> Other critics of postmodern theories of gender are the sexual difference theorists, whose work includes that of the philosopher Rosi Braidotti. While concurring with the notion that sex and gender are social constructs, Braidotti (1994) argues that the terms of the sex/gender debates are rooted in an Anglo-American tradition, which is simply not translatable in a continental European context. Thus, the term 'gender' does not have the same connotations in the French or Italian languages, for example. Braidotti further argues that the sex/gender debates in Anglo-feminist theory construe the development of male and female genders in a parallel fashion. Taking a phenomenological approach, she argues that any feminist theory of sexual difference must acknowledge the power differential in dominant constructions of female and male genders. According to Braidotti, the patriarchal system of domination has resulted in a sexual dichotomy in which men are disembodied signifiers of the phallus, whereas women are reduced to the material and denied subjectivity. This results in two separate sets of problems. In Braidotti's view, feminism must address these differences, particularly in relation to women and embodiment. It seems clear that the sexual difference theorists and the gender theorists have opposing claims: the former call for a redefinition of the female feminist subject. On the other hand, the gender theorists reject the feminine in favour of a new androgyny. However, as Braidotti (1994) herself points out, the fundamental point of consensus between the two positions is the idea that feminist practice must challenge the universalistic stance of scientific discourse by exposing its inherent dualism. Feminist scholars are united in attributing the creation of binary differences to this dualistic mode of thinking in a hierarchical scale of power relations.

historical construction of sexuality, tracing the development of sexual politics in Britain and contextualising contemporary sexual identities within the socio-political climate. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) is often hailed as one of the founding texts of queer theory. While both Foucault and Weeks analysed the historical construction of sexuality, Weeks' work emphasised the role of legislative change and the development of a social movement, whereas Foucault explored the symbolic and dynamic influence of institutions. Both authors pointed to the historically contingent nature of sexualities. Thus, rather than an essential timeless homosexual identity, the meanings and function of the term were culturally and historically specific. Heterosexuality and homosexuality were therefore 'inventions' of late nineteenth century Western societies. Both noted the way such ideas were circulated and regulated, through the varying discourses of sexuality over time.

The social constructionist model of sexuality challenged the identity politics that dominated lesbian and gay movements in the 1970s and 1980s. Corber and Valocchi (2003: 2) suggest that activist subcultures had developed a 'minoritarian model of homosexuality', according to which gay men and lesbians constituted an oppressed minority in much the same way as racial/ethnic minority groups did. While identity politics rested on a notion of an essential and unchanging sexual identity, social constructionist theories of sexuality emphasised the changing discourses of sexuality over time. This implicitly acknowledged the instability of all sexual identity categories and challenged the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality. However, Corber and Valocchi (2003: 2-3) note that although much early lesbian and gay research during this time highlighted the constructed nature of lesbian and gay identities, it also '*implied that those identities were stable and coherent as they took for granted that the boundaries between homosexuality and heterosexuality were fixed and impermeable.*' They suggest that the emergence of Queer studies constituted an attempt to overcome the limitations of this approach.

### *The influence of postmodernism and post-structuralism*

The disillusionment with identity politics accompanied the rise of postmodern and post-structuralist theories. Butler's (1990) work has undoubtedly been enormously influential in the development of queer theory, particularly in terms of her challenge to static notions of identity. She examined the assumptions underlying understandings of embodiment in her critique of compulsory heterosexuality within feminism. Prior to the publication of Butler's (1990) work, feminist debates largely assumed a biologically determined sexed body, upon which gender was inscribed. Butler challenged this conception of embodiment and argued that sexual difference was also a social construct. According to this theory, the term 'woman' did not signify a foundational category, but rather a 'regulatory fiction', through which normative understandings of sex, gender and sexuality were reproduced, thus naturalising heterosexuality. In Butler's view, gender is produced performatively by reiterative acts. This had complex consequences for both feminism and lesbian and gay studies. Firstly, Butler's work suggests that feminism is self-defeating if it takes 'woman' as the category around which to organise, because this assumes a false unity. Secondly, rather than support an essentialist conceptualisation of same sex desire, Butler contests gender itself, arguing that understandings of gender in the sex/gender distinction of much feminist theory ultimately act against the legitimisation of lesbian and gay subjects. Thus, rather than naturalise same-sex desire (as she suggests many lesbian and gay theorists did), she contests the binary system through which all sexuality is defined and heterosexuality becomes naturalised.

Butler's (1990) work transformed the field of feminist theory, recasting the sex/gender debates in a new light. However, it is also viewed as a seminal text in the development of queer theory, as it represented an important challenge to the identity politics central to lesbian and gay studies. If queer theory takes as a central tenet the destabilisation of binary oppositions such as woman/man, gay/straight and all categories, including lesbian and gay are 'regulatory fictions' (Butler, 1990) and discursively produced, it is also a more inclusive terrain. Bisexuals, transgendered people and even heterosexuals may belong to the queer

imaginary if their actions disrupt normative gender and sexuality binaries. Yet Butler (1993) has argued that if ‘queer’ is to avoid the normativity of previous feminist and lesbian and gay work, it must be understood as being in a state of constant formation and flux and as such ‘queer’ resists clearcut categorisations. Despite these difficulties in defining queer theory, it does utilise particular concepts, such as heteronormativity: *‘the set of norms that make heterosexuality seem natural or right and that organize homosexuality as its binary opposite’* (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 4). In addition, the challenge to oppositional dichotomies often takes the form of transgressive acts, or those practices considered to destabilise heteronormativity.

### *Towards a critically queer feminism<sup>7</sup>*

Queer theory is certainly not without its detractors. Indeed, Teresa de Lauretis, the theorist often credited with coining the phrase ‘queer theory’ (1991), later disavowed the term. She originally introduced ‘queer theory’ as a challenge to the male bias contained within ‘lesbian and gay’. However, in her view the concept developed in such a way that it merely became *‘a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry’* (1994: 297) and no longer represented a challenge to hegemonic power relations. Numerous writers have expressed doubts about the political efficacy of queer, particularly in view of the emphasis on textualism and relative neglect of the social within much queer studies work (Seidman, 1995). McIntosh (2000: xi) suggests that queer is politically ‘debilitating’ not because it challenges identity, but rather because *‘it is obscure, elitist and merely fashionable’*. Jackson and Scott (1996: 16) have argued that *‘the prominence of Queer theory may have more to do with the making of academic reputations than with furthering grass-roots struggles, and may be explicable in terms of academic rather than street politics’*. These writers suggest that the tendency towards complex language and emphasis on theory, rather than empirical work, within queer studies is elitist.

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<sup>7</sup> Butler (1993) outlines her vision of queer in a chapter entitled ‘critically queer’. I do not deploy the term here to suggest an automatic affiliation with her position, but rather to indicate a critical engagement with the notion of a queer feminism.

Other concerns include whether queer subjectivity is androcentric and may in fact reinscribe a generic masculinity, in addition to failing to seriously address the material conditions of gender inequalities. Some feminist writers remain sceptical of a body of theory that they identify as dominated by gay men and inhospitable to feminism or as neglectful of political change (Jeffreys, 2002). It has also been argued that queer theory is dismissive of the struggle to establish progressive approaches to studying lesbian and gay experience within academia, a struggle which enabled the development of queer theory in the first place (Grant, 1994). In addition, as queer is inclusive of myriad identities, it may include subjects whose politics are not compatible with the lesbian and gay populations who are integral to queer theory and politics. Weeks (2000: 6) argues that ‘the queer insurgency’ that ostensibly challenges the identity politics of the lesbian and gay movement, nonetheless ‘*is also about forming an identity – not so much around sexual orientation, but about style, about stance, about choice.*’ He also criticises the tendency on the part of queer studies writers to dismiss the work by pioneers of lesbian and gay studies: ‘*Queer studies and queer activism [...] have spent an enormous amount of energy rejecting the pioneers of the 1970s as if they had achieved little*’ (p. 4). However, Weeks further notes that a politics of transgression and a politics of citizenship are both ‘necessary to each other’ (p. 7).

Some of these criticisms relate to aspects of queer that may also be perceived as its strengths. For example, the appeal of queer lies partly in its inclusiveness. As feminist debates in recent years have shown, an acknowledgement of difference can strengthen rather than weaken the political project. Critically interrogating the privileges of whiteness for example confronts racism within feminism, addresses the complex workings of power and allows for new understandings of diverse conceptualisations of womanhood. By challenging the binary opposites inherent in much normative thought regarding gender and sexuality and self-consciously refusing an identity, queer acts as a cautionary reminder of the limits of all identities. Dudink (2000) argues that ‘*Queer theory is a project to understand how normality functions. That it is much less stable, self-evident and*

*coherent than it pretends to be.*<sup>8</sup> In addition, the concept of heteronormativity facilitates a nuanced analysis of the centrality of heterosexuality to social relations and the ways in which it is naturalised.

Nonetheless, the body of work within queer theory (and activism) has largely been concerned with white gay male experience, a situation that is increasingly acknowledged, with more recent work importantly redressing this (Cruz-Malave and Manalanson, 2002; Munoz, 1999; Somerville, 2000). Some would argue that it is the lack of attention to difference that supports the emphasis on transgression as a means of challenging social hegemonies. Queer's challenge to the social order is often concerned with transgressive acts that take the form of stylised performances. This is problematic if we consider that what may be seen to constitute transgressive - within the context of academic work - is inevitably dependent upon the situatedness of the author and reader. Lawler (2000) examines this dynamic in relation to Fox's (1994) work on class relations. Fox argues that research on working-class people which lauds self-conscious efforts to resist class hegemony, often reflects the bias of middle-class researchers, who '*can afford to accept the premise that incorporation is equivalent to defeat or regression. The Left stamp of approval thus falls on those behaviours, tendencies and gestures which not only resist domination but do so for decidedly progressive aims.*'<sup>9</sup> Thus, working-class participants may be pathologised or criticised for not conforming to the values of researchers, values that are often intrinsic markers of privilege. As Lawler points out, notions of resistance may therefore invoke the very power relations they ostensibly criticise. A central theoretical interest of this research project concerns the ways in which particular practices come to be understood as subversive, while others are regarded as politically acquiescent. The same behaviours may be understood differently in the two national contexts explored within this study. The dichotomy of resistance/assimilation is understood as of interest in its own right, when viewed as a process by which practices are interpreted and made meaningful. All categorisations of subversion and incorporation are illustrative of normative

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<sup>8</sup> In collaboration with Meiher, I. C., Mak, G. & Vanwesenbeeck, in Sandfort, T. & Galesloot, H. (2000: 191).

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Lawler, (2000: 169).

assumptions. Thus, the critical interrogation of such interpretations attempts to unravel the binary oppositions within critiques of binary oppositions. Rather than highlighting transgression for its own sake, or simply assessing the extent to which lesbian parents may or may not subvert heteronormativity, this research represents an effort to consider the implications of these debates for understandings of hegemonic conceptualisations of notions such as kinship and resistance.

Although various authors highlight tensions between feminist and queer theory (Jagose, 1996; Weed & Schor, 1997), an integrated queer feminist perspective is increasingly gaining ground. While earlier second wave debates within feminist theory included theories of sexuality that were contrary to Foucault's notion of historically contingent discursively constructed sexualities, more recent feminist work takes the theoretical conceptualisation of sexuality within queer theory as axiomatic. Writers such as Judith Butler (who identifies primarily as a feminist writer<sup>10</sup>) have been central to the field of queer theory and have also transformed feminist debates about gender, sex and sexuality. Contemporary feminism has occasionally been caricatured by queer theory writers, who assume that a specific second wave approach to sexuality is representative of all feminist theory. Some feminist work continues to be sceptical towards queer theory. However, feminism is responsible for many of the insights informing queer theory. Jagose (1996: 57) highlights queer theory's roots in both lesbian feminism and gay liberationist thought. She notes that '*Queer is [also] productively informed by lesbian feminism in three crucial respects: its attention to the specificity of gender, its framing of sexuality as institutional rather than personal, and its critique of compulsory heterosexuality.*' Valocchi and Corber (2003: 10) point to intersectionality within feminist theory as a possible means for a rapprochement between the two, where intersectionality is understood as an acknowledgment of multiple facets of identity variously occupying locations of privilege and subordination. They suggest that intersectionality in combination with the 'mobile' understanding of sexuality within queer theory can enable a productive integration of feminist and queer analyses. While the fluid notion of sexuality

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<sup>10</sup> See for example (1994) 'Gender as Performance, An Interview with Judith Butler', *Radical Philosophy*, Summer, no.67.

within queer theory could destabilise heteronormative assumptions within feminist work, queer theory would benefit from contemporary feminist theoretical conceptualisations of difference, extending the queer emphasis on ‘mobility’ to terrain such as ‘race’ and class. In my view, it is possible to utilise an integrated queer feminist analysis incorporating the feminist tradition of gendered analysis of power relations and theorising of difference with the queer understandings of sexuality and heteronormativity. In fact, in view of the feminist intellectual legacy of theories of difference, lesbian mothers are a classical example of intersectionality, whereby queer and feminist analytical insights can be productively engaged. In the following sections, feminist theories of motherhood and previous research on lesbian motherhood will be explored.

### **Feminist theory and motherhood**

Early research on child development ignored the subjectivity of the mother, who was important only insofar as she affected her child. Feminists critiqued this objectification of mothers as a ‘needs satisfying other’. In addition, they contextualised motherhood and mothering experience within a gendered and unequal society. Thus, feminists highlighted the disjuncture between ideologies of motherhood and women’s experiences (Bassin et al, 1994). Snitow (1992) divided American feminist work on motherhood into three stages. She refers to the first as the period of the ‘demon texts’, which were often interpreted as a wholesale rejection of motherhood. In fact, feminist writers of the time were attempting to challenge hegemonic ideologies of motherhood, in which motherhood was constructed in oppressive ways and maternal ambivalence was taboo. In contrast, the second stage was characterised by an idealisation of maternity and debates centred around which construction of motherhood was most useful for feminists. More recently, a third phase represents more nuanced efforts to address the complexities of women’s experiences of mothering.

### ***Early anti-mothering statements***

Second wave feminists argued that in order to achieve subjectivity, it was necessary for women to create a life beyond the traditional home and motherhood. Friedan (1963) called home “*a prison*” and Mitchell (1971) referred

to child-rearing as an “*instrument of oppression*”<sup>11</sup>. Firestone (1971) called for a new technology that would enable children to be born from artificial wombs, thus freeing women from biological reproduction. A rejection of motherhood was also addressed by Rich (1976), who suggested that antipathy toward motherhood could be an expression of women’s desire to achieve selfhood. Her ground-breaking text outlined the connections between what she termed ‘the institution of motherhood’ and her own experiences as a mother of three sons. She identified the dissonance between social expectations regarding motherhood and social realities and thus addressed the impact of maternal myths on lived experiences. She also described how she experienced her feelings of maternal rage as repugnant in the face of hegemonic ideologies of motherhood. Her work importantly identified some of the complexities of motherhood and the socially constructed nature of pervasive maternal myths, in addition to societal pressure to conform to particular images of motherhood. As Snitow (1992) points out, although early feminist statements were seen to be anti-mothering, they must be contextualised within the prevailing ideologies of the time. Feminists critiquing predominant representations of motherhood challenged the notion that women could only be fulfilled through motherhood. This intervention helped create a space in which women could articulate the complex realities and ambivalences of mothering.

Chodorow and Contratto (1982) highlighted the tradition of mother-blaming present in much feminist writing. Taking a psychoanalytical approach, they argued that as the mother as caregiver is so integral to early experience, maternal images are profoundly affecting. In their view, we have an infantile desire for an all-powerful mother who is fully responsible for our well-being. Adulthood involves accepting that a mother is an individual in her own right. However, culture obstructs this process by reinforcing longings for a mother who is a self-sacrificing nurturer. They note that much feminist writing about motherhood takes a ‘daughter’s perspective’.<sup>12</sup> In addition, feminist work often assumes an

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<sup>11</sup> Both references are cited in Bassin et al. (1994: 6).

<sup>12</sup> Lawlor (2000) also suggests that feminist work on motherhood has been biased towards a daughter’s perspective and attempts to redress this in her work on mother/daughter intersubjectivity. Nice (1992) and van Mens-Verhulst et al. (1993) are also recent examples of work in this vein that addresses both daughter *and* mother positionality in theorising motherhood.

omnipotent mother, a position ultimately leading to either mother-idealisation or mother-blaming. They argued in favour of a collective movement to alter both social structures and cultural ideologies.

### *Compulsory motherhood and normative ideals*

Feminist writing on motherhood in the 1970s to the early 1980s was characterised by ambivalence and constituted an attempt to challenge prevalent maternal ideologies. Later feminist work also acknowledged the pleasure many women derived from maternal experience. Feminist essentialism celebrated motherhood as a uniquely female experience and a source of emancipation from patriarchal values. French-speaking feminist writers (e.g. Irigaray, 1985) have emphasised the significant role that motherhood plays in providing access to unacknowledged female experiences. From a rather different perspective, feminist advocates of the dual breadwinner model attempted to address the exploitation of women's labour in a male breadwinner system and emphasised the need for public provision of childcare and equal participation in domestic labour. In Scandinavian contexts, this required a rethinking of dominant notions of femininity and masculinity, with women's entry into the paid labour force being accompanied by efforts to involve men more in childcare and domestic labour (von der Fehr et al, 1998; Bergqvist et al, 1999). This latter perspective represented an alternative to essentialist notions of motherhood but nonetheless did not challenge the centrality of motherhood to female experience. Thus, feminist have recognised the pleasures many women derive from motherhood, and the conditions under which mothering work is undertaken.

In addition, feminists have also highlighted the 'mandatory' nature of motherhood in contemporary society (Woollett, 1991), where childlessness continues to be portrayed negatively. According to Phoenix and Woollett (1991), regardless of whether women become mothers, motherhood is central to the ways in which others define them and to their perceptions of themselves. Numerous writers suggest that motherhood is romanticised and idealised through cultural norms as the ultimate fulfilment for women. Although the wider availability of contraception and abortion have increased the possibilities of reproductive

control for many women, these advances exist alongside relatively intractable images of motherhood. While motherhood is portrayed in a positive light (but practical carework is simultaneously devalued) and inextricably linked with femininity, childfree lives are predominantly negatively depicted.

Research exploring motivations for becoming a parent identifies the varied symbolic and practical values associated with having children (Woollett, 1991; Brannen & O'Brien, 1996). The reasons articulated include the potential enjoyment of parenting, validation and status as an adult and an assurance of meaning and continuity in the lives of parents. Brannen and O'Brien (1996: 3) argue that children give parents a sense of security in terms of creating meaning in their lives and assuring them of comfort in their old age. They suggest that '*whilst increasingly economically useless, western children have become emotionally priceless*' to adult identities.

Infertile women are often asked to articulate their feelings about motherhood as part of infertility investigations or adoption procedures. As a result, they may be more conscious about the motivations for motherhood than women who take it for granted that they will become pregnant easily. Nonetheless, it must be noted that infertile women's subjectivities are shaped by their experience of infertility and that the group 'infertile women' is not a monolithic category. In their study of women's experiences of infertility, Pfeffer and Woollett (1983) found that two general themes emerged from women's accounts.<sup>13</sup> The first was that a variety of cultural forms presented a positive ideology of motherhood. The second was the negative portrayal of childless women. Many (heterosexual) women presented themselves as having assumed that they would have children one day. Motherhood was seen to confer adult female identity status. Having children was considered a means of cementing intimate relationships privately and in terms of a statement to extended family members. Women also reported subtle pressure from the wider family to ensure family continuity. In addition, they articulated the practical and symbolic significance that the mother-child relationship held for them. It was seen as an outlet for a relationship of caring and affection, as well as

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<sup>13</sup> The discussion here refers to Woollett's (1991) account of this research.

a source of fun and stimulation. In contrast, “*the lives of childless women are seen as empty, lacking the fulfilment and warmth motherhood brings*”.<sup>14</sup> Woollett (1991) suggests that motherhood represents an escape from a negative identity, because negative assumptions are often made about the psychological health and ability of childless women to form close, loving relationships. In contrast, childlessness is often associated with selfishness, emotional deprivation and the lives of women without children are usually perceived as unfulfilling (Morrell, 1994). These discourses regarding the appeal of parenting are articulated by people prior to parenthood, as well as by parents (Woollett, 1991). This suggests that these ideas are simply not the result of parenting, but rather shape people’s choices and aspirations.

### ***‘Race’/ethnicity and the regulation of motherhood***

However, normative motherhood ideals clearly delineate who constitutes the acceptable mother. For example, Phoenix (1991) has documented some of the negative attitudes towards teenage mothers that exist in England. Similarly, French pronatalist policies, which provide financial benefits to women who have children as an inducement to increase the French birth rate, are not denied to black and migrant women in France, but are really aimed at white women (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). In a consideration of mothers as ethnically situated actors in national processes, Phoenix and Woollett (1991: 16-17) refer to the work of Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989) on gender and the nation-state. They point out that although Yuval-Davis and Anthias do not address motherhood specifically, their emphasis on women’s participation in ‘ethnic and national processes’ is pertinent to an analysis of motherhood. They note that mothers are responsible for the biological reproduction of ethnic groups. Nation-states often encourage or discourage particular groups to have more children. While early second wave feminists in the US were centrally concerned with the availability of contraception and abortion, African-American and indigenous populations were more likely to be sterilised without their consent (Davis, 1982). More recently, right-wing parties in Europe have exploited xenophobic and racist

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<sup>14</sup> Woollett, A. (1991), p.59.

concerns about multiculturalism, fears that are linked to notions of women as biological reproducers of ‘the nation’. Thus, hegemonic discourses encouraging women to become mothers are not equally supportive of all women.

Hill-Collins (1994) points out that much feminist theorising about motherhood assumes that male economic and political domination is the main structure around which family life is constructed. She criticises this assumption for the “*dichotomous split between the public sphere of economic and political discourse and the private sphere of family and household responsibilities*” (p. 57). By placing the experiences of ‘racial ethnic women/women of colour’ at the centre of feminist theorising about motherhood, Hill-Collins shows how notions of kinship in which the father is at the centre of the family distort the experiences of women of colour. She writes: “*For women of colour, the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concerns of racial ethnic communities – one does not exist without the other*” (p. 58). The expectations and meanings of motherhood therefore vary according to social and political context.

### ***De/Re-constructing motherhood***

Ruddick (1984; 1994) introduced the concept of ‘maternal thought’, the intellectual work of mothering. She argues that mothering is characterised by intellectual work in addition to caring practices and challenges the dichotomy between embodied motherhood and rational intellect inherent in much theory. An interesting aspect of her work is the conceptual shift from motherhood as an identity to motherhood as an activity. In this way, mothering work may be carried out by caregivers – including men – who are not the birthgiving mother, but are engaged in care practices. The development of new reproductive technologies has also complicated understandings and definitions of motherhood. The distinctions between biological, gestational and social ‘mothers’ remain contentious and challenge the notion of motherhood as an essential category.

Butler (1990; 1993) rejects essentialist notions of sexual determination, arguing instead that bodies are forcibly produced through discourse. In relation to the

capacity of particular bodies for impregnation, she notes '*although women's bodies generally speaking are understood as capable of impregnation, the fact of the matter is that there are female infants and children who cannot be impregnated, there are older women who cannot be impregnated, there are women of all ages who cannot be impregnated, and even if they could ideally, that is not necessarily the salient feature of their bodies or even of their being women. [...] I am not sure that is, or ought to be, what is absolutely salient or primary in the sexing of the body. If it is, I think it's the imposition of a norm, not a neutral description of biological constraints*' (1994: 33). While I agree with Butler's point that the meanings attributed to motherhood and biological reproduction are discursively produced, I find her lack of attention to the regulation of material bodies problematic as it does not account for the centrality of reproductive rights to women's lives in local contexts and women's concomitant vulnerability.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Butler's questioning of the presumption of sexual difference remains crucial.

Although feminist theory has begun to address diversity in mothering experiences and to deconstruct the category of motherhood, a glaring example of difference which has been relatively overlooked, is that of lesbian parents. Chodorow and Contratto (1982: 197-198) point to a dichotomy between motherhood and sexuality in early second wave feminist theory. Similarly, hegemonic discourses produce sexual and maternal as binary oppositions. This dichotomy has been rarely challenged by feminists in terms of imbuing mothers with sexual subjectivity. When this has occurred, it has been centrally concerned with heterosexual mothers. Rare exceptions include Rich (1976: 232-233) and Lorde (1984b), who reflect briefly on their identities as lesbian mothers of children conceived in previous heterosexual relationships. Nonetheless, lesbian

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<sup>15</sup> For example the contested nature of abortion politics in the Republic of Ireland has on occasion rendered women's bodies more vulnerable to legal intervention and the imposition of unwanted pregnancy. The notorious 'X case' in 1992 is an obvious example. A 14 year old rape victim was prevented from travelling abroad for an abortion by a legal injunction, provoking an outcry both in Ireland and internationally. A subsequent referendum apparently resolved the situation by securing 'the right to travel' if the health or life of a woman was at risk. However, the 'C case' only a few years later in 1997 concerning another teenage rape victim highlighted the inadequacies of the law – in this case her wish to travel abroad to procure an abortion was challenged by pro-life groups and her parents (the young girl in question was in care at the time). Thousands of Irish women travel abroad for abortions annually, as this service is currently unavailable in Ireland.

motherhood/parenting has not been the subject of sustained analytical attention by feminist theorists. This may be due in part to the relatively recent development of lesbians actively choosing parenthood after coming out, rather than conceiving children in the context of heterosexual relationships. However, it possibly also suggests that feminist theory has largely conflated motherhood with a heterosexual identity and has constructed lesbian and mother as oppositional categories. Thus, although normative scripts of femininity include a prescribed motherhood, normative femininities are not inclusive of all women. I would argue that lesbian women are also excluded from normative scripts of womanhood that prescribe a motherhood role by virtue of being considered 'unfit to parent'. Lesbians are a group of women for whom motherhood remains a highly controversial choice and do not experience the same pressures to embark on motherhood after coming out. While feminists have begun to acknowledge and critically interrogate concepts of difference, the salience of sexuality to hegemonic constructions of womanhood and motherhood has been largely overlooked.

### **Lesbian motherhood**

It is clear that although 'lesbian' and 'mother' are often considered to be oppositional categories, in fact many lesbians are mothers. Some lesbians become mothers in a heterosexual relationship prior to coming out. A rather more recent phenomenon is that of lesbians who choose to become parents in the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle. The women's movement, the LGBT rights movement, and developments in reproductive rights and technologies have enabled all women - heterosexual and lesbian - to explore a wider range of possibilities than was perhaps previously imaginable. In a discussion of lesbian families in the United States, Slater (1995) suggests that lesbians who came out during the 1970s were unlikely to have children, in contrast to earlier, more closeted generations of lesbians who often had children within heterosexual relationships. She also attributes this generational difference to critiques of motherhood within the burgeoning women's movement, which coincided with the development of a more accessible lesbian community. Thus, many lesbians opted for a childless lifestyle. In Slater's view, the equation of coming out with a

political choice not to become a parent politically marginalised lesbian mothers. She suggests that young, politically active lesbians thus ‘unwittingly’ reinforced the social dichotomy between lesbianism and motherhood. In perceiving the choice to opt out of motherhood as a necessary part of emancipation, these younger lesbians *‘left unchallenged the accompanying social oppression of women who were both lesbians and mothers’* (Slater, 1995: 90). While this analysis focuses on politically active lesbians, it nonetheless highlights the changing discourses of motherhood within lesbian communities over time.

Slater (1995) highlights a new generation of lesbian women. These younger lesbians are distinct from the previous two groups - lesbians who became mothers within the context of a heterosexual marriage and lesbians who made a political choice to reject motherhood - that preceded them. Lesbians are now having children after coming out. This situation has also been enabled by changes in reproductive technologies and adoption services. For example, since the early 1980s some sperm banks have established insemination programs that are open to women irrespective of marital status or sexual orientation. Adoption has also become a possibility for some lesbians, although it is typically restricted to single women and women who present themselves as heterosexual. In any event, many lesbians choose the ‘low tech’ option of a known sperm donor. Slater (1995) suggests that lesbian mothers may also have become politically organised as a result of custody battles with ex-husbands. Thus, lesbian parents have become politically mobilised at the same time that new reproductive technologies and established lesbian communities have made motherhood a more visible option for lesbian women. The culmination of these changes has been a shift in perception among lesbians regarding motherhood, which is an increasingly viable possibility. Lesbians are now becoming parents individually or in couples outside of heterosexual marriages, a markedly new demographic development. The themes explored within the literature on lesbian parents and their children reflect the relatively recent development of this family form, as it largely addresses issues of children’s well-being and family formation.

### *Previous research on lesbian parenting*

According to Morningstar (1999), the literature on lesbian parent families falls into two main categories: psychological outcome studies of children of lesbians - most of which concern children who were conceived in a previous heterosexual relationship - and psychological and socio-cultural accounts of the experiences of lesbian mothers and their families. I would add a third category, that of more recent theoretically-oriented work examining lesbian parenting in terms of practices and symbolic meanings. Nonetheless, as Morningstar (1999) notes, the first category is by far the largest. Thus, the body of research on lesbian parents with children has focused primarily on the children of gay and lesbian parents, rather than the parents themselves. In addition, most research has been carried out in British or North American contexts, which arguably have more established histories of lesbian parenting, due to the location of metropolitan centres associated with LGBT commercial and political spaces.

The majority of previous research has examined the developmental pathways and general well-being of these children in comparison to children raised by heterosexual parents. The emphasis in research on children reflects pervasive myths about the incompatibility of a lesbian or gay identity with effective parenting. Opponents of lesbian and gay parenting rights (such as adoption or access to new reproductive technologies) frequently posit such claims as children growing up with lesbian or gay parents will become gay themselves or that 'homosexual' parents (particularly gay male) will abuse their children (Hicks, 2003). In fact, no study has produced evidence to lend credence to these myths.

Numerous authors have highlighted the similarities between children of lesbian parents and children who grow up with heterosexual parents (e.g. Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Johnson and O'Connor, 2002). Patterson (1992) provides a comprehensive overview of 'outcome studies' since the 1970s on children with lesbian parents. She notes that the children are consistently rated similarly to the children of heterosexual mothers in all areas of psychological development, including separation-individuation, emotional stability, moral judgment, object relations, gender identity and sexual identity. However, the studies she refers to

focus almost exclusively on children born within a heterosexual arrangement. Patterson (1994) carried out a study of children born to or adopted by openly lesbian parents. She investigated the self-concept, behavioural adjustment and sex role behaviour of 37 children, who were found to be within the 'normal' range of development. Her findings support her earlier conclusion in the 1992 review that children are not adversely affected psychologically as a result of having lesbian parents, although children in the 1994 study were found to feel more stressed than children in other families. Patterson suggests that this may be due to the fact that their lives are actually more stressful than the lives of children in more traditional families. On the other hand, she also found that children with lesbian parents were more articulate about their emotions than other children in the study, which could account for their greater propensity to articulate stress. Concern for children's well-being in lesbian households may also stem from an awareness of homophobia in society and the potential difficulties of growing up in a marginalised and stigmatised family - rather than simply homophobic attitudes – and it is notable that children with lesbian parents do not appear to be adversely affected.

Some studies identify positive traits associated with growing up with lesbian parents. For example, children of lesbian and gay parents often see themselves as more tolerant and aware of a diverse range of viewpoints than their peers from heterosexual families (see Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Lott-Whitehead and Tully's (1999) study of 45 lesbian mothers concluded that lesbian families have numerous strengths, including openness concerning sexuality and difference, and that they offer an environment in which both they and their children thrive. A number of families in their study experienced a high level of stress, but the parents were careful to protect their children from the impact of homophobia and to maintain their families' integrity, without minimising the possible effects of their lesbianism on their children. In the context of political debates about lesbian and gay parenting rights, several European governments have commissioned reports investigating the well-being of children raised by lesbian and gay parents, which have also concluded that a lesbian or gay identity is not incompatible with effective parenting. For example, the Swedish government released a report based on the findings of a special commission, in which it was clearly stated that

lesbian and gay parents can provide loving supportive environments for their children (SOU, 2001).

Stacey and Biblarz (2001) are critical of what they view as the tendency in research to downplay potential differences between the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents and they provide a thorough overview of previous research. They argue that the children of lesbian parents may in fact be different, but that this difference is manifested in positive ways. For example, they suggest that children may develop in less gender-stereotypical ways, a finding which previous authors fail to acknowledge. Stacey and Biblarz suggest that this is due to a conflation of a 'no difference' outcome with a position that indicates there is no need for social concern regarding lesbian and gay parenting. While they acknowledge the necessity for combating homophobic stereotypes of lesbian and gay families, Stacey and Biblarz suggest that this should not be done in ways that presume any potential difference will be negative. Irrespective of whether children of lesbian parents are either no different, or are positively affected by their upbringing, the considerable body of research indicating that having a lesbian mother or parents is not detrimental to children has played a significant role in the evolution of legal rights for lesbian parents, such as legislative changes regarding adoption and access to new reproductive technologies. In addition, custody battles formerly automatically awarded custody to a heterosexual spouse, a situation which has since changed dramatically largely due to the research refuting arguments about the negative impact of lesbian parents on their children. This research is clearly necessary in the context of a homophobic society in which lesbian parents face legal discrimination and social stigma. Nonetheless, Patterson (1992) suggests that researchers turn their attention to more productive aspects of research, given the growing level of awareness and acceptance that the children of lesbian and gay parents are not adversely affected as a result of their parents' sexual orientation.

### *Socio-cultural accounts of lesbian parenting*

The second main category of work on lesbian parenting consists of largely socio-cultural accounts of the experiences of lesbian parents (Hanscombe and Forster,

1982; Pollack and Vaughn, 1987; Benkov, 1994; Nelson, 1996; Moraga, 1997; Hicks and McDermott, 1999; Wells, 2000; Saffron, 2001) and the legal implications of lesbian parenting for the relationship between gender, sexuality and the state (Beresford, 1998; Lehr, 1999; O'Donnell, 1999; Bernstein and Reimann, 2001). A number of themes emerge from this literature. These include: the difficulties of communicating plans to parent to family of origin; considerations influencing the preference for a known or unknown donor; the effects of 'biologically asymmetrical' (Pies, 1988) relationships to children within a lesbian couple, such as the legal vulnerability of the co-parent; and other diverse legal and ethical concerns. Lesbians choosing parenthood face a variety of complex decisions. Each of these decisions involves counteracting deeply embedded social norms. This process can be liberating but also difficult. The creation of lesbian and gay families requires rethinking family configurations and hegemonic notions of kinship. This provides lesbians with the opportunity to reconsider relations between partners, as well as with men, families of origin and children.

### *Lesbian co-parents*

The literature on lesbian motherhood from the 1970s frequently addressed custody concerns with respect to children from prior heterosexual relationships. As more lesbian couples are openly planning to have children together, many highlight the precarious legal status of co-parents with regard to their children as a major concern. In many countries, same-sex couples do not have access to the benefits accrued married heterosexual couples and in those nation-states where they can register in same sex partnerships, they are often not extended rights of adoption. While the lack of legal and social definitions concerning the role of co-parents can be stressful, writings by lesbians concerning their decision to have children together reiterate their view of the decision as a joint one with equal responsibility expected from both partners. Some express confidence in their role as a co-parent, which they derive from the experience of raising a child. Various anthologies contain stories of women's commitment to raising a child together after a relationship ends (e.g. Pollack & Vaughn, 1987; Saffron, 2001).

Muzio (1999: 209) in her psychoanalytic account of lesbian motherhood argues that a co-parent is at risk of becoming reduced to 'mimicry', which Irigaray (1985) describes as the role historically relegated to the feminine. However this can be overcome by mimesis - the self-conscious adoption and subversion of the feminine role. "*To play with mimisis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it...to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible*" (Irigaray, 1985: 76). Women may therefore employ mimesis as a strategy to transform subordination into affirmation and to subvert any notion of a coherent identity. Muzio (1999: 209) suggests that lesbians raising children have the possibility to explore as mothers and co-mothers 'the feminine' in a context '*unbounded by overt masculine ownership*'. Lesbian parenting couples may therefore mimic each other's interpretations of their roles in a way that transforms them. This could result in new ways of thinking about gender and parenting.

### ***Reconceptualising Men, Fathers and Fathering***

Lesbians who achieve parenthood by using the services of a sperm bank are perhaps among the most controversial of lesbian parent families. The existing literature suggests that the decision about whether to use a known or an unknown donor is a complex one. Morningstar (1999) in her account of the developmental pathways of lesbian families, suggests that the possible legal threat posed by a known donor to the couple and especially to the co-parent, causes many lesbian couples to favour insemination with an anonymous donor. In my view this is a large generalisation and cannot be assumed for lesbians within all nation-state contexts. However, the distinction Morningstar makes between the legal claim of a known donor and anonymous donor is an important one as it suggests that donor anonymity among lesbian couples is therefore not motivated simply by the issue of involvement, but of legal security. These considerations have become complicated by the option of donor identity disclosure that is offered by some clinics, including the Sperm Bank of California, which offers a lesbian-friendly service. Donor identity disclosure enables any subsequent child to contact the donor upon reaching the age of eighteen.

The issue of lesbians using sperm banks to become pregnant is particularly controversial, partly because any information regarding paternity is usually unavailable to children. This is a situation that some argue is an infringement of children's rights (e.g. Freeman, 1996). Vanfraussen et al. (2001) examined 41 children's attitudes towards donor identity disclosure in lesbian parent families in Belgium. Although 54% of children were content with donor anonymity, the remaining 46% desired more information. The researchers found no clear indicators regarding which children express a preference for more information, as this was not determined by their parents' stance on the issue, although boys appeared to have a slightly greater wish for more information. They therefore recommend a flexible system offering anonymous and open-identity donors in order to meet the potential needs of each individual family. Scheib et al (2000) interviewed heterosexual and lesbian parents who chose DI in the US and found a marked preference for donor identity disclosure among all participants in their study, regardless of sexuality. Interestingly, both lesbians and heterosexual women expressed a strong preference that donors be physically similar ('matching') to their partner. The authors argue that this suggests that matching serves functions beyond concealing the non-biological relationship of the social father to the child. I would argue however, that it could serve a similar purpose in lesbian families, where partners may also wish biological markers to be less evident.

Donovan (2000) argues that lesbian parents challenge hegemonic discourses about fatherhood in constructing their family forms. This perspective is supported by Bewaeys et al's (1993) work. In a study of lesbian and heterosexual couples' motivations for using donor insemination (DI) in Belgium, they found that heterosexual participants perceived themselves as becoming 'more normal', in contrast to lesbian parents, whose choice of DI in the context of a lesbian relationship represented an exacerbation of their difference in society. In addition, while heterosexual couples emphasised secrecy regarding DI, lesbian parents intended to disclose information about the circumstances of their children's conception. It must be noted however, that lesbian parents had less choice in this issue, as social fathers in heterosexual couples could pass as the

biological father. In a follow up study of identity-release sperm donor recipients in the US, Scheib et al (2003) found almost no parents regretted using an identifiable donor. Disclosure did not impact negatively on families, irrespective of sexual orientation or relationship status, although heterosexual couples were less likely to be open about the means of conception with children, family and friends. Father absence is hardly exclusive to lesbian families, nor characteristic of all lesbian parenting arrangements. Concerns about the single mothers and lesbians who parent independently of men, while ostensibly 'in the best interests of the child', may constitute part of a conservative discourse that idealises a heteronormative nuclear family form (Thompson, 2002).

### *Inventive Mothers – egalitarian practices and kinship reconfigurations among lesbian parents*

A small body of more recent research examining the practices and meanings of lesbian parenting represents a move towards new ways of thinking about lesbian parent families, including work that addresses lesbian parenting from psychological and psychoanalytical perspectives (Schwartz, 1998; Laird, 1999; Malone and Cleary, 2002). These theoretical analyses have been centrally concerned with the creative potential for new ways of achieving egalitarian relationships and reformulating notions of kinship. Research on lesbian motherhood has suggested that lesbian couples demonstrate more egalitarian living arrangements than heterosexual couples. Dunne (1998a) argues that while motherhood provides lesbians and heterosexuals common ground on which to interact, the sexuality and gender dynamics of the relationship between lesbian parents parenting as two women together "*necessitates the transformation of the boundaries, meaning and content of parenthood and facilitates the construction of more self-reflexive, egalitarian approaches to financing and caring for children*".<sup>16</sup> In this way, she argues, lesbian motherhood represents a fundamental challenge to existing gender structures. Even when parenting was not a shared project, lesbian mothers experienced enormous support from partners and domestic work was shared equally. Unlike in many, particularly

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<sup>16</sup> See Dunne, G. (1998b), Abstract.

middle-class heterosexual relationships, where women anticipate financial dependence on their male partner while the child is young, the mothers she studied waited until they had achieved work goals which promised long-term financial security before having children. This work is particularly interesting because it examines lesbian parenting from a feminist perspective, addressing the division of domestic labour.

The theoretical literature on lesbian parenting has also examined the possibilities for new formulations of kinship. Lewin (1993) in research carried out in the late 1970s and early 1980s, found that the lifestyles of lesbians with and without children were dissimilar enough so that lesbian mothers felt they had more in common with other mothers than with childless women. In a later article, she suggests that analyses which portray lesbian mothers as either 'resisters or accommodators' in relation to gender norms, are too simplistic. She argues that lesbian mothers may be both or neither. In her view, a more accurate interpretation of lesbian parenting narratives is that they are '*strategists, using the cultural resources offered by motherhood to achieve a particular set of goals*' (1993: 350). These goals and resources are shaped by the heterosexist and gender differentiated social context. In Lewin's view, although many lesbian parents are 'conscious resisters', others may willingly adjust to traditional values where possible. Their behaviour may be viewed as transgressive (in which case they are seen as resisters or subversives), or (along with lesbian/gay marriage) as assimilation into heterosexual norms and values, an abandonment of the subversive potential of queer sexualities. Lewin notes that the search for 'cultures of resistance' vital to feminist theory and analysis should not limit accounts of women's lives to narratives of victimisation. On the other hand, she warns against complacency when evidence of resistance is uncovered, as both interpretations may '*fail to reveal the complex ways in which resistance and accommodation, subversion and compliance, are interwoven and interdependent, mutually reinforcing aspects of a single strategy*' (p. 350). Hayden (1995) also challenges the dichotomy of resistance/accommodation and suggests that debates about the creative or normative values attached to kinship formation among lesbian and gay people highlight the centrality of biology to conceptualisations of kinship in American society. She further argues that the symbolic role of biology

may be reconfigured in lesbian parent forms, where biology may become a more flexible concept. These explorations of the potential for lesbian parent families to develop new practices and deconstruct the meanings attributed to categorisations such as 'kinship' and 'motherhood' represent new ways of examining lesbian motherhood experience.

*Conclusion:*

Relatively little is known about the lives of the new generation of lesbians choosing motherhood in local contexts, despite the significance of their existence to social and theoretical debates about diverse topics including gender, kinship and equality. The overwhelming emphasis in much previous research on the well-being of their children has played an important political role in refuting offensive homophobic myths. Indeed the well-being of children should always be a necessary component of considerations of new intergenerational family forms. It must be noted however that this argument may often be used not in children's best interests, but rather to further the political agenda of the interlocutor, as has been the case in homophobic rhetoric invoking lesbian parents as an example of the breakdown of 'family values'. Nonetheless, it is increasingly acknowledged that lesbian and gay parents do not compromise their children's well-being by virtue of their sexuality. As a result, researchers are turning their attention to more productive aspects of lesbian parent families.

An integrated queer feminist approach enables an interpretation of lesbian mothers' narratives in which they are acknowledged as gendered sexual subjects. This facilitates an exploration of discourses of biology, kinship and gender among lesbian parents whereby their experiences and perspectives are contextualised within frameworks of domination and hegemonic ideals. This dissertation therefore attempts to address the experiences of lesbian parents in diverse local contexts in an effort to reconsider notions of resistance and subjugation within previous theoretical work and critically analyse the efforts of lesbian parents to create and establish meaningful conceptualisations of their families in often unsupportive contexts.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Comparative Context: Heteronormativity and Social Policy in Sweden and Ireland

This chapter addresses the relationship between gender, sexuality and social policy in Sweden and Ireland. These interconnections indicate how certain familial forms are endorsed by the state through legislation and the social security system. Research indicates that superficially at least, the two countries have almost opposite reputations in relation to gender issues and lesbian and gay equality. Sweden is one of the few countries to have passed a Registered Partnership Act (1995)<sup>17</sup>, enabling a marriage like contract to be entered into by same gender couples. Homosexuality was decriminalised in Sweden as early as 1944. In contrast, homosexuality was not decriminalised in Ireland until 1993 and although there has been some discussion about the introduction of registered partnerships, it appears unlikely to happen in the near future. Furthermore, Sweden is ranked third by the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and the Gender-Related Development Index (GDI), constructed by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Ireland's position is ranked sixteenth for both measures.<sup>18</sup> In comparison with Sweden, women in Ireland have made significantly less progress concerning labour market entry, parliamentary representation and parental leave policies (Smyth, 1997). Ireland's legislative policies still largely assume a male breadwinner model (Conroy, 1997), unlike in Sweden (Hobson & Takahashi, 1997). Nonetheless, how two apparently such different countries prove useful in a comparative study of lesbian parenting will be discussed.

In recent years, numerous researchers have integrated an awareness of gender relations into studies of different welfare states (Sainsbury, 1994; 1996). However, the heteronormative assumptions inherent in much legislation and

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<sup>17</sup> The law on registered partnership was passed in 1994 [Lagen (1994:1117) om registrerat partnerskap] and came into effect in 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Official statistics for 2003, <http://www.hdr.undp.org/>. During fieldwork (2000), the GDI ranking for Sweden was 4, while Ireland was ranked 17<sup>th</sup>. Their ranking on the GEM in 2000 was 3 and 17 respectively.

social policy have received scant attention from researchers. Accordingly, a focus on the significance of gender and sexual identity enables a critical analysis of the heteronormative development of welfare policy and the social security system in Sweden and Ireland. A social security system is illustrative of the ways in which particular familial relationships are legitimated and supported while others are not. This has consequences for women's choices regarding partnerships and parenting. The case of lesbian parents also addresses the limits and possibilities of gender legislation by exploring what is possible when women in relationships organise their intimate lives independently of men.

The different logics concerning gender and social policy in Sweden and Ireland illustrate their normative assumptions about gender. Hobson (2003) has characterised these two approaches in terms of citizenship frames as 'gender-distinctive' (Ireland) and 'universalist' (Sweden). Thus, Ireland like many post-colonial societies, has a history and culture reflecting the dominant nationalist emphasis on traditional family forms and a strong male breadwinner role (Nandy, 1983; Meaney, 1991). In contrast, Sweden has a longer tradition of women's participation in the paid labour force and clearly encourages men to participate more in caring for children (Björnberg, 1998; Bergqvist et al., 1999). An examination of the social welfare and legislative context for lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland highlights the potential constraints and possibilities within two distinct welfare states. This is illustrated in the gendered nature of social policy, in addition to the differential treatment of lesbian subjects. In this chapter, family law and social security systems in Sweden and Ireland will be addressed in terms of gender and sexuality politics in order to situate lesbian parents within local social systems.

### **Feminist Analyses of Welfare States and Sexual Citizenship**

As Sainsbury (1994:2) points out, early feminist studies of welfare states tended to have a 'generic' view of the welfare state and paid insufficient attention to differences in state formation. In viewing the state as an outcome of patriarchy, feminists were often oblivious to significant variations between specific states and ways in which these variations may or may not have been advantageous to

women. Furthermore, initial studies did not have a comparative focus. The few studies that did have a comparative dimension focused on similar countries. The dominance of Anglo-Saxon countries in the research meant that their contextualised experiences were often mistaken for the universal. Sainsbury points to two distinct approaches visible in early feminist research on welfare states. The first addresses the lack of critical attention to gender relations in mainstream welfare state theory and attempts to incorporate gender awareness into mainstream models. The second approach argues for the creation of alternative theories and models.

McLaughlin and Yeates (1999) note the overall dearth of literature on sexuality and social policy, although cite Carabine's (1992) work on sexuality and welfare in the British context as an exception to this gap in the literature. In this and subsequent work (Carabine, 1995; 1996; 1998; 2001) Carabine addresses the extent to which social policy is informed by normative ideologies concerning heterosexuality and argues that these rules affect gender relations. Her analyses largely focus on the way that heteronormative assumptions shape social policy, rather than directly addressing the impact of these assumptions on the experiences of lesbians and gay men.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, as McLaughlin and Yeates (1999: 50) point out, the main focus of feminist analysis of welfare regimes continues to be the gendered division of labour and wage inequalities. They suggest that this overlooks the significance of 'biopolitics', or Foucault's notion of somatic norms (the discursive regulation of bodies), which they argue is central to a consideration of gender relations. In their view, it is this theoretical neglect in feminist welfare state analysis that in many ways '*replicates the focus of mainstream authors on labour decommodification and associated social rights, rather than placing "biopolitics" at the centre of analysis*'. In addition, they argue that existing feminist work on welfare regimes and the division of labour has '*subsumed "sexuality" within the concept of "gender"*'. Thus, the differential needs and experiences of lesbian women are overlooked. A queer analysis therefore enables a consideration of the differential implications of

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<sup>19</sup> Sexuality is not the only area of 'difference' that has been neglected within feminist social policy and welfare state analysis. For example 'race' and ethnicity have also been ignored within much of the literature, although this is increasingly addressed (e.g. Williams, 1989; Quadagno, 2000).

social policy for lesbians. The effects of family status/configuration constitutes a key component of this type of analysis.

Some efforts have been made to address women's familial status in feminist welfare state analyses. O'Connor (1993) argued that the concept of de-commodification - '*the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation*' (Esping Andersen, 1990: 37) - should be augmented by the concept of personal autonomy. This refers to protection from personal and public dependence and is central to unravelling the relationship between the state, market and family. All groups may not have equal access to the labour market and hence they may not be equally commodified. Orloff (1993) argues that while most 'mainstream' comparative work on welfare states has ignored gender, most feminist work on welfare states has not been of a comparative nature. In an effort to integrate these concerns - gender and comparative welfare state research - she highlights the salience of family law and legislative frameworks to concepts of legal personhood and bodily integrity. She therefore argues for greater attention to these areas in analyses of power relations and points out that efforts to address state provision must not assume a gender-neutral citizen, but rather acknowledge gender differences in 'productive and reproductive labour' (p. 309). In addressing the possibility of women's autonomous households, she emphasises economic independence from marriage. However, McLaughlin and Yeates (1999) criticise Orloff's formulation of autonomous women's households for its focus on women as mothers and as mothers living without a male (or female) partner. Nonetheless, her work does note the gendered aspects of male breadwinner models, in which women are constructed as primary carers and financially dependent.

In an attempt to highlight the salience of familial connections, Lister (1994: 37) argued that the concept of de-commodification did not take into account the significance of family relationships in terms of gender and economic independence. She therefore suggested that the notion of de-commodification be supplemented by what she termed 'defamilisation', or the extent to which individuals can maintain '*a socially acceptable standard of living, independently*

*of family relationships, either through paid work or through the social security system*'. In this way, theories of welfare states could become inclusive of women as gendered individuals. Lister (1994: 35) acknowledges critiques by black feminists who have argued that white feminists' concern with economic dependency does not take into account the experiences of many Afro-Caribbean women, for whom financial independence of men has traditionally been more characteristic. However, Lister notes that only the most privileged women workers are unaffected by the 'ideology of dependency' that affects women's experiences and position in the labour market.

McLaughlin & Glendinning (1994) also critique the lack of attention to family processes within Esping-Andersen's (1990) work on welfare states. While he addresses the variable nature of the relationship between men across classes with the state and market, he does not examine relationships between individuals (male or female), families and states or markets. They argue that it is this theoretical neglect that renders work on comparative welfare states inadequate to the task of addressing care issues. In an effort to redress this, they utilise the term 'familisation' and its corollary 'de-familisation' to examine the processes of care relationships, including carers and the cared-for. This enables feminist analyses to take into account the work of disabled activists and the lesbian and gay movement, who '*are centrally concerned with the (inadequate) extent of de-familisation in those welfare policies relevant to them*' (p. 65).<sup>20</sup>

In a later analysis, McLaughlin & Yeates (1999: 52) define familism as '*the way the foundations of a society are based on the patriarchal heterosexual nuclear family*'. Familization is described as the '*historical processes and specific measures that have constituted and reconstituted*' the outcome of familism. In contrast, defamilization refers to the historical processes which 'undermine or

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<sup>20</sup> In later work, Esping-Andersen (1999) introduced the concept of 'familialism' and 'defamilialization', where a familialistic system '*is one in which public policy assumes – indeed insists – that households must carry the principal responsibility for their members' welfare. A de-familializing regime is one which seeks to unburden the household and diminish individuals' welfare dependence on kinship*' (1999: 51). In the 1999 publication, he attempts to integrate critiques of his earlier work into a comparative welfare regime analysis. However, he again fails to acknowledge the significance of gender to social relations and the contributions of feminists who have engaged with his work.

contradict' familism – in other words, '*provisions and practices which reduce the extent to which well-being is dependent on 'our' relation to the patriarchal heterosexual family form*' (p. 52). Thus, defamilization concerns how legislation and social welfare affect the lived experience of and possibility to choose any intimate relationship, whether heterosexual, homosexual or platonic.

The recent burgeoning literature on sexual citizenship offers another perspective from which to consider the interconnections between gender, sexuality and the legal regulation of kinship. If feminist analyses of welfare states have neglected the significance of sexuality, Evans (1993) argues that analyses of the social construction of sexuality have often neglected the gendered social context in which it occurs. He examines the interconnections between sexuality, the market and the state and identifies the ways in which sexual subjects are supported and constrained. Bell and Binnie (2000: 10) have argued that '*All citizenship is sexual citizenship*'. However, like Evans (1993), they note that there is a diversity of sexual citizenships – thus transgendered rights arguments for example may have a different agenda to lesbian and gay activist frameworks, despite commonalities and strategic alliances between them. Their analysis takes an explicitly queer perspective and questions the ways in which sexual citizenship is premised on the notion of rights and obligations. Thus, they introduce the concept of 'dissident sexual citizenship', or those modes of sexual citizenship which challenge what they consider the normative formulations of sexuality inherent in many claims to the state for formal acknowledgment. While they acknowledge the presumption of heterosexuality in social policies relating to families, they are wary of the tendency to frame sexual citizenship claims within familial terms. Identifying similar concerns to those articulated by Butler (2002), they suggest that this may not alter the landscape of sexual citizenship. These criticisms highlight the limitations of particular formulations of sexual citizenship in the context of hegemonically heteronormative society. However, in my view Bell and Binnie (2000) overlook the complex ways in which lesbian and gay conceptualisations of kinship may challenge existing legal frameworks and understandings. In addition, their analysis is centrally concerned with a gay urban norm and neglects the potential for disruption of hegemonic notions of

sexual citizenship by differentially situated queer actors, including lesbian parents.

Feminist comparative analysis usually attempts to highlight patterns of similarity and diversity in hegemonic processes related to for example gender, labour market participation and kinship. The body of comparative work on welfare states has placed Sweden and Ireland within different clusters, due to their very different policy formulations. This research study does not endeavour to provide a macro analysis of welfare state policies for lesbian parents, but rather to examine lesbian parents' situatedness in specific local contexts and the ways they negotiate hegemonic discourses of gender and kinship. In order to contextualise their narratives, it is necessary to consider the social policy framework within which their experiences take place from a comparative perspective. The next sections provide a brief overview of previous efforts to incorporate Sweden and Ireland into comparative analyses.

### **Ireland in Comparative Analyses**

McLaughlin & Yeates (1999: 52) argue that in order to understand social policy rationale in Ireland the concepts of familization and defamilization (which are applicable to all welfare regimes), must be integrated with another theoretical consideration – *'the way that the control of women's bodies and the governance of their sexuality have been critical in nationalist struggles and in post-colonial 'new state' establishment'*. Yuval-Davis (1997) has highlighted the gendered imagery of nationalist discourse. In an analysis of gender and national identity in the Republic of Ireland, Meaney (1991) contextualised gender relations within a broader framework of postcolonial symbolism. Thus, she argues that the interconnections between religion, gender-segregation and national identity are characteristic of many postcolonial societies, where women are not only a symbolic resource in representations of 'the nation', but also become *'part of the territory over which power is exercised'* (p. 191). McLaughlin & Yeates (1999) argue that Ireland's postcolonial history had distinctive consequences for the subsequent development of biopolitics and familism in its welfare regime. In their view, while the role of imperialism in the development of the British,

French and German welfare regimes is increasingly explored, a postcolonial analysis has not been extended to accounts of the development of welfare regimes in the 'colonised' countries. They further argue that any analysis of Ireland's welfare regime that neglects biopolitics and the relationship between social policy and population, ethnicity and nation, can only offer incomplete explanations.

It is this 'theoretical incompleteness', which in their view may account for the difficulty experienced in categorising Ireland in cross-national studies of welfare regimes. They point out that Ireland has either been excluded from comparative welfare regime analyses – such as Esping-Andersen's categorisation – or inconsistently grouped. For example, Lewis & Ostner (1995) group the UK and Republic of Ireland together because of their strong adherence to a male-breadwinner model.

On the other hand, analyses concerned with distribution have tended to place Ireland and the UK in different categories (McLaughlin & Yeates, 1999). For example, Siaroff (1995) extended Esping-Andersen's analysis to include a fourth model and placed Ireland in a 'late female mobilization welfare state' cluster, along with the 'Latin Rim' countries. The UK was placed in group characterised by 'female work desirability' alongside Australia, Canada and New Zealand. These examples illustrate some of the difficulties of categorising Ireland in comparative analyses. For this reason, a comparative analysis that addresses context-specific complexities of the Irish case, may be more productive.

### **Sweden in Comparative Analyses**

Unlike Ireland, Sweden has been the subject of numerous comparative studies in welfare state literature. As Bussemaker and von Keersburgen (1994) point out in their review of the treatment of gender in welfare state research, given the dominance of theoretical approaches which examine women's economic independence outside of marriage, it is not surprising that the Nordic, social democratic type of welfare state has come to hold the status of a role model of a gender-friendly welfare regime. However, while they acknowledge the merits of

this model, they point to the dangers of an approach focusing purely on social policy that neglects the possible inequalities which women in social democratic countries, including Sweden, face. Thus they called for theoretical accounts of the gendered character of '*the various forms of dependency in relation to certain social domains*' (p. 17). An exploration of the significance of gender to lesbians' experiences is therefore particularly illustrative of mediating factors in achieving greater equality.

There are other noticeable criticisms of social policy in Scandinavia and Sweden in particular. Elman (1993, 1996) argues that the structure of Sweden's centralised corporatist state does not permit women to make claims on it that do not directly relate to work-force participation. This hinders the possibility of the state to address sexual violence as a gendered phenomenon. In her comparative study of state responses to sexual violence in Sweden and the USA, she found that the independent character of the radical feminist movement in the States, made the state more permeable to accepting their demands. In contrast, she portrays Swedish feminism as a diluted form of liberal feminism, incapable of dealing with the stark realities of sexual violence against women. While it is the case that service provision and awareness of sexual violence have been relatively late to develop in Sweden, compared to its British or North American counterparts (Ryan-Flood, 1998), it is a clear misrepresentation of Swedish feminism to argue that it is incapable of achieving goals concerning issues relating to women's bodies. Eduards (1997) has documented the politically powerful women's shelter movement in Sweden and suggests that it is a departure from mainstream Swedish feminism, in that it takes women's bodies as a theoretical starting point. Indeed, the very existence of this large autonomous movement indicates that there is a strand of Swedish feminism that is addressing these issues and furthermore, is having an impact. Nonetheless, there is a general analytic consensus that the Swedish women's movement has traditionally been primarily concerned with women's employment conditions and the combination of work and care responsibilities (Hobson, 2003).

Hernes (1987) coined the term 'women friendly' to refer to Scandinavian welfare states. This characterisation is based on the degree to which women's labour

market participation is not hampered by caring responsibilities. Favourable policies and conditions, such as the public provision of subsidised childcare, ensure that women are able to combine paid employment with carework. In addition, these societies are organised around a dual breadwinner, rather than male breadwinner model. The same rules and benefits regarding parenthood apply to women and men. These include parental leave benefits and pension contributions during periods of inactive labour force participation due to caring for children. Thus, these welfare states maximise women's opportunities for financial independence of men and greater possibilities in terms of exiting marital relationships and are relatively supportive of solo mothers. Swedish policies for example are often characterised variously as 'gender-neutral' (Elman, 1993, 1996), 'woman-friendly' (Hernes, 1987), or 'state feminist' (Stetson and Mazur, 1995). Bergman and Hobson (2000: 92) suggest that the Scandinavian welfare states are *unfriendly* to men in that they undermine what Connell (1995) terms the 'patriarchal dividend'. However, they challenge the claims of authors such as Lewis (1992), who suggest that Sweden is the epitome of the weak male breadwinner model, as in their view such claims neglect the extent to which men remain the primary breadwinner in heterosexual relationships within these countries. They point to research highlighting men's average work hours and women's earnings after divorce in support of their argument.

Generalisations regarding gender politics in the 'Scandinavian countries' are commonplace in welfare state literature. In international studies, Sweden is often clumped among the other 'Scandinavian', or more properly 'Nordic' countries, consisting of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, with little or no recognition of the very real differences among them (Bergqvist et al., 1999). The history of these nations has been closely interlinked throughout the past millennium, they have a common legal tradition and, Finland apart, they have languages that are closely related. Conclusions based on single country studies have often been generalised to other countries within the Nordic region. Bergqvist (1999) notes that social scientists often seek to interpret circumstances in their own countries in relation to tendencies described in international literature. This may result in countries with similar welfare state models seeming more homogenous than they actually are. Similarly, Karvonen and Sundberg

(1991) argue that macro- historical and institutional analyses of the Nordic countries are often overly deterministic and obscure the motivations and subjectivities of individual actors.

In fact there are important differences among the Nordic countries, which are clearly illustrated with regard to childcare and legislation pertaining to lesbian parents. According to Leira (1993), the example of childcare shows that the universal principles usually connected with the Scandinavian model do not apply. Norway for example has invested relatively little with regard to both the care of children under three years of age and full time care. In contrast, in Denmark and Sweden considerable efforts have been made to ensure universal access to childcare. The basic principle of childcare provision is to make it possible for all parents to combine work and care through the same form of provision. In addition, the model of public childcare has been developed in accordance with pedagogical principles. Childcare provision in Finland has followed a rather different trajectory. Although it has been associated with gender equality in the other Nordic countries, debates in Finland have centred around public daycare versus a home care allowance for carers (usually women) (Bergqvist et al, 1999).

A consideration of the extent of state recognition of lesbian and gay partnership and parenting is also illustrative of differences between the Nordic countries. Denmark was the first country in the world to introduce registered partnerships in 1989. The other Nordic countries took time to follow suit. Norway eventually established registered partnerships in 1993, Sweden in 1995 and finally Finland in 2002, thirteen years after Denmark. Denmark was initially seen as the pioneer in the area of lesbian and gay partnership and parenting rights, largely due to the early steps taken to recognise lesbian and gay partnerships. In addition, unlike Norway and Sweden, lesbians were able to access reproductive technologies - albeit only privately, not through the public healthcare system. However, following a political campaign in which the concept of a lesbian mother was invoked as a monstrous Other and associated with 'techno-monsters', 'mad scientists' and 'unnatural mothers' (Bryld, 2001: 300), access to reproductive technologies was restricted by law to heterosexual couples in 1997. Fortunately a Danish midwife was able to exploit a loophole in the law - that no doctor could

provide assisted conception – and set up a sperm bank in Copenhagen whose services were open to all women, including lesbians. Due to her status as a midwife, rather than doctor, she has been able to operate without technically breaching the law.<sup>21</sup>

Insemination is not expressly forbidden to single women in Norway, but there is no legal provision for it either and currently no clinics there offer this service to lesbian women. Legislation specifically prohibits lesbians from access to new reproductive technologies in Sweden. The Swedish registered partnership law explicitly restricted the availability of NRTs to heterosexual couples. Many Norwegian and Swedish lesbians travel to Denmark to avail of insemination at the clinic in Copenhagen. Interestingly, in Finland lesbians have been able to use the services of private sperm banks and fertility clinics for many years and lesbians from the other Nordic countries have been able to undergo IVF in Finland. The lack of legislation prohibiting lesbians from accessing NRTs was exploited by private clinics. However, in recent years there has been some political debate about whether to restrict these services to heterosexuals.

A very limited form of lesbian and gay adoption was introduced in Norway in 2002, where lesbian and gay couples who have been registered partners for more than twelve years may apply to adopt jointly. Similar conditions regarding duration of partnership do not apply to heterosexual couples, so this is clearly a limited extension of the law and is grounded in assumptions about the relative longevity of heterosexual partnerships in comparison to their lesbian and gay counterparts. Denmark and Finland do not allow lesbians to adopt, but recent legislation that came into effect in January 2003 in Sweden has extended the possibility of adoption to same sex couples. Fostering is possible for lesbian and gay parents in Norway and Denmark, although it appears to be rare. It is more difficult for lesbians and gay men to be accepted as foster parents in Sweden. Berggren (1995) refers to one known case of a Swedish gay male couple fostering a gay teenage boy, but notes that it appears exceptional. However, in

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<sup>21</sup> The midwife in question was interviewed for this research in February 2002.

Finland lesbian and gay people have been able to foster and adopt for many years, as this is treated separately to partnership laws.

These are some examples of differences between the Nordic countries with regard to recognition of lesbian and gay partnership and parenting rights. My aim is not to portray any one as the most or least developed in relation to childcare or lesbian and gay rights, but rather to highlight the fact that many of the debates have taken a different character in the Nordic countries. Analyses which treat them as a homogeneous group and assume an overall similarity in relationships between sexuality and the state therefore overlook significant local differences.

### **A New Agenda for Research**

Korpi (2000) suggests that welfare state analysis be augmented by addressing a broad array of legislation, including social insurance programs for parents and children, family-relevant taxation policies, and social services for children as well as the elderly, measures which are all likely to have gender-related effects. He argues that '*the touchstone for the selection and categorisation of indicators is thus whether the institutional characteristics of a specific policy primarily contributes to the general support of the nuclear family, in particular one of the single-earner type, or whether it is likely to enable and promote married women's paid work, a dual-earner family, and the redistribution of caring work within the family and at the societal level*' (p. 144). Korpi is concerned with the analysis of social policy and welfare state citizenship, and offers a model for the incorporation of gender as an integral conceptual element in the analysis of inequality and welfare state activity. According to this model, ideal types will be most fruitful analytically when they are applied to specific policy institutions. However, as Shaver (2000) points out, a drawback with this approach is the reduction of social policy to a limited set of chosen policy institutions.

A more compelling analysis is offered by McLaughlin & Yeates (1999), who argue that welfare regime theory must be developed to integrate familisation and the effects of colonialism and post-colonialism into its analysis. Without such theoretical development, it is their view that theories and explanations of the

welfare state in Ireland will be unable to overcome their current limitations. They call for research that examines a number of aspects of biopolitics. These include: the extent to which regimes recognise a range of family arrangements as being ‘more or less legitimate choices’; the rules governing access to benefits or services provisions in relation to family status; an analysis of the levels of income achieved by all individuals in terms of their family situations; the effects of differences in income and access to services on the quality of the emotional relationships people have with each other within families<sup>22</sup>; and the effects of social security systems on individuals’ experiences of choice of relationship, autonomy within relationships, and ‘power of exit’ (McLaughlin & Yeates, 1999: 54).

Accordingly, by addressing these issues in relation to sexual identity and social policy in Sweden and Ireland, the ways in which the state endorses certain family forms over others would be revealed. An analysis of gender, sexuality and familism in these two welfare regimes will help to overcome some of the difficulties of comparative research in categorising the Irish case and simplistic assumptions of homogeneity regarding Sweden in a Nordic context. In addition, a qualitative research approach facilitates an exploration of different resignificatory and relational possibilities. Although comparative research usually attempts to uncover patterns of similarity and difference – for example, by examining cases with similar outcomes, but different trajectories and vice versa (Ragin, 1991) – this research takes a rather different focus by examining two distinct cases and comparing the ways in which lesbian parents negotiate hegemonic frameworks and understandings. In the following sections, the trajectory of hegemonic sexual citizenship formulations in Ireland and Sweden will be addressed, by analysing the development of social policy pertaining to gender, sexuality and the regulation of kinship.

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<sup>22</sup> Although this is a vague concept and McLaughlin and Yeats do not suggest how it might be assessed, it is nonetheless interesting to consider in relation to lesbian parent families. For example, the lack of access to new reproductive technologies or legal recognition of non-biological relationships, may affect the balance of power within the family.

## Gender, Sexuality and the Welfare State in Ireland

There are three major influences on the development of social policy in Ireland with respect to gender and sexuality: postcolonialism and nationalist responses in the form of a highly gender differentiated division of labour, resulting in the coding of female caregiver/male breadwinner model in the context of heterosexual marriage in the 1937 Constitution; women's traditionally low participation in the labour force in Ireland; and Ireland's accession to the EEC/EU.

Family policies vary between states in the extent to which they facilitate the combination of work and family lives. Many states including Ireland support a breadwinner/housewife form of gender contract (Lewis, 1993). This assumes that responsibility for the economic support of the family rests with the father/husband, while the mother/wife cares for the family within the home. The taxation system in Ireland maximises the net income of one-income families by doubling the tax allowances and tax bands. This arrangement is based on marriage rather than on children, and is most beneficial in cases where the breadwinner is a high-income earner. There are no tax allowances for childcare expenditure. In contrast, social democratic states such as Sweden have an equality contract and support working parents by providing state-supported childcare, shorter working hours and parental leave (Sainsbury, 1996).

The particular configurations of marriage and motherhood in Ireland are often attributed to the influence of a nationalist political heritage in the context of postcolonialism. Numerous writers have highlighted the gendered imagery of women in Irish symbolic figurations of 'the nation' (Nash, 1993; Smyth, 1997), particularly in Irish literature. These range from representations in which 'Mother Ireland' mourns the loss of her sons<sup>23</sup> to a beautiful young woman making sacrifices for her beloved.<sup>24</sup> Gray and Ryan (1997) suggest that these two examples, which are most often referred to in analyses of nationalist imagery in Ireland, tell us little about women's actual lives and that even within nationalist

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<sup>23</sup> This image is often referred to as 'an Sean Bhean Bhocht' (the Poor Old Woman).

<sup>24</sup> This figure is popularly known as Cathleen Ni Houlihan.

discourse gender is invoked in multiple and complex ways. Anthias & Yuval-Davis (1993) explore the utilisation of gender as a symbolic resource in nationalist and postcolonial discourse. They suggest that women '*both signify and reproduce the symbolic and legal boundaries of the collectivity*' (p.28) through their actions, including motherhood in the context of heterosexual marriage. Thus, women are prohibited from specific behaviours - such as particular forms of dress, or pre/extra-marital sexual relationships - that are seen to compromise collective national/ethnic honour. Smyth (1991: 11) suggests that women are symbolically invoked in Irish nationalist rhetoric '*in a discourse from which women, imaginatively, economically, politically disempowered, are in effect and effectively excluded*'. This serves to construct women as an integral part of nationalist symbolism while simultaneously denying women's own agency and subjectivity.

Nandy (1983), with reference to colonialism in India, has argued that the colonised man has been constructed as feminine by colonial powers. Nationalist responses have often taken the form of a polarisation of gender roles, where notions of womanhood are used to assert the masculinity of the colonised man. This results in highly differentiated gender norms persisting long after colonialism has officially ceased, as these new norms continue to act as a symbol of the power of male subjects. Thus, women are not simply a symbolic resource for 'the nation', women's bodies also become the terrain in which power is exercised.

Meaney (1991) applies principles of Nandy's work to a consideration of gender relations in Ireland, although she takes issue with Nandy's claims with regard to the inevitable relationship of nationalist politics to gender, stating '*it is arguable that any form of national identity must constitute itself as power over a territory defined as feminine*' (1991: 191). Nonetheless, she highlights similar anxieties to those outlined by Nandy as the origin of the distinctive regulation of relationships and reproductive rights in Ireland, as illustrated through concerted debates about marriage, contraception and abortion. In her view, prohibitive abortion laws in Ireland are indicative of '*the extent to which women only exist as a function of their maternity in southern Ireland*' (p. 188). She argues that '*a*

*deep distrust and fear of women*' is paradoxically grounded in the idealisation of the mother in Irish culture as an omnipotent and 'dehumanised' figure. While this may be historically accurate, it seems a slightly overly pessimistic analysis twelve years later, given the important reforms to marriage and abortion that have taken place in the interim.<sup>25</sup> A more contemporary analysis is offered by Gray & Ryan (1998), who explore some of the changes in the relationships between 'woman', women and Irish national identity. They argue that representations of women in the 1990s are more diffuse than in the 1920s (the period when the Irish Free State emerged) and that symbols of women and Irishness need to be understood within changing economic, social and political contexts. Even so, they acknowledge that there are some continuities in the ways that symbols and representations of women are employed to convey meaning.

### **Motherhood and the Irish constitution**

The original 1922 constitution of the Free State, which was agreed in negotiations with the UK government, contained no overtly religious or moral overtones. The 1937 constitution, however created new provisions based on middle-class nationalist ideals and was formulated in explicitly nationalist and religious language. The 'special position' of the Catholic Church was asserted in Article 44 (removed in 1972), in which it was recognised as '*the guardian of the faith of the great majority of the citizens*'. Another article affirmed the centrality of the nuclear family: '*the family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society, as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights antecedent to and superior to all law*' (Article 41.1). In the same article, women's participation in and contribution to society was relegated to motherhood within marriage and the private sphere: '*the state shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home*' (Article 41.2.2); and

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<sup>25</sup> Divorce is now available and the 'right to travel' abroad for abortion has been established. The traditionally highly contested nature of these issues however is supportive of Meaney's analysis. Indeed, the practice of abortion is still prohibited within the Irish nation state. The complex nature of abortion politics in Ireland has long been acknowledged by Irish feminist writers as a postcolonial signifier, where an anti-abortion stance (originating in Catholic tenets) became conflated with a nationalist stance. Thus Ireland's abortion law can be interpreted as a means of cultural differentiation (Fletcher, 1998; 2001, Smyth, 1998).

to ‘guard with special care the institution of marriage’ (41.3.1). The ban on divorce was formalised in another article: ‘No law shall be enacted providing for the dissolution of marriage’ (41.3.2). This unique combination of religious doctrine and oppressive gender relations reflected the close relationship between the Catholic Church and state policy in subsequent decades until the 1970s (Lentin, 1998).

Thus the Republic of Ireland has a constitution which explicitly addresses issues pertaining to traditional gender roles. The special status given to the family in the constitution has formed the background for debates about women’s rights. Family law reform has largely focused on women’s rights and divorce. There have been enormous constitutional and legal changes concerning these issues in the past thirty years. Many of these changes have emerged as the result of campaigns by feminist activists.

### Fathers and the Irish Constitution

The emphasis on marriage in the Irish constitution has had consequences for unmarried fathers. In the mid-1960s, a case arose of an unmarried father whose biological child was to be given up for adoption by the mother without his consent or consultation. He attempted to obtain legal support for his parental claim on the child (*The State (Nicolaou) v. An Bord Uchtála*, Supreme Court, 1966). However, the court ruled that the mother had sole authority in any decision regarding adoption. In distinguishing between the natural father and those persons, including the mother, whose consent was required by the legislation, it was stated:

When it is considered that an illegitimate child may be begotten by an act of rape, by a callous seduction or by an act of casual commerce by a man with a woman as well as by the association of a man with a woman in making a common home without marriage in circumstances approximating to those of married life, and that, except in the latter instance, it is rare for a natural father to take any interest in his offspring, it is not difficult to appreciate the difference in moral capacity and social function between the natural father and [those whose consent was required under the statute].<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In Connolly (1995: 14).

Connolly (1995) points out that Nicolaou, a man who was committed to taking responsibility for his child, was not differentiated by the Court from men who take no interest in their children. The Court therefore permitted all unmarried fathers to be treated differently by the law to mothers because some unmarried fathers would be unwilling to meet the responsibilities of parenthood. It was also held by the Court in this case that an unmarried mother has, by virtue of Article 40.3.1 of the Constitution, a personal right to the care and custody of her child, but that an unmarried father possesses no constitutional right to either custody of or contact with his child. Some judges have subsequently expressed doubts about the constitutional basis of the rights of an unmarried mother (Connolly, 1995) but most have approved it. However, a mother's rights are not inalienable, as they may be transferred or relinquished.

Under the Status of Children Act, 1987, an unmarried father was given the right to apply to court to be appointed guardian of his child. Connolly (1995) notes that it seems unlikely that this would have benefited Nicolaou as an unmarried mother may still give her child up for adoption without the consent of the child's father. This development interestingly distinguished between prospective adoptive married parents and unmarried fathers, implicitly supporting the former as the more appropriate family context in which to raise a child. In this case, the Court affirmed that an unmarried father has no constitutional right to the guardianship of his child, and stressed that the legislative right was one to apply to court to be appointed guardian, not a right to be appointed guardian.

The treatment of widowers differs slightly to that of unmarried men. In 1984, the Irish High Court overturned a legislative provision whereby a widow could adopt irrespective of whether or not she had custody of other children, whereas a widower could only adopt if he had custody of another child (O'G v. Attorney General)<sup>27</sup>. The Court ruled that this was in violation of the widower's constitutional right to equality before the law. The original provision was clearly based on the notion of sexual difference enshrined in the Irish constitution, in which women are essentially predisposed to nurturing motherhood, while men's

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<sup>27</sup> Cited in Connolly (1995: 16).

contribution to family life is that of a breadwinner. This construction of womanhood has been highly influential in legislative provision. Connolly (1995: 17) refers to an incident in December 1991, when the Chief Justice of the time described as the constitutionally preferred role of a wife who is also a mother that she '*should remain at home and devote herself entirely to the family*'. The emphasis on women's role as caregiver rather than paid worker, is also evident in the history of women's employment in Ireland.

### **Employment**

It was not until the 1970s that the Oireachtas<sup>28</sup> began to consider the possibility that women had a right to participate equally in the employment market. Ireland's accession to the European Community played a significant role in the development of Irish social policy, as restrictions regarding women's employment had to be removed as a condition of Ireland's entry to the EEC in 1973. A commitment to equality of pay between men and women is clearly stated in the Treaty of Rome of 1957. The European Council subsequently passed two Directives (1975; 1976) advising every Member State to introduce laws ensuring that men and women were treated equally in relation to both equal pay and access to employment, including promotion (Cook & McCashin, 1997).

Many of the barriers to women's labour force participation that were in place prior to Ireland's membership in the EEC seem archaic today. In 1973, the ban on married women participating in public sector employment in Ireland was finally removed with the introduction of the Civil Service (Employment of Married Women) Act. Similar prohibitions were overturned in other semi-state and private sectors within the same timeframe. For example, an Aer Lingus ban on married air hostesses was lifted in 1973 following union negotiations. The 1973 Act removing the marriage ban was the first step in a series of important legislative acts in Ireland during the 1970s. The three main anti-discrimination Acts are the Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act 1974, the Employment Equality Act 1977 and the Maternity (Protection of Employees) Act 1981. The Unfair

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<sup>28</sup> The Oireachtas, or national parliament in the Republic of Ireland, consists of the President and two Houses: Dáil Éireann (the House of Representatives) and Seanad Éireann (the Senate).

Dismissals Act in 1994 amended Employment Law to include sexual orientation as a category covered by the law. Several authors note that although being forced to resign or retire on marriage may seem incredible to many younger Irish women, only one generation of Irish women have come of working age in a climate which is free, both from the ban itself and from a family ideology of female caregiver/male breadwinner that it reinforced and that remains enshrined in the Constitution (Smyth, 1988; Smyth, 1997; Mahon, 1998). Even so, the effects of the marriage ban are still experienced by many women of the previous generation.

The gendered ideology of the family embedded in the Irish Constitution has been highly influential in shaping Irish laws. As a result, many women have been forced to choose between a career and motherhood. This is reflected in the fact that Irish women have had the lowest labour market participation rate in the EU. While it has increased considerably it continues to rank low by EU standards. The most significant change in the Irish female labour force has been the increased participation rates of married women. Most of this increase has taken place since 1971 with the rate more than trebling from 7.5 percent in that year to 29 percent in 1992. By 2002, the percentage of married women in paid employment had risen dramatically to 46 percent.<sup>29</sup> Young married women in particular are remaining in the labour market and combining earning and caring responsibilities.<sup>30</sup>

Clearly, there is much room for improvement regarding the facilitation of women's participation in the paid labour force. In particular, childcare provision remains weak and the introduction of publicly subsidised universal childcare would make an enormous difference to Irish women's lives. However, the ideology of motherhood whereby mothers are the most appropriate carers of young children has been traditionally entrenched and it is possible – though in my view unlikely - that young Irish women may not choose this option as the

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<sup>29</sup> This information can be downloaded from the central statistics office Ireland website: <http://www.cso.ie/index.html>

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, according to the 1997 Labour Force Survey, approximately 80 percent of women who are in paid employment in Ireland are in full-time employment. This figure is slightly higher than the EU average of 73 percent (O'Connor, 1999).

ideal. In any event the rising cost of living in Ireland may necessitate dual breadwinner roles. Extensive parental leave reform would also impact positively on women's choices regarding labour market participation. Despite the anti-discrimination laws that are now in place, Irish women still face significant gender inequalities – including the gender wage gap. The prevailing view is that Irish women continue to experience employment conditions as restrictive and frustrating (Smyth, 1997).

### **Families and the Social Security System**

Cook & McCashin (1997) argue that the view that women should confine themselves to the domestic sphere, which is given constitutional sanction in Article 42.2.1, has been viewed by successive Irish governments as the cornerstone of Irish social welfare code. Prior to the mid-1980s women were perceived as invariably economically dependent on men. Married women were not entitled to the same amount or the same duration of unemployment benefit as single women and all men. A married man was automatically entitled to claim his wife as a dependent irrespective of whether she was in fact earning, while a married women had to show actual dependency before she could claim her husband as a dependent. Women, as single parents, could claim an allowance, but this was denied to men in the same situation. Interestingly, although lesbian and gay relationships are generally disadvantaged under familial regimes such as Ireland's, lesbian and gay couples on social welfare may not be subject to the limitation rules which apply to heterosexual couples. As their relationship is not recognised, they may be considered individual claimants, rather than face restrictions on the benefits they receive as a recognised family unit – a restriction that further impoverishes the most vulnerable families (McLaughlin and Yeates, 1999).

An untaxed children's allowance for each child is paid to every mother regardless of her marital status. There are also means-tested family benefits available. These benefits include heat and coal allowances in the winter, clothing allowances, discretionary payments for 'exceptional bills or expenses', a rent allowance and free medical care and prescriptions. The Family Income

Supplement is available to families whose earned income means that they have lost the additional benefits listed above. This ensures a supplement to raise wages to a specified minimum, a reduced rent allowance and a hospital card to cover certain medical expense benefits. The Lone Parent Allowance is also available.

Childcare provision in Ireland is among the most expensive in Europe and the lack of good quality affordable childcare has been identified as a barrier to women's participation and retention in the workforce (O'Connor, 1998; Galligan, 1998). A report published in 2000 found that the average cost of childcare in Ireland is 20% of average earnings. For women with low earning potential it may therefore be financially detrimental to participate in paid employment (P2000 Expert Working Group).<sup>31</sup> Parents who cannot afford the prohibitive costs of private childcare are forced to rely on relatives (often grandmothers). Waiting lists for preschools and montessoris tend to be extensive. Although a system of health board pre-schools does exist, again the waiting list is lengthy and priority is given to children who are at risk in the home. Some organisations, including large companies and semi-state organisations sometimes provide workplace crèches, but these are seen as a bonus rather than an obligation (Prendiville, 1995; O'Connor, 1999). Overall, Irish social policy is informed by a presumption of heterosexuality, an emphasis on marriage and a male breadwinner model. These policy frameworks have important implications for lesbian women in Ireland.

### **Lesbians in Ireland**

Lesbian lives in Ireland are '*marked by prejudice and discrimination on the one hand, and by celebration and pride on the other*' (Moane, 1998: 439). Coinciding with the development of second wave feminism in Ireland in the early 1970s, lesbian groups began to form and act both as support groups and to engage in political struggle. While numerous lesbian political groups have formed and disbanded (including lesbian mother groups) since the 1970s, the lesbian telephone helplines have remained consistently active. Irish lesbians have

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<sup>31</sup> Information about the P2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare in Ireland can be downloaded from the European Industrial Relations Observatory website: <http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie/>

been involved in both the women's movement and the lesbian and gay movement. In 1978, lesbians instigated new initiatives around exclusively lesbian issues. The same year, the first lesbian conference was held in Trinity college Dublin, and the Dublin Lesbian Line Collective was formed (Crone, 1995). Various lesbian-oriented events began to take place on an annual basis and soon there was a proliferation of lesbian groups throughout the country, although largely concentrated in urban areas. In 1991, Dublin Lesbian Line, Dublin Lesbian Discussion Group (now First Out), and Cork Lesbian Line presented written submissions to the Second Commission on the Status of Women (1993), in addition to an oral presentation to the Commission by Dublin Lesbian Line. The document submitted by the Dublin Lesbian Line emphasised lesbians' rights as participatory citizens (Moane, 1997). The final report of the Commission made a number of recommendations pertaining to lesbians, including legislative change safeguarding workers from unfair dismissal on the grounds of sexual orientation and the integration of lesbian and gay sexuality awareness in the sex education curriculum in Irish schools. Later the same year a co-ordinating group called Lesbians Organising Together (LOT) was formed. This group aimed to act as a support and resource for lesbians in Dublin and became the first lesbian group to receive NOW (New Opportunities for Women) funding for an outreach and education programme (Lesbian Education and Awareness – LEA). LEA ran a high-profile campaign urging greater acceptance of lesbians during 1999.<sup>32</sup>

Lesbians have also been active in campaigns for legislative change. Homosexual activity remained technically a criminal offence in Ireland until 1993, even though prevailing codes of practice for government agencies condemned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act (1989) included sexual orientation in its title. The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) ran a very public campaign and lobby to repeal the legislation on male homosexuality (successfully attained in 1993). The non-inclusion of lesbians in that legislation meant that lesbianism was not an

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<sup>32</sup> This involved a billboard campaign with a picture of a mother and daughter accompanied by the slogan 'How should you feel if your daughter's a lesbian? The same way you'd feel if she wasn't.' The campaign was launched in Dublin with the aid of Deputy Jan O'Sullivan, Mary Coughlan (an Irish folk singer), MEP Patricia McKenna, Deputy John Gormley and the director of Women's Studies at University College Dublin, Ailbhe Smyth.

issue in the public debates and discussions. In 1993 homosexuality was finally decriminalised, and the new law also introduced an equal age of consent. Sexual orientation has been included in the Unfair Dismissals Act (1993), the Employment Equality Act (1996) and the Equal Status Act (2000). However, the latter two acts allow for exemptions on the grounds of religion, therefore rendering lesbians and gay men particularly vulnerable. Nonetheless, these changes indicate that during significant progress has been made in advancing lesbian (and gay) rights in Ireland during the past decade. However, lesbian parents have retained a low profile and lesbian parenting issues have not been highlighted in the LGBT movement's political agenda.

### **Parenting Rights**

The constitutional emphasis on marriage is reflected in family law and has interesting implications for lesbian parents. In the case of married parents, both names are recorded on a child's birth certificate and joint guardianship is automatic. An unmarried biological mother is automatically considered the sole guardian and her name is included on the birth certificate. An unmarried father must prove paternity and then apply separately to the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths if he wishes to have his name documented on a child's birth certificate. However, a successful outcome will not confer any rights on the father. Rather it acts to ensure the child's inheritance from the father's estate. The father must apply to the courts in order to obtain guardianship rights, access and custody. Although the status of illegitimacy was abolished by the Status of Children Act (1987), a birth mother cannot record the father's name without his consent. During the past decade, there has been considerable media debate about 'rights of fathers'. This period has also witnessed the formation of several conservative fatherhood rights groups.

The custody of the children of separated or divorced lesbian mothers is left to the discretion of the courts. The judiciary is supposed to allocate custody according to the best interests of the child/ren and the sexual orientation of parents is ostensibly irrelevant. However, 'hearsay' evidence is admissible and lesbian mothers are often afraid to reveal their involvement with another woman in court,

in case it influences custody arrangements. Nevertheless there have been a number of reported cases where the lesbian mother was open about her sexual orientation with a favourable outcome (Prendeville, 1995). There is no legal recognition of lesbian and gay partnerships, although there has been some political debate about this as a result of the recent wave of European countries introducing relevant legislation. Lesbian co-parents have no formal legal rights as parents.

### *Insemination, fostering and adoption*

Donor insemination (DI) was first introduced into Ireland in 1982 and is predominantly obtained privately. Only one clinic has publicly provided DI for all women, regardless of sexuality. The fact that a relatively conservative society such as Ireland has offered donor insemination to lesbians, a possibility that is denied to Swedish lesbians through legislation, may seem surprising. According to McDonnell (1999: 70), the preferred institutionalised response in Ireland to new reproductive technologies has been '*to defer public debate and to leave policy frameworks to the self-regulatory activity of the medical profession.*' This contrasts with the response of Nordic countries, where national ethics committees and widespread public debate have informed the regulation of NRTs. In Ireland, the potential legal and ethical implications of NRTs were ignored in normative discourses that depicted them as a resource for heterosexual married couples with fertility difficulties. Thus, the introduction of NRTs in Ireland did not precipitate a public crisis. McDonnell (1999) notes that the pronounced absence of public debate about NRTs has meant that public discourse not been influential in their regulation. In the UK, the possibility of single and lesbian women accessing NRTs was publicly debated. But this concern was not raised in Irish media or political debate, rather NRTs were normalised by the profile given to childless married couples who were the presumed consumers of this medical assistance. While the availability of the service to non-married couples, lesbian and single women was not prohibited, '*they did not emerge as a legitimate subject or public with distinct needs and claims*' (McDonnell, 1999: 76). She further argues that the invisibility of lesbians and single women who may avail of the service is not only taken for granted, '*but it is adopted as a strategy of*

*inverted logic to avoid open contestation over competing claims'* (1999: 76). Thus, the claims of non-married and lesbian couples are removed from the terms of any potential debate. The absence of political or legislative disputes on NRTs has meant that public contestation and, hence, public debate have been absent in the Irish context. O'Donnell does note however, that international public discursive events have become an important reference for mobilising public concern in Ireland. It may also be the case that the liberal market policies of Ireland and Britain facilitate access to private services, unlike in a social democratic society such as Sweden, as appears to have been the case in Finland, where private clinics have made their services available to single and lesbian women.

In Ireland, adoption is restricted to heterosexual couples, with clear guidelines that couples must satisfy to be eligible. The adoption organisations are mostly private voluntary bodies, although there are also some denominational groups. However, many lesbians continue to bypass these formal channels by becoming pregnant through informal arrangements with known donors. The adoption laws are therefore most restrictive to lesbian co-parents and infertile lesbian women. Fostering is arranged by Regional Health Boards, which are state agencies. Single women may act as foster mothers in exceptional circumstances. Interestingly, the severe shortage of foster carers in Ireland has led some health boards to advertise for foster parents in Irish lesbian and gay press during the 1990s, although this does not appear to have been noticed by the mainstream Irish media.

### **Gender, Sexuality and the Welfare State in Sweden**

The struggle to attain equal rights for women in relation to paid employment developed quite differently in Sweden compared to Ireland. In 1939 Sweden passed an Act outlawing the dismissal of women on the grounds of marriage, pregnancy or childbirth, legislation that was exceptional in an international context at the time (Gustafsson, 1994). It arose as a result of feminist campaigns responding to a government commission, which in 1935 recommended that married women be dismissed from employment in order to help combat the

economic depression that the country was experiencing. Feminists argued that if married women left the paid workforce, working-class women would be unable to afford to marry and have children. As Sweden was at the time facing a population crisis, these arguments appealed to the pronatalist concerns of the government (Hobson, 1993; Gustafsson, 1994).

From the 1960s onwards Swedish economic policies aimed to increase the labour supply of married women. Sweden was facing a labour shortage during this time period and married women were identified as a labour resource to solve this problem. Gustafsson (1994) suggests that one reason for the increasing acceptance of married women in the labour force was that Sweden (as opposed to for example Germany) did not view immigrants as guest workers, instead extending full citizenship rights to them. Thus the economic costs of immigrant workers (who were entitled to bring their families and to Swedish language instruction) were far greater than simply bringing married women into the workforce.

### **Gender Equality and ‘the family’**

A new discourse emerged on inequality between women and men (*jämställdhet*) during the late 1960s. Gender inequality was attributed to both women’s lack of participation in paid work and the gendered division of labour in the home. The message in the major social policy investigation of sex roles, *Women’s Life and Work* (Dahlström, 1962), was that men’s attitudes towards carework needed to change. This would alter the existing gender relations by deprivileging the male breadwinner model. It also undermined those rare instances where women were privileged as individuals through the construction of gender roles, for example in custody cases where the mother was automatically assumed to be the most appropriate primary caregiver. In addition, this new approach called for the abolition of widows’ pensions, the last bastion of women’s economic protection under a male breadwinner system. However, this challenge to existing gender ideologies was not framed within the language of power, but rather as an issue of education and socialisation. Women’s confinement to the domestic sphere would be challenged through labour market participation, thus facilitating women’s

active engagement with a wider range of arenas. There were also corollary benefits for men, who would benefit emotionally from greater involvement in domestic life (Bergman and Hobson, 2002).

Policy discourse assumed that women and men's working lives would become more and more similar over time, as men would also shoulder responsibility for carework. According to this perspective, women's liberation would be achieved through equal participation in paid employment, thus reflecting the roots of the social democratic welfare state in class-based emancipatory politics. Many of the policy ideas of the time are often attributed to a progressive group of social scientists and political activists, Group 222. This group was composed of men and women across several political parties.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Swedish men have played an active role in feminist debates about gender equality. This is perhaps a reflection of the construction of gender equality ideology in Sweden, where 'equality meant equality between the sexes, emancipation meant emancipation of women *and* men' [italics as they appear in the original text] (Bergman and Hobson, 2002: 105).<sup>34</sup>

Sainsbury (1996: 163) highlights the impact of direct payment of children's allowance to mothers as a contributing factor to the undermining of the father-breadwinner model in the 1940s. However, Bergman and Hobson (2002: 105) suggest that 'the real turning point' occurred in the 1970s with policy interventions concerning redistribution that further undermined the male breadwinner system. Thus, tax reforms founded on the premise that all workers be treated as individuals removed the marriage subsidy that was paid to men married to housewives. In addition, the tax rate of married women's salaries was formerly calculated by adding the wife's wages to her husband's and then taxing them at the highest rate. This practice was also abolished. Bergman and Hobson (2002) note that widows' pensions represented 'the last residue' of the male breadwinner model and were finally phased out in the late 1980s.

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<sup>33</sup> Group 222 initiated many of the political debates with respect to gender equality. They were also instrumental in the formulation of related social policy. The number 222 was the address of one of its members, Annika Baude, a prominent social democrat (Baude, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> The Swedish women's movement has been criticised for a heterosexist bias. Rosenberg (2002) suggests that the Swedish women's movement has a history of neglecting lesbian-specific issues.

Swedish equality discourse emphasises the benefits of shared parenthood for women and men, in addition to the advantages for children in attending the public childcare system. Nonetheless, this rhetoric co-exists with prevalent ideas about the importance of mothers' accessibility to their children. Swedish research clearly shows that women's work orientation correlates to their occupation and social position. As a result, highly educated women who have professional, independent jobs are strongly committed to both work and the family. In contrast, research on women with less advantaged socio-economic status are primarily oriented toward family life and as a result their working lives are organised around a caregiving role (Elvin-Nowak, 1999).

Several researchers have pointed out that modern femininity in Sweden is based on participation in fields that in previous decades were considered the domain of men, such as paid employment. Lifestyles based on more traditional gender roles (such as becoming a full-time housewife) are no longer regarded as a positive expression of femininity (Haavind, 1998). Elvin-Nowak (1999) found this line of reasoning consistent with the findings of her research on motherhood in contemporary Sweden. She uncovered a discourse of motherhood in which the child's needs are central, but where the mother, in accordance with the equality discourse, is also expected to find her well-being external to the child and family. She concludes that in Sweden women acting as a sole caregiver after their child/ren's infancy, face criticism because their situation is considered to represent "*blatant subordination and excessively traditional femininity*" (p. 61). Swedish discourses of gender equality in which women's and men's life paths are expected to approximate one another produce a normative understanding of femininity and masculinity in which both women and men are expected to want and enjoy a life independent of their partner and child: '*The mother who questions this by giving up a job outside the home thus also questions the ideology of equality, and becomes a representative for an ideal considered to be antiquated*' (Elvin-Nowak, 1999: 63).

However, women are nonetheless in a double bind, as mothers who prioritise a job or career over the family risk even greater disapproval. Since motherhood is

constructed around accessibility, women in paid employment are constantly judged as to the performance and integration of their roles as worker and mother. According to Elvin-Nowak (1999: 72), the mother who does not prioritise her child breaks an invisible taboo: “*This mother actualises the gender neutrality norm from the ideology of equality, which is seldom desirable in reality*”.

### Fatherhood in Sweden

Bergman and Hobson (2002) provide an illuminating overview of the historical context for the changing relationship between gender, fatherhood and social policy in Sweden. They argue that the Swedish welfare state has played a unique and active role in the normative regulation of fatherhood. This is illustrated through the introduction of policies reserving part of the parental leave allowance for fathers and laws that enforce the obligations of biological fathers to their children after divorce through a system of shared custody.

Sweden began to regulate the formal acknowledgement of paternity for children born outside marriage in the first decades of the twentieth century. Unlike many countries (including Ireland) where paternity is related to marriage, a law passed in Sweden as early as 1917 required that the paternity of all children be established. The impetus behind this legislation was concern for the material well-being of unmarried mothers and their children, as Sweden had one of the highest illegitimacy rates in Europe. In addition, infant mortality was higher among children born outside of marriage and they were disproportionately represented in foster care and orphanages. The 1917 act also obliged men to make an economic contribution to their children's upkeep, regardless of marital status (Bergman and Hobson, 2002). A further legal change in the postwar era ensured the inheritance rights of children with unmarried parents (Björnberg, 1998). More recently, Swedish legislation has moved from a protection of the rights of children born outside marriage, to an emphasis on the right of a child to know the identity of her or his biological parents. However, the increasing emphasis on biological paternity from the early twentieth century also reflects efforts to ensure that men were held responsible for the maintenance for someone else's biological child. It has also been suggested that the emphasis on biological

fatherhood was contiguous with eugenicist discourses of the 1930 and 1940s. In 1933 a law was passed allowing for blood tests establishing the identity of biological parents (Bergman and Hobson, 2002).

Legal practice also began to emphasise the role of biology in the regulation of fatherhood. Bergman and Hobson (2002) note that despite the plurality of family forms and constellations, biological fatherhood remains crucial to the coding of men as fathers in the Swedish welfare state. Following the publication and subsequent discussion of a government commission on Family and Marriage, a dramatic change in the construction of fatherhood took place during the 1970s. The role of fathers as financial providers was replaced with an emphasis on men as participatory fathers. The rights of the child were considered paramount and the relationship between individual parents was not to interfere with their responsibilities and rights with regard to parenting. As a result, men were now conferred with official decision-making rights, irrespective of whether they were residential parents or not. Joint custody is strongly supported in the event of relationship breakdown between parents and is considered to be in the best interests of children. Changes to the Parental Code in 1998 now allow courts to rule in favour of joint custody even when one parent is opposed to it. Even in situations where a biological father has lost contact with a child or children and their mother's new partner has been involved in raising them, the biological father is entitled to demand visitation rights or custody (Bergman and Hobson, 2002). Perhaps the most dramatic indication of the social policy efforts to ensure that men participate in family life, is the '*pappa månad*' or father's month, introduced in 1994 as part of the parental leave provisions. According to this law, one of the twelve months of parental leave available to parents is reserved for fathers (and one month for mothers) and is not exchangeable. This provision for fathers was recently extended to two months in 2003.

However, an examination of the impact of social policy on men's behaviour reveals disappointing results. While studies indicate that children are the primary motivation for Swedish men to adjust their professional activity to their family lives (Björnberg, 1998) and more Swedish men than men in other countries base their identity on their family life, men's involvement in household work and in

childcare is lower than that of women. Men do one third of what their partners do, even when both have full-time jobs. Thus, Björnberg (1998) argues that men tend to be child-oriented but less motivated to do the housework. In Sweden, about 30 per cent of fathers take up some part of parental leave. Although Swedish feminists have expressed disappointment with this low percentage, given the incentives to fathers, it is still reflective of the more active fathering role in Sweden, relative to many other countries. The recent extension of the period of parental leave reserved for fathers from one month to two months reflects an effort to encourage men to play a more active role. Despite the problematic implications of certain aspects of the active fathering discourse in Sweden, in many ways it represents a move away from gendered essentialist notions of biological motherhood and often constitutes an effort to ensure that men share caring responsibilities. However, in the view of Bergman and Hobson (2002: 124), the emphasis on biological fatherhood in Sweden has meant '*celebrating participatory fathering, while at the same time not disturbing the division of labour within the family or the gendered inequalities in the labour market*'. Irrespective of whether the emphasis on participatory fatherhood has been emancipatory or not, it has become central to Swedish men's identities (Plantin, 2001) and to Swedish family discourses.

## Employment

The Swedish welfare state has supported women's participation in the workforce with subsidised public childcare and generous parental leave. This is reflected in Swedish women's employment rates, which are comparable to men's. Perhaps more surprisingly, Sweden has one of the highest fertility rates in Europe, although it has dropped substantially in recent years from 2.1 in 1989 to 1.5 in 2002.<sup>35</sup> Hoem (1990) attributed the high fertility rate in Sweden to progressive social policy that enabled women to combine work and care responsibilities. Chesnais (1996) compared Sweden with Italy and also concluded that policies designed to facilitate the integration of work and care responsibilities in fact contribute to higher fertility rates. However, fertility in Sweden has dropped

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<sup>35</sup> Statistics Sweden (2003) Women and Men in Sweden: Facts and Figures 2002. Sweden: Statistiska Centralbyrån.

substantially in recent years. This has been attributed to increasing unemployment and reduced levels of financial support for families. Although the level of support remains higher in Sweden than in most other European countries, Hoem and Hoem (1996) suggest that Swedes have experienced considerable 'relative deprivation' in recent years and this has influenced their fertility.<sup>36</sup>

The high labour market participation rate of Swedish women is one indication of the level of support for female employment.<sup>37</sup> Support for the dual earner family is reflected in generous parental leave allowances (including leave days to care for sick children), in addition to job security ensuring that posts remain open while parents are on leave. All workers are entitled to five weeks of vacation annually, a further incentive to women's participation in the labour force (Hobson, 1993). The conditions of solo mothers provide another example of the extent to which the male breadwinner model has been undermined in Sweden. As Hobson & Takahashi (1997) note, solo mothers in Sweden experience much lower levels of poverty compared to their counterparts in many other Western countries. Nyberg (2002) suggests that although the capacity of Swedish solo mothers to support themselves through paid employment has been affected by the economic decline of the 1990s, it has improved significantly since the 1970s. However, women's capacity to form autonomous households has improved through higher transfers, rather than higher labour market earnings.

Analyses of the historical trajectory of Swedish family policies concur that important initiatives took place in the 1930s and 1940s (Hirdman, 1989, 1998; Bergman and Hobson, 2002).<sup>38</sup> From the late 1960s, expert discourses connected gender equality to men's roles in the family and the dual parenting model. Swedish media debated sex roles and equality in the family throughout the late

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Murphy-Lawless, J. & McCarthy, J. (1999: 89).

<sup>37</sup> However, although most women work full-time, they are over-represented in the part-time sector. Part-time employment represented nearly 15 percent of total employment in Sweden in 1998. The average female share of part-time employment from 1995-1998 was 76.4 percent (International Labour Organisation website) [<http://www.ilo.org>].

<sup>38</sup> These initiatives were largely inspired by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal's famous book Kris i Befolkningsfrågan [Crisis in the Population Question] (1934). Hirdman (1989) in her discussion of the Swedish welfare state model emphasises the socialist sympathies of the Myrdals. She suggests that Alva Myrdal in particular believed that institutions such as childcare centres were the best way to raise children, rather than children being cared for by their mothers, who had not received special education for this role.

1960s and early 1970s (Hirdman, 1998). This had different implications for women and men. While women were encouraged to participate in the paid labour force, men were expected to play a more active caring role in family life. Although these discussions challenged hegemonic motions of masculinity and the construction of men as breadwinners, they were not radical in the sense that they were centred around the traditional nuclear family (Leira, 1993; Sainsbury, 1996). To some extent, the sex role debate addressed the consequences for family life of women's widespread entry into the labour market. Bergman and Hobson (2002: 106-107) suggest that '*in a society with a history of social engineering it is not surprising that the dual earner family model would authorize experts to define new parenting styles and with the loss of the full time housewife, the construction of explicit norms for fathering.*' Swedish women's mass entry into the labour market has not been accompanied by men participating equally in domestic work. Recent decades have however witnessed men becoming more active in family life (Björnberg, 1998).

### **Families and the Social Security System**

The public provision of childcare was a fundamental demand of the Swedish women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s and 'day-care for all' was a popular feminist slogan (Bergqvist, 1999). Eighty-seven percent of children up to six years of age in Sweden are registered in some form of childcare (Statistics Sweden, 2002). Parents are entitled to twelve months of paid parental leave (usually at 80% of their salary, although there are ceiling levels). This can be extended over a longer period of time if parents choose to take a smaller payment each month.<sup>39</sup>

Sweden became the first country to introduce a reform of parental leave that included fathers in 1974. This policy innovation was explicitly meant to contribute to equality between women and men. It was based on the assumption of the dual breadwinner family. Parents were seen as economically independent individuals, both with obligations and rights in respect of their children as well as the labour market (Bergqvist, 1999). Parental leave allowance has been set at

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<sup>39</sup> See Nyberg (2003) for a detailed account of parental leave provisions in Sweden.

relatively high levels of compensation, which has minimised loss of income. In Sweden, the scheme includes a ‘father’s month’ and a ‘mother’s month’, the entitlements to which are not transferable between parents (unless there is an unknown father, as in the case of children conceived through DI, but this can cause complication with local social security offices).

### **Marriage and Cohabitation**

Sweden has a long tradition of low marriage rates in addition to high rates of cohabitation and births outside marriage (Bergman and Hobson, 2002). Many couples do not marry until after the birth of a child or children, if at all.<sup>40</sup> Although it has been argued that the Swedish preference for cohabitation is indicative of a decline in the institutionalisation of the family (Popenoe, 1988), nuclear family ideology nonetheless remains strong in Sweden.

Søland (1998) examines the discursive landscape accompanying the introduction of registered partnerships in Denmark. She argues that marriage has lost symbolic value in Denmark and has therefore been extended to same sex couples because it no longer represents the locus of normative family ideologies. In her view, lesbian and gay actors and organisations have been too conformist in their pursuit of this possibility and have unquestioningly accepted middle-class ideals of ‘decent lifestyles’. As a result registered partnerships may create a new normative framework of gay life that excludes ‘less respectable’ modes of homosexual lifestyles. She is strongly critical of a politics of assimilation and suggests that the queer movement should retain a commitment to diverse lifestyles and visions of kinship. Halvorsen (1998) in her discussion of the Registered Partnership Act that was passed in Norway in 1993, also illustrates that the passage of this legislation is indicative of the extent to which cohabitation has become an acceptable norm among heterosexuals. She notes that relatively few couples registered their partnership, thus suggesting that the

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<sup>40</sup> Statistics indicate that couples who begin cohabiting in their twenties and thirties eventually marry in their forties if the relationship has lasted. Marriage appears to have become a largely pragmatic arrangement, rather than a symbolic one. A brief rise in the number of marriages took place during the 1990s, just prior to the cut off date for access to a widow’s pension (Family formation and family dissolution in the 1980s, Official Statistics Sweden, 1990).

Act has symbolic rather than practical value. In Halvorsen's view, lesbian and gay people are obtaining formal rights in areas that are of declining social and symbolic value, as the demarcation of new boundaries for the legitimising of relationships and lifestyles are occurring elsewhere. This analysis also appears to be applicable to the Swedish context. Thus, while legislation extends the rights of marriage to lesbian and gay couples in the Nordic countries, parenting remains far more controversial, as illustrated by the legislative restrictions for lesbians and gay men concerning adoption and assisted conception.

### **Lesbians in Sweden**

A recent survey of attitudes towards homosexuals in Sweden was widely reported in Swedish media.<sup>41</sup> The changes in attitudes over the previous twenty years were hailed as an indication of major progress. In 1980, only 30 percent of Swedish people felt comfortable about having a homosexual as a friend. By 2000, as many as 70 percent indicated that they did not object to having homosexual friends. Whether this news is worth celebrating is debatable, but the study did indicate some striking findings concerning the last bastion of heterosexuality in Sweden – the family. Over 60 percent of respondents did not support lesbian and gay adoption. Interestingly, only 51 percent of the 668 adult Swedish residents surveyed supported same sex marriage, despite the introduction of registered partnerships in 1995 (Landén and Innala, 2002). Nonetheless, Sweden is often considered to be one of the most progressive countries in the world concerning lesbian and gay rights.

Homosexuality was decriminalised in Sweden as early as 1944. RFSL<sup>42</sup> (The Swedish Federation for Gays and Lesbians) was established in 1950. The first openly gay Swedish public figure came out in 1951 and lesbian and gay social life has been increasingly visible in Sweden since the late 1950s. Interestingly, it has been a principle of Swedish law since 1955 that the sexual orientation of parents should not influence custody disputes (SOU 1984: 63, 274). In 1973 the

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<sup>41</sup> See for example *Dagens Nyheter* dagens debattartikel, 'Ökad tolerans mot homosexuella' [Increased tolerance towards homosexuals], August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2000. The research was eventually published in an academic journal in 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Riksförbundet för sexuellt likaberättigande.

Swedish parliament declared after a vote that Sweden should view homosexuality as equal to heterosexuality. In 1978 the age of consent was made the same for heterosexuals and homosexuals. Section 9 of the Penal Code, the Prohibition Against Unlawful Discrimination (1976) was extended in 1987 to include sexual orientation (Widegren and Ytterberg, 1995). In 1999 this was further amended to include more extensive obligations in relation to employment. Lesbian couples are afforded a measure of legal protection through the recognition of cohabiting relationships (the sambo law) and the law on registered partnerships. The sambo law does not give rights of inheritance and also excludes certain social benefits.<sup>43</sup> Registered partnerships (gay marriage) came into effect in 1995. The partnerships are almost identical to heterosexual marriage, except for the crucial distinction of parenting rights. Registered partners are expressly prohibited by law from adoption, fostering, assisted insemination, fertility treatment and parental leave. Finally in 1999, an Ombudsman against Discrimination because of Sexual orientation,<sup>44</sup> was appointed by the government.

Lesbian mothers are only able to share parental leave with their partners if they are in a registered partnership. This is an interesting regulation of lesbian parenting, as the same rule does not apply to cohabiting heterosexuals. A Swedish lesbian mother has the right to the same benefits as any other Swedish lone mother. However, there are complications in the case of lesbians (and single heterosexual women) who become pregnant through insemination at a sperm bank abroad, as the name of the father has to be declared on the birth certificate (and in order to qualify for lone parent benefit). This situation with the birth certificate does not apply to heterosexual couples who conceive by insemination.

Biological parents are automatically awarded custody upon the birth of a child. However, legislative changes that came into effect in January 2003 allow lesbian

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<sup>43</sup> Recognition of cohabiting relationships – heterosexual and homosexual - was introduced in 1987. Initially, these were two separate laws. However, the sambo laws were eventually rewritten and combined to cover both heterosexuals and same sex couples under one law in 2003 [Sambolag (2003: 376)].

<sup>44</sup> Hans Ytterberg, a former associate judge with substantial experience working for the rights of lesbians, gays and bisexuals. The Ombudsman was interviewed for this research study in February, 2002.

and gay people to adopt. This includes the possibility of second parent adoption for lesbian co-parents, although it is dependent upon the biological father rescinding all formal rights. Given that many Swedish lesbians parent with involved donors, this situation does not allow for all possible configurations of lesbian parent families, where there may be more than two active parents.

### *Insemination, adoption, fostering*

A paternity case in Sweden in 1981 involving a child who was conceived by insemination served as the impetus behind a nationwide controversy over donor insemination. The Swedish lower court pronounced the child in question ‘fatherless’, when the social father challenged paternity on the basis that insemination had taken place without his consent. The ‘Haparanda case’ sparked a debate which resulted in the introduction of legislation regulating donor insemination in 1984. Three mandatory conditions concerning DI were introduced: psychosocial screening of prospective parents; the registration of DI births in the National Population Register; and the anonymity of donors was outlawed, introducing a system of open donor identity. This latter innovation was framed in terms of the ‘child’s right to know’ (Liljestrand, 1995). According to Liljestrand (1995: 271) the debate over DI that raged in Sweden in the early 1980s was ‘*a smokescreen for issues other than the child’s best interests*’. She further contends that DI was constructed as a social problem within the terms of the debate because it represented a challenge to normative frameworks and ideologies. In addition, she argues that the possibility of single or lesbian women conceiving children through DI constituted a central dimension of this threat. In Liljestrand’s view, this is because they would enable the conception of children who would grow up without a father and knowledge of their paternity.

Donor insemination is only available to married heterosexual couples in Sweden. Unmarried heterosexual women and all lesbians are prohibited by law from being inseminated within the health care system, although this obviously does not prevent home inseminations from taking place. Many Swedish lesbians travel to neighbouring Denmark, where a single clinic in Copenhagen offers DI services to single heterosexual women and lesbians. Interestingly, Sweden is the

only country in the world that has a system of compulsory donor identity disclosure for DI services. Thus, heterosexual couples who utilise this service in Sweden cannot choose an anonymous donor, as all donors must agree to make their identity known to any future child when she or he turns eighteen. This remarkable stipulation provides a particularly clear illustration of the emphasis on biological fatherhood and knowledge of bio-paternity in a Swedish context. There have been difficulties in achieving a sufficient supply of donations for Swedish sperm banks however, resulting in lengthy waiting lists for heterosexual couples who wish to use this service. A consequence of this which has been completely absent from discussions in Sweden is that heterosexual Swedish couples are also travelling to Denmark to avail of insemination.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the introduction of registered partnerships in 1995, adoption was restricted to heterosexual couples and single people in Sweden until new legislation in 2003 enabled same sex couples to adopt. Although single lesbians were not formerly excluded in the previous adoption prohibitions, it seemed unlikely that a lesbian who was open about her sexuality would be approved for adoption. A Supreme Court verdict from 1993 denied a man living with another man the right to adopt a child on his own (Berggren, 1995). The new legislation includes second parent adoption, where a lesbian or gay man can become a legally recognised parent of their partner's biological child. This is a tremendous advance from the previous restrictions on lesbian and gay parenting rights in Sweden and represents the culmination of several years of activist lobbying and governmental investigation. The primary legal vulnerability has been the lack of formal recognition of co-parents. However, adoption by a co-parent can only take place if she and her partner are in a registered partnership. The legal situation with regard to fostering is less clear. A lesbian couple, cohabiting or registered partners, might be allowed to become foster parents as there is no law against it. There is one Swedish case of a gay male couple becoming foster

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with midwife, Copenhagen Clinic, February 2002.

parents for a gay teenage boy (Berggren, 1995). Fostering gay and lesbian teenagers is therefore possible, but remains exceptional.<sup>46</sup>

Several Members of Parliament have proposed motions to change the law on adoption and insemination since 1995. While the adoption law has recently been altered, assisted conception remains controversial. Although the discourse around lesbian and gay parenting in Sweden has ostensibly been centrally concerned with the welfare of the child, it should be noted that such debates concerning 'the best interests of the child' often take a homophobic form. With the publication of the Swedish government report (SOU 2001: 10) indicating that children of lesbian and gay parents are not harmed by their parents' sexuality, the discussion became more focused on adoption. The Ombudsman against Discrimination on the grounds of Sexual Orientation (HomO), has suggested that the debates within the commission were overshadowed by the issue of adoption.<sup>47</sup> There was considerable popular concern that extending adoption rights to lesbians and gay men would have a negative impact on heterosexual prospective adoptive parents, as most adoptions involve children born abroad and their countries of origin might object to sending children to Sweden to be raised by same sex couples.

In Sweden, very few children are given up for adoption every year and most adoptions involve children born abroad. According to the Adoption Centre, Sweden, the number of Swedes adopted from abroad is 41,000 and this figure grows by approximately 1,000 every year. Sweden today has more internationally adopted children per capita than any other country in the world. The most common countries of origin for these children are Columbia, South Korea, China, Vietnam, Russia, Belarus, South Africa, India, Bulgaria and Ethiopia.<sup>48</sup> The imperialist dimensions of international adoption have been increasingly debated in recent years (SOU 2001: 10). Nonetheless it remains an accepted practice for (predominantly white) Swedish couples who would otherwise be unable to become parents.

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<sup>46</sup> One Swedish couple who participated in this research did however qualify in 2002 as a 'contact family', or part-time/respite foster carers of a special needs child who was in a long-term foster care placement.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, February 2002.

<sup>48</sup> This information is provided on the homepage of the Adoption Centre, Sweden:  
<http://www.adoptionscentrum.se/>

However, it is clear from my interviews that although second parent adoption is a crucial issue for lesbian parents, international adoption is not the means by which many would choose to become parents. In fact, assisted reproduction is a very important issue for lesbians wishing to embark on parenthood. Yet this has rarely been part of the public discourse concerning lesbian and gay parenting in Sweden, although this may change now that the laws on adoption were revised in June 2002 to include lesbian and gay parents. Assisted reproduction therefore remains the last barrier to full legal equality between heterosexual and homosexual parents in Sweden. In contrast, Irish lesbians have accessed these services due to their relative invisibility whereby they are not formally recognised through the act of prohibiting them from using assisted reproduction services. It must be noted however that this research took place prior to the innovative legislative changes regarding adoption that have recently been introduced in Sweden.

### **Previous Research on Lesbian Motherhood in Sweden and Ireland**

The paucity of research on lesbian parenting in Sweden is surprising given the level of public and political interest in the issue. There have been consistent calls for more research on lesbian and gay parenting in Sweden by political parties. The government commission publication on the children of homosexual parents is the largest report examining this topic to date in Sweden and also included interviews with lesbian and gay parents, culminating in recommendations to equalise parenting rights between heterosexuals and homosexuals. There have also been several leaflets produced by RFSL, the national LGBT organisation (RFSL, 1997, 1999). Helmadotter and Jansson (1998) produced a handbook for lesbian and gay parents, in which they examined the reproductive decision-making process, legislative and social issues. An edited anthology with chapters by lesbian and gay parents in Sweden constitutes another important contribution (Eman, 1996). These experiential accounts highlight the existence of social and legal discrimination and parents' efforts to protect their children. Other research has outlined changing attitudes towards lesbian and gay parenting. Landén and Innala (2002) note that more Swedes are supportive of homosexual adoption than in previous years, but that nonetheless most participants were unsupportive. An

undergraduate dissertation (Enero & Lundin, 2000) examined the relationship between attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexual parenting and political affiliation. Their results indicated a positive correlation between the variables, with attitudes reflecting the standpoints of the political parties participants supported.

Even less has been written about lesbian parenting in Ireland. The research that has been carried out primarily takes the form of an undergraduate and a postgraduate dissertation. O'Connell's (2000) MA thesis in Women's Studies on lesbian reproductive decision-making is the most significant study to date and was used to inform a recent government commission on assisted reproduction in Ireland. Her work identifies the lack of comprehensive guidelines concerning the availability of DI and recommends that all assisted reproduction services be made available to lesbians. She interviewed five lesbian couples for her research. Due to difficulties in recruiting participants for her study, only three of these couples were living in Ireland. Her research sample included lesbians who had conceived in prior heterosexual relationships, rather than an exclusive focus on lesbians who became parents in the context of a lesbian lifestyle. She concluded that lesbians become parents in diverse ways and that their choices are constrained by the absence of a supportive legislative framework.

Spillane (2001) examined reproductive decision-making among childless lesbians as part of her undergraduate dissertation in sociology. She interviewed nine lesbians living in Ireland and found that although participants were not mothers, they often had significant relationships with children through extended family and friends. Her findings also suggest that participants usually did not make a conscious decision to remain childfree, but rather the absence of social support and lack of any impetus to embark on parenthood shaped their life paths.

The Irish Equality Authority produced a report (Mee & Ronayne, 2000) on the legal implications of partnership rights for lesbian and gay couples. Their report included an examination of the legal framework for lesbian and gay parenting issues, including adoption, fostering, legal guardianship, custody and access, financial support, the registration of births, passports, fertility services and

surrogacy. The purpose of the report was to clarify the current legal status of same sex couples and the changes that would be required in order to recognise their partnerships. The publication therefore acts as an information resource and does not include policy recommendations. However, in a report on lesbian, gay and bisexual equality issues the following year (2001), the Equality Authority did recommend formal legal recognition of same sex partnerships and lesbian and gay parenting rights (including adoption and assisted reproduction).

This review cannot be exhaustive, as there are undoubtedly other reports and investigations that have not been widely published or disseminated. However, it does provide an indication of the scarcity of research on this topic in both countries. The predominance of North American and British research in this field clearly needs to be redressed, in order to examine the significance of local contexts for lesbian parents' experiences and needs.

### **A Comparative Study of Lesbian Parenting in Sweden and Ireland**

Comparative analysis of lesbian parents in these two social contexts facilitates an exploration of the ways participants negotiate hegemonic discourses of kinship while situated differently from the norm. An examination of the experiences of lesbian parents highlights how individual societies facilitate or restrict women's autonomy according to their sexuality. According to Reinhartz (1992), there is a paucity of feminist cross-cultural research. Oyen (1990: 1) argues that there is an increasing demand for comparative studies due to the "*growing internationalisation and the concomitant export and import of social, cultural and economic manifestations across national borders*". She further argues that this globalising trend may require that researchers doing comparative studies shift their emphasis from "*seeking uniformity among variety to studying the preservation of enclaves of uniqueness among growing homogeneity and uniformity*". Further, overarching comparative analyses can obscure significant aspects of local social policy formulations. Clearly, Ireland and Sweden have distinctive approaches to parenting, which are coded in their legislation and social security systems. The contrast between the two in terms of social policy frameworks regarding gender and familial relationships is significant. There is

considerably more support for women's autonomous households in Sweden, as illustrated by women's greater participation in the labour market and the availability of parental leave and subsidised childcare, all of which affect women's choices regarding the financial and employment implications of motherhood. Queer activism has become increasingly networked on an international scale over the past twenty years and this is reflected in the growing emphasis on transnationalism in queer research (Corber and Valocchi, 2003). Yet the Nordic countries, including Sweden, have more formal rights and a high level of media visibility for lesbians, gays and bisexuals than many other countries. This contrasts with the Republic of Ireland, where lesbians and gay men have fewer legal rights, less recognition and are more marginalised from mainstream discourses than in Sweden (McDonnell, 1999). Any advantages they may have compared to Sweden (in Ireland, access to fertility treatment and formerly DI, both in the private sector) appears to have been accrued by their very invisibility. As policy-makers are not aware that lesbians and gay men are actively seeking these services, they are not explicitly prohibited from using them. It may also be the case that the tendency toward a liberal market policy in Ireland facilitates access to private services, unlike in a social democratic society such as Sweden. These social policy differences shape the context for lesbian women's choices and experiences in local contexts and are therefore pertinent to any analysis of lesbian parenting.

Unlike comparative studies of welfare states that examine macro structural processes, this research project takes a qualitative approach, exploring how lesbian women negotiate possibilities and limitations within two welfare state contexts. Policy discourse and formulations regarding gender, sexuality and 'the family' set the context for normative understandings of kinship and equality politics. A comparative analysis of lesbian parenting places the perspectives of lesbian parents at the centre of analysis. Rather than simply compare their narratives to an implicit (and unidimensional) heterosexual model, Irish and Swedish lesbian parents' discourses are examined relationally to each other.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Public Knowledge/Private Lives: Research Ethics and Sample

Feminist critical interventions into debates about epistemology and ontology in the social sciences have been fundamentally concerned with power dynamics in research and the ethical treatment of participants. Social research requires sensitivity to a range of issues concerning power, identity, difference, representation and context. The practice of research consistently necessitates making decisions with ethical dimensions. Debates about ethics in feminist research have changed over time but the ethical dilemmas inevitably encountered in social research remain difficult to resolve. Second wave feminist research transformed the epistemological field by a critical engagement with androcentric theories and epistemologies, through work on and with marginalised subjects. More recent discussions of feminist epistemologies have addressed complexities of power dynamics in the research process and the ways that gender is mediated by for example 'race', ethnicity, class, age, (dis)ability and sexuality. Ethical considerations are not merely limited to the dynamics of the interaction between the researcher and researched during the data collection process however. This is particularly apparent within the literature (both feminist and non-feminist) on participants engaged in covert activities (e.g. Bourgois, 1995; Feenan, 2001; Mahmood, 2001). Such work is compelled to address the consequences of the research for participants in ethical terms as the researcher confronts the potential outcomes of making details of participants' activities public knowledge when writing up research.

Although there are clearly differences between lesbian parents as a research sample and groups engaged in covert activities, such as paramilitary groups or drug dealers for example, the dynamic of public knowledge and private lives remain central to ethical considerations in this study. In exploring the lives of lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland, I carried out research with participants whose negotiations of local contexts were manifested differently. Both during and post-fieldwork in Ireland, I have grappled with the dilemma of researching a

group whose very invisibility accrued them certain advantages in a social climate that is traditionally unsupportive of lesbians and gay men. The nature of this dilemma highlights my continued negotiation of the field long after I have left specific spatial boundaries and thus supports a conceptualisation of 'the field' that goes beyond the notion of a particular spatial territory. The contrast between the two samples in terms of negotiating (in)visibility illustrated the complex ways in which participants resisted dominant discursive modes of politics and heteronormative space. This was occasionally manifested in potential participants' refusal to participate in research and thus evoked important ethical issues: Could the act of doing research on lesbian parents in Ireland potentially highlight the existence of this group in ways that could be detrimental to their well-being? Following a discussion of feminist epistemology and research ethics, this dilemma will be examined in greater depth in the following sections and the chapter will conclude with descriptive information about the research sample.

### **Feminist Epistemology: Positionality and Reflexivity**

This research study follows a feminist postmodern approach to discourse and epistemology. Feminist writers have extensively critiqued a traditional positivist conceptualisation of the research process whereby the researcher acts as an objective 'expert' extracting knowledge from passive research 'subjects' (e.g. Stanley & Wise, 1983; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Mohanty, 1991; Stanley, 1997). The concept of universal knowledge has been challenged by feminist researchers who have pointed to the ways that androcentric research has often been presented as representative of all human experience, thereby ignoring or pathologising women's experiences. In contemporary feminist debates, research is understood to be a dynamic process in which knowledge is created interactively by multiple actors, situated differently. Thus, the identity of the researcher and context of research influences the epistemological project. Feminist epistemologies therefore emphasise the non-neutrality of the researcher, the agency of participants, the situatedness of knowledge and promote sensitivity to the power relations inherent in the research process.

Harding (1986) identifies three stages in the development of feminist epistemology. She terms the first stage 'feminist empiricism', in which feminists attempted to remove sexist bias from research in the belief that it could then become 'neutral'. There are obvious problems with this endeavour, as it is premised on a belief in objectivity that many feminists have argued is unobtainable. Harding suggests that this effort to incorporate women is inevitably doomed as it fails to address the problematic assumptions that are constitutive of traditional science. She suggests the creation of alternative theories. The second stage identified by Harding is that of 'feminist standpoint', of which she is an advocate. Within this framework, feminist research acknowledges gendered social relations and brings this awareness to bear on analyses of women's lives. This provides the possibility of more nuanced and inclusive understandings. In Harding's view, feminist standpoint can be considered a 'successor science' (Harding, 1991). However, later theorists have highlighted the silences within (and therefore partial nature of) Harding's work - for example the failure to address Black and lesbian women's experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1990). The third position that Harding outlines is that of feminist postmodernism, which is critical of meta-narratives of women's experiences and rejects the conceptualisation of a unitary self. All identities and narratives are perceived as fragmented and in a state of flux. These debates and developments have highlighted the contested nature of objectivity and relativism within feminist epistemological work.

Feminist epistemological work has been centrally concerned with the legitimation of knowledge and the role of experience and interpretation. While research that aims to uncover women's voices is clearly engaging with dominant frameworks that marginalise women's perspectives, the issue of interpretation remains critical. Participants' narrative accounts are mediated by interpretation and the researcher again interprets those narratives in particular ways. No one method can 'neutralise' the process of interpretation, which is inevitably a political and contested activity. Feminist researchers therefore attempt to acknowledge the selective grounds on which interpretations rest and the possibility of silences and absences in the research data.

Stanley & Morley (1988) suggested that feminist researchers should concern themselves with work that was 'by, on and for women'. In their view, this would facilitate work grounded in egalitarian relations, based on shared epistemological perspectives between researcher and participants, with a political agenda of social change. However, the assumption that a shared gender will facilitate understanding between the researcher and researched constructs gender as a monolithic category independent of other characteristics. Researchers have inevitably encountered problems as a result of attempting to create a shared understanding on the basis of gender, which also often assumed for example a similar ethnicity and class (Riessman, 1987; Gilbert, 1994). It should be noted however, that power dynamics in research are not always biased in favour of the researcher, as for example Phoenix's (1994) account of her experiences as a black woman researching white women vividly illustrates. The 'matching' of characteristics between the researcher and participants constructs identity as a singular resource and also fails to address the epistemological perspective of researchers from marginalised groups carrying out research on members of hegemonic groups.

In a review of feminist writing about positionality, Rose (1997) critiques what she terms the 'reflexive landscape of power'. In her view, feminist conceptualisations of power relations construct the research relationship as one where '*the relationship between researcher and researched can only be mapped in one of two ways: either as a relationship of difference, articulated through an objectifying distance; or as a relationship of sameness, understood as the researcher and researched being in the same position*' (1997: 313). She argues that within this framework there is no possibility that the researcher and participant may understand across 'difference', or fail to connect through their apparent 'sameness'. Indeed, insider/outsider debates suggest that the relationship between researcher and informant can be reduced to social categories such as gender or class and as such these identities somehow lack fluidity. Yet various writers have pointed to the dynamic quality of the boundary between researcher and participants, which is not a fixed entity, but mutable and varied (Phoenix, 1994; Valentine, 2002). Clearly, relationships of power and potential exploitation are inherent to the research process and require constant

negotiation. Rose's criticism that feminist researchers reproduce the objectifying distance of traditional positivism by conceptualising difference as distance is a useful insight. Nonetheless, important differences remain between feminist and traditional positivist research, in terms of aims and approaches.

Mullings (1999: 4) proposes that researchers seek what she terms 'positional spaces', transitory shared spaces that are not informed by identity-based differences as the latter rarely act as stable indicators of an individual's positionality. Certainly, identities and performances can be misinterpreted and are therefore uncertain. Valentine (2002) suggests that the interview is always a 'joint production' as a result of the diverse intersections of identities and biographies. In her view, rather than seeking to identify a 'transparent knowable self', feminist researchers should instead focus on the 'tensions, conflicts and unexpected occurrences' that emerge in the research process (2002: 126). This approach emphasises the agency of participants, who may resist the researchers' assumptions and interpretations. Contemporary feminist researchers acknowledge that the possibility of exploitative social relations between researcher and researched are always present. Reflexive accounts of the research process help to identify power dynamics in research, contributing to greater understanding of the epistemological basis of the work. In this chapter, conflict and dilemmas in research are reflexively analysed to illustrate how the situatedness of the researcher affected the production of knowledge and epistemological terrain.

### **Feminist Research Ethics: power, representation and 'the field'**

Qualitative research was initially posited both as an inherently 'feminist' method and as an ideal means of achieving more egalitarian relationships in research. The interactive nature of qualitative methods were considered less objectifying than traditional quantitative methods and allowed women's voices to be integrated into the research process (Bowles & Duelli-Klein, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983). However, these claims have since been challenged by writers who argue that there is no one feminist method and who defend quantitative methods as a useful analytical tool (Kelly et al., 1992; Oakley, 2000). In a discussion of

feminism and ethnography, Stacey (1991) has further suggested that participants are in fact *more* vulnerable to exploitation in this kind of qualitative research, where social interaction facilitates manipulation on the part of researchers. Furthermore, this approach elicits intensely personal information and understandings of the world that are ultimately simply data for the research project, rather than an egalitarian and mutual exchange. Participants in my research for example often appeared to relate to the researcher as a fellow-member of a minority (lesbian) community and interview encounters occasionally developed into more sustained social relationships. While these relationships may have positive advantages for both researcher and researched, they highlight participants' potential vulnerability, as the boundary between research and friendship can become blurred.

Power is inevitably implicated in research at every level of analysis, not just during the data collection process. The researcher is always the final author of a research text and thus has ultimate power regarding whose 'voices' to portray and how. Mohanty (1991) outlines how feminist researchers can be implicated in processes of domination, by contributing to the marginalisation of research participants, while Patai (1991) suggests that it is impossible for U.S. academics to produce truly ethical research about Third World women. Informed by similar concerns regarding 'the appropriation of the voices of "others"', England (1994: 81) opted out of continuing a study of a lesbian community in Toronto. These latter accounts relate to dissimilarity between the researcher and researched. Mohanty and Patai both address the politics of First World woman researching Third World women and in England's case, that of a heterosexual women researching a lesbian community. The different identities of the researcher and participants in these contexts also constitutes a difference in power.

Dilemmas of representation are not restricted to researchers with 'outsider' status. Zavella (1993) found that as a Chicana woman doing ethnographic research on Chicana working mothers, her status as a cultural 'insider' hindered her understanding of the complexities of the research material. She also experienced difficulties in presenting her work on these ethnographic 'others' to her peers. Being a member of a subordinated group under study creates particular

dilemmas in that ‘insider’ researchers experience unique constraints in how they are held accountable to the community being studied. Zavella points out that along with the cooperation facilitated by one’s insider status comes the responsibility to produce analyses that are sympathetic to the interests of the participant group and to share whatever knowledge is generated with them. As an Irish woman in a lesbian relationship with a Swedish woman, my personal status/life facilitated research access to a difficult-to-reach community (lesbian parents) and also engendered responsibilities. Particularly where participants were not known to me personally prior to an interview, advance knowledge of my sexual identity – provided either by a ‘go-between’ or volunteered by myself – often appeared to act as a reassurance. This is not to suggest however, that I was always and everywhere an ‘insider’ or that such categorisations are not mediated by other facets of identity and experience. In Ireland for example, the fact that I am from Dublin, middle-class and childless were markers of my differential situatedness compared to some respondents.

Patai (1991) highlights a further dilemma that arises when researchers – consciously or unconsciously – encourage participants to hope that research will improve their personal circumstances. As McDowell (1999: 239) notes in a consideration of ethical dilemmas in feminist research: ‘*Researchers may inadvertently raise expectations of positive intervention on behalf of participants, leading to feelings of disappointment or betrayal*’. Researchers may also experience pressure to portray communities in specific ways as a result of particular political discourses. While it is in my view important to remain sensitive to the political context of research, this should not inhibit research in ways that are intellectually stultifying. Stacey & Biblarz (2001) have argued that the climate of hostility to lesbian and gay parents has informed researchers’ portrayal of these families as ‘just like’ heterosexual ones. The efforts of researchers to avoid pathologising the children of lesbian and gay parents has often obscured the possibility that these children may be characterised by difference in a *positive* way. However, it is understandable that researchers may feel sensitive to such constraints. Even when our interpretations of research findings are sympathetic to participants, our work may be subject to distortion or

interpreted differently by other readers and thus the participants from marginalised groups we study are potentially vulnerable.

In a discussion of issues of representation and readership, Nast (1994: 60) writes: '*For a number of reasons, we do not attempt to make all things apparent to all people*'. Katz (1994: 71) also suggests that there are potential risks in making '*the practices of the oppressed visible to those who dominate*'. Ribbens and Edwards (1998) argue that some topics of research may allow us to evade the difficult negotiation of ethics and representation more easily than others. In particular, a focus on more 'public' social worlds, and established social science topics, may allow researchers to avoid confronting and exploring them. They point out that issues regarding access, interpretation and analysis have been of concern to qualitative researchers across disciplines for many years. It is the particular topics under consideration – aspects of private, domestic and personal lived experience and understandings – that in their view present researchers with difficult quandaries.

A particularly challenging ethical dilemma occurs when the researcher works with subjugated groups whose experiences are difficult to portray while remaining sympathetic to their marginalised status. Bourgois' (1995) work on crack dealers in Harlem, New York is an interesting example of the problem of presenting politically sensitive material in ways that do not compromise either the analysis or research participants' well-being. While carrying out research with crack dealers, he was faced with numerous difficult ethical dilemmas concerning representation. His research included discovery of crimes committed by participants (e.g. gang rape), which he could not condone. During his fieldwork he attempted to dissuade the crack dealers from selling drugs to pregnant women, an active intervention into the choices and behaviour of participants.<sup>49</sup> Ever aware of the racist stereotyping of this group, he was forced to confront the possibility that he could unwittingly reinforce problematic

<sup>49</sup> This is in my view a highly problematic strategy on Bourgois' part, as the women in question must surely have wanted to obtain drugs. While Bourgois felt culpable for the birth of crack-addicted babies in the absence of his objections, this is nonetheless a controversial construction of the pregnant body, as it prioritises the needs of the foetus over the addiction of the woman. It seems highly unlikely that these women did not in any case obtain the drugs from another source. Further, he did not attempt to challenge participants' sexism to the same degree.

assumptions about them. He attempted to overcome this by using reflexivity to locate the research within the context of wider power relations and by integrating women's experiences in his research. His analysis, an account of the connections between post-Fordism, racism and masculinities, ultimately respects the dignity of participants without romanticising them or flinching from addressing the harsh realities of their lives.

In my research, I have occasionally encountered situations where participants have bypassed official channels in order to achieve their aim of becoming parents. I refer to this only obliquely here, as I have made the decision not to discuss this in any further detail in this dissertation. Unlike Bourgois, who found some of the actions of his participants unconscionable, I have no ethical or moral problem whatsoever with the strategies used by some of the women in my study. On the contrary, I am critical of the prohibitions of state bodies that place obstacles in the path of lesbians attempting to become parents and make the journey to parenthood that much more difficult for many of them. The decision to censor myself on this point and not discuss these alternative strategies has been a fairly straightforward one. What has been far more challenging is the decision about whether to refer to it at all. Even with this short paragraph, I have wondered if I am betraying my participants in some way by referring – however briefly – to the very existence of these alternative strategies.

Kirsch identifies a pressing question for feminist researchers, as '*How can research be made more accessible to wider audiences?*' (1999:1). Clearly, producing research which may be of benefit to participants, and/or which they have access to, is a positive intervention. Yet at times it is precisely the expansion of the audience beyond the academic world that can lead to problems, as already suggested in the case of research on groups engaged in covert activities. This raises difficult questions about the purpose of research, particularly concerning aspects of private life that might be controversial in public discourse. A major ethical issue I encountered in doing research on Irish lesbian parents, was not simply *how* to represent them in the space of the research text, but rather whether to write about them at all. However, as Ribbens & Edwards (1998: 13) suggest, the transformation of 'private knowledge' into '*a*

*more publicly based resistance, or at least a diversification and undermining of hegemonic discourses'* is a valuable goal for researchers. The challenge lies in successfully achieving this in ways that are not harmful to participants.

This concern with the potential impact of research beyond the immediate context of fieldwork pertains to understandings of what constitutes 'the field' in research. The concept of 'the field' as a physically bounded spatial terrain has been challenged by ethnographers. It is increasingly also acknowledged to be located and defined in terms of '*specific political objectives that (as such) cut across time and space*' (Nast, 1994: 57). Rather than a researcher simply returning from 'the field' after a period of intensive research, the ethical considerations and responsibilities relating to issues of representation and difference, continue to inform the research in the writing-up stage. Thus, the ongoing negotiation of such dynamics integral to the research process highlight the spatial assumptions underpinning traditional understandings of 'the field'.

The conceptualisation of 'the field' as both a social and spatial terrain, suggests that the situatedness of the researcher is central to the knowledge produced. Engaging in reflexivity as part of the process of critical analysis will therefore move the discussion beyond an epistemological project of ethics and representation to a consideration of the notions of spatiality underpinning such conceptualisations. I lived in Sweden and Ireland for almost two years during fieldwork. While this research is based primarily on interviews, I also attended numerous relevant events (e.g. Pride) and my embeddedness in queer communities in both countries provided contact with people and knowledge of situations that were pertinent to the research. Katz (1994) concludes that as a '*gendered, historically constituted social and political actor who works as a social scientist and teacher*' her multiple identities require negotiation of the field beyond particular spatial boundaries. Thus, her political engagement and attempts to effect social change mean that she is '*always, everywhere in "the field"*'(p. 72). Similarly, it is the multifaceted nature of these overlapping identities, or rather, the fact that like Katz (1994), 'I am always everywhere in the field', that makes the ethical concerns addressed in this chapter so pressing. While it may be the case that my research findings evoke little or no response

from groups unsupportive of families that do not fit into a traditional heteronormative model, in my view it would be unethical not to consider the potential repercussions of this research for participants. Furthermore, the concerns that are outlined here are of relevance to broader discussions regarding social research ethics.

### **Sweden – discourse of openness**

From my previous experience of doing comparative research on Sweden and Ireland (Ryan-Flood, 1998), I found that there was an advantage in beginning fieldwork in Sweden. As an Irish person, there are certain assumptions or norms within Irish society that are not always evident to me as a cultural insider. In comparing women who have embarked on parenthood within the context of a lesbian lifestyle, aspects of that experience which may be different because of the cultural context, would become more obvious if I carried out interviews in Sweden first. Any findings that challenged my own hitherto unacknowledged assumptions would make me more aware of those assumptions when doing fieldwork in Ireland. This was apparent when the interviews with Swedish participants evoked particular discourses of fatherhood, which led me to question Irish participants in more detail about this aspect of their reproductive-decision-making, than I believe would have been the case if I had begun interviewing in Ireland first.

Upon arrival in Sweden, I was immediately struck by the degree to which lesbian and gay parenting was a topic of debate. As already outlined in the previous chapter, Swedish media and political discussion has devoted considerable attention to ‘homosexual families’ (SOU 2001: 10) in recent years. The level of public discussion about lesbian and gay parenting was particularly intense during the period of fieldwork, with calls for more research in the area from numerous sources, including the Swedish government. I found the LGBT organisations I made contact with very helpful. Their encouragement was perhaps based on the conviction that more awareness based on research could only be beneficial in the struggle for equal rights. Overall, it was relatively easy to make contact with participants in Sweden. During my previous experience of research there, I found

that there was general support for academic research and willingness to participate among people working in a variety of sectors. This is possibly because of a more dynamic interaction between academia and public life in Sweden than I have observed in the UK and Ireland. Furthermore, the political potential of the research often seemed to play a role in participants' decisions to take part. During conversations before and after interviews, I frequently got the impression that interviewees viewed their participation in the research project as the responsibility or gesture of a 'good citizen', in that it was seen as a social contribution that would benefit the wider community. As McDowell (1999) notes, researchers may raise participants' expectations that research will constitute a positive intervention on their behalf. However, Swedish participants appeared confident of the benefits of research, in the absence of any such promises on my part.

Andreasson (1996) argues that 'openness' has displaced 'resistance' as a normative signifier of a political strategy in contemporary Swedish LGBT politics. According to his analysis, this is reflected in the increasing number of openly lesbian and gay people in Swedish mass media. Openness has therefore become the predominant means by which lesbian and gay people assert and defend their sexual identity in Sweden. As Foucault argued, discourses of sexuality change over time and according to context. Thus, what I term a 'discourse of openness' appears to be predominant among lesbian parents in contemporary Sweden. This discourse of openness was apparent during interviews with Swedish participants, who frequently referred to the importance of 'openness' about their family forms. It was seen as necessary to be open about their sexuality for the sake of their children. Refusing to pass as heterosexual was also perceived as a means of challenging prejudice:

We made a decision when we were waiting for [expecting] Jacob [eldest child] that all four of us should be very open, that we should be very open in every place where our kids were, not a secret and of course you don't say when you meet somebody hi I'm Hanna and I'm a lesbian, you don't do it like that but in every situation that somebody asks or me or you or Olof or Johan [gay fathers] something we don't deny anything [...] and then we are very open everywhere else [...] because we are so open and we make these demands I think we help others

- Hanna, Swedish participant parenting with her partner and a gay male couple

Hanna's sexuality and that of the other three people she shared parenting responsibilities with, was not an 'open secret', rather it was something that was clearly communicated, although in ways sensitive to the immediate context. It was important to establish that Hanna and her partner are a lesbian couple and that the two men they parent with are a gay couple. The possibility of their sexuality being unclear or unacknowledged was unacceptable. This discourse of openness was very striking in the Swedish sample. While Irish parents also shared their conviction that it was important to be open for their children's sake, they were likely to do it in a less overt or confrontational way. In Ireland for example, the role of both partners in a couple relationship as parents was communicated, but in a way that emphasised their status as parents or guardians, rather than their sexuality as a lesbian couple. In both contexts, participants emphasised the importance of being 'open' about their family form for the sake of their children. However, Irish participants communicated this information in a more indirect way. This contrast, which will be elaborated further in chapter six, illustrates some of the central differences between Swedish and Irish participants in my study with regard to what it means to be 'out' as a lesbian parent. These distinctions have informed ethical considerations regarding the potential impact of this research.

### **Negotiating (In)Visibility in Ireland**

Lesbian and gay activism in Ireland has been influenced by anti-imperialist politics. The concept of an indigenous lesbian and gay politics carries particular significance among Irish activists (Rose, 1994; Bowyer, 2001). Thus, confrontational models of queer activism are often viewed as a cultural import and therefore problematic. Nonetheless, increased lesbian and gay visibility and established events such as annual Pride (which originated abroad) in Irish cities have been utilised by Irish LGBT communities in the struggle for equality. Although considerable advances have been made in recent years and research indicates growing levels of acceptance, especially among young people (Inglis, 1998), homophobia remains widespread.

Audre Lorde's famous words 'Your silence will not protect you' became a slogan of the lesbian and gay rights movement in North America during the late 1980s. In her essay (1984c) where this sentence originates, Lorde argues for the necessity of articulating '*what is most important to me*' (1984c: 40), regardless of the consequences. She discusses the particular need for an expression of what is often left to silence, no matter what the possible outcome: ridicule, violence, even death, because the act of speaking '*profits me, beyond any other effect*' (1984c: 40). She made this argument in the context of her experiences as a Black lesbian mother who had experienced cancer. Her words continue to hold resonance almost twenty years later. The way in which her famous statement 'your silence will not protect you' has become a catchphrase among (particularly North American) queer activists<sup>50</sup>, constitutes a broader normative strategy within a script of coming out. Silence in this context is interpreted as living a closeted existence, which can have profoundly negative connotations within queer communities, as opposed to being open about your sexuality in everyday life. It is interesting to contemplate the application of these words in an Irish context, particularly in view of the way that this slogan is deployed as a strategy for lesbian and gay rights in the US. Or rather, to rephrase the ethical concerns of the researcher in light of the strategies of (in)visibility on the part of participants, 'What if your silence *does* protect you/them/us?' In this way, silence can form an agentic strategy within a complex local context, rather than a problematic stance contrary to a linear trajectory of political openness.

After embarking on fieldwork in Ireland, I soon observed the contrast with Sweden in terms of the very different levels of media and political debate about queer parenting. I became aware of what seemed to me a deafening silence regarding lesbian parenting, arriving as I was from a context where it was a source of intense discussion. This is not to undermine the greater prominence given to lesbian and gay issues in contemporary Irish media, where they have a much higher profile than in previous decades. However, it was illustrative of the different political moments in both countries and the politicised meanings of visibility for participants. In contrast to Swedish participants, for whom

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<sup>50</sup> For an example of LGBT paraphernalia with this slogan, go to [http://www.theeyeofnewt.com/store/html/items/BS\\_Your\\_Silence\\_Will\\_Not\\_Protect\\_You.asp](http://www.theeyeofnewt.com/store/html/items/BS_Your_Silence_Will_Not_Protect_You.asp)

'speaking out' about their families constituted an important political gesture, Irish participants tended to live out their lesbian identities in a more segregated way.

While participants who volunteered for my research clearly believed that it was important to tell their stories, the impact of the media occasionally arose during interviews. Sorcha described her experience during late pregnancy when chatting with a woman she met in the park. They had both seen a documentary about lesbian and gay parenting that had been aired on the BBC. Despite this, the woman she spoke with assumed that her obvious pregnancy implied Sorcha was heterosexual and commented negatively about the programme, which Sorcha found very distressing:

There was one that I encountered while I was pregnant remember, that was awful, it was just, just awful [...] so I'm walking around with my big baby and my impending motherhood and all of a sudden this thing came back to me, it was following em, a programme that was on the tv, you might have seen it, it was on BBC2 [...] and it was called pink parents [...] We saw that and it was great you know [...] and it came about when I met a stranger you know that I had seen this thing [...] and em she said to me obviously never having laid eyes on me before in her life, oh you saw that as well, it was scary wasn't it? And that's the first time in a long time that I had experienced that kind of like direct, direct thing that people out there actually think, think it's scary the thought of us being parents, is actually scary to them and I thought Jesus Christ you know

- Sorcha, Irish participant

In the above example, a key factor is Sorcha's presumed heterosexuality. However the incident is illustrative of the way that public discussion can have painful repercussions for individuals whose lifestyle is the topic of debate. However, while upset because of the response from the woman she met in the park, Sorcha expressed delight with the programme itself and her own experience of watching it.

Nonetheless, the potentially negative impact for participants of greater awareness about lesbian parenting was also made apparent when another participant, Catherine, talked about her reaction to a radio programme where the subject of lesbian and gay parenting arose:

Every time that the topic comes up on the radio like the Gerry Ryan show<sup>51</sup> or whatever [...] and every time that kind of stuff comes up I have to deal with the repercussions because I'm an out lesbian. I'll walk down the street and every single person has to have a comment about that then to me, whether or not I want to hear it or discuss it you know. Every single person will have something to comment you know, you're actively having to deal with that all the time. It was a bit of the thing of whether or not you know, how you actually do use publicity and everything, how you, what effect having somebody on the television or on the radio has on other people you know and how you actually take responsibility for that.

- Catherine, Irish participant

Catherine's comments reflect the dilemma of equality struggles in an Irish context. On the one hand, it appears that the lesbian and gay movement must advocate parenting rights and challenge prejudice by drawing attention to the issue and refuting homophobic assumptions about queer parenting. On the other hand, to do so may make life difficult for lesbian and gay parents in the short term, who become more vulnerable to verbal and other abuse. I wrote an article about lesbian and gay parenting for *Gay Community News*, a monthly Irish publication, partly as a means of recruiting participants for my research.<sup>52</sup> However, this was written for a national lesbian and gay publication and therefore a sympathetic audience. Another Irish researcher provided some comments about lesbian parenting for a radio show about families in Ireland. Prior to her appearance on the show, we discussed the ethical difficulties involved in contributing to media discussion. At that stage of the research, I felt that I would not feel comfortable contributing as I was unsure whether I would ever want to discuss my research findings outside of queer venues and sympathetic (gender/women's/queer studies) academic audiences in Ireland. This researcher was interviewed for the programme and provided an excellent foil to some of the homophobic comments/assumptions that were discussed. Nonetheless, afterwards she confessed to me that she felt relieved that it was a small slot on a low ratings show and therefore unlikely to receive much attention. I have also been approached by researchers within the media in Ireland. In one case, I agreed to have my contact details forwarded to staff of an Irish television programme, who were considering doing a piece on lesbians and reproduction (inspired by discussions of the 'mannotincluded' online sperm facility in the UK at the time). However I stipulated that I would be involved in a consultancy role

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<sup>51</sup> A popular radio show in Ireland

<sup>52</sup> The article appeared in *Gay Community News*, November 2000.

only. The decision about whether to agree to be considered as an academic consultant was not an easy one. Finally I decided that if I agreed to contribute in this role, I could perhaps help to ensure that a supportive perspective was communicated.

In retrospect, it is interesting to note that while in Ireland I engaged in many of the same practices in negotiating (in)visibility as the Irish participants in this study. When attempting to elicit relevant information from various authorities, or deciding how open (or not) to be about my research to various audiences, I often deployed a strategy of indirect enquiry/communication, similar to that exercised by many participants in negotiating their daily lives. For example, I phoned individual fertility clinics in Ireland in an effort to find out if they offered their services to lesbians. O'Connell (2000) has documented some of the difficulties in attempting to do this. Enquiring about whether services are available to lesbian women may provoke an explicit policy being implemented, where previously women might have benefited from the lack of specific guidelines concerning clients' sexuality. I realised that if a clinic provided services to heterosexual single women and I asked specifically about lesbian women, this could potentially alert them to the fact that lesbians might be interested in DI. The clinic could then become inclined to devise a policy specifically prohibiting lesbians from accessing the clinic, whereas having no specific policy on this might be beneficial to lesbian women. Alternatively, it might alert them to the possibility that theoretically lesbians can pose as single heterosexual women to use their services, if a clinic is willing to accept single women as clients. So I chose to ask indirectly and find out what kinds of criteria clients had to fulfil.

It appeared that no clinic was willing to state explicitly that it would treat clients who were not in a heterosexual relationship. Previously, the Well Woman clinic in Dublin had openly advertised its services to all women, including lesbians. However, that particular clinic decided to terminate its sperm bank in 1999 due to financial difficulties and referred enquires to a private clinic in Dublin. I rang the private clinic and was informed that they treat heterosexual couples only. They referred me to another clinic in Belfast. That clinic also stated that they only accept heterosexual couples. Further enquiries at various clinics around the

country received the same response. There is no specific legislation prohibiting lesbians from access to sperm banks, although medical council guidelines do state that this service should only be used in cases of infertility and genetic problems. Nonetheless, at this time it appears that no clinic in Ireland is willing to offer this service to lesbians.

I faced this dilemma of openness many times during my research in Ireland, particularly when I was asked about my research topic in non-queer public contexts. I found myself repeatedly facing the question of whether to highlight the existence of this group in arenas that were potentially hostile. For example, I worked part-time as a class teacher for an undergraduate course during my fieldwork in Ireland. One of the seminars dealt with alternative families. I debated whether to show students an excerpt from a fictional film about a lesbian couple planning to have a child together. I discussed it with the course lecturer, who felt that it would be beneficial for the students. In the end, I did show the film clip, which received a mixed response. I was struck by the contrast with the enthusiastic response a couple of months later, when I showed the same excerpt to an audience at the Lesbian Lives Conference at University College Dublin, where I gave a presentation of my research. Exposing students to the plurality of families in contemporary society hopefully contributes in a small way to the development of an increasingly tolerant social climate. However, the decision to show the film was informed by concern that increased awareness may not be entirely positive in the short- term for Irish lesbian parents.

### **Recruiting participants**

The dynamics of openness and (in)visibility were also evident when recruiting participants for the study. It was clear from the early stages of fieldwork that the ‘gayby boom’ is less established in Ireland. Although the age range of children in the Irish sample is similar to the Swedish sample, the proportion of Irish lesbians choosing parenthood appears to be much smaller. Accurate figures are impossible to obtain, but O’Connell (2000) suggests that there may only be 2000 lesbian-headed families in the entire country, although she does not attempt to estimate how many of these are women who conceived in the context of a lesbian

lifestyle.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless there does seem to be some indication that the number of Irish lesbians who embark on parenthood, is quite small. In contrast, there are estimated to be 50,000 lesbian- and gay-headed households with children in Sweden, which includes those children conceived in heterosexual relationships (RFSL, 1997).<sup>54</sup> Although there was previously a support group for lesbian parents at Outhouse, the LGBT community centre in Dublin, this had been disbanded prior to fieldwork, due to other commitments on the part of its organisers. It would appear that the prevailing social climate has not been conducive to a lesbian baby boom. Many lesbians I spoke with knew few or no lesbian parents. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I met a British lesbian who had moved to Ireland one year previously. She commented that her decision to leave the UK was partly informed by a desire to escape from the lesbian baby boom in the town there where she was living. She had experienced fertility problems and found it difficult to accept her childlessness while surrounded by expectant mothers. In contrast, she had not met any lesbians who had chosen parenthood during her time in Ireland. This encounter further reinforced my suspicion that relatively fewer Irish lesbians were becoming parents than in Sweden.

The general social climate may not be the only factor influencing the later development of the gayby boom in Ireland however. It is perhaps also the case that some older Irish lesbians articulate a radical feminist political stance that is critical of the role of motherhood in women's lives. This is particularly meaningful in an Irish context, where reproductive control has been difficult to establish and motherhood has been symbolically deployed and interwoven with the dominant nationalist discourse. Mary Dorcey, the renowned Irish lesbian poet, writes of her decision to remain childfree in her poem 'Daughter', where she refers to '*this whole wide world that was not yet wide enough for me to bear you into*' (1994: 43). This could be interpreted as a rejection of motherhood as an

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<sup>53</sup> According to estimates from Ireland's Central Statistics Office in April 2002, Ireland's population is 3,917,336, of which 38% of the population are under the age of 25 years. (<http://www.idaireland.com/news/pdf/vsmar03.pdf>). O'Connell (2000: 76) suggests that the number of Irish lesbian mothers is approximately 1% of all women in Ireland. These figures obviously do not include the possible number of gay men in Ireland who are fathers.

<sup>54</sup> Sweden's population in April 2002 was 8,916,760 (<http://www.scb.se/statistik/be0101/BE0101tab1preleng.asp>).

institution and/or a reference to homophobia in society. One Irish participant whose child was amongst the oldest in the study referred to reactions within the lesbian community when she disclosed the news of her pregnancy:

So for people in the lesbian community there was a certain amount of hostility I would say. A mixture, either people who were very supportive or people who didn't, you know [...] some women felt I think that eh you know this, you know puts us back in some kind of compulsory motherhood thing you know, you're not a woman if you don't have a child kind of thing, you know and thought we were rejecting all that and I used to discuss it with people and argue with people, but there would have been a certain amount of hostility alright.

- Eithne, Irish participant

Yet despite the traditionally unsupportive climate in Ireland for the LGBT community, there have been significant changes in recent years and some Irish lesbians have chosen to become parents. Interestingly, the age range of the children of Irish parents in the study is similar to the age range of children in the Swedish sample. Not all Irish lesbian parents contacted about this research were willing to participate however. In some cases this appeared to be linked to a desire to keep their life choices private. On one occasion, I was introduced to a lesbian who had three children with a gay man. When I told her about my research, she agreed to be interviewed. During a telephone conversation to arrange a meeting time and place, she informed me that no-one in her family knew about her sexuality or that of her children's father and said that '*I have a bit of a secret life going on here*'. We made an appointment to meet, which she did not keep. She did not contact me to explain her absence and when I phoned her, apologised and said that it was due to a family emergency. We made another appointment, which she also missed. Again, she did not inform me of this in advance and it proved impossible to get in touch with her to find out why or to rearrange the meeting. Despite her very warm manner in person and on the phone, I interpret this as a sign that she did not want to be interviewed and chose a form of passive refusal rather than doing so outright. This experience repeated itself with another potential research participant. I suspect that the difficulties in recruiting participants in Ireland are linked to issues of (in)visibility. This offers one possible explanation for the apparent reluctance on the part of some potential participants to take the risk of exposing themselves and their lives to an unknown researcher, even if, as in my case, the researcher in question is part of the Irish

queer scene and vouched for by other members of the community.<sup>55</sup> This therefore raises ethical questions – should these encounters be interpreted as a sign that it would be better to avoid doing such research at this time, rather than expose participants to the disciplinary power of public discourse, in Foucauldian terms? My experience of research clearly illustrates that lesbians who embark on parenthood in Ireland are an extremely difficult research group to recruit. This raises the issue of whether their refusal to participate in research is an attempt to resist my efforts to document aspects of their lives that they might prefer to remain hidden. However, the fact that a substantial number of women did agree to participate suggests that this was not the only resistance discourse available.

I also suspect that the difficulties in recruiting participants in Ireland are linked to a certain apathy concerning academic research generally among non-academics in addition to a degree of discomfort with potential exposure, despite assurances of the usual rules concerning ethics and confidentiality. The interconnectedness of this community meant that anonymity was a particular concern for participants. In carrying out this research, I was continually aware of my own privileged position as a childfree woman with a homebase abroad. Unlike respondents, I would leave for another country at the end of the year and was not directly responsible for the care and well-being of dependent children. Ethical considerations regarding anonymity have been adhered to throughout the writing up of this dissertation. In one case, a couple I interviewed in Ireland informed me after the interview of their concern that some of the details they had disclosed might make it possible for the donor's identity (which was known only to them) to be revealed. I sent them a copy of the transcript so that they could veto any details they specifically wished to be omitted from the thesis.

In Sweden, although potential respondents were generally more likely to be positive about taking part in the study, snowballing remained the most effective form of recruitment. Very often interviewees phoned friends and advised them to take part. Their friends would usually have heard of my research elsewhere and

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<sup>55</sup> O'Connell (2000) experienced similar difficulties in recruiting participants for her study of lesbian reproductive decision-making in Ireland. Only three lesbian couples living in Ireland who conceived in the context of a lesbian lifestyle, participated in her research.

were willing to participate, but had procrastinated making contact. In such cases, a phone call from a friend served as a reminder of the research and they kindly agreed to be interviewed. This was an important indication of the time pressures of parents with small children, which made it particularly generous of them to give up precious free time for an interview.

I made numerous efforts to contact potential participants in both countries. To this end, I placed announcements on e-mailing lists, LGBT websites, publications and organisations and distributed flyers at LGBT events. In Sweden, a sexual health/education magazine interviewed me about my research and the resulting interview article was accompanied by my contact details, so that potential respondents could get in touch if they read the article<sup>56</sup>. I also contacted some midwives in Sweden who had met lesbian parents in the course of their work, via a mutual acquaintance. Annual LGBT Pride in Stockholm took place shortly after my arrival in Sweden and I distributed flyers about my research there.

In Ireland I also wrote to every LGBT business in the country and asked them to pass on information about my research to customers, clients and staff. I also gave information about the study to LGBT helplines. In addition, I wrote an article about lesbian and gay parenting for *Gay Community News*, a national Irish queer publication, which was accompanied by details of my research and contact information. I also contacted a social worker suggested to me by a friend as someone who could potentially help me contact lesbian foster parents and I wrote to the Irish Fostercare Association. The latter responded by saying that they had no knowledge of any lesbian foster parents in Ireland. I did however manage to interview a couple who had a foster child. I had previously lived in Sweden and had numerous contacts among the lesbian and gay community and academic community in both countries, so I was able to advertise my research informally through those networks, which proved to be successful in several cases. Possibly another effective strategy would have been to advertise through non-LGBT groups, as in Ireland it seemed that many lesbian parents disappeared from the

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<sup>56</sup> RFSU (1999)

queer scene when they became involved in the demands of child-rearing. However, due to my unresolved concerns about giving lesbian parents a higher profile as a result of the research, I felt it would be unethical to advertise the study in this way. The total number of participants is 68, of whom 40 are Swedish and 28 are Irish. Altogether 26 interviews (with 24 family units) took place in Sweden<sup>57</sup> and 18 interviews (with 18 family units) in Ireland.

### Method of Recruitment

The following table indicates the ways in which participants were approached about the research. The numbers refer to parenting units (couples and lone parents) rather than individual participants:

Method of contact:	Via a friend/ acquaintance of the researcher	Contact via other participants	LGBT parenting network	LGBT event	Midwife	Total
Swedish	6	8	8	1	1	24
Irish	10	1	N/A	7	0	18

**Table 4.1: Method of recruitment**

Numerous participants reported hearing about my research from multiple sources. One potential Irish respondent, who declined to take part, informed the mutual acquaintance who was acting as intermediary that twelve different people had suggested she participate. This also raises issues about inadvertently ‘hassling’ potential respondents when attempting to make contact within the context of a small community. The rather high number of participants who were approached through a personal friend or acquaintance of the researcher is an indication of my own status as a member of the LGBT community and the importance of personal assurances in successfully making contact with this sample group, particularly when researching a sensitive topic. While personal contacts were the most

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<sup>57</sup> One Swedish couple was interviewed twice for this research, another Swedish couple was interviewed individually.

effective means of recruitment, this method may be considered to limit the scope of the sample. However, it may also be interpreted as an illustration of the interconnectedness of this community. In order to avoid the possibility that participants may be identified by readers familiar with the local context, I have gone to considerable lengths to maintain participant anonymity in the study. Many identifying details have therefore been altered.

### **Interviews, discourse analysis and language**

In view of the dearth of research on this topic in both Sweden and Ireland and because much previous work in the area has focused on the children of lesbians, interviews appeared to be an ideal means of exploring lesbian women's experiences of parenthood. The interviews which took place were quite open-ended and explored a number of themes, which included: reproductive decision-making; the transition to parenthood; the division of labour within the family; encounters with medical/social personnel; and biology and kinship, in addition to background questions such as age, occupation and so on (see appendix 1). Interviews typically lasted about three hours and generated over 1,500 pages of text. The majority of interviews took place in participants' homes, with two exceptions. One interview in Sweden took place in my office at Stockholm University and an interview in Ireland was carried out within my home. I prepared a list of interview topics and possible questions, although often participants' narratives spontaneously followed a trajectory in which many of these questions were answered without any prompting. Interviews were extremely informal – typically they took place around a kitchen table or in a living-room and participants often kindly invited me to join them for dinner afterwards. The relaxed nature of the interview setting reflected the interview relationships that were created and that have largely been sustained in the aftermath of the research encounter. I have often been utilised as an information resource by participants, who have contacted me with questions about for example adoption, insemination and previous research covering a diverse range of topics. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, I also carried out an interview with the midwife in Copenhagen who runs the only clinic that offers DI services to women irrespective of their sexuality. In addition, the Swedish

Ombudsman against Discrimination on the Grounds of Sexuality was interviewed for this research. These latter two interviews took place in February 2002.

Ethnographic insights inform this dissertation and discourse analysis is used to interpret the interview texts. The approach to discourse analysis outlined by Gill (1996), rests on four key themes. Firstly, texts are of interest in themselves, rather than as a means of ascertaining a prior reality. Secondly, language is constructive, as opposed to a passive means of communicating a particular reality (that does not in any case exist beyond the text). Thirdly, discourse is a 'social practice', as people use language actively as a means to do something. Finally, texts have a 'rhetorical nature' in that they are attempts to present particular versions of the world. Thus, a discourse analytical approach attempts to engage with the meanings generated by texts. The process of analysis was an iterative process, in which familiarity with the interview transcripts was developed. After transcription, the interview texts were read carefully approximately ten times. Prior to writing an analytical chapter, all of the interviews in their entirety were read again and relevant excerpts were pasted into categories in a word document. The resulting file was then used as a resource when writing the chapter. While qualitative software packages, such as Nudist, are useful for indexing data, this method enabled the relevant transcript excerpts to be elicited organically from the wider interview text. Thus, the embedded meanings of the excerpts were retained.

I had already lived in Sweden for a year in 1996-1997 and took Swedish language classes during that time. However, my language abilities were insufficiently developed to conduct interviews in Swedish when I returned to Sweden for fieldwork in 1999, at which time I immediately began to take advanced Swedish language courses. Notices about the research were of course written in Swedish and when participants contacted me, they were given the option of doing interviews in English or Swedish (with an interpreter present). To my surprise, most volunteered to do the interviews in English, with two exceptions. (The latter two interviews took place towards the end of my sojourn in Sweden, by which time the interpreters were hardly required). Swedish

students learn English in school from the age of ten years and English language music and media are prevalent aspects of everyday life. I have continued to develop my Swedish language ability upon completion of fieldwork and read and speak Swedish on a daily basis so that I am now proficient in the language. Although the English language hegemony of this research is both problematic and undesirable, it is my view that the choice on the part of Swedish participants to speak English should be respected and their words not undermined because they are in their second language. Indeed, as the transcript excerpts illustrate, participants exercised considerable fluency in English. The two interviews in Swedish are the only ones that were not personally transcribed by me, although I have translated them. Many participants in Sweden seemed to enjoy the opportunity to practise speaking a second language and frequently expressed a sense of accomplishment at having successfully communicated and articulated complex feelings and ideas in English.

Finally, the period of fieldwork in both countries was substantial. I lived in Sweden from July 1999 until September 2000, at which point I moved to Ireland for eight months until May 2001. I have remained in regular contact with participants throughout, who receive frequent updates about the progress of the research. For example, I wrote to all participants prior to my departure from Ireland with my new contact details in London and the information that the fieldwork interviews had concluded. Numerous participants have commented that they find this helpful and that they appreciate being kept informed about the research project. Participants in turn have often contacted me with new information about their lives, such as a change of address or the birth of a child. The sharing of information with participants about the progress of the study and any findings generated constitutes an important ethical dimension of this research.

## Interview Participation

The following table outlines the relationship status of interview participants:

Interview participation	Couples both partners present	Couple one partner present	Lone parent	Post break-up BM <sup>58</sup>	Post break-up CP <sup>59</sup>	Total
Swedish	16 (n=32)	1	2	4	1	40
Irish	10 (n=20)	2	4	1	1	28
Total	26 (n=52)	3	6	5	2	68

**Table 4.2: Interview participation**

In three cases, only one person in a couple relationship agreed to take part, because of time commitments or lack of interest from the other parent. Some participants continued to parent with former partners. In these latter cases, interviewees appeared somewhat reluctant to broach their former partners about participation, although the reasons for this were not articulated. I respected their reticence and did not attempt to contact the former partners. One exception to this is the case of a couple who continued to live together and have another child after their relationship ended. They are categorised as a couple with both partners present, as they were interviewed together.

## Sample characteristics

As already mentioned in Chapter Two, previous research on lesbians who embark on parenthood has suggested that this group overwhelmingly consists of middle-class professionals (e.g. Morningstar, 1999; Scheib et al., 2000). It seems

<sup>58</sup> BM indicates biological mother.

<sup>59</sup> CP indicates co-parent.

likely that this is an inaccurate representation, as these results may well reflect sampling strategies – for example much of this research has focused on lesbians who access sperm banks, an expensive process that excludes women with lower incomes. There are few discussions of ‘race’ and ethnicity in the literature, although it appears that previous studies have predominantly white sample populations, which again may be an effect of methodology. Franklin (1997), in relation to her study of reproductive technology, has documented some of the difficulties of participant recruitment that aims for a sample population that is not predominantly white, professional and middle-class. Socio-cultural accounts from the US and UK of lesbians who choose parenthood do include narratives by Chicana, African-American and Black British women however (e.g. Moraga, 1997; Wells, 2000; Saffron, 2001), although these are relatively rare. In this study, participants generally (but not exclusively) followed a similar profile of white professional women found in much previous research.<sup>60</sup>

The majority of participants ( $n = 67$ ) were white, with one respondent from Sweden who identified as ‘mixed race’. While this may be an effect of the recruitment methods, it is perhaps also related to the demographic characteristics of the general population in Ireland at least. The Irish population has been relatively homogenous until very recently, as a perusal of the census figures indicates. Ireland has typically been characterised by large scale emigration, rather than immigration, a situation that has only changed significantly in the late 1990s with the emergence of economic transformation often referred to as the ‘Celtic Tiger’. The 1990s witnessed net inward migration at its highest levels for the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> According to the 2002 census statistics, the largest current immigrant group originates from the UK (almost 250,000, or 6.25 percent of the total population).<sup>62</sup> The proportion of the population born in the rest of the EU was 0.9 percent in 2002, while the proportion of usual residents born in the

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<sup>60</sup> The fact that a research sample is predominantly white obviously does not render ‘race’ any less salient to the research and it is unfortunate that this has not been addressed more in previous work in this area. A forthcoming article is currently in preparation, in which whiteness among lesbian parents is critically interrogated, based on the interview texts with Irish and Swedish participants in this research.

<sup>61</sup> This is reflected in the fact that the Irish population has increased significantly over a period of eleven years between 1991 and 2002 from 3,525,719 to 3,917,203 people.

<sup>62</sup> Of these, almost 50,000 were born in Northern Ireland.

USA was 0.6 percent. The number of 'foreign-born' usual residents from countries other than the EU or USA has grown from 26,100 in 1996 to 97,200 in 2002, and now represents just 2.5 per cent of the usually resident population.<sup>63</sup>

Sweden has a longer tradition of multiculturalism and many members of the younger generation are descended from 'new Swedes', or immigrants who settled in Sweden. Significant demographic changes in migration took place during the second half of the twentieth century, when for example Sweden experienced a labour shortage in the 1970s and migration typically occurred from southern Europe. In more recent decades, numerous refugees and asylum seekers have moved to Sweden, usually fleeing from conflict in their countries of origin. In addition, Finland has a large Swedish-speaking population, many of whom have migrated to Sweden.<sup>64</sup> Approximately 12 percent (or 1.05 million people) of the population in 2002 were born outside Sweden. The largest countries of origin are Finland (190,000), Bosnia/Yugoslavia (127,000), Iraq (63,000) and Iran (53,000). This is reflected in the fact that approximately 26 percent of all Swedes aged between 20 and 50 years have one or both parents born abroad. In addition, 15 percent of 20-50 year olds were themselves born outside Sweden.<sup>65</sup> The relatively homogenous character of the Swedish sample in this research may be an effect of recruitment strategies. Another possibility is that it is in fact representative of this parenting group, although this cannot be assumed.

There was some diversity among the sample in terms of nationality. Three Swedish participants (1.2%) were born abroad. They had lived in Sweden for many years and had Swedish partners. Among the Irish sample, seven participants (25%) came to Ireland as adults. In all cases, they had been living in Ireland for between two and ten years at the time of the interview and usually

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<sup>63</sup> All figures are taken from the Principal Demographic Results publication produced by the national statistics office in Ireland. The publication is available to download at [http://www.cso.ie/census/pdr\\_comment.htm](http://www.cso.ie/census/pdr_comment.htm)

<sup>64</sup> The existence of a Swedish-speaking minority in Finland is a result of the Swedish colonial occupation of Finland from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A small minority of Finns are native Swedish speakers: about 265,000 in Finland and 25,000 on the Åland islands (under Finnish sovereignty), or 5.6% of the total population according to official statistics (Statistics Finland, 2002).

<sup>65</sup> Similar figures are not available for Ireland. All figures are taken from the Statistics Sweden database, available to download at: <http://www.scb.se/statistik/be0101/be0101eng.asp>

had an Irish partner and/or at least one Irish parent. In an Irish context, this aspect of the sample may thus reflect prevailing demographic trends in migration. It is also possible that the larger proportion of migrants within the Irish sample is illustrative of a greater willingness to talk with a researcher on the part of those who have more recently settled in Irish society.

### Educational attainment of participants

Maximum Education level	Leaving Certificate /Studentexamen <sup>66</sup>	Post-LC/ Studentexamen <sup>67</sup> /Apprenticeship	University degree	Post-graduate degree	Total
Swedish	1	3	29	7	40
Irish	1	7	9	11	28
Total	2	10	38	18	68

**Table 4.3: Educational attainment of participants**

As the above table indicates, participants' educational level clusters around university degrees, although this is slightly more pronounced in the Swedish sample. This possibly reflects the increased opportunities of entering third level education in Sweden, where there are no tuition fees and generous state loans and grants are available to everyone thus enabling people from any socio-economic background to obtain university qualifications.

<sup>66</sup> Irish and Swedish equivalent of the A-levels respectively.

<sup>67</sup> Post-LC/Studentexamen indicates post-leaving certificate or studentexamen qualification.

### **Participants and occupational status**

The majority of participants worked in professional occupations, as the following table illustrates:

<b>Group</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Swedish</b>	<b>Irish</b>
1	Legislators, senior officials and managers	0	0
2	Professionals	28	16
3	Technicians and associate professionals	5	4
4	Clerks	1	1
5	Service workers and shop and market sales workers	1	0
6	Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	1	1
7	Craft and related trades workers	0	4
8	Plant and machine operators and assemblers	1	0
9	Elementary occupations	1	0
10	Armed forces	0	0
11	Other	2	2

**Table 4.4: Participants' occupational classifications, based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations from the International Labour Organisation (ILO).**

Clearly, participants in both samples are clustered in the 'professionals' group. This research does not therefore differ significantly from previous research

studies in which lesbian parent participants are predominantly classified as professionals.

## Household Income

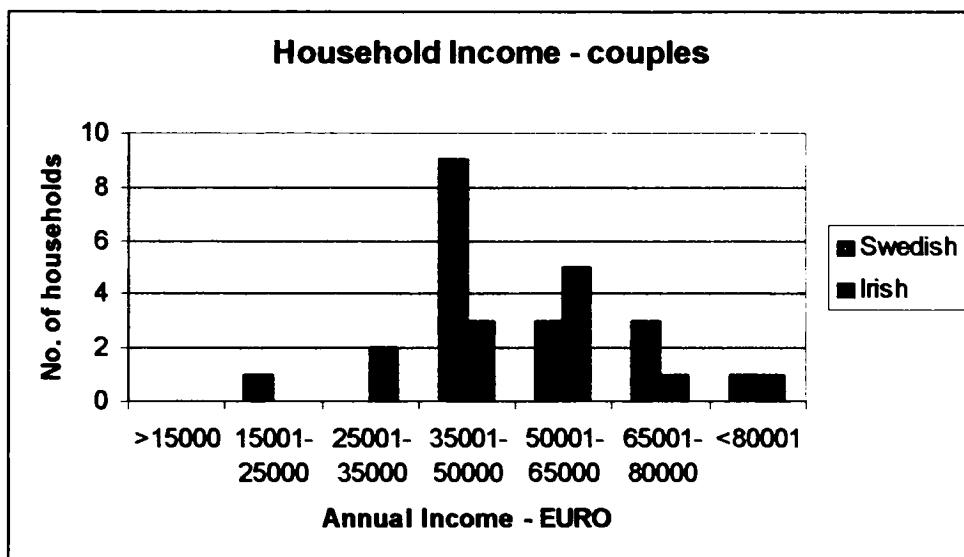


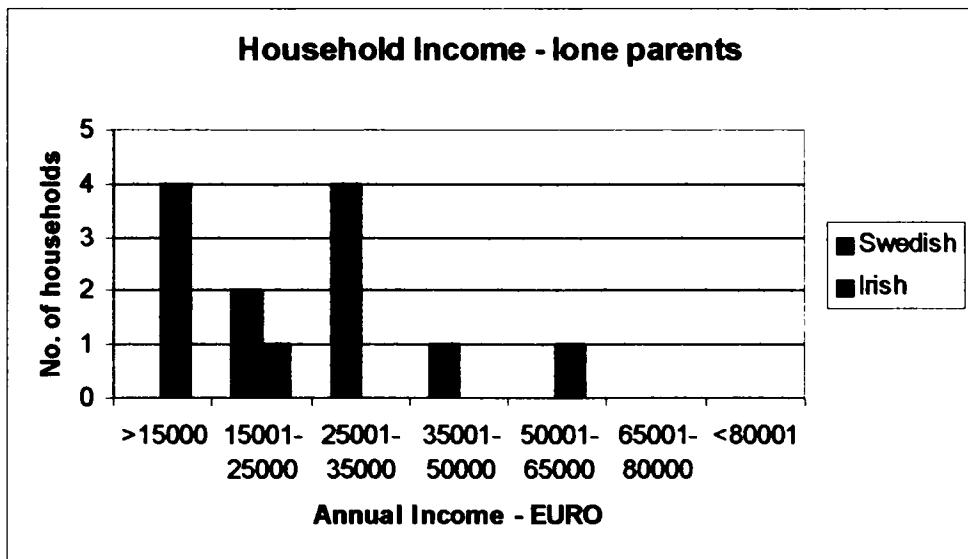
Chart 4.1: Household income for couples

Annual household income figures were originally provided by participants in Irish pounds (punt) and Swedish crowns (kronor). All figures are presented here in EURO, which is any case the currency now used in Ireland.<sup>68</sup> The figures are relatively low as many participants were on parental leave (in Sweden) or working part-time, thus they do not reflect the respondents' maximum earning potential. The average income per participant was slightly higher in the Swedish sample. The mean for Swedish participants' earnings was €29,939 per annum, compared to €26,124 for Irish participants.

<sup>68</sup> The exchange rate used:

1 EURO = 0.787564 IRISH PUNT (<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/currency/>)

1 EURO = 9.13 SWEDISH KRONA (<http://finance.yahoo.com/m3?u>)



**Chart 4.2: Household income for lone parents**

The Irish lone parents sample includes two participants who were interviewed after the break-up of a relationship. Similarly, there are four participants who are classified as lone parents following the end of a relationship in the Swedish sample. Their former partners did not participate in the study and their annual income is unknown. In these cases, children were therefore conceived in the context of a dual income household and with one exception former partners continued to contribute to the financial costs of raising children.

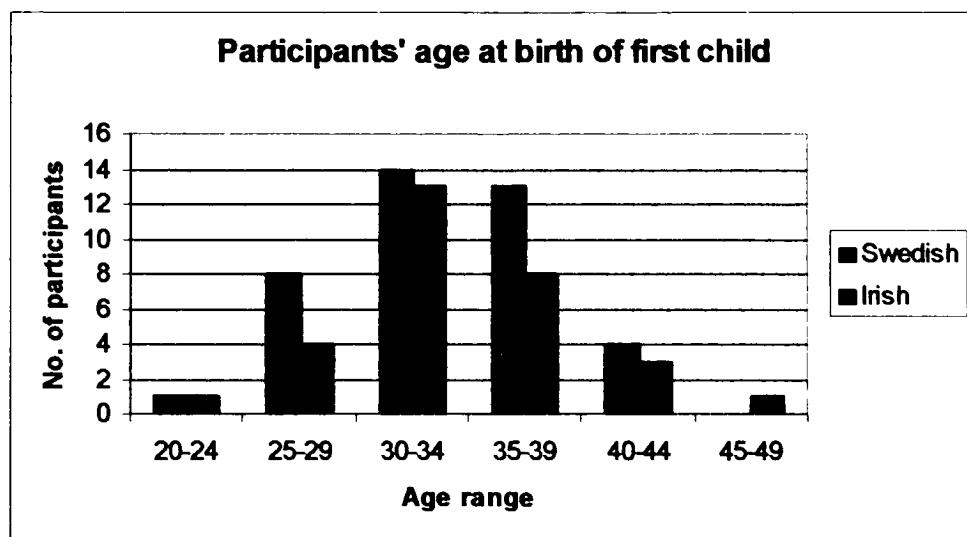
The income figures clearly indicate that Irish lone mothers experienced greater relative poverty than their Swedish counterparts. This is illustrative of the considerably more substantial social welfare benefits and subsidies available to Swedish women, including childcare costs for example. However, two of the Irish lone parents had unplanned pregnancies and possibly would not have planned parenthood in their financial circumstances.

Interestingly, lesbian parent participants in both countries have approximately the same average income, although household incomes appear slightly higher in Sweden, where women receive more state-subsidised benefits such as childcare. In many cases in Sweden, fathers also made financial contributions towards children, reflecting the greater levels of involvement on the part of donors than in Ireland. However, it was rarely the case that fathers were equally financially

responsible. The degree of financial contribution depended on the degree of contact.

### **Participants' age at birth of first child**

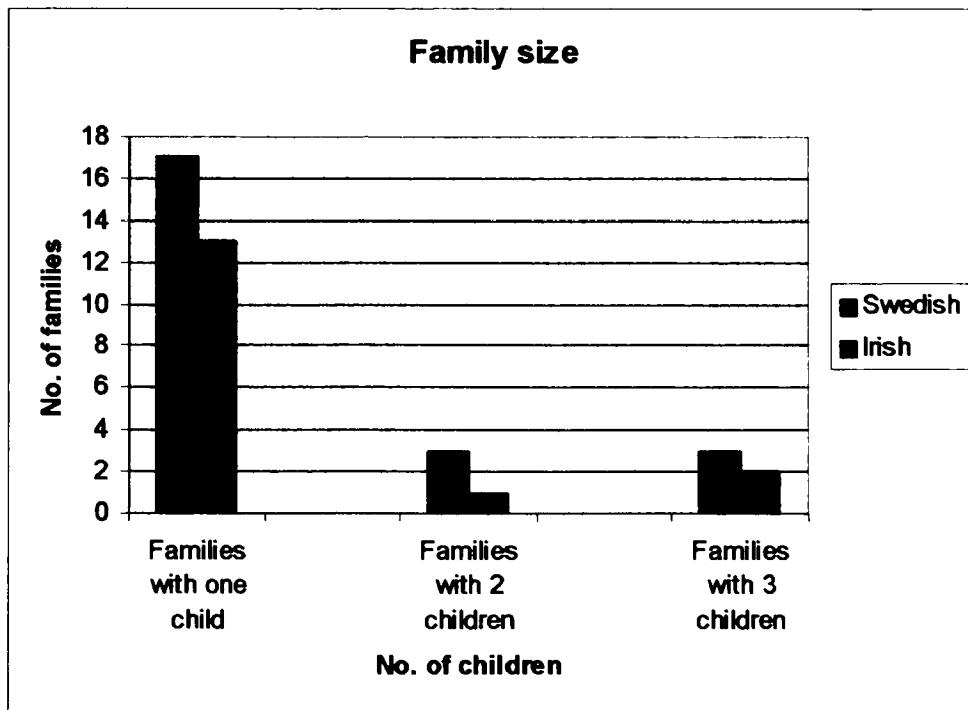
As the following chart indicates, participants predominantly embarked on parenthood in their thirties. Participants occasionally referred to age considerations as providing the impetus behind attempts to conceive.



**Chart 4.3: Participants' age at first birth**

### **Family size**

Family size tended to be quite small among the sample. The following chart presents data for family size concerning children who were conceived to lesbian parents. It is worth noting that several participants had children from a previous heterosexual relationship (who are not included in the chart). One couple also has a foster child (who is included in the chart):



**Chart 4.4: Family size**

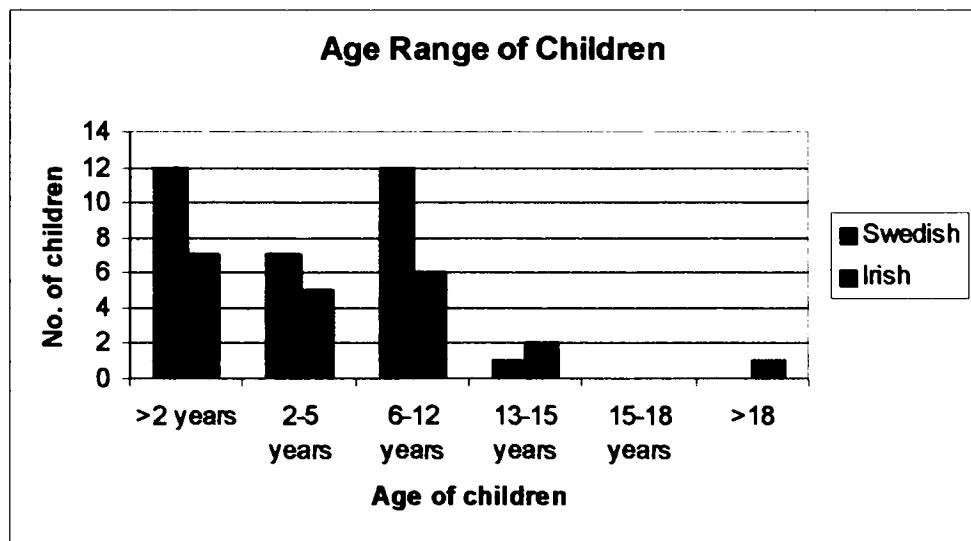
In total, there were 58 pregnancies, leading to 8 miscarriages (13.79%), one stillbirth and 52 live births (including two multiple births). There is also one foster child included in the above chart. Three Irish families were parenting children from previous heterosexual relationships, but these children are not included in the data. As the table indicates, the majority of families in the sample ( $n=30$ ) had one child. The largest family size consisted of three children. In some cases, participants expressed a desire or at least conceded there was a possibility they may have another child ( $n=12$ ) and five families have in fact had a second child since the interviews took place. Another couple has experienced a miscarriage since fieldwork ended. So this appears to be a group that is to some extent in the early stages of creating intergenerational families.

The interview sample also consisted of two Irish couples and one Swedish couple who had yet to conceive, although they had begun the process of monthly inseminations. Two of these couples have since become parents, one of whom was interviewed for the second time two weeks prior to the birth. I feel particularly fortunate to have had the opportunity of interviewing these women, given the secrecy that often surrounds the inseminating process. Most women

chose not to inform friends that they were trying to become pregnant because they did not want to face constant enquiries about the outcome of inseminations, particularly when they were prepared for a long wait before a successful conception. I initially interviewed these latter couples because they volunteered and seemed eager to participate. The interviews proved very interesting and I therefore decided to include them in the thesis where appropriate, for example in the discussion of lesbian reproductive decision-making. I asked similar questions as in other interviews, although some of the responses obviously had an imaginative or planning rather than experiential quality for these six participants. We maintained regular contact after the interviews by phone and e-mail and they continued to inform me about their experiences. This has enabled me to follow their progress over time, which has proved beneficial to the overall research, providing particularly detailed data.

#### **Age range of children**

The age range of children being parented was quite limited, with most children being of primary school age or still in infancy.



**Chart 4.5: Age range of participants' children**

The total number of children parented by participants at the time of fieldwork was 53, of whom 34 had Swedish participant parents, compared to 19 with Irish

participant parents. There were three couples in the Irish sample who were also parenting children from previous heterosexual relationships.

As the above chart indicates, the majority of children being parented by participants were under five years of age (n=29). This therefore suggests a very recent demographic trend of parenting among lesbians. The one person being parented who was over 18 years of age was a foster child who entered into the care of the lesbian couple interviewed when already an adolescent.

Despite the small sample size, the comparative dimension of the research illuminates diverse issues concerning the possibilities available to women in both contexts, thus highlighting the material impact of the welfare state on women's educational, financial and reproductive possibilities.

### **Conclusion: Uneasy resolutions**

This chapter has addressed the ethical dilemmas encountered in the research process. In particular, the tension between the need to tell women's stories and negotiate their vulnerability in homophobic contexts has been a point of analysis. The impact of strategies of openness and invisibility have been discussed in terms of their epistemological implications during the recruitment of participants and the process of data collection and analysis. Participant confidentiality and anonymity remain central to the presentation of data. The ethical dilemmas encountered challenge conceptualisations of 'the field' as a spatially bounded entity. Rather it is the nature of political standpoints and community belonging that relationships and events influencing 'the field' continue to evolve long after a period spent in a particular geographical location is concluded. By thus politically situating 'the field', it becomes clear why issues of representation and ethics have been so central to the research process.

The dilemma of openness and representation has also been addressed in terms of the consequences of researchers' engagement with the 'public worlds' of the academy and discursive terrain of the media. It is not the intention of this author to conflate these two spheres, but rather to highlight the ways in which they may

potentially overlap in terms of participants' vulnerability. Further, work automatically becomes available to diverse users once it is disseminated within the public arena of the academy. The two national contexts of the research highlight the different ways that participants may hope research will be utilised and thus varied understandings of the role of visibility in multiple terrains, including the academy and the media. It is also illustrative of the dialogical nature of research, in which participants are not passive objects but agentic subjects.

While it is hoped that this study will have a positive impact on participants' lives by informing the policy-making process, this research is characterised by a continual negotiation of the potentially negative consequences of rendering aspects of these women's lives visible to a public domain. However, research about lesbian parenting in contemporary Irish and Swedish society that is both sympathetic and rigorous does not in itself 'cause' homophobia. Although I remain concerned about the possibility of certain groups distorting my work, a moratorium on research about this topic because of homophobia is not, in my view, an acceptable alternative. Censorship of this kind is not always an appropriate solution and may constitute another victory for those hostile to families that do not adhere to a heteronormative form. My uneasy resolution of this difficult issue therefore has been to continue with this research and to write about the findings. I retain a strong commitment to dissemination of the research findings among user groups such as the LGBT community and policy-makers. However, even if the possibility that public debate may be intensified in negative ways as a result in the short-term remains, so too does the need for discursive interventions that are sympathetic to lesbian parents in order to counter widespread homophobia. Furthermore, it has become apparent that a strategy of relative invisibility will not be possible indefinitely. Since my return to London to write up the research, there has been greater discussion of lesbian and gay parenting in Ireland than ever before, largely influenced by events in the rest of Europe with regard to legislative changes concerning LGBT equality. It is likely that this debate will continue to expand. This research therefore hopefully constitutes a contribution to the undermining of hegemonic heteronormative discourses.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### In Search of Doctors, Donors and Daddies: Lesbian Reproductive Decision-Making in Sweden and Ireland

Lesbian parents disrupt normative assumptions about the linear connection between heterosexuality and parenting. The most common representations of motherhood in Western society take place within a heterosexual matrix. Lesbians are actively discouraged from parenting by legislative prohibitions that restrict them from access to adoption, fostering and assisted reproduction. This is reflected in popular assumptions that a lesbian identity is incompatible with parenthood. During fieldwork in Sweden, I was introduced to a middle-aged Swedish man who enquired about my dissertation topic. When I explained that I was researching lesbian mothers, he replied in a puzzled voice: "*Isn't that a bit of a contradiction?*" Although new reproductive technologies have developed at a rapid pace and despite the advances of the lesbian, gay and bisexual movement, including at that time almost daily articles in Swedish newspapers about homosexual parenting, procreation/reproduction often remains linked to heterosexual sexual activity in the popular imagination, as this example illustrates. In fact, alternative insemination is a straightforward process and requires little or no medical assistance. It is also the case that some lesbians become parents through fostering or adoption. Nonetheless, the fact remains (but perhaps not for much longer, given recent developments in gynogenesis<sup>69</sup>) that in order for a woman to become pregnant, a donor is required. Although not all participants in this study were biological mothers, a factor common to all parents was that she or her partner had conceived a child and experienced pregnancy.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Sourbut (1996) used the term 'gynogenesis' to refer to the process whereby an embryo is created using the genetic material of two women. There is no 'father' in such a situation and all offspring are female, as neither genetic parent carries the Y chromosome, which is required for male offspring. In January 2002 scientists at the Reproductive Genetics Institute in Chicago claimed that they have devised a way to create 'artificial sperm' from any cell in a woman's body, which can be used to fertilise another woman's eggs. The new method was already being tested on human eggs and scientists claimed that it could become available within the next eighteen months (although this does not appear to have materialised at this point in time). This technology was originally created to enable men who do not produce viable sperm to have a biological child with a female partner.

<sup>70</sup> One couple also had a foster child, in addition to two children born to one partner in the context of their relationship.

The decision about whether to have a known or unknown donor, an involved or uninvolved donor and the practicalities of meeting donors or accessing clinics required considerable effort and discussion. In this chapter, the discourses of lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland concerning finding and choosing a donor and issues of access with regard to sperm banks, will be explored. The ways in which social and institutional contexts influence reproductive decision-making among lesbian women in two distinctive welfare regimes illustrates their limitations and possibilities. Cultural discourses regarding the ideal family in the social imaginary also featured in participants' accounts, where these values were re-imagined.

### **Contrasting Discourses of Fatherhood among Swedish and Irish Participants**

For lesbians choosing biological parenthood, one of the first practical decisions concerns finding a donor and deciding whether or not they want this person to play an active role in a future child's life. The vast majority of participants chose to have a known donor. Sperm banks are difficult for Swedish and Irish lesbians to access. Nonetheless, most interviewees expressed a clear preference for a donor whose identity was known to them. Perhaps the most dramatic difference between Irish and Swedish participants was that Swedish lesbians were far more likely to choose an involved donor. In contrast, the most common situation among Irish participants was to choose a donor, whose identity remained secret. Such donors agreed that if the child became curious about the donor, he could be contacted by the child at some point in the future. This type of arrangement, where the donor's identity remained known only to the lesbian parents, was completely absent from Swedish participants' discussions and choices. Despite this difference regarding donor involvement, both samples generally shared a preference for their child to have access to knowledge of their paternal biological origins. These family constellations are summarised in the following table, where donor status is delineated in terms of donor anonymity or knowledge of his identity, and degree of donor involvement. The numbers refer to the arrangements chosen by individual families:

	Known, involved donor	Known, uninvolv ed donor	Anonymous donor
Swedish	17	4	3
Irish	4	9	5
Total	21	13	8

**Table 5.1: Donor status among Swedish and Irish families at time of interview**

Three of the Swedish families classified in the table above as having a known but unininvolved donor, originated as an arrangement with some donor involvement. After some time, the donors themselves chose not to maintain contact with the children, contrary to the initial agreement. The fourth Swedish family in the middle category involves a couple who conceived via insemination at a clinic, but imported semen from the Sperm Bank of California with the donor identity disclosure option (the child can access the donor's identity upon reaching the age of eighteen). This couple had an initial preference for a known and involved donor, but were unable to achieve this. In contrast, the Irish families with a known but unininvolved donor had all specifically chosen that arrangement from the beginning. It is worth noting that the degree of contact on the part of involved donors in Ireland, was very slight. There was a far greater amount of contact and degree of shared parenting on the part of donors in Sweden. Thus, there is a dramatic contrast between the two samples in terms of understandings of fatherhood.

Although five of the Irish families have been classified as 'anonymous donor' types, only three of these refer to usage of sperm bank services. One child was conceived through a one night stand with an untraceable man, another was a result of rape. All of the Swedish participant families classified in this category had undergone insemination with an anonymous donor at a clinic.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> As noted in the previous chapter, some participants were still attempting to conceive at the time of the initial interview. This included one of the three Irish couples who had used sperm bank services. One of the Swedish couples who used a sperm bank was also in the process of inseminating. Both of these latter couples have become parents since the completion of initial fieldwork interviews. Another Irish couple who participated have yet to conceive.

## Choosing Known Donors

The reasons given for choosing a known donor were always explained in terms of the best interests of the child. The importance of having a known donor was far more entrenched among Swedish participants, with Irish parents more likely to view it as a preferable option rather than a necessity. Swedish participants referred to a child's right to know the identity of their father, adopted children's need to know their biological parents and a sense of guilt at having to face their future child's questions about a donor if his identity was unknown. In addition, the donors were most often very involved in the children's lives. Irish parents liked to leave the option open for their children in case they were curious in the future, but preferred to have little or no involvement on the part of donors:

We wanted to have a known donor, but we didn't want that the identity, we didn't want a father, we didn't want to share parenting with somebody else, but we wanted to know who the donor was ourselves and we wanted that information to be confidential.

- Eimear, Irish participant

The majority of Swedish participants expressed a strong belief that children have a 'right' to know their biological father and that to deny a child this right was either unconscionable or contrary to the welfare of the child. The importance of knowledge about one's biological origins was repeatedly articulated by most Swedish participants. An important difference between Irish and Swedish lesbian parents is that while a preference for a known donor was shared, the Swedish women also had donors who were involved in the children's lives. There were a number of reasons given for this. Swedish women expressed the importance of having a male role model ('*förebild*') in a child's life. While they acknowledged that any man - not just the biological father - could fulfil this role, it was considered easier to have a father who was regularly involved in the child's life to provide this. It was also assumed that donors would want to be involved and that to choose a known donor required their involvement. The kind of steps taken by Irish women to ensure that a known donor was found who would also be uninvolved simply did not appear to have occurred to any of the Swedish participants:

We think because maybe for our sake it would be very easy to have an unknown father to do an insemination in Denmark for example, because we wouldn't have any compromises or negotiations you know. And there would be just one home and one base for the children, so there would be positive things for that too but we think that it's very important for a child to be able to know their roots at least being able to find out sometimes but if you go to Denmark you will never know so em we thought it was for the children's best that we would like to have a father.

- Magdalena, Swedish participant

Yeah and I suppose I was really quite strong on this one, I couldn't resolve it all for myself, I wasn't happy with the idea of a completely anonymous donor, it would have been very secure for us because there would never be any risk of someone trying to take the child off us or anything like that, so personally I wanted, my strong desire was to have a donor who would not have any involvement in raising the child and would not feel themselves as a parent but who would consider the possibility if at some point this person, if the child wanted to meet them, then that would be something they would consider. That they wouldn't rule it out so we had to talk about that quite a lot.

- Karen, Irish participant

Although the amount of contact that donors had with children in Sweden was often described as limited by participants, in fact it ranged from every day, to four or five times a year. The most common arrangement was for donors to see their children once or twice a week, usually involving an overnight stay. In cases where donors saw their children less often, participants usually expressed dissatisfaction with this and a desire for greater involvement on the part of the donor.

In Sweden, women who have a child are required by law to notify the authorities of the father's name. If the parents are not in a relationship, the father must make monthly payments for the maintenance of the child. He faces legal penalties if he fails to do so. The child maintenance is deducted by the state from his salary every month and given directly to the mother. If, through no fault of the mother, the father cannot be found, she will be given the maintenance from the state. However, if the woman refuses to disclose the father's identity, it is possible she may not receive the allowance. Biological fathers are strongly supported by law through the mechanism of automatic shared custody at the birth of a child and increasing legal promotion of joint custody in divorce cases. Bergman and Hobson (2002) argue that the Swedish welfare state represents a strongly institutionalised expression of biological fatherhood. It is currently the only country in the world in which donor insemination at a clinic is accompanied by compulsory donor identity disclosure. This legislation was introduced in 1985

and remains exceptional in an international context. There are significant benefits designed to induce men's greater participation in parenting, including the reservation of two months of the duration of parental leave for fathers. Irish family law retains a strong influence from the 1937 constitution, which defines the family within the context of marriage and a male breadwinner model. As a result, unmarried fathers are not recognised by law and have to apply to the courts for joint guardianship. An unmarried mother has a personal right to the care and custody of her child, but an unmarried father possesses no constitutional right to either custody or contact with his child (Connolly, 1995). Although individual women may be able to use this situation to their advantage, guardianship in an Irish legal context is based on an ideology of motherhood that is clearly sexist, through the explicit construction of women's contribution to society within the confines of domestic motherhood.

Swedish participants seemed remarkably confident about their legal status as parents with regard to donors, despite the lack of legal recognition for non-biological parents. Not one expressed the fear that was so frequently articulated by Irish interviewees, that known donors might fight for custody or increased contact. The prospect of losing custody of children was a major concern of Irish participants. In marked contrast, Swedish women either welcomed men's involvement or accepted it as inevitable and went to immense lengths to secure amicable and equitable arrangements. In fact, one reason often articulated by Swedish women when explaining a preference for gay male donors, was that they would be more reliable in their commitment to a child, whereas heterosexual men might later start a family with a partner and lose interest in a child or children they had with lesbians:

Maybe they [heterosexual men] find later on a woman that they want to create a family with and where comes Anton [son] in then? You know when he has new kids with his new home and a new family and maybe he forgets about Anton and a gay man would never do that, there's never a risk or a chance that he would meet a woman and create, start having a family.

- Eva, Swedish participant

Four couples in the Swedish sample chose heterosexual men as donors who would be involved in the children's upbringing. One of these donors was already

a close friend of the couple. The other three donors were in relationships with heterosexual female friends, who themselves suggested their partner as a donor. Only one of these arrangements worked out successfully. In two other cases, the donor lost interest after several years and chose not to remain in contact with the children. The fourth donor later married a woman who was uncomfortable with the situation and he now has less contact than was originally anticipated. Clearly, no generalisations can be made and one of these arrangements proceeded amicably. However, the other three cases may suggest that concerns expressed by participants about involving a heterosexual male donor are not unwarranted.

In contrast, among Irish participants with known and involved fathers, a gay man was seen as less threatening than a heterosexual man, because he would be equally disadvantaged as the lesbian parents in a potential custody battle, on the basis of also being gay. Rather than expressing concern that a heterosexual father would lose interest, they worried that he might become *too* interested and have a legal advantage in a custody case because of his sexuality. Irish interviewees felt vulnerable to fathers who might develop an attachment to a child, particularly once the child was past infancy and required less work. Heterosexual men were seen to be more powerful in a legal context on the basis of their sexuality:

**M: It felt less risky than involving a straight man.**

**G: In case anything went wrong, in terms of them changing their minds, that really they didn't want to go down the route of just having a donor relationship**

**M: Yeah you know, custody issues or whatever, it just it might be riskier with a straight man.**

- Maeve and Gráinne, Irish participants

As involved donors, gay men were also seen as a more practical option by both Irish and Swedish interviewees, because they understood the difficulties of coming out and the hardship of facing homophobia in society. In addition, gay men were seen to embody a more appealing form of masculinity than many heterosexual men. Gay men were perceived as challenging hegemonic masculinity in ways that were advantageous to parenting:

I don't want my kids to have a stereotyped male role, I don't like that, or a stereotypical female role model, as it's seen in this society. I really love and like it that our kids are in a gay community as well and I think it's necessary for all kids to see all diversity and for example I really love to see my kids, that they see both their fathers or other gay men who are not these stereotype, not this macho

- Hanna, Swedish participant

In Sweden, having a known donor meant having an involved father. It was insufficient for a child to have knowledge of their paternity, a relationship with that person was also required. This was not just based on the potential difficulties of finding a donor who would agree to have no role in the child's life, but because among Swedish participants the importance of children having a relationship with their fathers was frequently reiterated. The emphasis on participatory fatherhood among participants can be seen as a reflection of broader discourses about the significance of fatherhood and biological relatedness in Swedish society. These normative discourses were acknowledged by one co-parent who had an initial preference for an anonymous donor at a sperm bank:

There seems to be this incredibly strong need in Sweden for a child to know that they have a father somewhere so I figured oh well you know okay I accepted that after a while.

- Anne, co-parent whose partner is Swedish

Among Irish interviewees, the preference for a known father was generally shared, although less prioritised than among Swedish participants. A known donor did not necessarily imply a relationship between children and the donor however. Given the dominant social norms regarding the nature of kinship and importance of biology, it is unsurprising that a known donor was preferable. Even if interviewees themselves considered biology to be unimportant in parenting, they recognised that broader social norms continually reinforce the significance of biological origins. It was therefore usually viewed as best for the child if this option existed. The distinction between a 'Dad' or 'Pappa' and a 'donor' or 'biological father' was occasionally referred to in interviews. The former was a social parent, whereas a donor is someone who is the biological male parent:

They [children] explain that they have no Dad, a Dad is a relationship that you have with a person, but they have a father who is the person that made them.

- Catherine, Irish participant

Some Swedish participants said that they might have gone to Denmark if they had not found a donor, but this was seen as a last resort, a desperate measure. Many however were clear that this was not something they could ever have considered because of the anonymity of the donor. For Swedish women, there were other advantages associated with having known fathers. Another parent was someone who also shouldered responsibility for childcare. When children spent time with their fathers, the lesbian parent or parents were free to spend time alone with their partner or devote their energies to other areas of life:

We thought it was easier to find two men, one or two men here in Sweden and then we were talking also about this thing that it was good for our kids to have their fathers and it should be good for us because then our kids could be with their fathers and we have some time for ourselves and all these things to do and going on vacations and all these things.

- Gunilla, Swedish participant

Men's participation in parenting was not seen as beneficial solely to children, it could also be advantageous to lesbian parents, who were able to share the practical aspects of childcare with involved donors. This enabled them to concentrate their energies in other areas of their lives as well. This can be seen as a reflection of a Swedish public discourse of participatory fatherhood dating from the 1970s, when women's entry to the paid labour market was encouraged and facilitated, along with men's greater involvement in family life. Both men and women were perceived to benefit from men's greater involvement in parenting.

### **Custody Considerations among Irish Lesbian Parents**

Three women in the Irish sample had children from a heterosexual marriage. Each had experienced prolonged custody battles and homophobia within the legal system. When they embarked on parenthood with their female partners, one chose to have a donor whose identity remained known only to them and the other two couples chose to inseminate at a sperm bank. Despite the fact that in Sweden

fathers have the same rights as mothers and in Ireland fathers are only recognised if they are married to the mother of the child, this legal situation provided Irish participants with little or no sense of security. The legal system and instruments of the law were perceived as threatening and inherently unsympathetic to lesbians. Although the marriage bias in Irish law prevents recognition of unmarried fathers (and has traditionally exempted them from responsibilities), this was not considered to provide sufficient security. This was true for most participants, not only those couples where one partner had been through a custody battle with an ex-husband:

**I don't think you can ever as a lesbian in this country depend on any legal system to support you, you know. That's how I feel about it anyhow [...] So I wouldn't have any faith in the Irish legal system whether or not there's legislation there to support us in any legal battle over a child.**

- Sile, Irish participant

Once a case has come to court, families are very much at the mercy of judges. If a woman's ex-husband agrees to share custody with her, even partially, she runs the risk of being denied even this limited visitation should she challenge the case in court. While there have been enormous improvements in how lesbians are treated in Irish courts in recent years, Irish participants remained worried that homophobia would act against them in custody cases. It seems that the broader social context shapes women's perceptions of the range of choices available to them, regardless of legal protection or vulnerability. Although Sweden has a highly regulated code of fatherhood that confers men equal rights and responsibilities at the birth of a child, this was not perceived as threatening to lesbian parents. On the other hand, despite the lack of social rights (and responsibilities) afforded fathers in Ireland, Irish interviewees articulated concern that they would be losers in custody battles, on the basis of their sexuality. Choosing an uninvolved donor was therefore seen to provide them with a greater measure of security.

## Finding a Donor

The task of finding a donor was often a lengthy and intensive process. One participant estimated that over the past fifteen years while searching for donors for her partner, herself and friends in their lesbian network, she had approached more than 500 men, of whom only 3 agreed. Although for a small minority of participants the donor was an immediately obvious candidate such as a close friend of many years standing, for most participants it took immense time and effort before finding a suitable person to agree to act as a donor.

There were numerous ways of meeting donors. The most common method of finding a donor was to enquire among friends and acquaintances. For lesbian women choosing parenthood, the donor is a person whom most often they become acquainted with in the context of embarking on parenthood. Unlike in heterosexual relationships, there is seldom a prior shared history of friendship or sexual intimacy. The relationship usually resulted from women's search for a donor. Some Swedish participants (n=12) placed or answered advertisements in lesbian and gay publications or internet sites. Several other Swedish interviewees mentioned that they had considered it. Only one Irish couple in this study attempted to find a donor using this particular method. Although they received several replies, they did not respond to any of them. Despite the fact that this method of meeting donors was more common among Swedish participants, at least twelve advertisements appeared in the 'contacts' column of the *Irish Gay Community News* from women looking for donors or from men wishing to act as donors, between 1997-2000 (Spillane, 2001). It may have been easier for Irish participants to find someone suitable within their acquaintance network, due to the lesser degree of involvement required. For Swedish women it was perhaps harder to find someone compatible, because of the degree of commitment they would be embarking on in parenting as a shared project. Attempts to meet donors through ads on the part of Swedish participants were sometimes successful although in many cases, women encountered men whom they found distinctly unappealing options before finding someone who became the eventual donor.

This process was often described as demoralising and discouraging. One couple met with a man who answered their advertisement and during the course of the meeting they realised that he was a paedophile. They immediately left and called the police. The same couple also met a man whom they recognised as the donor for friends of theirs. He denied that he had any other children. Others described some of the men they encountered as disturbed and perverted, particularly the heterosexual men who responded to ads. Considerable caution was taken in meeting men contacted this way and participants were careful to check them out thoroughly:

Yes, it was, kind of terrible, we put this ad in and that should have been an interesting study, to meet all those men! [Laughter] They were from like age 25 to 80 years old.

- Viveka, Swedish participant

R: And how did you meet Mattias [biological father]?

Rg: Over the internet, an advertisement on the internet. I was giving up lots of times and Eva said no one more, we will try one more. No I don't want to, I'd given up, yeah several times and Eva said no one more time, one more time. And the more nutcases we met, oh I thought god it's no idea.

E: God some were nuts, straight guys, gay guys, you know.

Rg: After a while, all the straight guys was no way, no straight guys, because they were really nuts.

- Regina and Eva, Swedish participants

Some participants who placed advertisements later went on to meet donors through friends or acquaintances. One Swedish couple, whose children were among the oldest in the sample, had attended a support group for lesbians contemplating parenthood. They also referred to the experiences of women in that group who had attempted to meet donors via advertisements. Some of these men wanted to watch the lesbian couple having sex in exchange for sperm, or for children to be conceived via intercourse.

Nonetheless, some participants had extremely positive experiences with their donors, whom they met through advertisements. These arrangements had worked out very successfully and now years later the donor had become an important

part of their own life as well as their child's and was an established figure in their kinship network:

And all by an accident, I don't know why, I was reading in this ad, there was a man who was looking for a lesbian woman or a lesbian couple and he wanted to have a child and I answered his ad and he called me two days later and he came to my apartment and it was like a big love [laughs], it was a strange feeling, he had been looking for a woman for a long time and he was living alone at the time too and I had been you know trying to find a possible or a man to have a child with and we met five weeks talking about everything and nothing.

- Stina, Swedish participant

The difference between this search for a donor and traditional heterosexual scripts concerning a search for a partner is that the relationship between the lesbian woman or couple and the donor centres around conception. Often this is the only reason they meet in the first place. Just as some heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men advertise in personal columns for a sexual partner, so do some prospective parents seek to find a suitable donor/mother in the same way in queer publications or internet sites. The developing relationship between an involved donor and lesbian woman or couple is based on parenting and is a platonic relationship not a romantic one. Locating potential donors through advertisements provided women with a practical strategy for finding compatible fathers when they had exhausted their own networks of friends and acquaintances. It was a joint effort between partners and immense efforts were taken to ensure the trustworthiness and suitability of men who responded to advertisements.

### **UK Networks**

One couple in the Irish sample conceived their second child while living in Britain. They belonged to a network of lesbian women interested in becoming parents. Another lesbian couple in this network contacted men through an advertisement in a gay publication and then vetted them for the rest of the group. They received 40 replies to their ad and accepted five of these men. The men who agreed to act as donors would arrive at the organising couple's home at short notice and obligingly provide the sperm, which this couple would take to a woman in another room to be used for insemination. The men would not know

who was being inseminated and agreed to donate but have no parental responsibilities. Women usually chose to inseminate with several donors in the same month, in order to maximise the secrecy of the donor identity. The men however agreed that the children could contact them in the future if they were curious about them (assuming that it could be surmised who the father was). The men had no way of reaching the mothers however. In fact, all the children ended up bearing a strong resemblance to a particular donor, so there was no doubt about their paternity:

J: They'd come into the bathroom, jerk off into a beer mug, somebody would take it and use a syringe and do it

R: But they wouldn't know who was using it

J: No they'd be somebody else doing the, in somebody else's house as well [laughs], it wasn't even in our own house that we did it.

R: So I guess it was helpful that your friends knew these men

J: Yeah they had done a bit of vetting, we didn't do any vetting really...

B: I was going to throw out the man with the shoestring tie.

J: Oh you didn't like him

B: He looked like a country and western, he had this shoestring tie [J laughs] you know the kind of thing where you're like [J & B in unison] OH GOD! [laughter] But I don't know whether I threw that out or not anyway it wasn't him, so.

J:[...] We had all sorts of donors turning up who used to do it for nothing, it was really nice.

- Joan and Barbara, Irish participants

Their experience is typical of certain lesbian groups in the UK and US during the late 1980s, where networks of lesbians, often influenced by radical feminism, made similar arrangements with donors. The ethos of these groups was that women were parenting independently of men. Considerable lengths were taken to ensure the anonymity of the women. This was to prevent later intervention on the part of donors should they become curious about the children. Given the climate of hostility towards lesbian mothers at the time and the entrenched custody battles taking place between lesbian who became parents in heterosexual relationships and their former male partners, it is unsurprising that women would have been extremely concerned about their legal security as parents (Green, 1997). Some groups took the extra precaution of mixing the sperm of multiple

donors together and use the resulting mixture for insemination. This US and UK phenomenon appears to be entirely absent from the discourses of lesbian parents interviewed for this study, apart from one couple who were living in Britain at the time they conceived their second child within one of these networks. There is a long history of emigration from Ireland to the US and UK, particularly during the 1980s, a time of high unemployment in Ireland. Many Irish lesbians and gay men emigrated during this period because of the unsupportive social climate in Ireland at that time. Given that their destination was often the US and the UK, it is probable that like this couple, some went on to become parents abroad. The current economic boom in Ireland coinciding with increased social tolerance has encouraged the return of many emigrants. Two Irish couples in the study conceived at least one of their children while living abroad.

Most Irish participants found donors within their immediate network of friends and acquaintances. Occasionally a friend suggested or introduced a couple to a potential donor. Many of these men were heterosexual with left-wing politics and were willing to do the couple a favour by acting as a donor, provided there was a clear understanding that the arrangement required no parenting responsibilities. It was also the case that gay men often wanted more involvement than Irish participants were willing to consider. Unlike Swedish participants, who were concerned about a lack of commitment on the part of heterosexual men and welcomed greater involvement on the part of donors, Irish lesbian parents were unanimous in their desire to be the sole or primary parenting figures. Uninvolved donors in Ireland agreed that their identity should remain known only to the lesbian parents and be revealed at a later stage to the child, if she or he was interested. This suited everyone, as the lesbian parents wanted sole responsibility for the child while leaving the possibility of future contact between the child and the donor open, should the child express an interest in meeting him. These men were asked about their medical history and usually requested to undergo testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. The main concern, besides their medical health, was if they seemed likely to be trustworthy and responsible about upholding the condition of non-involvement:

And so we asked him and he thought about it and he said yes and [...] we were saying that's fine but what about you know in five years time, when she's five [...] or she's twenty-two and decides I want to find out who this person is you know. He said well I'm okay about that [...] I think he was a pretty amazing person to be able to do that.

- Aoife, Irish participant

### Changing Donors

Not all donors initially accepted went on to become the biological father. Sometimes arrangements were terminated by either party, due to unforeseen circumstances arising. One participant backed out of using a particular donor at the last minute when disconcerted by his behaviour and disclosure that there was mental illness in his family:

J: And he was too embarrassed so he did it before I got there, then he realised he had to keep it warm so he put it in a yoghurt pot and into a pot of boiling water [D laughs] so that's what I was faced with when I got there

D: This boiling, this yoghurt boiling! [laughs]

J: And then he told me that his mother was mad and I thought, because [...] I knew there was a little bit of genetics in schizophrenia and I thought oh I don't know whether, I mean [laughs] he doesn't seem entirely biologically sound anyway! As soon as this knowledge was there I thought gee I think I might just leave it now.

- Julie and Deirdre (partners), Irish participants

In some cases, women inseminated with several donors before becoming pregnant. Sometimes a donor declined to continue inseminating after a period of time, due to personal factors in the circumstances of his own life, such as a decision to move to a different country for example. Occasionally, women became concerned that lifestyle factors were lowering a donor's sperm count and after a period of repeated disappointment, decided to find another donor. Sometimes the women themselves moved to a different geographical location and it became impractical to continue with the same donor. The search for donors was a difficult and demanding process and women were usually reluctant to begin their search anew. Some of these women went on to become pregnant via sperm banks.

## **Sperm Banks – The Clinic Route and Donor Anonymity**

Rates of conception via frozen sperm are substantially lower than for fresh sperm. According to the Sperm Bank of California, the possibility of a fertile heterosexual couple in their 20s conceiving from well-timed intercourse is about 20-25% per cycle attempt. The chance of a fertile woman conceiving using frozen sperm is about 5-10% per cycle attempt with a vaginal insemination and 10-15% per cycle attempt with an intrauterine insemination. Freezing seems to cut down by about one-third the effectiveness of sperm. That is, it is likely to take approximately 30 percent more inseminations to become pregnant with frozen sperm than with fresh sperm. A further deterrent to using a clinic's services is that it is a very expensive process and given the longer period of time it can take to become pregnant, the financial strain can become prohibitive. However, clinics offer the advantage of thoroughly screening donors for possible health problems to a degree unlikely to be achieved outside of a medical setting.

### ***Swedish participants***

Those participants who chose to use a clinic gave the issue of donor anonymity much consideration. It was not the ideal prospect for all the women who eventually opted for this possibility. Of the five Swedish couples who inseminated at a clinic, three had initially searched for a known donor. One couple, Sara and Åsa, had found a gay man who agreed to act as a donor and Sara inseminated with him for some time. They then discovered that he had fertility problems and Sara underwent a course of IVF privately abroad, as IVF is not available to lesbians in Sweden. This led to a pregnancy, which unfortunately resulted in a miscarriage. They considered inseminating with this man again but for various reasons he lost interest and as they were unable to find another donor, they finally decided to go to a clinic instead, where Åsa conceived.

They described themselves as extremely happy with this decision and during the interview, commented that they enjoyed being the only parents and not having to negotiate with a father or fathers. On the subject of donor anonymity, they felt that it was something they had to be open and honest about with their child from

the beginning and were aware that she might experience this as a sense of loss. However, in their view it was better not to have the option of donor identity disclosure at the age of eighteen, because a meeting with the donor as an adult could be potentially painful and a sense of finality was therefore preferable. Thus, having a sense of closure from the beginning might make this reconciliation to donor anonymity easier. They recognised that children may respond differently to this knowledge and that there was no way to predict how their daughter would react to having an anonymous donor. Despite this, they felt that if they were open about it and sensitive to how their daughter's feelings about this might change over time, it would be something that she could cope with:

We are very much aware of it and have been all the time since we decided to do it this way and it's something that we have to sort of help her with and of course we don't know how she's going to react, because we think it's very individual, maybe she's going to be sad, maybe she's going to be totally fine, because she hasn't had anything else, so it's very difficult to say [...] and it can come into periods during her upbringing where she sort of has these questions and as long as we can give her the right answers and be honest about all the things, maybe she's going to be fine and okay you know the most important is that you love me and you did this because you really wanted to have me and hopefully that's the way it's going to be.

- Åsa, Swedish participant

Another Swedish couple, Elin and Ylva, were unable to find a donor, but inseminated only once at a clinic, which did not result in a pregnancy. They then met a man who agreed to act as a donor and play an active parenting role and they eventually had children with him. A third Swedish couple, Sylvia and Mia, who went on to inseminate in Denmark had initially felt it was important to have a known father. So they placed an advertisement in a queer publication. However, after receiving some answers and meeting one man they changed their minds and decided to go to Denmark instead:

**It seemed too complicated when I faced the facts, no this would be too complicated and two parents would be enough for our kids and so.**

- Sylvia, Swedish participant

Interestingly, they were ambivalent about the possibility of donor identity disclosure. Like Åsa and Sara, they perceived some disadvantages to this. The meeting between the donor and the child might not prove to be a positive

experience. In addition, they recognised that not all children may be curious about donors:

It's not like when she turns eighteen and she can knock on a door and hey that's Daddy. So I don't know, I mean for some people they want to find their genetic roots and you can never know that and hopefully it won't matter because we shall be two parents [...] I don't know if she would care or not, I mean I know adopted children who don't really care about their roots, so you can't really know.

- Mia, Swedish participant

Only one Swedish couple had decided from the beginning to go to Denmark for insemination by an anonymous donor. They also realised that they did not want to negotiate parenting with a third parental figure:

We want to decide everything. We don't want, even if it's a friend we don't want him to interfere in our lives.

- Linnea, Swedish participant

Among Swedish participants, insemination at a clinic was usually a last resort. However, interviewees who had children in this way expressed great satisfaction with the arrangement. Although they recognised that there could be disadvantages for the child in terms of the donor's identity remaining secret, the possibility that children might not suffer because of this was also raised. This potential problem was seen to be outweighed by the benefits of raising children by themselves. It is certainly the case that Swedish participants who had known fathers went to great lengths to negotiate visitation and responsibilities. This necessitated ongoing discussion with fathers, requiring considerable effort, communication and commitment from all parties. Although this was not without its advantages, it was a demanding process. Lesbians who inseminated at a sperm bank, were able to raise their children as the primary parental figures, without negotiating the presence of a third parent. In addition, it was seen to benefit the child who did not have to go back and forth between two homes.

### *Irish participants*

Like most participants, Irish parents Mary and Eileen initially attempted to conceive with a known donor. However, the (heterosexual) donor's girlfriend

became pregnant unexpectedly and he decided not to continue with the inseminations. Mary and Eileen were devastated and Mary was particularly upset by the sense of a lack of control. They had been concerned in any case about custody issues and when this donor backed out, they decided to try a clinic:

I just felt that like it was taken out of my hands, that like, because of other circumstances in his life like that he felt that he couldn't donate [...] also I was worried about custody and access [...] and I want to be able to take Fiona [child] out of the country, you know if we want to go away for holidays or live abroad [...] I decided that I didn't want to have to be counting on someone else's permission, someone who wasn't an active parent.

- Mary, Irish participant

Again, the issue of potential custody battles was a major concern for Irish women who decided to inseminate at a clinic. Although emigration and travel was a feature of life for participants in both countries, the issue of mobility and fathers was seen as more complicated among Irish participants. Another Irish couple who had their child via donor insemination at a clinic, initially considered using a donor from another country. However, they were concerned that as he lived abroad, there would be continual pressure regarding travel arrangements. In addition, they were worried that in the future he might wish to obtain official visitation rights, in which case the child would possibly spend part of the year living in another country. The advantage of having a donor who lived abroad however, was that it facilitated less involvement. This is a difference between participants in the two countries. In cases where fathers lived some distance away or abroad, Swedish interviewees generally expressed a desire for greater involvement on the part of donors in the form of more contact with children.

The notion of donor anonymity was also accompanied by a critique of fatherhood and the view that biological fathers are not necessarily good fathers. While it was considered important to have men involved in a child's life, that role could be filled by any suitable man, either a friend or relative. It was not restricted to a biological father. On the issue of knowledge available to children about their biological origins, participants felt that not all children are curious about this and were optimistic that a child would feel satisfied with the parents and upbringing they received. Overall, Irish women were more likely to emphasise the increased sense of control and choice associated with a clinic and safety in terms of

custody issues. Although autonomy was a feature of Swedish participants' accounts, they framed their discussions in terms of a preference for raising a child together without interference from or negotiation with a donor or donors. A child's knowledge about their biological origins was not considered to be more important than having a secure and loving home. Not all children were presumed to be curious about their paternity. The importance of being aware of and sensitive to a child's changing needs with regard to donor anonymity were articulated, as was the hope that having two parents and the love and security they provided, would be sufficient for any child starting out in life.

### **Transnational Journeys**

Another Swedish couple who chose to use a clinic, Katarina and Elisabeth, were unsuccessful in their search for a donor. Eventually they decided to go to a clinic, but chose to use sperm imported from the Sperm Bank of California (SBC). The SBC offers the option of donor identity disclosure once a child reaches eighteen. Donors are asked whether they will agree to this information being disclosed and when a woman or couple are looking at the clinic's catalogue, they can choose a donor with this option. So they ordered sperm from the SBC, which was then sent to Denmark, where they travelled every month for the insemination. Katarina did eventually become pregnant, but sadly miscarried. Eventually they met a man who agreed to be a donor and take part in any future child's upbringing. Unfortunately, this man was planning to emigrate in the near future. So he obligingly travelled to Denmark and deposited some sperm at the clinic there. However, his semen reacted badly to the freezing process, lowering the possibility of a successful outcome. Their monthly trips to the clinic continued. After two years of inseminating in Denmark, they decided to undergo IVF in Finland. However, the clinic they attended there had a policy of using unknown donors at that time.<sup>72</sup> So Katarina and Elisabeth once again imported sperm from the SBC. It was sent to Finland to be used in the IVF attempt there. During a

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<sup>72</sup> The clinic in question did not allow known donors to be used for its services where the donor is not also the partner of a woman receiving treatment in a heterosexual couple. This decision applies to heterosexual and lesbian couples and to single women as well. The rationale given for this is that complications may arise regarding access and financial provision (personal communication with clinic, September 2003).

consultation with the specialist at the Finnish clinic prior to treatment however, they were told that there may be a change in the law in the near future, which will prohibit them from accessing this service in Finland. If this occurred, the specialist suggested that the sperm vials be sent to St. Petersburg, where alternatively the IVF treatment could take place. Fortunately Elisabeth is proficient in Russian, otherwise their experience there could be complicated by a language barrier. Katarina later e-mailed me with her opinion about these events:

**“Isn’t this totally stupid. These little sperms have to travel around the whole world and me too before they will get into me.....”**

This is an interesting illustration of the potentially international context for lesbians accessing assisted reproduction. Given that many countries, including Sweden, restrict certain categories of women from accessing sperm banks and fertility treatment, it is inevitable that women will travel abroad to avail of these services. In this case, conception involves five countries: the US where the sperm originates; Sweden where the lesbian couple wishing to have a child are from; Denmark where alternative insemination takes place; Finland where they have attended an IVF consultation; and possibly Russia, if they were unable to carry out the IVF in Finland. In such cases, even if the donor identity disclosure option is available, the child and donor may not speak the same language. Katarina’s comment ironically highlights absurdities encountered by lesbians seeking to become pregnant in this way. Due to legal prohibitions, if they wish to follow the Swedish ideal of having a known donor, they are literally forced to chase services with the donor identity disclosure option around the world.

Irish clinics do not offer the possibility of donor identity disclosure. Although some participants had inseminated at the Well Woman Clinic in Ireland before it stopped providing DI, there is currently no clinic in the country willing to offer its services to lesbians. Such decisions are entirely at the discretion of individual clinics. One couple explored the possibility of importing sperm from the SBC with the option of donor identity disclosure. A gynaecologist was recommended to them by their sympathetic GP. Although the gynaecologist initially agreed to help them, he later changed his mind. This couple could technically still order the sperm and providing it was not deterred at customs, believed they could carry out

the inseminations themselves. However, it was unclear whether they would be able to import it successfully. In addition, as the success rates with frozen sperm are so much lower, they wanted to optimise their chances by arranging intrauterine inseminations with a doctor. In the absence of medical support, this proved impossible.

Discussions about donor secrecy take a different form within lesbian parent families. Unlike heterosexual nuclear families, where DI can be concealed, for lesbian parents and their children the existence of a donor is immediately evident. Openness about donor insemination from the beginning of a child's life, combined with the deconstruction of biological and non-biological kinship may enable lesbian families to mark the significance of DI differently. Although lesbians who inseminated at a clinic acknowledged that having an anonymous donor may be a loss for a child, it was also understood that not all children are interested in their biological origins. It was hoped that children would recognise that DI was an indication of how much the child was wanted and welcomed and that this would temper any possible disappointment they might feel about not having access to information about the donor. Interestingly, two couples considered it beneficial not to be able to access contact information for a donor, because then the child was not faced with the difficult choice of whether or not to act on this information and attempt to contact the donor as an adult. They surmised that having a sense of closure from the beginning might make this reconciliation to donor anonymity easier.

### **Alternative Conceptions 'The Hard Way'**

Not all pregnancies were the result of insemination. Some lesbians have never had, or wanted to have, sex with a man. However, many lesbians have experienced heterosexual relationships prior to coming out. It is also the case that some lesbians choose to have sex with a man sometimes. This might be a brief encounter or relationship after developing a lesbian identity, which may not change that identity in any way. The myriad complexities of sexuality are such that choice of partner cannot be presumed to delineate identity. Nonetheless, for many lesbian women, the prospect of conceiving a child through intercourse is

an impossible option. This is often considered an unacceptable route to pregnancy for a variety of emotional, practical and ethical reasons. Unprotected casual sex carries obvious health risks. In the context of a committed relationship, sex with a man for the purpose of conception may constitute infidelity. In addition, as already indicated, there was a marked preference for a known donor among participants and this is not necessarily facilitated by a casual encounter. Furthermore, sex is laden with emotional significance for many people and becoming pregnant through casual sex with a stranger is not an easy option for lesbians because of the personal meanings invested in sex, sexuality, identity, power and choice.

Although the overwhelming preference among participants was for alternative insemination, four Irish lesbians and one Swedish lesbian either attempted to conceive or became pregnant through intercourse. This was a voluntary encounter in four out of the five cases. Discussions about alternative insemination did not take place in Ireland until later than in the UK or the USA. There were no networks of women discussing insemination or how to find a donor until the early 1990s. For one Irish participant, the most practical way of becoming pregnant seemed to be through sex with a man. She had previous experience of heterosexual relationships and did not find the option physically difficult or emotionally distressing. Her partner was aware of this and it was not an issue in their relationship, or for her personally. The encounter took place prior to any major public awareness of AIDS and so the context of sexual health debates was also different:

I think yeah if there had been a different kind of cultural environment in Ireland it might have been different, also because I had had a whole kind of heterosexual past if you like, it wasn't that difficult for me to think well this is a possible route and it might be more efficient than another route, even if I'd had those options clearly out there, you know what I mean [...] whereas I know that for other women that I've spoken to about it, that would have been an incredibly difficult thing to consider. But it didn't feel that difficult to me and also I had kind of you know eh you know like I was a teenager in the '60s and sort of sexual revolutions and you know I suppose casual sex at some level was not really a forbidden, I didn't have a major ideological problem with it at the time and em it was kind of a, a pre kind of the whole AIDS issues and that way around, so it's just mixtures, but particular kind convergence of things at the time, I know now with other women, the whole issue around AI and what's available and that kind of end of things is much more on the agenda now here for women. I'm sure I would have looked at it differently.

- Eithne, Irish participant

Another Irish participant, Clodagh, had a one-night stand while travelling abroad and became pregnant as a result. The encounter had been a casual and unplanned one and was probably not something she would have given much thought to afterwards, except for the resulting pregnancy. There was no way of tracing the biological father. In her case, she decided to go ahead with the pregnancy, reasoning that if she had an abortion, she would probably not get around to planning a pregnancy in the future.

I suppose the reason I went through the whole thing and I had him was that it was you know em, it had happened, a lot of people would pay a lot of money to be in the position I was in and eh I reckoned if I didn't go through with it then that would be it I would never have a child, so.

- Clodagh, Irish participant

Clodagh felt somewhat relieved that the father could not be contacted, because she had witnessed difficulties among friends with fathers of unplanned pregnancies. In her view, if the man had not wanted the pregnancy, it would be difficult to stir his interest in the child. Although she was concerned that her child might develop a fantasy about her father, she also felt that raising a child alone prevented potential problems in terms of trying to persuade a biological father to share responsibility for the child:

C: I wouldn't even be able to find him, you know, so it wasn't even a decision, it was just the way it was, maybe it was for the best actually.

R: Why do you think that?

C: I know women who have children whose fathers were around, these would be gay women, but whether they were or not, men if, I think, if they're not, if they never wanted a child to begin with, you'll never get them interested, it'll just be a constant battle. I know women who have court cases, all this kind of stuff and at the end of the day, it just, no matter, if they take the father to court and get the maintenance and all the rest it's just not worth it, between the hassle and the, everything. Most fathers are absent with the mothers I know, you know, and when they do appear back in the child's life, which is whenever they want to appear [laughs], they just mess it up for everybody [...] and in most cases it seems to be like that, and when I see all that happening, I think well okay she doesn't have a father that I can tell her about, but she doesn't have someone coming in and messing up her life either. I don't know, we'll have to see how it goes as the years go on, because an absent father is always a brilliant one [laughs], is another side of it to a child you know.

- Clodagh, Irish participant

Clodagh's views are typical of the distinction between biological and social fatherhood articulated by many Irish participants. A biological father was not necessarily a positive presence in a child's life, whereas for Swedish women contact with and knowledge of biological fathers was important for children's well-being. This distinction between biological and social fatherhood among Irish participants constituted a critique of masculinities and a de-construction of biology and parenting. It did not reflect a negative view of men generally.

As already illustrated, the process of finding a donor can be a long and difficult one. For one Irish interviewee, her search for a donor proved unsuccessful and she became increasingly desperate. She was a co-parent to a child with her partner and attempted to become pregnant by the same donor. However, he then moved abroad and she was forced to begin her search again. She found another donor whom she began inseminating with and then he also emigrated. Her renewed search proved unsuccessful. Finally, she had a one-night stand with a casual acquaintance, which did not result in pregnancy. This event caused problems in her relationship with her partner, who was very upset that she had attempted to become pregnant in this way. In the end, she never conceived a biological child, although at this point in her life she felt reconciled to this and no longer had the wish to become a biological parent, particularly as her child grew older:

And then he left the country, so. And [...] the powerlessness in not being able to find a donor and that kind of thing you know, you found one and then he'd be around for three months and then he'd go away you know and wasn't available on the night you were ovulating anyway and looking around here and asking people and just coming up with no, no, no all along. Really I didn't find anybody here who was prepared to be a donor for me or for anybody else and that became, oh just the sense of just em, the, not having any power you know, and so, I did end up going and fucking a bloke, and that was like a big issue between Jean [partner] and I, because I had done that and she didn't like that at all.

- Catherine, Irish participant

As the above quote indicates, the sense of powerlessness and lack of control around finding a donor were a recurring theme for many women. The difficulty of finding a suitable donor was intensely frustrating and added to the stress of the process of attempting to conceive.

One Swedish participant asked a close heterosexual friend of many years to be a donor. She felt awkward about asking him to provide semen through masturbation and as they happened to be together on the day she was ovulating, decided to have sex with him instead. She became pregnant immediately. When referring to the method of conception, she said: "*I did it that way, the hard way.*" Although she initially felt comfortable with her decision, it proved difficult to resolve with her partner however and took a toll on their relationship, although this eventually passed.

I don't think he would have liked that [insemination] and for me it was, he's like a, he's a very nice person I mean he is very easy to be alone with and he's eh, it was not a big deal for him and I felt very comfortable with him so I, I mean it would be, I would feel embarrassed if I should ask him just to well you have to and I said okay go for it, but I mean it was very hard in the relationship [with her partner].

- Birgitta, Swedish participant

None of these encounters in any way changed these women's sense of themselves as lesbian. Although they chose to have sex with men, it was seen as a one-off event, in one case for pleasure and for the other three women it was with the explicit intention of becoming pregnant. In these latter cases, intercourse appeared to be the most practical means available at that time.

The last Irish participant who did not conceive by insemination, Dymphna, became pregnant as a result of rape. She did not initially tell anyone about the assault and did not report the crime. Due to her distressed state in the immediate aftermath of the assault, it did not occur to her to take the morning after pill. The realisation of her pregnancy came as an enormous shock. She informed her family and friends that she was pregnant when she was in her second trimester and her condition was increasingly obvious. Dymphna described her emotional state for the duration of the pregnancy as one of denial and did not attempt to obtain any prenatal care until close to the birth. Although she is pro-choice, she decided to continue with the pregnancy and raise the child. Despite persistent curiosity on the part of her family and friends, she has kept the details of the conception to herself. Dymphna is however, concerned about what to tell her son in the future. She is reluctant to reveal the truth about how she became pregnant to him, not solely because it would be difficult for her to discuss, but because she

is concerned that the knowledge would adversely affect him or that he might feel guilty about causing her emotional pain by virtue of being born. Raising her child without a father has made her feel more confident about the possibility of having an uninvolved donor should she choose to have another child in the future.

The diverse circumstances of conception among participants is illustrative of the wide range of possibilities available to lesbians who wish to embark on parenthood, despite the legislative limitations that may hamper their efforts. However, a previously unexplored aspect of lesbian parenting concerns unplanned pregnancy, which is often assumed to be impossible for lesbians. As the case of Dymphna illustrates, lesbians are also vulnerable to rape, which may result in a pregnancy. Unlike Dymphna, who did not have any choice in the matter, some participants in this study chose not to conceive by insemination. In addition, one participant conceived accidentally as a result of a one-night stand. This latter group highlights the relatively hidden phenomenon of sexual encounters which may not correspond to popular conceptions of a particular sexual identity, but which also do not challenge or conflict with that identity on a personal level. The variety of narratives and experiences reveals the complexity of considerations informing reproductive decision-making among lesbian parents.

## Conclusion

Lesbian reproductive-decision making is largely characterised by immense effort and discussion. Indeed, for lesbians planning parenthood, every step along the path to pregnancy and parenthood requires a radical rethinking of notions of parenting. For a small number of participants parenthood was an unplanned event and the option of abortion was given serious consideration. The fact that some lesbians experience unplanned pregnancy is a deconstructive notion, challenging fixed categorisations of sexual identity and highlighting all women's vulnerability to sexual violence.

This chapter explored the influence of social and institutional contexts in shaping reproductive choices available to lesbian women and their responses to legal and cultural constraints. Lesbian parents in this study created new family

constellations within the context of broader cultural ideologies of motherhood, fatherhood and kinship. In both Sweden and Ireland, 'blood ties' are usually considered an intrinsic part of what constitutes a family. Sweden has a particularly strongly coded form of biological fatherhood, which is reflected in social policy and practice. The gender equality initiatives of the 1970s emphasised a model of participatory fatherhood. Sweden's radical innovations concerning families and social policy are marked by a commitment to gender equality based on a construction of the family around a nuclear family model. This does not reflect the variety of family forms in existence, particularly among lesbian and gay families, where there may be as many as four active parents. Reproductive decision-making among Swedish lesbian parents reflects broader cultural norms concerning biological and participatory fatherhood. However, there are myriad ways in which these ideologies are reinscribed in new forms in lesbian families. The preference for gay men as participatory fathers reflected a commitment to queer community and a more subversive masculinity. Although men do not contribute to families simply by their presence, in lesbian parent families participatory fatherhood was developed in ways that were seen to be of benefit both to children and their lesbian parents.

Among Irish lesbian parents, the history of control of women's bodies was continually undermined through their discursive emphasis on choice and creation of new paths to parenthood, which enabled them to develop families maximising their security as custodial parents. The lack of recognition afforded unmarried fathers in Ireland is often interpreted as a sign of male oppression in Irish life. In fact, as the discourse of custody concern articulated by Irish lesbian parents indicates, the particular ideology of parenthood underlying Irish guardianship legislation is intended to apply only to certain kinds of parents and is implicitly heteronormative with its emphasis on married family life as the 'best' family form. Not all women have equal protection before the law and mothers who transgress the boundaries of normative womanhood may be penalised. Legislation assumed to confer certain rights to women is of no benefit to differentially situated women (such as lesbians) if it is not implemented within a context of commitment to equality. Irish participants' discourses reflected their view that the law does not protect lesbian parents. Participants in Ireland

therefore found new ways of circumventing their legal vulnerability, while retaining their preference for a known donor. The genealogy of motherhood in Irish society provided these women with a strong sense of self-confidence in their ability to create supportive, nurturing environments for their children without the involvement of active fathers.

Challenges to heteronormativity take a different form in different contexts, at least in part because heteronormativity itself varies according to context. It is therefore more precise to discuss a plurality or multiplicity of *heteronormativities*, rather than invoke a notion of heteronormativity as a homogenous concept.<sup>73</sup> Clearly, heteronormative practices and assumptions are manifested in diverse ways according to the cultural context in which they occur. Swedish women's decisions to involve donors must be viewed within the context of a history of gender equality constructed as a shared project among women and men and the promotion of participatory fatherhood. While Swedish women could be interpreted as reinforcing an ideology of fatherhood as necessary to parenting, multiple parents challenge the centrality of the nuclear family. A preference for gay men is another way in which dominant notions of the family were subverted and reinscribed within these families. They further utilised shared parenting in ways that were personally advantageous. Decisions by Irish lesbians to create particular family forms are a reflection of their agency and creativity within a largely unsupportive social context. Their former access to sperm banks within Ireland due to the lack of legal recognition of lesbians and ability to use the situation of unmarried fathers to their advantage illustrates a creative disruption of the heteronormative assumptions underpinning Irish social policy. This pioneering generation of Swedish and Irish lesbians are creating families despite considerable obstacles. The ways in which lesbians envisage parenting possibilities is influenced by wider discourses of 'the family' as well as social and institutional limitations. Heteronormativities are diverse and variable across space, place and time. Reproductive decision-making among lesbian parents cannot therefore be understood independently of the contexts within which it

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<sup>73</sup> Mark Graham (Dept. of Anthropology, Stockholm University) has also referred to 'multiple heteronormativities' in his closing address at the conference 'Farewell Heteronormativity' in Gothenburg, 2002.

occurs. In the next chapter, the significance of context will be explored further, with an analysis of the everyday spaces of lesbian parenting.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Queer(y)ing ‘Public’ Space: social and institutional contexts

Identity and space are mutually constitutive. Sexual identity is not simply a private issue, as the legal regulation of sexual practices, relationships and possibilities illustrates. Multiple measures render ‘public’ space heteronormative, including contexts where parenting may be enacted, such as hospitals, schools and neighbourhoods. Parenthood is supported within clearly heteronormative parameters. The prohibition of services such as assisted insemination for lesbians is indicative of the highly regulated nature of this realm. Lesbians who embark on parenthood, like heterosexual parents, encounter new social networks and institutional contexts. Becoming a lesbian parent also necessitates coming out in new spaces and presents particular dilemmas. The lack of awareness about lesbian parenting and homophobic attitudes were detrimental to participants in this study, who were unsure of a supportive response from service providers and others as a result. This uncertainty provided a stressful edge to everyday life. Their experiences within a diverse range of contexts forms the basis of this chapter, in which the heteronormative construction of various spaces is considered.

The literature on gender, sexuality and space has largely focused on gay male experiences within the commercial scene. This chapter therefore represents a departure from much previous research in this area with an exploration of lesbian parenting experiences in everyday contexts. In the following sections, differences between Irish and Swedish queer spatiality are outlined. This chapter addresses some of the consequences of spatial exclusion for lesbian parents, as illustrated by participants’ experiences on the path to parenthood. The strategies participants developed to protect themselves and their children in child-centred contexts such as daycare and schools are also explored. In addition, participants’ integration into neighbourhood communities in metropolitan, small town and rural contexts are analysed and offers new understandings of rural queer identities. The discursive constructions of space within the research illustrate the heteronormative understandings of ‘the family’ pervading many everyday

contexts and the potential for lesbian parents to queer(y) such boundaries, thus disrupting spatial identities and discourses.

### **Gender, Sexuality and Space**

The dynamics of gender, sexuality and space have been increasingly explored by feminist geographers in recent years. Duncan (1996: 137) points out that sexuality, like gender, is also '*often regulated by the binary distinction between public and private*'. Just as men and masculinities are traditionally associated with 'public worlds', women and femininities have often been confined to the 'private', or domestic sphere. Gender relations have involved the normalization and perpetuation of these spatial relegations. Similarly, homophobic rhetoric which purports that homosexuals should not 'flaunt' their sexuality, invokes a spatial narrative of heteronormative social relations. Valentine (1992: 396) has pointed out that arguments supporting the confinement of homosexuality to the 'private' realm, assume that heterosexuality is only present in private spaces. This ignores the ways that heterosexuality is evident within the public arena. In fact, all social interactions take place between 'sexed actors' in everyday environments. Numerous authors have highlighted how sexuality is apparent in spatial constructions – for example suburban housing developments are often sites of heteronormative familial ideologies and conventions, which implicitly marginalise lesbian and gay people (McDowell, 1999).

The term 'public space' would appear to be an oxymoron, given that many people are excluded from such spaces on the grounds of age, disability, gender, 'race', sexuality and so on. Further, these so-called 'public' spaces are often *privately* owned, regulated and managed. In addition, the term 'public' is constructed in false opposition to the term 'private', thus obscuring the way these arenas overlap and are mutually implicated. This latter point is particularly evident in the case of sexualities. For example, fear of violence may deter queer couples from expressing their sexuality in everyday behaviour, such as holding hands with a partner, in 'public' spaces. Valentine (2001) proposes the term 'the street' as a possible alternative to 'public space'. Despite its problematic connotations, the term 'public' space is utilized in this chapter, in which lesbian

parents' experiences in a diverse range of contexts – including institutional settings such as hospitals and schools – are analysed. Participants' experiences in neighbourhood locations, both urban and rural, are also explored. The term 'public' space is therefore more appropriate here, given the institutional and landscape nature of these contexts.

The heteronormative coding of particular spaces is manifested in diverse ways, for example through advertising and policy. Social institutions such as museums may only offer 'family discounts' to heterosexual nuclear families. Similarly, 'family' travel rates may be denied to lesbian parents and their children. (Both these examples were mentioned by participants in this research). Heteronormative spatiality is also apparent in workplaces/spaces. Skidmore (1999: 511) points out that post-Fordism and the continual growth of the service sector has contributed to the collapse of the distinction between 'job/worker/product/service', so that contemporary consumers may perceive the worker as part of the service. For example, the physical attractiveness of a retail worker is increasingly utilised to sell the product. Thus, male and female workers are under increasing pressure to conform to a particular heteronormative physical standard. McDowell (1995) has addressed the links between power relations, the body and heterosexuality as a hegemonic workplace identity in her study of masculinities among London bankers. Socialising and entertaining activities based on presumptions of heterosexuality were often required to sell services to clients. Homophobic banter and harassment further served to isolate lesbian and gay workers in the workplace. The manifestation of such heteronormative power dynamics in a variety of contexts is increasingly acknowledged and explored (Bell & Valentine, 1995a; McDowell, 1999).

### *Queers in Space*

Queer communities have resisted the heteronormative coding of space by various means. Celebrations of queer identities that take place in 'public' domains are one obvious example of this resistance. The hegemony of heteronormative sexuality in the streets of major metropolitan areas has been challenged by activities such as LGBT Pride parades and Mardi Gras, in addition to

transgressive events such as gay ‘weddings’ and ‘kiss-ins’ in ‘public’ spaces. Thus, queer activists have both asserted a claim to ‘public’ space and revealed the extent to which such space is normatively coded as heterosexual. Valentine (2001: 221) suggests that the increasing visibility of gay men, and to a lesser extent lesbians, within major cities *‘reflects the growing confidence of sexual dissidents to assert a claim to public space.’*

Many lesbian and gay communities have also established gay residential enclaves. Numerous authors have highlighted the role of (often white, economically privileged) gay men in gentrification (Knopp, 1995; Davis, 1995). Gay men are more likely to establish a visible presence in the landscape in the form of commercially oriented districts, such as Soho in London or Oxford Street in Sydney (Castells, 1983; Wolfe, 1992). Although lesbians, like gay men, create spaces for themselves within cities, these spaces are often less visible to heterosexuals (Rothenburg, 1995; Valentine, 1995). Adler and Brenner (1992) argue that a fear of male violence inhibits lesbians from having an obvious spatial presence. They point to the wage disparity between women and men as evidence that lesbians generally have fewer financial resources than gay men and are therefore less likely to establish their own commercial venues. In addition, they suggest that feminism has been significant in the development of many lesbian communities, which tend to be more politicised and less materially-oriented than those of their gay male counterparts. These conditions have not been conducive to the development of lesbian-owned commercial businesses targeting a lesbian client base.

Rothenburg (1995) suggests that lesbians are more likely to create residential, as opposed to commercial spaces. She carried out research on the Park Slope district of Brooklyn in New York, USA, a gentrifying neighbourhood and ‘lesbian-congenial space’ (p. 165). In her research, she found that lesbian residents convened in non-commercial venues, for example support groups, sports teams, self-defence classes, alternative cafés and co-operative bookshops. These venues were usually promoted not by professional advertisements, but by flyers and word-of-mouth. In addition, they were dependent on the commitment of volunteers, rather than paid staff. Interestingly, most of these spaces were

shared with other non-commercial users and appropriated and transformed into lesbian spaces at scheduled times. Thus, lesbian spaces were enacted in particular contexts at specific moments, rather than permanent fixtures. This time-space nexus lent these spaces a transitory character. Nonetheless, these spaces constituted important locations in which lesbian communities were imagined.

The establishment of visibly queer spaces has also had unforeseen and problematic consequences however. Myslik's (1996) research illustrates that gay men may be vulnerable to homophobic violence upon leaving the 'safe haven' of queer spaces, as assailants may target people exiting gay commercial venues. In addition, the conflation of a gay (male) identity with the commercial scene and material consumption has led many advertisers to target the 'pink pound' (and euro and dollar) as a niche market. However, the representation of gay lifestyles as 'chic cosmopolitanism' (Valentine, 2001: 222), has resulted in what Knopp (1998) terms 'managing success'. This refers to the problem of retaining a lesbian and gay spatial identity in venues that are increasingly attractive to heterosexual customers. Valentine (2001: 220) notes that traditionally gay neighbourhoods such as the Castro in San Francisco and Manchester's gay village are now popular with heterosexual visitors. She further points out that celebrations of queer sexuality, such as the Sydney Mardi Gras, are also marketed for 'non-gay-identified consumption' (p. 222). This phenomenon has caused concern among queer communities that these spaces are becoming colonised by heterosexuals, thus undermining the sense of security and safety that they represent for the LGBT population.

The fact that the presence of hegemonic or marginalised groups can shape the identity of a spatial location, highlights the interconnectedness of spatial and other identities. Sexual identities may be produced within particular spaces - for example a person may be interpreted as lesbian or gay in a specific spatial context such as a gay bar, or may only feel comfortable being openly lesbian or gay there. Thus, spatial visibility has operated as a means of communiting and establishing solidarity and has therefore played an important role in the development of LGBT equality movements. In addition, space is also produced through the performance of identities. This is evident in instances where the

performance of lesbian or gay identities in traditionally heteronormative environments can ‘queer’ those spaces, one of the functions of LGBT Pride parades in city streets. Similarly, the performance of heterosexual identities within queer spaces can challenge those productions of space. Spatiality refers to the dynamic nature of this interaction, whereby identity is actively shaped in particular places, as opposed to a conceptualisation of space as a passive terrain upon which identity is inscribed.

### Beyond the Queer Metropolis

The majority of empirical work on queer sexualities has focused on queer experiences in metropolitan areas.<sup>74</sup> More recently, the implicit urban/rural binary of much of this work has been critically addressed. Phillips and Watt (2000:1) argue that all sexual identities and discourses, whether hegemonic or liberatory, are grounded in a spatialised notion of centres and margins. They support this argument with reference to Foucault’s work on the history of sexuality, which they suggest has ‘*a hidden geography: the legal, medical, religious and other institutions, which discursively constitute and regulate sexualities, are concentrated in geographical and political centres*’ (i.e. metropolitan centres). They further argue that in equality struggles, metropolitan cities are seen as the centre of the regulation and liberation of sexualities. This has led to the empirical neglect of ‘in-between’ or liminal spaces on the margins of sexual geography. In their view, de-centring sexualities from metropolitan centres can be critically transformative by destabilising the spatial dichotomies informing theoretical and empirical understandings of queer experiences.

Bell (2000: 84) uses the term ‘metrosexuality’ to refer to the spatial focus of research on sexualities, in which the rural is implicitly imagined in negative ways. He argues that non-metropolitan queer experience within these localities has been depicted as virulently homophobic, in contrast to popular

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<sup>74</sup> Sinfield (2000: 21) clarifies the scope of the term ‘metropolitan’ for Queer Studies. Metropolitan refers to ‘global centres of capital’ but is also used to mean capital cities within nation-states. He notes however that power relations in a particular metropolis include and exclude residents on the grounds of for example ‘race’ and ethnicity. Thus, individual experiences are differentially mediated by multiple facets of identity.

representations of the rural as 'idyllic'. Halberstam (2003) also points to this spatial dichotomy within work on queer sexualities. Authors such as Bell and Valentine (1995b) earlier highlighted the limited structural services and facilities (entertainment venues, support groups, safe sex information) and 'basic resources' (such as LGBT media and books) available to support queer lifestyles in most rural communities. Valentine (2001) notes however that lesbians and gay men can develop spatially disparate communities through telephone helplines, newspapers and the internet, which may help counteract problems of isolation and lack of information. Weston (1998) offers a similarly bleak view. She argues that the urban/rural dichotomy is central to the construction of lesbian and gay identities, whereby the 'Great Gay Migration' to urban areas reflects a quest for community. In addition, she suggests that the anonymity associated with urban environments is less inhibiting than the closeknit nature of many rural communities.

However, not all LGBT visions of rural life have been negative. Valentine (2001) points out that certain radical feminist lesbian communities in the US constructed rural spaces as potentially liberatory. In a political context where heterosexuality was seen as the foundation of women's oppression, women-only communities in rural isolation were viewed as a means of creating a non-patriarchal society. The spatial isolation of the country would contribute to women's self-sufficiency. Essentialist ideas about women's closeness to nature as a result of their reproductive capacity also supported the concept of the country as a women's space, in contrast to the man-made city. However, tensions arose within these communities regarding issues of diversity and difference. For example the emphasis on the body and shared commitment to the landscape through manual labour marginalised disabled women. These rural utopian communities also often faced hostility and the threat of violence from homophobic neighbours and local residents.

Knopp (1998: 172) argues that queer experiences beyond the metropolis are potentially undermining of the hegemonic power order, especially if they are organised around other marginalised axes of identity. In contrast to the gay urban (particularly white, middle-class and male) sex radical, he suggests that queer

working-class, nonwhite, nonurban and female identity is less easily assimilated into hegemonic interests within British society. Gay white middle-class men can be accommodated within unequal power relations where '*their critiques of the class system, urbanization, and possibly even patriarchy*' can be undermined '*by labelling them as hypocrites (for indulging their privilege) or 'eccentrics' and tolerating them.*' This perspective offers another explanation for the predominance of white gay male spaces, compared to other queer spaces. While Knopp's argument is problematic in that it potentially downplays the oppression experienced by white middle-class gay men, it does highlight the various spaces of privilege that this group occupies, thus offering a reading of their multiple locations within the 'matrix of domination' (Hill-Collins, 1990). His work also emphasises the diversity of queer experience and different situatedness of queer actors. Despite this evident range of experience, previous work on gender, sexuality and space has largely focused on the gay commercial scene in urban locations, one of the most visible manifestations of queerness. This chapter explores a rather different terrain - the everyday spaces of parenthood and how lesbian participants negotiate them. Their endeavours illustrate the heteronormative construction of diverse spaces and the ways in which spatial identities can be destabilized by lesbian parents.

### **Queer Spatiality in Ireland and Sweden**

The spatiality of lesbian parenting has evolved differently in the two countries. The criminalisation of male homosexuality in Ireland and the campaign for decriminalisation in the early 1990s, provided Irish gay men with a public identity. For Irish lesbians, no such identity – albeit a criminalised one - existed in the public arena. Irish lesbians were therefore outside the law and at the same time rendered invisible by lack of official recognition (and condemnation). According to Walshe (2000: 477) "*This lack of an official identity for Irish lesbians can be seen as something of a mixed blessing, with little cultural visibility but a greater freedom from prosecution and a consequent imaginative freedom and openness, and this is reflected in the writings of contemporary Irish lesbians.*" He suggests that this different negotiation of public space led to differences in literature produced by Irish lesbians and gay men. While Irish gay

men, he argues, have tended to be more circumspect in their representation of sexual Otherness, Irish lesbians have '*occupied a different literary space*', one which is '*often more radical and subversive but less widely known*' (2000: 477). It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that despite a flourishing Irish lesbian literature, lesbian parents in Ireland rarely congregate as a group, even in alternative, 'safe' spaces. There was no support group for lesbian mothers in Ireland when fieldwork took place, although one previously existed in Dublin. (However, one such group has since been established outside the capital.) Lesbian parents are visible at queer events, such as Pride parades and for example the 'Lesbian Lives' conference held in UCD in 1999. (The theme of the conference that year was 'kinship'). In addition to support groups, lesbian parents in Ireland have developed particular spaces for themselves – the annual 'Women's Camp' being the most notable example of this. This camp takes place over a two week period during the summer and is organised on a co-operative basis by volunteers. It is the most significant gathering place for lesbian parents and their children in Ireland and offers a chance for them to meet similar families. Despite these important instances, lesbian parents nonetheless do not appear to constitute a politically organised social movement in Ireland at this time. This may be due to the constraints on leisure time imposed by parenting. It also appears to be strategic on some level - in order to protect their families, they must safeguard themselves from widespread homophobia by maintaining a low profile in Irish society.

It is interesting to consider a recent example of lesbian parenting made visible in Ireland. A photographic exhibition entitled 'Be Equal Be Different: Images of diversity' toured throughout Ireland in 2001. The exhibition was the result of a collaborative project between social activists in Finland, Italy, Ireland and the Netherlands<sup>75</sup>. The project resulted in a handbook and the aforementioned photo exhibition, in which images of members of diverse social groups represented the photographers' views on discrimination. A photograph from The Netherlands showed a naked lesbian couple and their infant child. One of the women in the

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<sup>75</sup> The organisations in question were: SETA and the Finnish Institute for Occupational Health (Finland); Age Action and Outhouse (Ireland); Arcigay and Associazione Generazioni (Italy); National Age Discrimination Office, E-Quality and the COC Netherlands (the Netherlands).

picture was heavily pregnant with their second child<sup>76</sup>. To my knowledge, this picture and indeed the entire exhibition aroused no comment whatsoever in the media in Ireland, other than in the Irish lesbian and gay press, where it was reported positively. However, in an interesting move of self-censorship this particular image was removed from the Galway City Library for part of the time that the exhibition was on display. When I contacted the library to find out the reasons for this action, I was informed that the library had no separate exhibition space. The photos were therefore exhibited in the main library area. Some library users objected to this image, although the grounds for their objections are unclear. It may be that the explicit nudity was considered inappropriate, rather than or in addition to the subject matter of the photograph. As there was no separate space for the exhibition, which would have given library visitors the choice of whether to view the pictures or not, this particular image was removed, although it was reinstated briefly for a later photo opportunity. There was no formal opposition to this action on the part of the library from either the exhibition organisers or the LGBT community. None of the other venues in Ireland where the exhibition appeared chose to remove the picture in question or any other. The treatment of this photograph in a ‘public’ context is an intriguing example of a response to greater visibility of lesbian parenting in Irish society. The lack of a *separate* exhibition space was explicitly invoked in the library’s account of the rationale behind their decision. Thus, a queer image was only appropriate in a separate – and therefore less visible – space.

In stark contrast, lesbian (and gay) parenting has been far more visible in Swedish society, in both political and media debate and popular culture. This is often attributed to the introduction of registered partnerships for same-sex couples in 1995, after which lesbian and gay parenting issues became the most blatant legislative example of LGBT discrimination. Cultural representations of lesbian and gay parenting include images by renowned Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlsson. She incorporated two pictures of lesbian couples who embarked on parenthood in her famous series ‘Ecce Homo’. In this photographic series Christ is depicted as a gay man. The first photograph shows a real-life

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<sup>76</sup> Marian Bakker, The Netherlands: The Lesbian Family, 1992. This picture can be found at the internet link: <http://www.outhouse.ie/bebd/marian.html>

lesbian couple, one of whom is heavily pregnant, receiving a syringe from an angel – a parallel with the biblical scene whereby Mary is informed by the angel Gabriel that she is pregnant. The next photograph shows the infant ‘Jesus’ with his two mothers and two fathers – a lesbian couple and a gay male couple.<sup>77</sup> This exhibition attracted widespread attention in Sweden and abroad. In addition, Pride Week in Stockholm has a designated family day every year, with special events catering to lesbian and gay parents and their children. The national organisation for lesbian and gay equality, RFSL, has also organised several conferences on the topic of lesbian and gay parents and their children. They have also run numerous ‘parenting’ courses for LGBT people contemplating parenthood. Clearly, lesbian parents occupy far more visible – although still often separate – and politically organised spaces in Sweden. However, while the existence of alternative spaces may serve an important function, the majority of parenting experiences take place in everyday contexts, such as hospitals, daycare, schools and neighbourhoods.

### **The Path to Parenthood**

#### *Consequences of Spatial Exclusion*

Lesbians are prohibited from accessing particular services in Sweden and Ireland, such as medical assistance with artificial insemination by a donor (AID) and other reproductive technologies, including in vitro fertilisation (IVF). Thus, fertility clinics and other places of service provision are coded as heteronormative spaces and new reproductive technologies (NRTs) become part of heteronormative imaginaries.<sup>78</sup> There were numerous consequences of this exclusion. As already outlined in the previous chapter, lesbian participants were forced to travel abroad for these services. In addition, some participants were deterred by the prohibitive cost and effort of this endeavour and opted to become co-parents instead. Susanne, a Swedish participant, did attempt to identify the source of her inability to conceive with a basic infertility investigation. She and

<sup>77</sup> To see these images, go to <http://www.eccehomo.nu/meny.html>

<sup>78</sup> Thus, NRTs are often presented as a means to enable a heterosexual couple to have a longed-for child, while opponents of NRTs may deride them as unnatural and actively utilise the example of lesbian parents as representative of the dangers of technology (Liljestrand, 1995).

the donor informed doctors that they were attempting to conceive together. While they did not lie outright and say they were a heterosexual couple, they did not reveal that they were gay. The prospect of lying to medical staff, in combination with the invasive nature of further fertility treatment, made Susanne decide not to persist any further with her efforts. Eventually her partner became the biological mother of their child:

We had these clinical examinations and I did some x-rays and anyway the next step was an operation, laparoscopy and that's quite, to me it's quite a large step and we somehow stopped there and we were talking, discussing and I felt that my drive [...] wasn't big enough for that step [...] and also there's legal difficulties in Sweden anyway, you're not allowed to do IVF, it's difficult to say now afterwards whether I'd have gone through the whole programme if it had been legalised [...] Maybe I might have, but we were kind of lying every time that we entered the clinic and eh I don't know.

- Susanne, Swedish participant

During fieldwork, I also interviewed an Irish lesbian, Bridget, who had attempted to become pregnant, but eventually gave up after several years of unsuccessful inseminations and has remained childfree.<sup>79</sup> She was unwilling to seek a medical consultation, as she assumed doctors would be unhelpful towards a lesbian in her situation. As a result of medical policy that confines services to heterosexual couples, both these women were unable to undergo intra-uterine insemination (IUI). This is a simple procedure performed by medical staff, which involves the placing of semen closer to the cervix and thus maximises the chance of conception. Like Susanne, Bridget was also concerned that fertility treatment would involve invasive procedures. Clearly, their experiences are not isolated cases. In addition to those participants in this study who experienced fertility problems, there are probably many other Irish and Swedish lesbians who have been unable to conceive and denied the possibility of adoption or affordable fertility treatment. This group of women – lesbians who are unsuccessful in their attempts to become pregnant and/or parents – is a largely hidden population. Their efforts are invisible, unless they manage to adopt or become parents with a partner.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> This interview has not been included in the dissertation, apart from the reference to it here.

<sup>80</sup> The same is also true of heterosexual women who experience infertility but choose not to adopt or undergo medical interventions such as IVF.

In this context of exclusion from reproductive services and technologies, home insemination constitutes a form of resistance. However, for those participants who chose the clearly 'low-tech' route of home insemination with a known donor, the restricted possibilities for medical consultation and advice also occasionally created difficult scenarios. Although the 'turkey baster' is a recurrent feature of alternative insemination in popular culture<sup>81</sup>, it is in fact a rather awkward size for this purpose. A smaller syringe is more appropriate given the relative volume of semen involved. Participants in this study typically used a needless syringe for insemination. Occasionally straws and a speculum were also deployed to optimise the possibility of conception. While there is a considerable literature on alternative insemination (e.g. Pies, 1988; Pepper, 1999; Mohler & Fraser, 2002) and participants were aware of how to perform this straightforward procedure, accessing the materials necessary - such as syringes - occasionally proved difficult. A lack of familiarity with the utensils themselves and how to obtain them, resulted in uncomfortable situations for several participants. As it was not possible to ask their doctor openly for information - who would possibly not be familiar with lesbian home insemination in any case - they were forced to rely on word of mouth or helpful friends for advice. An Irish couple, Ciara and Gillian, were advised to use a cow syringe by another lesbian couple who had conceived by alternative insemination. Ideally they would have liked a doctor to perform the insemination (preferably IUI) in order to maximise the likelihood of success, but this was not possible. They acted on the advice regarding the cow syringe, although they found the process of insemination uncomfortable and difficult:

**G:** We actually looked into going to the doctor [to perform insemination] [...] and there was nobody to do that here, there was nobody who could do that.

**C:** It was Una [friend] who put us in touch with her friend in [county] and they said, what was it they said, use a cow syringe and oh Christ

**G:** I'll never forgive them! [laughter]

**C:** [...] God we nearly killed ourselves but anyway they were the start of Hilary [daughter] and that's where it went from there.

- Ciara and Gillian, Irish participants

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<sup>81</sup> See for example, the third feature in the (2000) HBO film 'If These Walls Could Talk 2'.

While this was a humorous topic during the interview, it is also illustrative of the potential problems to which this lack of access to medical support can lead. Both Ciara and Gillian were well-informed about this topic, but had no familiarity with syringes, which caused problems in terms of accessing and choosing an appropriate kind. Similarly, Katarina, a Swedish participant, ran into difficulties when attempting to find a syringe for insemination. She was aware that appropriate ones were available for free at local pharmacies. Unable to disclose the fact that she wished to obtain a syringe for the purpose of insemination, Katarina was forced to provide an alternative reason for the purchase. She therefore told the pharmacist that she needed one to give her child an injection (the most common reason for obtaining a free syringe). However, she did not realise that the syringes came in different forms. The pharmacist asked what medicine her child was taking, in order to determine the correct type. Katarina then replied 'I don't know', at which point she understandably felt extremely foolish. She e-mailed me afterwards to describe the incident:

**'I said "I don't know" when she asked me what type of syringe I wanted. They are free at the pharmacy but they have different kinds and that made me [feel] really embarrassed and confused because I didn't know that. I felt so stupid when she asked because it's a syringe to give a child medicine and she asked me what medicine I should give my child. And I don't know?!??? I didn't [...] tell her the whole story but she solved my problem by saying "you better try the basic one" and it turned out to be right.'**

- Katarina, Swedish participant

These latter two examples illustrate how lesbian parenting remains to some degree an 'underground' activity, in that participants cannot be entirely open about their plans to become parents in all contexts, regardless of whether they actually require medical help or not. The denial of basic medical consultation and information resulted in numerous stressful situations that could not be anticipated by participants. It therefore exposes their vulnerability in contexts where appropriate services are restricted to heterosexuals. This exclusion occurs across various modalities of space, manifested in diverse contexts such as pharmacies and in the imagined spaces of NRTs.

### *Educating the 'caring professions'*

In addition to problems encountered in becoming pregnant due to exclusionary practices, many participants reported numerous difficulties with staff in prenatal and antenatal care contexts. Uncertainty about the consequences of disclosure regarding their sexuality was a cause of concern. Numerous interviewees described feeling stressed about outing themselves to potentially unsupportive staff. On the whole, participants found members of 'caring professions' to be sympathetic and helpful. However, midwives and doctors for example often had little or no experience of dealing with lesbian parents and participants frequently found themselves in the position of educating personnel, both as to the type of treatment that they required and in terms of correcting problematic assumptions about their families. Participants reported feeling somewhat drained by this aspect of their encounters with service providers, in addition to facing the challenge of embarking on parenthood. One Irish participant, Evelyn, resented having to challenge her midwife's ideas about family forms and father-absence within their family, particularly as they pertained to her son. The midwife in question ostensibly attempted to be cognizant of diversity in family forms, but nonetheless made reference to 'fathering and mothering' at the end of their prenatal course, without acknowledging that not all families consist of a father and a mother:

She [midwife] [...] would work hard at being very politically correct but she did a bit of a wobbly at the end of it, where she forgot, at the course, talking about fathering and mothering and whatever. She rang up out of the blue [...] and the next thing was something about and who is going to play the fathering role in our relationship and I was like, what, you know, where are you getting off. So we kind of, I had to bring her through all of that, you know, which I resented having to do [...] She had never met Cormac [son] [...] and she had decided that he needed a lot of controlling or whatever, kind of fatherly heaviness or whatever. But anyway so [...] that certainly rubbed up the wrong way in terms of having to deal with her issues around our family.

- Evelyn, Irish participant

The difficulties of participating in prenatal courses as a lesbian couple or single lesbian expectant mother, were a feature of several Irish accounts. Course providers often assumed that all participants were heterosexual. Although they reported some awareness of issues pertaining to lone mothers, lesbian parents

appeared to be a relatively unknown phenomenon. This lack of support exacerbated participants' concern about the possibility of exposure to homophobia, not only from course providers, but also from the other people attending the courses.

Swedish participants also reported similar difficulties among midwives and other medical personnel in terms of a lack of familiarity and awareness of their family form. They were often the first lesbian expectant parents that staff had encountered. Again, the issue of educating staff arose:

We've had to do some educating because I mean, like the midwife we went to before Alexandra [daughter] was born [...] actually we asked her have you come across two mothers before and she said oh yes she said [...] and then it turned out it was ten years before wasn't it, just once and she still remembered it and she was not, educated a little bit and the same has been with people at the hospital and it's always like that.

- Ingela, Swedish participant

However, in contemporary Sweden there have been some improvements in service provision in recent years, often as a result of queer activism. In Stockholm, there is even a midwife who is recommended by the national organisation for LGBT equality, RFSL, as someone working in this area who has particular expertise regarding lesbian parents.

### *Assumption of Heterosexuality*

The conflation of pregnancy with a heterosexual identity in myriad contexts was a recurring feature of Swedish and Irish accounts. This illustrates the role of space in shaping identity – for example, a woman giving birth in a hospital is assumed to be heterosexual. For many participants, the recurring assumption of heterosexuality was depressing and served to make them more aware of their marginalisation and therefore vulnerability in society. Mairéad, an Irish participant, was a single mother who found hospital questions about her 'husband' or 'boyfriend' - never 'girlfriend' - tiresome:

At the hospital they were saying do you want to call your husband. I said I don't have a husband, do you want to call your boyfriend, I don't have a boyfriend [...] and if they had of said do you have a girlfriend, but there was just that and I think I was feeling very

vulnerable, I was in pain so I was very like oh bother all of this bother all the straight people like all these questions, questions, questions [...] because I'd had nine months of this you know and em and I was tired of it you know, tired of it all.

- Mairéad, Irish participant

These questions could also be experienced as alienating by solo heterosexual mothers, but it is interesting that for Mairéad acknowledgement of her lesbian identity was important. As pregnancy was so strongly associated with heterosexuality, biological mothers in both countries experienced a negation of their lesbian identity in many contexts as a pregnant woman. Unlike co-parents, whose lesbian identity becomes apparent in the assertion of parenthood (which is itself continually contested), biological mothers in this study found that their sexuality was rendered invisible by pregnancy. Stina, a Swedish participant, experienced feelings of frustration similar to those articulated by Mairéad regarding the assumption of heterosexuality because of her impending motherhood:

But it was also that people seeing me as pregnant thought I was heterosexual once again. So all these people who didn't know me, okay I couldn't go in the streets screaming I'm a pregnant lesbian but it was disturbing [...] and I wanted people to know that also a lesbian can be a pregnant woman, so when I got the opportunity I always told people in some way that I was lesbian too, that was very important to me.

- Stina, Swedish participant

If the biological mother was automatically categorised as heterosexual, her partner - the co-parent - was often assumed to be a helpful friend or relative. Participants who did not wish either to lie about their sexual identity and relationship, or marginalise the role of co-parents, were forced to continually challenge this interpretation of themselves as heterosexual. Swedish participants tended to be more direct and open when communicating with hospital staff and expect both partners to be treated as equal parents, whereas Irish participants emphasised the importance of equal access, such as extended visiting hours, rather than acknowledgement of their relationship or parental role.

The confusion about understanding that participants and their children represented a lesbian family form illustrates the ways that families are invariably interpreted through a heteronormative lens. For example, the supportive midwife

of a Swedish couple, Katarina and Elisabeth, recorded that Elisabeth (the co-parent) was a 'mother' in their medical records. Minutes after Katarina gave birth, a new nurse on duty asked her if Elisabeth was 'the mother'. Katarina was nonplussed by this question and asked her to clarify. In an interesting attribution of motherhood to biogenetic substance, the nurse then explained that she thought Elisabeth was the egg donor. She had read their journal and interpreted the reference to Elisabeth as a 'mother' in this way. Despite having just endured a protracted and difficult birth, Katarina had to come out to the nurse and explain that she and her partner were a lesbian couple who had conceived a child by insemination.

The failure to acknowledge co-parents could be a source of pain to couples in both countries. This was a common theme of participant accounts regarding medical emergencies, including miscarriage. In these distressing circumstances, hospital staff often appeared unaware or unwilling to acknowledge their status as lesbian couples. Participants themselves did not always feel capable of illuminating staff on this point, in what was a medical emergency scenario. This exacerbated an already emotionally difficult situation:

*My experience in the hospital wasn't great at all in terms of Maeve's [partner] involvement when I was miscarrying, they didn't really understand or accept or whatever the fact that she was my partner. I don't think they quite got it [...] so that was very hard.*

- Gráinne, Irish participant

*When we went to the hospital [...] especially one older male doctor [...] we told him that we were both mothers but he didn't want to see me like a mother, he wanted to see me like Margareta's [partner] friend. And we didn't take that discussion then but it doesn't feel good [...] I will have to fight in some situations I think.*

- Linnea, Swedish participant

Swedish couples were more likely to press for an acknowledgement of their partnership status, as illustrated by Linnea's comment '*I will have to fight*', above. In contrast, Irish participants tended to 'choose their battles', occasionally prioritizing a helpful and less stressful service over communicating their lesbian identity. For example, an Irish couple, Caoimhe and Aisling, chose not to mention their lesbian identity in the context of a hospital childbirth. While

Caoimhe was present throughout the birth, she was ostensibly there as the 'birthing partner', rather than co-parent:

In the hospital I was [...] her birthing partner, I wasn't her partner do you know what I mean or I wasn't the mother or the husband or whatever, I was just her birthing partner and they didn't know our relationship so every now and again you just for peace's sake you just say nothing but that doesn't make me feel that I'm less because you know like instead of getting involved in a situation that you don't want to be slightly embarrassed or you don't want Aisling [partner] to be embarrassed or you know you just go with the flow you say look I'm a friend I'm here to help her with the baby so but that didn't make me feel less excited or part of it because when I was ringing my friends they were all congratulating me. These were nurses I just wanted them to do a job, I didn't need them to recognise me.

- Caoimhe, Irish participant

In this sense, Irish participants' accounts of their interactions with relevant personnel appeared to be characterised by a greater degree of self-conscious distancing on the part of participants, than seemed to be the case among their Swedish counterparts. This was a strategy that Irish participants adopted in order to deal with a heteronormative context that was potentially unsupportive at a time when their main priority was to access a particular service. In this particular case, as Caoimhe indicates in the above quote, her personal understanding of herself as a parent was not undermined, as she received sufficient validation from friends and family – in other words her parental identity was made visible and supported in alternative spaces and contexts.

### ***Homophobic discrimination and heteronormative expectations***

In addition to a lack of awareness of lesbian parenting in general, participants who were open about their identity as lesbians occasionally encountered active criticism of their life choices. For example, the midwife who attended Maeve, an Irish participant, during childbirth communicated her disapproval regarding Maeve's family form. The birth was unusually long and there were complications. The midwife was unsupportive of Maeve in this context as a result of her homophobic opinions:

I felt there was one [midwife] that was a bit moralistic [...] she was giving out to me about pushing [...] I'd been pushing for hours and I was getting very tired [...] no matter what I was doing I couldn't push him out [...] she [midwife] was tired and stressed but there was a touch, just a touch moralistic about it, this shouldn't be happening anyway, you know lesbians.

- Maeve, Irish participant

Gunilla, a Swedish participant, found nursing staff behaved in overtly homophobic ways after she had given birth. She had difficulties breastfeeding and many nurses were uncomfortable being alone with her, so were reluctant to help. She and her partner described this experience:

G: The personnel who were working there, not all of them but some of them

H: They didn't want to go into you

G: No they didn't want to come into my room

H: As if she was going to rape them

- Hanna and Gunilla, Swedish participants

Another Swedish participant, Ulrika, encountered homophobia when she attempted to get help for the severe postnatal depression she experienced. Although her GP was very helpful and supportive, she was feeling particularly distressed one evening and in desperation phoned a helpline:

When I was really bad I felt like I'm going to hang myself or throw myself out of the window or something [...] and then when I called to this helpline, this nurse who was answering, she was really really homophobic and [...] she almost dropped the phone when I told her that I was living with Annika [partner] and I felt like this you know, I really needed help and she asked with really, she was so you know scared or upset or whatever, so she almost screamed 'and where is the father' you know and like, and I said he is, I know who he is and he is here and all this but he can't help me with this. And then she just said that you should have thought of that before, she said to me. She was really a pain in the ass, really. After that phonecall I felt like I'm going to jump, I felt so bad.

- Ulrika, Swedish participant

In addition to the general lack of awareness and prejudice that participants encountered, there were countless instances in which particular spaces were clearly inscribed in heteronormative ways. For example, hospital hours gave special privileges to visiting fathers, rather than co-parents. Although all participants who gave birth in hospital were able to negotiate the same access for co-parents, the prospect of having to do so was a source of anxiety prior to giving

birth. Participants were concerned that they would encounter homophobia and resistance in response to their efforts to ensure that co-parents had the same hospital visitor hours automatically awarded fathers. Furthermore, in a Swedish context, hospital policy conferred donors with special privileges that birth mothers did not always find appropriate or desirable. Åsa, a Swedish participant, recalled that the donor visited her every day when she was in hospital and was insensitive to the fact that she wanted more time and space for herself and her partner. As he was the father, he was entitled to these lengthy visits, despite the fact that she had not had a relationship with him:

He didn't announce, it was just suddenly he'd stand there in the door and I was trying to sleep and I was bleeding and the milk was...and he just came in and sat down for hours and talked about other things, his private life and...I didn't have the strength, he wasn't that close to us. He was the father to her [child] but he wasn't that close to me, he wasn't my husband. [...] But because he was the father to her he was always welcome and [...] you [partner] should be the one who is always welcome and he should have this special time of the day when visitors come. [...] The hospital didn't do wrong but it made a little bit of a problem because it was a very strange family, they didn't know how to deal with it. They tried to be nice.

- Åsa, Swedish participant

Another problem encountered in a hospital context concerned recognition of partners as next-of-kin. There is no formal recognition of lesbian and gay partnerships in Ireland, thus all lesbians and gay men in relationships are vulnerable to exclusion from the decision-making process regarding their partners in contexts such as medical emergencies. This occasionally featured in participants' accounts. For Irish participants, there was no possibility of being recognised as their partner's next of kin. One couple attempted to redress this, albeit unsuccessfully:

**G: You tried to put me down as your next of kin as well but there was difficulty with that.**

**M: There was a difficulty with that, wasn't there? And I wouldn't give them another name. That bit at the end, we refused to give them a name. Because legally you're not recognised as next of kin, so I refused to give them a name.**

- Gráinne and Maeve, Irish participants

In Sweden, due to legal recognition of cohabiting or 'sambo' relationships and registered partnerships, for those couples who had children after the introduction of these laws in 1988 and 1995 respectively, co-parents could be identified as

next of kin. Nonetheless, one Swedish couple in a registered partnership reported that medical staff did not keep the co-parent informed of her partner's condition after she was rushed to hospital with complications and given a caesarean section. Fathers are allowed to attend this operation, but staff did not offer her this option. In addition, she was not asked if she would like to touch their child, who was placed in an incubator in intensive care. She was in a state of shock as a result of her partner and child's illnesses and the emergency nature of the operation, thus it did not occur to her at the time that physical contact with their child might be possible. The treatment she received highlights her vulnerability as a parent in a context where she was not legally recognised. Even when, as in Sweden, partnership status was legally recognised, the heterosexual nuclear family model is so ingrained that co-parents could nonetheless be excluded from important scenarios, such as attendance at the birth of a child by caesarean section.

While participants reported many instances where medical and other staff were supportive and open, the fear of encountering homophobic reactions in a variety of contexts, including hospitals, was experienced as stressful. Participants did occasionally experience overt hostility and discrimination. However, encounters with institutions were more generally characterised by a lack of awareness concerning lesbian parent families. Thus participants were forced to educate staff - an onerous task - while simultaneously seeking their services.

#### **Child-centred contexts:**

##### *Openness for the sake of the child*

Upon becoming parents, participants faced new dilemmas of openness. In addition to asserting their status as lesbians and parents, they had to identify the best ways to protect their children from discrimination. All participants, without exception, stated that it was important to be open about their family form for the sake of their children. Rather than children bearing the burden of telling people about their parents' sexual identity, participants themselves disclosed the relevant details to extended family, friends, neighbours, school staff and so on. For many participants, parenthood involved new sets of relationships with heterosexuals,

such as their children's friends' parents and thus extended their social networks. While being 'out' may have been important prior to parenthood, it now held a new significance and simultaneously involved negotiating coming out in unfamiliar spaces.

You can be openly gay but only live in the gay community and you think that you are open, open, open, but really you are not, because you're just [...] dealing with people that are gay too [...] and I think now [...] we cannot hide, never, I mean if you want to do it sometimes, you cannot do it because of the children, because I can never deny myself in any situation when I have children, never. I have to be strong and I have to all the time be aware of what I'm saying about me and, because I want them to be open about it. I mean if you, if I, if I'm gay and I don't have children, then I can meet somebody and I can say okay I'm not going to say anything this time. Just they can ask do you have a partner and I can say yes and they don't know if it's a man or a woman but they probably think it's a man and then I don't care, but I never do that anymore, never.

- Birgitta, Swedish participant

I think I've come out more as a lesbian since I've become a parent [...] I think it's important for us to be open because I think it's important for her [daughter] [...] and I have been more open, it's just has been a more natural progression for me to be more out since Danae [daughter] was born because em I suppose I, it's not that I'm closed up, but I'm more private I suppose and I suppose I would pass for straight or I had passed for straight I think [...] but em I suppose in my work circles it wasn't something that occurred to people a lot you know [...] So em, it's just been, I have been a lot more public and a lot more out and more people now of my colleagues and throughout the whole [industry] sector in Ireland you know, know about Danae and about you know our family, now.

- Eimear, Irish participant

In child-centred contexts such as daycare and schools, participants reported engaging in similar practices of informing staff about their particular family form. Rather than simply disclosing the information and relying on staff to deal with any relevant situations appropriately, they then had to explain how they became parents, the identities of all the parents and the possible implications for their child of having lesbian parents in the particular context. All participants were proactive about protecting their children in school situations, although the nature of this protection took various forms. A strong discourse emerged among Irish participants regarding the choice of a suitable school for their children to attend. The majority of state-run schools in Ireland have a Catholic ethos, unlike in Sweden where schools are run on a secular basis. Among Swedish participants, it was taken for granted that their children would attend a local school. In contrast, Irish participants often made special efforts to locate a multi-

denominational school for example, or any school perceived to have a more tolerant environment and greater relative awareness of family diversity.

The interactions between participants and daycare or school staff in both countries also took a different form. While Swedish parents made it explicitly clear to the relevant parties that they were lesbians raising children, Irish participants in couples emphasised their equal roles as parents, rather than their sexuality as lesbians. This relates to a rejection of normative scripts of coming out, reflected in the broader LGBT rights movement in Ireland, where an indigenous approach to equality struggles is particularly salient. It reflects a cultural mode of communication, whereby meaning is created with what is not said, as much as what is directly expressed.<sup>82</sup> This does however enable people to avoid confronting the potential implications of the information being communicated. This is clearly highlighted in the case of Eithne, an Irish participant, who described how she and her former partner would attempt to identify a sympathetic person within a daycare or school establishment to discuss ‘the situation’ with:

In a nursery situation or a school situation it was a question [...] of deciding maybe who we thought would be a good person to kind of establish the situation there, you know [...] and maybe it's to a certain extent it's a cop out, you know like we would say co-parents and you know this is the child and here we are and all the rest of it, we wouldn't necessarily talk about lesbianism and this that and the other, we'd let them deal with whatever they were going to deal with about that, or make whatever assumptions, but present them with the situation as it pertained to Ciarán [son] if you like em, and in some ways maybe people found that easier, you know, maybe they didn't think about, although you know after a period of time they did, but you know maybe they didn't even have to go there at some level and we maybe allowed them not to, if they chose not to.

- Eithne, Irish participant

In contrast, Swedish participants felt less constrained in encounters with institutional staff. Hanna and Gunilla, Swedish participants, provided a vivid illustration of educating daycare personnel about how to treat their family. They described how they challenged staff at their son’s daycare to acknowledge their family form. When a child began daycare, it was standard practice for a sign to be put up on the wall with the names of his or her parents. The staff initially put Hanna’s name and that of Olof, the biological father, but did not include Gunilla

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<sup>82</sup> This relates to earlier discussions about (in)visibility in chapter four.

or Johan, the co-parents. When Hanna and Gunilla complained, the staff obligingly added Gunilla and Johan's names, however they placed Hanna and Olof together and Gunilla and Johan alongside one another on the sign, as if they were heterosexual couples. When they complained again, the staff made yet another sign, this time with Hanna and Gunilla's names on one side, Olof and Johan's names on the other and their son's name in the middle, thus acknowledging the parental status of all four parents and their relationship to one another. The staff were helpful and open to suggestions, so Hanna and Gunilla were disappointed when they failed to acknowledge Tomas's status as an older brother when their second child was born. When a younger sibling is born, a sign is also displayed to indicate that the older child has a new sibling. The daycare workers were unsure as to whether the birth of their second child was to be acknowledged or not. As both Hanna and Gunilla were biological parents with different donors, staff were also unclear about the fact that they were brothers:

G: And now we have taught the person at the daycare centre how they should treat us because it was the same when Daniel [younger son] was born, when other kids get their sister or brother they put up a sign saying congratulations Tomas has a brother, but when Daniel came that sign didn't come up

H: And I was very disappointed and I said to them immediately why don't you put up a sign that Tomas [older son] has a little brother

G: [...] They didn't know if it was okay to do it or not because they didn't know exactly how we wanted it or if it was a secret or something like that and we said no it's not a secret and everybody should know and we are not at all a secret and Daniel is Tomas's little brother even though I'm not the biological mother and he has two other biological parents than Tomas has but he is my kid too so we had a long discussion there and they understood that they had made a mistake and there was not bad feelings about that but it was nice to have this discussion.

- Gunilla and Hanna, Swedish participants

Irish participants could also challenge daycare/school staff, particularly in situations where a child was in need of information and support. Thus, although the difference between Swedish and Irish participants' discourses regarding emphasis on the sexuality of the parents was a general pattern, there were exceptions. Not all Irish participants exercised reticence on this point and could also choose to educate staff when the need arose:

D: Well of course he announced to all of them how he was born with a syringe and everything.

**J: He just talked about having a donor**

**D: And what's a donor and how does that work and blah blah blah and omigod. And so the teacher nearly had a heart attack [...] She said it all to Julie [partner] and what should I say and what should I do and Julie just gave her the sentences to say and she said them so it was, at least they talked to us about it.**

- Deirdre and Julie, Irish participants

Another strategy reported by Irish participants (but not Swedish) was to participate in school activities and become a valued volunteer. In this way, they protected their children within the school environment by establishing good relations with staff and becoming an integral part of the school community:

I also got very involved in the school itself which meant that I had good relations with the teachers and stuff [...] I did work for the school so I mightn't have bothered doing all of that and [laughs] all that time, if I wasn't trying to make sure that his [son's] situation in school would have been positive but it was important to me that it was.

- Eithne, Irish participant

Thus, Irish participants actively sought out the most supportive environment for themselves and their children, which highlights the generally heteronormative nature of most child-centred spaces. In contrast, Swedish participants were less constrained in their attempts to queer existing environments.

### *Safeguarding children*

Several participants referred to difficulties for their children at school that originated not from staff or other children, but from the parents of other pupils. For example, some parents were uncomfortable with their children becoming friends with the children of lesbians and/or spending time at a lesbian family home. One Swedish couple remarked that they had always told their children that they could fall in love with a boy or a girl when they grew up. However, when their small son announced that he was in love with another boy in his class, the parents of the boy in question appeared quite uncomfortable. Participants generally encouraged the development of friendships between their children and children with parents who seemed unconcerned about their family form.

While all participants described their children as being very proud of their families and two mothers and even, in some cases, boasting about it at school, there was some indication that the level of openness that Irish children exhibited changed with age. Although the number of children over twelve was very small ( $n = 2$ ), Irish participants reported that their children tended to be more reticent about having lesbian parents as they became older. This was interpreted as the development of a clearer understanding of the marginalisation of lesbian parents in society and also as part of a teenage endeavour to cope with change, difference and their own developing sexuality. Participants however respected their children's right to decide whether or not to disclose this information. This was not a feature of Swedish participants' accounts, although this does not foreclose the possibility that their children may similarly become more inhibited with age. This reticence on the part of children was manifested in several ways – for example by inviting fewer friends home, or only friends from primary school who had always known about their family. One Irish co-parent who returned to Ireland with her partner and child after some years living abroad commented on the change in their son in Ireland:

He's [son] having a very difficult time with us being lesbians here, which he didn't have in [abroad], it wasn't really an issue for him. You know all his friends came round to the house, they knew we were partners, we could be sitting cuddling on the couch, they could come in and play whereas here I'm some kind of auntie and it's a huge insult but you know he, I have to accept, I have to give him permission to be how he needs to be, to adapt to this culture [...] I can understand that he finds it hard but it doesn't stop it hurting me. I am not his mother here and I hate it.

- Rosemary, Irish participant

Swedish parents could also experience marginalisation as a result of their child's negotiation of the wider world. Unique to Swedish participants in this study was the creation of special names for co-parents, such as nicknames or a term such as 'extra mamma'. These names constituted a function in addition to a term of address. Thus, a child might refer to both parents by saying '*I have a mamma and an extra mamma*'. However, such appellations were not understood or validated when used by children outside of their intimate circle:

From the beginning, it was mamma and malla [nickname] and that felt equal, sort of, and then it was, she started to call me Malena because no-one knew what malla was outside, in

the society, so that was where she learned that, she began to understand [...] when she said malla, no-one understood, what's that.

- Malena, Swedish participant and co-parent

All participants emphasised the important role openness about their family form played in their children's well-being. However, this was often communicated differently by participants in both countries. In child-centred contexts, Swedish participants were more likely to assert their identity as lesbians, in addition to parents. In contrast, Irish participants made considerable effort to locate and establish safe spaces for themselves and their children. They defended their role as parents, rather than highlighting their status as lesbians. However, these patterns are not absolute – many Irish parents did highlight their lesbian identity and some Swedish participants were more reticent. What these general differences illustrate is the perceived degree of social and institutional support and cultural forms of communication in two national contexts.

### **The Queer Metropolis and Beyond: urban/rural landscapes**

Participants often commented that having a child opened up new arenas for meeting heterosexuals, such as mother and child groups for example. However, neighbours and family of origin also related to them in a different way, a child providing common ground upon which to establish a rapport. Irish participants frequently emphasised their efforts to locate supportive neighbourhoods, more so than Swedish interviewees. This resonates with Irish participants' attempts to identify appropriately diverse/supportive/aware schools, a concern that was not expressed by Swedish participants. It would be reasonable to assume that lesbian parents are concentrated in urban areas, given that metropolises are usually associated with greater tolerance towards queer people. However, only one third of Irish participants lived in Dublin and half of Swedish participants in Stockholm, the two capital cities. The majority of the remaining participants lived in small towns or rural areas.<sup>83</sup> While urban areas were seen to provide a

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<sup>83</sup> The relatively small-scale nature of qualitative research means that it cannot be assumed that this is a representative sample. Nonetheless, the distribution of participants across urban/rural locations remains striking.

more open-minded environment, rural spaces were also perceived to have particular advantages.

For some Irish participants, financial security played an important role in establishing protection from neighbourhood harassment. Despite this, rural Irish participants were generally from the lowest income brackets in the study. However, they were usually embedded in alternative communities where a lesbian identity was supported. Swedish participants articulated a perception of rural neighbourhoods as less tolerant, although they reported positive experiences overall. Participants in both countries often described the countryside as a nicer environment to raise a child, with fresh air and nature activities all around. The lower cost of living in the countryside also facilitated a better lifestyle for their families. Some Irish participants were located in alternative subcultures for whom rural landscapes represented a retreat from what one participant referred to as the 'rat race'.

### *Escaping harassment in Ireland*

Several Irish participants had experienced verbal and other harassment in residential neighbourhoods prior to becoming parents, often from local youth. This informed their decision to move to areas where they might be less likely to experience such difficulties. These were typically more middle-class/affluent neighbourhoods. Concern for safety and freedom from harassment could even inform participants' decisions to become home-owners, as this was considered to provide further protection against potential problems, such as eviction by an unsympathetic landlord for example. A homeowner status would enable them to become more embedded in a neighbourhood in ways that would facilitate the creation of supportive relationships with neighbours and police. One Irish couple, Karen and Orla, experienced repeated harassment over time, including having stones thrown at the windows of their rental home. Ultimately they decided to move to another neighbourhood where they bought a house:

**K:** Because of the kind of harassment that we experienced where we were living and because it would be so insecure to go ahead with a pregnancy as a lesbian couple in rented

accommodation somewhere like [town] where it's small and your landlord will probably hear about it or know about it, it did also affect our decision to buy.

O: Yeah because we were thinking like Jesus if we had a baby now and all this stuff being thrown at the windows you know.

- Karen and Orla, Irish participants

Although I specifically enquired about instances of harassment, there were no similarly violent examples reported among Swedish participants, who did however refer to verbal harassment and other discrimination. Nonetheless, such violent incidents undoubtedly occur in Sweden, as Tiby's (1999) research shows.<sup>84</sup>

Knopp (1995) has suggested that non-urban (and other marginalised) queer identities may provide a more challenging location from which to interrogate both critical notions of queer and hegemonic power relations. However, it may also be the case that other facets of privilege are invoked to counteract hostile environments. For example, one Irish couple attributed their freedom from harassment to their economically privileged status, which enabled them to be considered 'eccentric' but nonetheless socially acceptable:

We live here, we're in the country, in this area if you're not in an estate you're rich and that's it and we're eccentric [...] and you can get away with it once you build that façade around yourself here. Otherwise you can forget it. I mean I wouldn't live here in any other way. But we find people are incredibly nice to us, we have good friends, straight friends, local people, who are very keen on us and who are prepared to accept us at face value, who will come into the house and come to parties and do all that.

- Joan, Irish participant

In this case, their 'difference' as lesbians was mediated by their wealth, a privilege which they recognised and actively utilised to secure protection for themselves and their children. Although financial security was sometimes perceived to act as a buffer against harassment in Ireland, many Irish participants did not have substantial disposable incomes, often as a result of choosing to work part-time. Working shorter hours enabled them to spend time with children and reflected a political commitment to a less materialist lifestyle. These participants usually lived rurally, where living costs were lower and they could participate in

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<sup>84</sup> Her survey of homophobic harassment found that 25% of the 3,000 Swedish lesbians and gay men who participated had experienced hate crime victimisation on the grounds of their sexuality.

alternative communities (often lesbian) that were supportive of difference. In contrast to an urban/suburban environment, rural areas could also offer freedom from the inhibiting gaze of neighbours:

I wanted to live in the country and I always wanted privacy and that would have been important in terms of being lesbian you know the freedom to go out into the garden and hug Bronagh [partner] or whatever without being overlooked potentially like, that was important.

- Muireann, Irish participant

In the above excerpt, Muireann identifies the urban environment as more constraining and does not draw on notions of urban anonymity so central to other queer metropolitan narratives (e.g. Weston, 1998). This is an intriguing characterization of life in the countryside, as freer from the constraints of densely populated urban living. However, it also constructs the metropolis or urban spaces as hostile, rather than emancipatory. This may indicate that Irish urban environments are less supportive of non-heterosexuals than urban contexts in many other nation-states. However, it may also suggest that the claims to emancipation that constitute the liberatory narrative of the metropolis in so much of queer theory are in fact exaggerated.

### *Socialising in the Neighbourhood*

Irish participants described other strategies utilised as a means of self-protection when interacting with new non-LGBT acquaintances in a variety of contexts, including neighbourhoods. One of these was an assertive demeanor that prevented people from expressing overt hostility:

I probably wouldn't make it very easy for somebody to be expressing some kind of overt homophobic stuff at me in the normal course of events, em, I think.

- Eithne, Irish participant

I would be more prickly like that style you know, my attitude to people who are going to be any way funny is like come off it, probably throw them out of it [laughs]

- Sorcha, Irish participant

This approach was necessary in the face of potential hostility and was developed when living openly as a lesbian, prior to becoming parents. More common among participants however, was a strategy of confident self-presentation. By self-confidently and unapologetically disclosing their lesbian identity, participants felt that they neutralised other people's responses. Presenting their sexual identity as something uncontroversial and unproblematic, was perceived to evoke a similar reaction from those around them:

I suppose that I just have the mentality that if I don't have a problem with it then other people don't have a problem with it. If I don't go in there feeling defensive or you know imagining that people are going to feel this way then they tend not to.

- Síle, Irish participant

Thus, Irish participants actively and continuously 'manage' and negotiate their identities in diverse spaces. Although previous research has focused on the emancipatory scope of urban spaces (in contrast to the constraints of rural life), many Irish participants presented an intriguing vision of life in rural Ireland. Rather than 'escaping' to a big city, they actively chose to carve out lives for themselves and their children in the countryside. An awareness of homophobia and the need for support shaped their choices concerning place of residence. Financial security played a more important role in suburban and urban areas.

### *Integrating communities in Sweden*

Swedish participants articulated concern about perceived conservatism of rural and small town communities, compared to the apparently more tolerant metropolis of Stockholm. However, their experiences in these localities were generally very positive. Participants were often surprised by the acceptance they experienced in rural communities. Although lesbian parenting was typically a new concept or neighbours had never personally met a lesbian parent before, they usually became accustomed to the idea quickly and remained friendly:

M: This is a small society really and I go to this group for mothers and their babies, we [...] just meet to have coffee and they are also really nice and they are a little bit surprised but at the first meeting they get used to the idea.

L: That's not a big thing, the big thing is to have children and talk about that

M: [...] I think in general people are very friendly, I'm surprised.

L: When they get to know you they see that you are just like everybody else, not so strange.

- Margareta and Linnea, Swedish participants

In the above excerpt, Margareta and Linnea present an image of themselves as 'just like everybody else', unlike the 'rich eccentrics' of Joan's narrative earlier. In this way, developing relationships with neighbours, particularly through the shared experience of parenthood, enabled lesbian parents to become familiar as individuals, rather than just representatives of a minority group. In contrast, the rich eccentric strategy actively utilises the concept of difference in order to render lesbian parents outside compulsory normative categorisations and standards.

Participants themselves occasionally invoked notions of sexuality based on an urban/rural dichotomy. Metrosexuality was associated with sexual freedom, where rural sexuality was constructed as conventional and unaware of alternative sexual practices:

They [heterosexual neighbours] don't know, they don't realise that I have other experiences than they, that I know everything about fistfucking, [laughter] that they don't even know exists. And that [...] I have another background and other experiences and [...] I can feel that, that if I tell something about my life before the children, they would be very very shocked because they are very, here in [town], more than in Stockholm for example, much more [...] conservative people.

- Sofie, Swedish participant

Although Sofie's comments may invoke a caricature of rural heterosexuality, they illustrate the continuing importance to her of her lesbian identity. For Sofie, urban environments provide greater possibilities for awareness and acknowledgement of her lesbian 'difference', which she desires. The sense of community she experiences with her heterosexual neighbours is partly a result of the elision of difference between them. In this sense, urban environments represent a link to a sexual imaginary that she identifies with and that holds a certain symbolic significance.

Similar to Irish participants, many Swedish interviewees referred to the importance of conveying self-confidence about their sexuality, which offset any potentially negative reactions. Asserting their sexuality as self-evidently unproblematic constituted a self-protective measure. However, the most effective means of defending themselves and their children was through the strategy of openness, as already outlined in the previous section on child-centred contexts. This highlights the centrality of a discourse of openness in a Swedish context, where it constitutes both a self-conscious protective strategy and political goal.

### **Conclusion**

The active negotiation of space is a recurring theme of participants' narratives. Heteronormative spatiality was evident in myriad contexts. Participants utilised a diverse range of strategies to disrupt and challenge this coding of space. This occurred in a variety of modest ways embedded in the ordinary practices of parenting. Irish participants often sought out particular spaces that they perceived as more supportive of lesbian parents. Swedish participants were less constrained in their range of spaces and were more likely to access whatever was available in a given locality, rather than choose a location/space as a potentially more tolerant place. While all participants stressed the importance of openness about their families for their children's sakes, Swedish participants openly asserted a lesbian identity as part of a politicised discourse, in which being 'out' constituted both a means of protecting their children and a rights-based strategy. In contrast, Irish participants were more reticent on this point and fought for equal recognition as parents, rather than acknowledgement of lesbian identity. Thus, their experiences of particular spaces were more often characterised by barriers to relationships/intimacy, compared to Swedish participants. This was a general pattern of participants' accounts, rather than an absolute difference: some Irish participants were quite confrontational in their method of coming out, while some of their Swedish counterparts chose to be less direct. Nonetheless, this did form a notable difference between the two samples and reflects the general perceived level of social and institutional support. In addition, it is also perhaps illustrative of cultural forms of communication. As already noted in chapter four, Ireland is a cultural context where direct verbalisation is less common, rather

meaning is created by complex allusions or elucidations. The normative script of 'coming out' is often viewed as an international import in a postcolonial context where an indigenous LGBT movement has particular significance.

A spatial analysis marks a shift in emphasis from marked bodies (lesbian identities) to the ways in which heteronormativity is constructed within particular spaces. This enables a consideration of power dynamics that problematises heteronormativity, rather than an evaluation of the success or 'lack' thereof, with which lesbian subjects negotiate space. Common to both contexts was the construction of heteronormative spatial identities. This was manifested in policies such as hospital visiting hours and discursively by the frequent interpretation of lesbian parents as heterosexual. The experiences of participants in this study suggests that much could be done to improve awareness of lesbian parenting issues among service providers in for example medical and educational settings.

Recent work on gender, sexuality and space goes beyond addressing geographical and physical boundaries and exclusions, to an examination of the construction of spaces themselves. Thus, lesbian parents' experiences of spatiality can be understood as part of a wider moment in which heteronormative spatiality is often destabilised and occasionally reconstituted. This queer(y)ing of 'public' space enables a reconsideration of debates within the literature on gender, sexuality and space, which have previously focused largely on the experiences of white urban gay men. As this research study illustrates, an integration of 'domestic' spheres - in this case the everyday spaces of lesbian parenting - contributes to queer spatial analysis, particularly from a gender perspective. In addition, the emphasis on visibility in previous work on lesbian and gay spaces is perhaps less applicable to a consideration of lesbian parents' daily life. A more diffuse and transitory conceptualisation of lesbian parenting spatiality appears more appropriate, given the relative absence of spaces specific to lesbian families and the locatedness of their familial practices within other arenas. The fact that lesbian parents are often invisible to 'other' onlookers in everyday parenting contexts, does not render those spaces less important in the shaping of their subjectivity as lesbian parents.

Finally, in this study participants offer new queer readings of rural spaces from the perspective of rural inhabitants. Much queer theory has been premised upon an urban/rural binary in which the rural is implicitly pathologised. However, some rural participants in this study offered an alternative vision of the rural as a potentially less constrained space than urban locations, challenging metrocentric notions in previous work. Lesbian parents deconstruct the heteronormative spatiality of myriad everyday contexts, therefore destabilising particular spatial identities.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Negotiating the biological ‘tie’: Identity, power and difference among lesbian parents

If the lesbian mother is at once ‘icon and conundrum’ (Weston, 1991: 169), what of the ‘non-biological co-parent’, whose parental status is even more contested? Rohrbaugh (1989: 157) refers to her as ‘a shadowy figure’. In the previous chapter, we saw that her identity as a parent is frequently challenged in wider society. Certainly in legal terms, there is generally little or no acknowledgement of her existence. Recent studies of lesbian parenting have highlighted the egalitarian practices of many lesbian parents who share the responsibilities of household labour and childcare equally (e.g. Sullivan, 1996; Dunne, 1998a). The literature on queer ‘families of choice’ (Weston, 1991; Weeks et al., 2001) has emphasised the alternative basis of families that are not organised around ‘blood ties’. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the implications for equality and kinship formation of the differential legal status of lesbian couples with children where only one partner has any parental rights. Participants in this study gave a variety of reasons for choosing to be/becoming a ‘biological’ or ‘non-biological’ parent. What then were the consequences of this difference? If two women plan and raise a child together, but only one of them is accorded any legal recognition, is this difference understood as a power imbalance and if so, how is it negotiated? Aside from the legal advantage/vulnerability, are there any other ways in which couples articulate difference associated with being a biological or non-biological parent as manifested through the lived experiences of parenting? Are the meanings attributed to motherhood/parenthood different/contested in this family form? Do lesbian parents and their children utilise alternative kinship appellations for biological and non-biological parents? In this chapter, these questions are explored with reference to reproductive decision-making, the symbolic interpretation of biology, the nomenclature of parenting, family constellations and the break-up of couple relationships. The myriad possibilities for the disruption and reinscription of heteronormative assumptions regarding the role of biology in parenting will be explored.

### Lesbian parenting: reinventing cultures of relatedness?

Anthropologists have long highlighted a distinction between the biological and social as intrinsic to understandings of kinship in many European and American cultures. Schneider (1968) questioned the role of biology, or nature, in American kinship and argued that so-called biological 'facts' were merely cultural interpretations. In his view, the 'American' system of kinship was based on two hegemonic orders: nature (or substance) and law (or code). Sexual reproduction provided a symbolic link between these two orders. Although it has been argued that his analysis retained elements of the biological constructs which he attempted to bring into question by preserving the nature/culture distinction (Franklin, 1997: 55), his work is nonetheless frequently cited as a groundbreaking study in the area of kinship. Franklin (1997: 53) distinguishes between 'nature', or 'relations of blood' and 'the order of law', or legally regulated kinship through marriage. According to Edwards & Strathern (2000: 159) '*It is arguable that what makes twentieth-century English kinship, and its Euro-American cognates, distinctive is precisely the division and combination of social and biological facts.*' These 'facts' are understood not as foundational categories, but rather as culturally contingent and variable.

Carsten (2000) questions any prior analytic distinction between the 'biological' and the 'social' in studies of kinship. In deploying the term 'cultures of relatedness', rather than kinship, she endeavours to consider comparatively ways of being related that do not '*rely on an arbitrary distinction between biology and culture, and without presupposing what constitutes kinship*' (p. 5). She further argues that the infinite (re)combinations of these two elements – biology and culture – is the basis for the dynamic potential of Euro-American cultures of relatedness. This in turn has implications for an epistemology of relatedness and reproduction. In view of Carsten's arguments, we may consider whether lesbian and gay kinship creatively recombines the elements to which she refers.

Schneider (1997) previously argued that in an American context, many lesbians and gay men form kinship networks that may contest the norm, but in which the norm is always the point of reference. Thus, "*'culture' is indeed the 'hegemonic*

*discourse*” (p. 273). In response, Gutiérrez (1997) crucially points out that the term ‘American’ needs to be critically interrogated (particularly in terms of ethnicity), before claiming any one particular cultural discourse as ‘THE hegemonic one’ (p. 280).<sup>85</sup> Schneider’s suggestion that lesbians and gay men’s kinship narratives are defined in relation to normative discourses of kinship, rather than independently of them, remains valuable when an understanding that there are multiple possibilities for sites of normative discourses is retained.

In a consideration of debates about the ‘uniqueness’ of lesbian and gay kinship, Hayden (1995) suggests that lesbian parents utilise the same symbols of kinship as heterosexuals, but that they are reconfigured within these family forms. Thus, (hetero)normative ideologies of ‘the family’ remain the reference point for arguments in favour of the legitimacy of lesbian and gay family configurations. She highlights two important ethnographies from the west coast of the U.S. to illustrate her argument – Weston’s (1991) work on ‘families of choice’ and Lewin’s (1993) work on lesbian motherhood. Weston (1991) argues that lesbian and gay kinship is distinctive because of the decentralisation of blood ties, whereby friendship or ‘love’ and choice become a defining characteristic of kinship. Hayden points out that for Weston, gay and lesbian ‘chosen families’ do not constitute mere derivations of, or substitutes for, a traditional view of kinship based on heterosexual relations, ‘*rather they are distinctive in their own right*’ (p. 41). In contrast, Lewin (1993) suggests that for lesbian women, ‘motherhood’ becomes a defining characteristic of identity that elides the ‘difference’ of lesbianism. I would add however that Lewin’s focus on primarily lone parents, most probably influenced these findings. Both ethnographies have informed debates about the potential for distinctive kinship formations among lesbians and gay men.

In Strathern’s view the ‘families we choose’ thesis exposes the selective dimension that is also present in heterosexual kinship through ‘*the detachment from blood families implied*’ (1992: 196). Many lesbians and gay men may

<sup>85</sup> Béteille (1991: 25) has commented on the white-centredness of Schneider’s (1968) work on kinship. He points out that the dichotomy between substance and code does not acknowledge the complex historical dynamics of race stratification and kinship in the US, whereby for example an African-American may be denied as kin to a white American.

experience hostility and ostracism from their families of origin and create new families of choice with friends. In other words, 'blood ties' are also constructed, rather than based on so-called 'facts of nature'. An integration of these insights is particularly salient for a consideration of lesbian parenting couples, where one partner is a biological (and therefore legally recognised and recognisable) parent – and one partner is not, or rather is continually defined in terms of her 'lack', as a 'non-biological/non-legal' (and therefore perhaps invalid) parent. As Hayden notes, in an American context this partner is '*doubly excluded from the realm of kinship*', as she is neither a legal spouse, nor a biological parent (p. 49). Many Swedish participants in this study were registered partners, a status similar to heterosexual marriage, which however at that time denied all parenting rights possibilities such as adoption and access to new reproductive technologies. Nonetheless, this legal recognition of the co-parent as a partner, did perhaps go some way to endorsing if not her role as a parent, at least her existence as a partner.

The literature on lesbian and gay kinship has generally ignored the *combination* of biological and non-biological status *within* the family (particularly in the case of lesbian couples parenting together), although Hayden's (1995) work is an important exception in this regard. A consideration of this dynamic within 'the family', is not meant to suggest that lesbian couples with children necessarily constitute a new 'nuclear family' form. Indeed, as we have already seen in Chapter Five, the involvement of donors in Sweden challenges the model of two parents and one home implicit to the traditional nuclear family structure. Rather, the purpose here is to explore the meanings attributed to biology and consanguinity within these families in all their diversity. Hayden (1995: 50) suggests that the ways in which lesbian mothers in an American context attempt to 'rectify' the 'asymmetry' of differential biological status is an indication of the salience of the 'blood tie' to American kinship, even in a context where traditional dominant articulations of kinship are apparently resisted. In her analysis, unlike 'chosen families', where the centrality of biology as the basis of kinship is undermined, lesbian couples with children invoke articulations of biology that emphasise its diffuse quality, as opposed to constructing it as a monolithic category. Thus, '*Far from depleting its symbolic capital, the dispersal*

*of the biological tie seems here to highlight its elasticity within the symbolic matrix of American kinship'* (p. 50).

Although lesbian parents themselves may negotiate the meanings of these symbolic signifiers in different ways, it is interesting to consider how researchers have utilised categorisations of lesbian motherhood that exclude co-parents. Lewin (1993) framed her comparative research on lesbian and heterosexual motherhood in the United States as work on 'single mothers', despite the fact that approximately 25% (n=20) of her sample were lesbian participants who planned and embarked on parenthood with a same sex partner.<sup>86</sup> In the first stage of her research, she looked at women who became pregnant in a heterosexual relationship. For the next stage of her study, she researched what she termed at the time 'intentional single mothers' – women who conceived while single or in a relationship with another woman. Lewin (1993) clearly outlines her reasons for constructing this latter group of lesbian mothers as single mothers.<sup>87</sup> At the time of embarking on her research, the lesbian baby boom was in its infancy and it was a strategic way of constructing lesbian motherhood in a hostile political context. Certainly, in legal terms, they were technically identified as single mothers. It is nonetheless striking that co-parents are entirely excluded from the categorisation of 'lesbian mothers' in her analysis. It is only in more recent writings and research that co-parents' parental status is acknowledged, although it remains relatively unexplored. This relative marginalisation of co-parents in academic work is a further indication of the 'taken-for-granted' parental status of lesbian birth mothers, compared to their partners.

Legal recognition of co-parents has been particularly problematic to achieve, as in most European countries the law still retains a nuclear family model, whereby a child has one mother and one father, or a maximum of two parents. New reproductive technologies have challenged this categorisation with the advent of possibilities such as sperm and egg donation and surrogacy. The legal regulation of heterosexual couples and same gender couples availing of these technologies are clearly different. If a married heterosexual couple in Sweden or Ireland

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<sup>86</sup> This percentage was conveyed by Professor Lewin in a personal communication, June 2003.

<sup>87</sup> See Lewin (1993), prologue and p. 8-9.

chooses to conceive via a sperm donation, the social father is legally acknowledged as the second parent. Lesbian couples who conceive by the same method are unable to gain legal recognition of the co-parent in Ireland. This situation has recently changed in Sweden. However in these cases the lesbian couple must be in a registered partnership (unlike heterosexual couples) and the biological father must be either unknown or willing to rescind all parental rights. As most donors played an active parenting role in the families in this study, this is clearly not reflective of many lesbian parenting arrangements in Sweden. Nonetheless, this recent legislative change represents a welcome first step towards acknowledging the rights and obligations of co-parents. Although this possible legislative change was under discussion when I was carrying out fieldwork in Sweden, it was not passed in parliament until after fieldwork had concluded. These interviews therefore took place with women who did not yet have that possibility – although all appeared optimistic that the law would change within the near future.

Numerous sociologists have pointed to the ways individuals are constantly constructing and reconstructing their intimate relationships (e.g. Giddens, 1992; Heaphy et al, 1999). In this chapter, the possibility that lesbian parents reinvent and expand notions intrinsic to normative definitions of kinship, such as ‘biology’, are explored. Understandings of lesbian and gay kinship as ‘unique’ versus ‘conventional’ echo discussions of the egalitarian potential of lesbian and gay parenting (Dunne, 1998a; Warner, 1999). Malone & Cleary (2002) argue that *“The attributes of harmony, adjustment and equality that pepper reflections on the lesbian family are modern heirs to a number of fantasies of ‘being one’. The fantasy of ‘one’ marks traditional heterosexual images of love and family”* (p. 274). In this way, they argue, power and difference within lesbian parenting families are ignored or overlooked. Most participants’ parenting experiences in this study are characterised by kinship arrangements in which children are raised by ‘biological’ and ‘non-biological’ parents. An explicit consideration of the status of biology in these families, will therefore enable an exploration of the dynamics of power among lesbian parenting couples. The ways in which kinship is delineated in these families potentially de/re-constructs or substantiates

heteronormative discourses regarding the significance of biology and parenting, reinventing or reinforcing hegemonic kinship discourses in complex ways.

### **To be or not to be: a birthgiving mother**

Prior to conducting fieldwork, I anticipated that the biological status of parents would be a sensitive issue in terms of a related power imbalance among couples. For my first 'couple' interview therefore I initially met with Viveka, the biological mother, independently of her partner Susanne. Viveka was also in the apartment while the interview with her partner took place. During the course of the interview with Susanne, the co-parent, I observed that the couple continually reminded one another of incidents which they might individually have temporarily forgotten. Furthermore, it appeared that the issue of a biological relationship with their child was something that they had addressed openly and at length between themselves. This was apparent in all the interviews and the biological status of parents was not usually a sensitive topic. It was however a more painful issue for participants who had experienced infertility, but even then the implications of this were discussed with their partner prior to insemination. This reflexive awareness of biology and parenting was a recurrent theme of interview narratives. The assumption that partners would feel inhibited about discussing biological 'difference' in parenting in front of one another, failed to take account of parenting as a shared enterprise.

For many participants, the choice about who would become a biological parent was really a decision about whether or not to experience pregnancy and childbirth. This was often a point of straightforward agreement among couples. In fact, a striking characteristic of the sample was the relative ease with which this reproductive division of labour was allocated. Among many couples in both countries, there was a clear distinction between who wanted to experience pregnancy and childbirth and who did not. Almost forty percent ( $n = 11$ ) of all co-parents interviewed, expressed a clear and persistent wish **not** to experience the physical aspects of childbearing. The reason most frequently articulated for this complete absence of inclination to be a birth mother was a fear of the pain

associated with childbirth. This was often a source of amusement to the couple when recalling this aspect of the reproductive decision-making process:

R: And was it difficult to decide who would be the biological mother?

N: No that was the easy part! [laughter] We didn't even discuss that! [laughs]

R: [To I] You didn't want to?

I: No I'm terrified of being pregnant and then to go through the delivery and oh god I didn't want that, I wanted a child so this is good.

- Nina and Ingegerd, Swedish participants. Nina is the biological mother.

C: Well my mam had warned us never to let me have a baby

A: Because she doesn't have a very high pain threshold!

C: They know me so well!

A: I'll have to go again [laughs]

- Caoimhe and Aisling, Irish participants

Interestingly, this discourse concerning fear of childbirth featured equally powerfully among Swedish and Irish accounts. This is perhaps surprising, given that Sweden has a strongly institutionalised role of the midwife in prenatal care and childbirth, a factor associated with increased control on the part of the birth-giving woman (Kitzinger, 1992; Romlid, 1998; Wrede, 2000). In contrast, childbirth in Ireland is traditionally regulated by obstetricians and the 'active management of labour' model is influential in policy and practice.<sup>88</sup> The discourse of fear of childbirth articulated by participants in this study perhaps suggests that more could be done in both countries to cater to women's concerns about pain relief and empowerment during childbirth. However, these findings may also suggest that women find insufficient comfort in prevailing discourses – some of which were expressed by birth mother participants in this study – such as 'you forget the pain', when contemplating an undoubtedly difficult physical process.

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<sup>88</sup> The Active Management of Labour, while often associated with low caesarean rates, is also frequently criticised as overly interventionist and a compromise to women's integrity and agency in childbirth. For further discussion of these debates, see O'Regan (1998).

What is also striking about these accounts is that for co-parents (and indeed for many birth mothers), consanguinity was not a priority. Social parenting represented the most meaningful connection for them personally as a parent. Rather than explicitly desiring a biological or genetic relationship with a child, co-parents expressed a desire to have a child in their life and for a social parenting role. In this context, I use the term 'birth mother', as it was specifically discomfort about this aspect of the reproductive process that featured in co-parents' accounts. Consanguinity may not have been important, but it was not objectionable in the way that giving birth was:

**M: I never wanted to be a biological mother, so.**

**R: Why was that?**

**M: Well I'm terribly afraid of delivery that's one thing and I never really wanted it. I'm fine with raising a kid, living with one. Having one biologically, that's not important to me.**

- Mia, Swedish participant and co-parent

**Geraldine [partner] was definitely, wanted to have a child and I was definitely wanting to be a parent. But I never had any intention of being the biological mother I had no desire to you know be the one to carry the baby.**

- Aoife, Irish participant and co-parent

Some birth mothers took on the role of pregnancy and childbirth simply because it was the only option if they wanted to have a child, given their partner's fear of childbirth and of course the practical difficulties regarding adoption, including legislative prohibitions. Sofie, a Swedish participant had no particular preference for becoming a biological parent, but her partner was adamant that she could not face pregnancy and childbirth herself. In referring to her decision to be the birthgiving mother, Sofie said: '*It was not something she [partner] could even consider!*' This is not to suggest however that birthgiving mothers were under duress to take on this role. Participants were agreed that if both partners had shared a fear of childbirth they would not have embarked on parenthood at all, as adoption was not a possibility at that time. Nonetheless, in cases where one partner was unable to have children, occasionally the more reluctant partner did become the biological mother. However in these cases, participants described

their initial reluctance to take on this role in terms of a lack of enthusiasm rather than a more intense revulsion or fear at the prospect.

Another reason articulated by some co-parents for not wanting to be a birth mother, was a perception of pregnancy as violating a sense of control. One birth mother laughingly described her partner's personal resolve not to become pregnant, as dread of her body being 'colonised'. This perception of pregnancy as a compromise to bodily integrity arose in several interviews:

**I just didn't have any internal desire to actually have a baby growing inside me, it didn't, I don't know what that is whether it's just a control thing you know but I didn't.**

- Aoife, Irish participant and co-parent

**B: I always have known that I don't want to be a biological mother. I don't know why, I just feel that that's not for me. I want children but I don't want to have something in here growing and coming out well, no. So it was not a problem for us at all.**

**R: Are you frightened of the physical pain?**

**B: I don't know, I mean to have something growing inside you, it feels like oh, ugh!**

- Beatrice, Swedish participant and co-parent

It seems unlikely that these concerns about bodily integrity and physical pain in childbearing are unique to lesbian women. It is surely the case that many heterosexual women share these feelings. However, unlike lesbian couples they do not have the option of becoming a parent with a partner who is willing to carry out this part of the reproductive process.<sup>89</sup>

This discourse regarding the pain of childbirth was also articulated as a *gendered* concern. Many co-parents articulated their fear in terms of a gendered embodied identification with a birthgiving woman. Katarina and Elisabet, a Swedish couple, described this phenomenon. Katarina laughed as she recalled an incident that occurred after they watched a video about giving birth at their prenatal course. Afterwards, Elisabet, the co-parent, turned to Katarina, who was pregnant at the

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<sup>89</sup> Adoption is of course a possible alternative for heterosexual women who wish to become mothers without giving birth.

time and said soberly: "My God, you really have *hell* in front of you, you know!" In describing her feelings at the time, Elisabet explained:

**E: Well I think that's a woman issue, because I'm not thinking about Katarina giving birth when I'm in there [watching film]**

**K: No**

**E: It's more like I'm thinking about me giving birth! [laughter] I feel omigod, I will never go through that and I'm feeling like, poor you! [laughs]**

- Katarina and Elisabet, Swedish participants

Several co-parents mentioned that feelings of distress when witnessing their partner in extreme pain during childbirth, in combination with their own anxiety about that pain, made the birth a less than pleasant experience. It is probably the case that many men also find it upsetting and experience a sense of helplessness when witnessing a partner giving birth. Indeed, in Pringle & Quaid's (2000) comparative study of fatherhood in Sweden and England, many respondents referred to shock at the degree of pain their partners endured during childbirth. However, the narratives of co-parents in this study suggest an added dimension of embodied gender identification. Clearly, this is not something that all women experience – certainly female doctors and nurses do not necessarily identify more with the pain of female patients in childbirth due to a shared gender for example and this embodied gender identification was not a universal feature of participants' accounts. However it did occasionally emerge in interview narratives and not always in a purely imaginary or empathetic way. One Irish participant for example experienced physical symptoms similar to some of those her partner was undergoing while giving birth:

**M: Actually Eileen's breasts got sore and perineum and vagina swelled and everything at the birth, so she came out in sympathy with me!**

**E: I did yeah, I did I was in a ferocious state.**

- Mary and Eileen, Irish participants

Mary and Eileen were raising Eileen's two children from a heterosexual marriage and another child who was conceived by AI in the course of their relationship. Eileen's symptoms may be related to her experience of having given birth

herself, in addition to an embodied gendered sense of identification with her partner, where these dimensions are understood as mutually implicated.

Hanna, a Swedish participant, developed serious complications during her pregnancy and went into labour early in the third trimester. The birth was treated as a medical emergency and carried out by caesarean section. She felt that she had missed out on some of the pleasures of pregnancy because she experienced it for a relatively short time and also of the birth, because she was barely aware that it was happening. This initially left her with a strong desire to experience a second pregnancy, but these feelings receded during her partner's pregnancy:

I was very sad and disappointed over that [personal experience of pregnancy and birth] so then I thought for a long time that I wanted one more kid, but then when Gunilla [partner] got pregnant, I was so close in her pregnancy that I felt like it was my pregnancy because I felt her stomach and I slept beside you and I was so close all the time and I was the first person in the delivery room and I was all the time so near so I got very satisfied and so I felt like no, it's not necessary to have one more biological kid and a pregnancy for me because it was such a nice experience with Gunilla.

- Hanna, Swedish participant

In this quote, parenting is emphasised as a shared experience in the context of a couple relationship. The biological mother/co-parent is not simply another woman, but an intimate partner. Hanna's emphasis on this closeness and parenting as a shared experience also served to reinforce her role as a parent.<sup>90</sup>

The very small number of couple relationships consisting of two birth mothers is not a simple reflection of the reluctance, already described, of many co-parents to become a birth mother. Some co-parents ( $n = 5$ ) intended to become a birth mother at some point in the future. Indeed, several have gone on to do so since fieldwork took place. Age was another consideration that also influenced women's decision not to be a birth mother. Several participants considered the

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<sup>90</sup> See Rival, L. (1998) for a discussion of anthropological debates about the 'couvade', or the participation of fathers in childbirth rites. Examples of the couvade can be found among the Huaorani Indians of Amazonian Ecuador, where men take the same steps as women, such as fasting or abstaining from particular food during pregnancy, in order to prevent harm coming to the future child. Rival argues that this can be understood, not simply as the assertion of paternity or as a challenge to Western notions of individuation, but rather as a process whereby a 'a new human person is brought to life and new relationships are created' (p. 628).

health risks too great to risk a pregnancy, in which case the younger partner took on that role. In addition, some women ( $n = 5$ ) experienced fertility problems which prevented them from becoming a birth mother, as a result of which their partner began inseminating instead. These factors are broken down in the following table:

	Co-parent because of fear of childbirth	Co-parent because of age	Co-parent because of infertility	Future birth mother	Other reasons	Total
<b>Swedish</b>	7	1	3	4	1	16
<b>Irish</b>	4	3	2	1	2	12
<b>Total</b>	11	4	5	5	3	28

**Table 7.1: Reasons for co-parent status among participants who did not plan future insemination**

This table does not include participants who were both a birth mother and a co-parent. Former partners involved in parenting who did not participate in interviews (Swedish  $n = 5$  and Irish  $n = 1$ ) are also not included. In these cases, interviews took place with the birth mother. Other reasons given for co-parent status included a combination of factors such as age, health and having already had children in a previous heterosexual relationship or the break-up of a relationship prior to the participant becoming a birth mother.

### *Infertility*

In five cases, participants who wished to be a birth mother discovered that they had fertility problems. Although the realisation of infertility was often traumatic, it did not necessarily become a source of tension between the couple. The factors influencing difficulties in resolving this included the importance placed on having a biological or genetic connection to a child. Overall however, participants emphasised their strong desire to have a child in their life, rather than a longing for a bio-genetic ‘tie’:

**I tried to get a child myself and [...] we tried for two years and we didn't succeed. And I don't, I'm not sorry about that in any way because I'm happy enough with Torsten [son] so**

that's how I conclude that it was not in a reproductive way, more a family, a social wanting. Because I don't mind that Torsten is not my biological child, it doesn't mean that much to me and I really tried to think about this [...] how is it, do I trick myself or don't I and [...] it doesn't matter because I feel that Torsten is my child as well in every way, so.

- Susanne, Swedish participant

Susanne also referred to her relationship with both her step-parents, to whom she was very close. She did not distinguish between them and her birth parents, a factor which also influenced her reconciliation to an inability to become pregnant. Again, the desire to be a parent was articulated in terms of becoming a social parent, rather than having a bio-genetic relatedness with a child.

Catherine, an Irish participant, experienced fertility problems as the result of a life-threatening illness. For her, becoming pregnant and giving birth represented a validation of her health and thus fertility complications were particularly difficult to accept. In contrast, her partner conceived easily and quickly, a source of envy on Catherine's part. She referred to her own infertility, in contrast with what she termed her partner's 'super-fertility', as a sensitive issue between them. Thus, power, fertility and embodiment were connected in complex ways – being a birth mother was meaningful because of what it would symbolise in relation to her health status. This is an illustration of the diversity of factors that could influence the symbolic role of biology in parenting.

Similarly, Anita, a Swedish participant who was adopted at birth, was influenced by these circumstances in her desire to become a biological parent. She had an excellent relationship with her adoptive parents and did not express any interest in making contact with her birth parents until well into her adult life. She became particularly curious about the relationship between a biological parent and child and was very excited at the prospect of embarking on parenthood as a birth mother. The knowledge of her infertility was devastating. After a long and unsuccessful struggle to become pregnant, her partner, Ingela, volunteered to inseminate. Unlike Anita, Ingela had initially been less enthusiastic about parenthood, but gradually came round to the idea. She conceived after just one insemination. Anita described her mixed feelings of joy and pain when this occurred:

R: How did you feel when Ingela became pregnant?

A: Em, well since I had still these grief feelings. I mean I was so sad from the [failure of insemination].. at the same time I was happy but I didn't know how to handle it. Neither the grief for me nor these feelings. I mean when we made Wilma [daughter] it was a very good day, it was really, the four of us were very happy, we were happy to meet again and happy with the way we did it [...] we were in an apartment in Stockholm, we took the train in the early morning and we were talking first, we were sort of excited all of us and then we thought we'll just give it a try and see what happens and that, I was a very, part of that because I just put a lid over my other feelings and then I mean the guys in the apartment, they were first in there and then we were standing outside [...] and I was happy, sort of part of it.

- Anita, Swedish participant

Still struggling to come to terms with her sadness as a result of her own infertility, her partner's attempt to conceive was difficult for Anita emotionally. In her account, above, the conception is constructed as a group process and she emphasises her role among the parents (Anita, Ingela, the donor and his partner) in creating their child. She appropriates generative power when she refers to the day when 'we made' their daughter. However, her pleasure at participating in this process is enabled by 'putting a lid over' her feelings of sadness at her personal inability to conceive. She refers to her difficulty at handling all these different emotions simultaneously. Despite this, her subsequent relationship with their child helped her to overcome feelings of loss at not being a biological parent. It was often apparent that becoming a co-parent helped to alleviate distress caused by infertility and that longings for a biological child faded after time spent loving and caring for a non-biological child.

Sara, a Swedish participant attempted to become pregnant for two years and finally conceived via IVF. However, she miscarried, at which point her partner began inseminating and later gave birth to their daughter:

But when Bodil [daughter] was a couple of months [old], one evening I was thinking about this, oh I also wish that I could have one biological child for myself. It went through my head once and we talked about it but then it was gone and now I know I thought so, but I don't anymore [...] She is my child as much as she can be and if we also get the adoption<sup>91</sup>, it will be equal [...] I feel her so much as my child that I can't imagine another way.

- Sara, Swedish participant and co-parent

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<sup>91</sup> A reference to the political debate regarding second parent adoption, which was taking place in Sweden at that time.

Eimear, an Irish participant had tried to become pregnant for some years but was unable to conceive and eventually her partner gave birth to their child:

If I weren't with Sorcha [partner] I would still not be a parent you know so, you know there was a compromise on my part and I still got a lot from it you know which you know more than makes up for that sadness I feel for that personal thing that I would have liked, so...

- Eimear, Irish participant and co-parent

Co-parents who were unable to conceive often referred to their delight at becoming a parent and feelings of good fortune that this was possible because of having a female partner. This does not mean that the decision to change over to a partner for insemination was always easy to accept however. Even if the consensus was that it was important to be a social, rather than a biological parent, the decision for one partner to abandon the prospect of being a biological mother and for her partner to begin inseminating instead required some time to adjust to. Karen and Orla, an Irish couple in the study, were attempting to conceive. Although Orla had been trying to become pregnant for some time, no pregnancy was forthcoming. They referred to the assumption on the part of friends that they would simply swap places and that Karen would begin inseminating immediately. However, as Orla stated '*you can't just switch*'. Both were determined to try every possible avenue for Orla, before beginning a process of accepting that she was unable to conceive. Difficulties in accessing fertility treatment (as already outlined in Chapters Five and Six) exacerbated the distress associated with infertility.

### **This ubiquitous myth: biological relatedness and parenting**

All participants identified as parents, regardless of biological relationship to their children. This does not mean however, that the biological relationship between birth mothers and children was ignored or viewed as entirely insignificant. Although participants were equally involved in parenting, a belief in a special or unique mother-child relationship based on the experience of pregnancy, occasionally emerged. Participants for example often referred to a birth mother's ability to wake up as soon as a child began crying, or even immediately

beforehand. This 'special connection' was seen as particularly or only apparent during a child's infancy and breast-feeding periods.

I think you feel something towards a child that you've given birth to that is different from a child that you haven't, or the child responds differently to or something, I don't know, I don't know what it is. And I might be wrong, but I just can't believe that that nine months counts for nothing immediately. I think it does get much less influence as time goes by but I think it you know, it takes time for that to fade you know.

- Emma, Irish participant and birth mother

I think you can never come away from the fact that when you've carried a child there's also something else in it which for example, the only thing I can say is, and I think that's very very normal is that and I know most parents have that thing during night-time and all this, with children waking up all the time, I know fathers and mothers have the same thing, the mother wakes up, it doesn't take one second and she doesn't need to cry or anything, I just wake up straight ahead if there's just a noise though she's not in our room or anything, I think that goes very deep inside yourself because you had her in your, carried her and everything [...] I think that's something very special that can never ever be taken away or anything.

- Åsa, Swedish participant and birth mother

This awareness of a child's physical needs was not shared by all birth mothers however. For example, Sinéad, an Irish participant, is rarely woken by external noise and slept through most of her son's night feeds. In the morning, Sinéad would have no memory of these nocturnal interruptions and would often comment with wonder on his ability to sleep for long periods of time. Her partner had children from a previous heterosexual relationship and Sinéad had been curious to see if she felt a particular 'fine tuning', or special awareness of her biological child's needs. However, this never developed. In contrast, her partner, the co-parent, woke immediately upon hearing his cry:

Sinéad would sleep through half the breastfeeding. She would go to bed, she would wake up in the morning and say that baby was brilliant, and I'm going he woke at two and four and six [...] but she slept alright, not even disturbed by him [...] I would wake, I've always woken at the first sign of a child's cry. So I was very tuned into that anyway. Sinéad just never needed to get tuned in, no need, and she wouldn't have done anyway. I think the child would have gone through the night as a necessity, he just would have been a very hungry baby when she woke up.

- Rosemary, Irish participant and co-parent

So for this couple, the roles reported by some other couples were reversed and having given birth did not provide a special awareness of a child's physical needs. Nonetheless, Sinéad did find that being a birth mother was significant in

one way. Having co-parented her partner's children from a heterosexual relationship since their infancy and identifying strongly as their mother, she was surprised to find that she experienced a 'genetic connection' with her birth child. While she loved all three children equally, she found that the marked physical resemblance and similar mannerisms she shared with her son held a particular resonance for her. The physical similarity between Sinéad and her son, is made meaningful precisely because it represents a particular ideation of biology:

S: I think what surprised me was the genetic connection [...] from the minute Turlough [son] was born and I saw this nose, this O'Reilly nose it was just like oh shit you know he really is mine, you could pick him out in a crowd! [laughter]

R: He always looked very much like Sinéad

S: And I'm the image of my father and this floored me, you know. And seeing Turlough, there was one point where Turlough was three and he was reciting this poem for my father and it was like, it was like going right back there and being in that place. And looking like that, it was very very strange and the poem was one that [...] was about whole generations going past, but it was also a children's [poem], it was one of those ones. So it was kind of meaningful for all three generations and this kid was three saying it and I can remember being that kind of child and knowing that these were children's words, but there was, I can remember being in that space, so that was very very strange and just seeing him doing things in the same ways, which I didn't have with David and Christopher [partner's children from previous relationship]

- Sinéad and Rosemary, Irish participants

Many co-parents also invested in the notion of a special connection between a birth mother and child for at least a period of time, usually immediately after birth and during the breastfeeding stage. Numerous participants referred to children turning initially to the birth mother for comfort during the breastfeeding stage because '*she was the one with the breasts*'. Not all participants experienced this and those who did said that it changed when the child was weaned. For some co-parents the weaning of the child therefore represented a new stage in their relationship as a parent. Both Niamh and Eva in the following quotes describe their occasional feelings of frustration as the non-breastfeeding parent.

I would have felt with Cormac [non-biological child] well this breastfeeding lark especially when I, two and a half years down you know I'm not sure how much more I can hack this where every time Cormac cries he wants Evelyn [partner] because of the breastfeeding. But it peters out and it switches and it has been through different times

- Niamh, Irish participant

But sometimes I get [...] not jealous but sometimes I feel like I want to be a part of it more [...]I can feel a bit outside, but it's just now in the beginning and I know that it's going to be different when Regina [partner] is not breastfeeding anymore.

- Eva, Swedish participant

However, this notion of a particular physical connection between a birth mother and child was often presented as a positive concept which was to be acknowledged, rather than viewed as undermining of the co-parent. In this way, co-parents emphasised their personal sense of security in their role as a parent. Rather than equality being dependent on 'sameness', difference could be acknowledged without being threatening. This perhaps draws on or emulates a hegemonic kinship discourse dependent on sexual difference, thereby legitimating the lesbian parents' culture of relatedness:

And I think that's a nice thing, I have no, I think that's a good thing. I don't feel you know envy or jealous or anything. I think that is something to celebrate I think that's a really nice special thing I wouldn't like to take it away at all because that's the fact of the matter, he was inside Aisling [partner] for nine months.

- Caoimhe, Irish participant and co-parent

While some participants referred to the significance of a biological or genetic relationship, this was not a universal feature of accounts and is not to suggest that all birth mothers in the study felt an immediate connection with their children. In particular, where the pregnancy was unplanned or reminiscent of an earlier traumatic experience, as was the case for several Irish participants, such feelings of 'connectedness' took some time to develop. Dymphna, an Irish participant, became pregnant as a result of rape. She referred to being 'in denial' about her condition for the majority of the pregnancy. Thus for example she did not receive any prenatal care until the final trimester. The birth itself was a particularly difficult one and it took some time before she felt 'connected' with her child:

D: Because I was so in denial about being pregnant and everything, when he was born, the bond that so many people said oh when you have a child and the bond will be there

R: It wasn't?

D: No, no [...] it took some time, yeah a few months at least. But not to say that I didn't care for him or you know but I just, I guess there was something in me that wasn't connected so therefore I couldn't connect to him in the way that I would have liked to.

- Dymphna, Irish participant

Nicola, an Irish participant, had given a child up for adoption twenty years previously and found that giving birth again brought back memories of this difficult time earlier in her life. She described her 'bond' with her younger child as a 'strong feeling' that took several weeks to develop. In her view, her feelings for her younger child developed at a slower pace because of the emotional trauma surrounding the adoption, which she also considered to have played a role in the complications she experienced in the second childbirth:

N: It [emotional bonding] took about four weeks. I think that was because of having adopted a child and just having been quite traumatised

R: You mean it brought that back to you?

N: Yeah I think that's why the birth sort of went a bit wild. Then obviously there is a bond, but before it sort of really kicked in, it took a while. I was thinking what am I doing and then you know it just gets stronger and stronger [...] it's just such a strong feeling.

- Nicola, Irish participant and biological mother

Another Irish participant, Clodagh, became pregnant unintentionally after a casual sexual encounter. As the pregnancy was unplanned, it took some time for her to feel comfortable with becoming a mother and developing what she viewed as particular manifestations of 'attachment' intrinsic to parenthood. These were feelings that she had recently begun to experience:

But I have to say in the last few weeks, I've really started having these attachment things and it's probably only now, a year and a half old, I just think my god if something happened to him, it would take me a hell of a long time to recover, whereas I think it was over my head a little bit before that.

- Clodagh, Irish participant

Another birth mother in this study referred to her partner 'engaging' with their child much more quickly after the birth, because she herself was so exhausted after a long labour that she did not have the emotional energy to do so. It appears likely that these experiences will resonate with those of heterosexual women who come to terms with motherhood in unplanned circumstances. These latter accounts, which refer to trauma, uncertainty about becoming a parent, and physical exhaustion challenge cultural myths of an automatic, universal and unwavering bond experienced by all birth mothers for their biological child. The

circumstances and experience of childbirth affect women's emotions and identity with respect to parenting, which may be complex and conflictual.

The concept of an essential, unchanging and universally experienced maternal 'bond', remains a persistent and ubiquitous myth. This is not to undermine or deny the powerful emotions experienced by many women in pregnancy or childbirth, rather the diversity of narratives is a reminder that these responses are also mediated by context. This does not make them feel any less 'real', but does suggest that responses can and do vary and this needs to be acknowledged, rather than pathologised. Clearly, as has long been acknowledged in the case of heterosexual adoptive parents, a non-consanguineous relationship can be the source of powerful emotional relationships and a biological relation does not guarantee any form of connection. What is perhaps interesting about these accounts is that while hegemonic discourses of motherhood are often articulated, they are undermined equally as often. These hegemonic discourses can also be realised in ways which challenge singular meanings of concepts such as 'biology', as the next section illustrates.

### **'I Try to Push My Genes into Him': co-parents and the attribution of bio-status**

Participants occasionally described incidents where attribution of biological relationship between co-parents and children was seen to validate their parental status. This illustrates the pervasive importance of biological status as a symbol of parenthood. While a birth mother's parental status was assured by virtue of giving birth, in contrast the recognition of co-parents was more contested. Participants recalled instances where a co-parent's parental status was affirmed by presumption of a biological contribution:

Actually when Karl [son] was a baby [...] my cousin's wife asked what colour were his eyes, and we said yeah he has brown eyes, yeah sure you have both brown eyes she said. And then she started to laugh because she knew [laughs] what she was saying and we just took it as okay she has accepted us as parents.

- Elin, Swedish participant

It's interesting sometimes because she's really like me, she doesn't look like me at all at all but sometimes her personality, she'll say things or do things a little bit like me and I kind of

laugh or sometimes at the school I'd collect her or whatever and people would say, when they didn't know [...] oh she's the spit of you<sup>92</sup> and I used to think that was really funny because she doesn't look remotely like me.

- Aoife, Irish participant

Another co-parent and Swedish participant, Eva, emphasised that she played a larger role in her child's life than the father. She articulated her relationship to her child in terms of passing on physical characteristics as well as personality traits, which she referred to however in biological terms:

E: I try to put a lot of personality into him [laughs], as much as I can, you know I try to push my genes into him [son].

Rg: He's got your

E: My eyelashes

Rg: Eyelashes, yeah. He has got Eva's! [laughs]

E: But I think it's important, if you see that he carries your genes, it's for the self feeling, especially for Mattias [donor] who doesn't, is not such a part of Alfred [son] yet. I'm such a big part of, I'm more a part of Alfred's life than Mattias is.

- Eva and Regina, Swedish participants. Eva is the co-parent.

The deployment of biology as a discursive strategy in claiming her place as a significant person in her son's life, illustrates the continued centrality of biology to understandings of kinship. However, in this case biology is understood not solely as biogenetic substance, but as a symbolic reflection of a close caring relationship her contribution to her son's upbringing. Interestingly, Eva emphasises the more central place she occupies in her son's life, compared to his father. This is particularly notable as the father in this case was very involved and at the time of the interview, visited the child daily. Eva asserts her position as a primary carer, 'pushing her genes' into him by social contact. The father's position, while that of a biological parent with regular contact, is nonetheless constructed as the outsider in the family unit. Thus, whereas the birth mother's parental status is taken-for-granted, this may be less so for donors/fathers in the context of the couple relationship.

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<sup>92</sup> 'Spit' here is a colloquial expression originating from the term 'spitting image', meaning bears a strong physical resemblance to.

Participants' attempts to redress power imbalance relating to differential legal and biological status expanded the symbolic deployment of biology as a symbol on several levels. The attribution of biological status to co-parents reinscribed the centrality of biology to understandings of relatedness, but biology was also invoked by co-parents and others in complex discourses to validate their position.

### **What's in a name? The nomenclature of kinship**

In a Swedish context, the possibility of adoption has recently become available to lesbian couples in a registered partnership, whereby a co-parent can obtain legal recognition. This is known as 'närstående' (literally 'nearstanding') adoption, or adoption by a person with a close relationship to the child. The issue of what to call the 'second parent' is a complex one. The apparent ambiguity of her role is illustrated by the variety of terminology used to refer to her in the academic literature. For example, much of the literature originating from the US uses a variant of the term mother: a 'non-biological mother' (Benkov, 1994; Nelson, 1996), a 'co-mother' (Muzio, 1993) and the 'Modern Other Mother (MOM)' (Sullivan, 2001). The classic children's text by Lesléa Newman (1990) refers to the lead character's 'two mommies'.<sup>93</sup> Other authors refer to her as a 'co-parent' (Schwartz, 1998), and a 'non-biological parent' (Kenney & Tash, 1995). Similarly, there were various options utilised by the participants in this study.

Having read the academic literature and socio-cultural accounts that tended to invoke a 'two mothers' model, when embarking on fieldwork I anticipated that participants in Sweden would tend to use the term 'mother' to describe themselves. However, in interviews many co-parents referred to themselves as a 'parent', rather than 'mother'. Although they identified strongly as a parent, the term 'mother' was most often used to refer to the birth mother. This was usually a way of communicating who carried out the physical aspect of childbearing, rather than to signify a differential caregiving role. Consider the following quote from an interview with Sara, who distinguished between herself and her partner. She described herself as a 'parent' and her partner as a 'mother':

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<sup>93</sup> Heather Has Two Mommies (1990), by Lesléa Newman was one of the first children's books to portray lesbian parent families in a positive way.

R: Do you think there's any difference then, between a mother and a parent?

S: ...well the difference is that I didn't give birth. That's the only difference. But I'm not a parent in the way a father is a parent, I don't think so at least, I don't want to be it, that way, I, I'm just neutral parent. [laughs]

- Sara, Swedish participant and co-parent

Although Sara identifies as a parent, rather than mother, she does so while rejecting the inhabitation of a male parenting space. Hayden (1995) argues that '*For women with a clear and gendered agenda for lesbian motherhood, its promise is deeply bound to the existence of a second female parent, who is neither downplayed nor de-gendered. She is not a father substitute, nor is she a gender-neutral parent; she is clearly another mother*' (p. 46-47). The excerpt by Sara above supports Hayden's (1995) claim that lesbian co-parents challenge heteronormative constructions of the family by not claiming a male space. However, whereas in an American context she suggests that this is achieved by both women appropriating the term 'mother' as an identity, in this research many co-parents described themselves as parents, rather than mothers. Despite refusing the title 'mother', Sara clearly differentiates between herself and a 'father'. A 'mother' is someone who gives birth. But this is a complicated claim, as it seems likely she would support a heterosexual adoptive woman's status as 'mother', rather than 'parent'. So perhaps the claim to a motherhood identity also rests on the number of mothers available. Or do these families represent a new 'culture of relatedness'? For Sara, this semantic difference delineates the different role in reproduction played by her partner. She does not appear to invest any other importance to it. But by distinguishing between themselves in this way, there is an investment in this difference, although what this may signify is open to interpretation. In Sara's interaction with schools, doctors, friends and extended family for example, she clearly presents herself as a parent and introduces their child as her 'daughter'. Is this less radical than a two mothers model referred to by Hayden? I would argue that it is indicative of the earlier stage of the lesbian baby boom in Sweden than in the US, where particular scripts for this family form, including the nomenclature of kinship, are less established, rather than clearly representative of a less destabilising approach to kinship. This is not to suggest however, that they will necessarily follow a trajectory resulting in the

predominance of a ‘two mothers’ model - which already exists among some couples in the study - but may either forge new identities or frameworks, or evolve traditional formulations.

Participants also emphasised the importance of making things ‘as easy as possible’ for children, whose way of describing their family might be misunderstood or ridiculed. In these cases the child would initially call the birth mother ‘mom’ or ‘mamma’ and the co-parent by her first name or some variation. The child could make their own decision about this as they got older, but in the meantime it was considered easiest for the child to use terms that fitted into the dominant discourse of one mother and one father.

Well basically he’s not going to call Caoimhe [partner] mammy as well because we think it might be a bit confusing at the early stages. Like later when he’s older he might decide to call her that.

- Aisling, Irish participant and biological mother

When she becomes three maybe she wants, maybe she says now I want to say mamma Sara and mamma Åsa instead. And that’s fine because then it’s her decision but we want to make it as easy as possible for her as long as she can’t sort of, with language, explain what she wants.

- Åsa, Swedish participant and biological mother

As Strathern (1992) has observed, ‘*it is an axiomatic tenet of Euro-American kinship reckoning that everyone has parents in the biological sense, whether or not one knows who they are*’ (p. 160). This hegemonic discourse was both incorporated into and contested in participants’ narratives. An Irish participant, Eileen, had children from a previous heterosexual marriage and was a co-parent to a child with her same sex partner. She described her personal identity in relation to their child as that of a mother, but wanted their child to call her by her first name and to call her partner ‘mommy’:

E: I see myself as a mother.

R: OK, but you want her [child] to call you Eileen, not mother.

E: Yes, because I think it’s important that she knows who her mother is.

R: OK, so what’s the difference?

E: I don't know, but I just, because I'm a mother myself before Fiona [child] came along and I know how important it was for me that I was recognised as being a mother [...] so when Mary [partner] wanted to have a baby I knew how important it was for her and I think it's important for Mary to be the mother.

M: You're contradicting yourself there.

E: I know that but I mean I do a lot of mothering things, but I'm not her mother, biologically I'm not her mother.

- Eileen and Mary, Irish participants

For Eileen, rejecting the name of 'mother' as a personal designation served two functions. In addition to communicating information about the identity of the birth mother to their child, it was a way of providing her partner with the space to claim 'recognition' for 'being a mother'. This was not something she viewed as undermining of her place in their child's life or as illustrative of different roles in everyday caretaking. Rather it encapsulates the complexities of navigating traditional notions of family within a context where they are reconfigured. In reference to this point, Mary, who had no objection to Eileen being called mother, commented:

I dunno like sometimes I think Eileen's a bit contradictory because she's like I'm Fiona's mum but I want her to know who her mother is and I think life is like that sometimes we have contradictions or things we haven't quite sussed out and sometimes like it sounds funny you know.

- Mary, Irish participant

This example suggests that clearly defined categorisations are not always appropriate or even desirable. Indeed, in the interviews when I asked participants about this delineation of names, contradictions often emerged which participants were comfortable with. When responding to my questions about naming and identity, participants struggled to articulate complex standpoints. While the spectre of a social/biological distinction that is a socially constructed dichotomy was clearly raised, the complex meanings attributed to new and old terms constructed in the interview narrative illustrate the process of the interview as a 'joint production' (Valentine, 2002).

A Swedish co-parent, Lisa, made the same distinction as that outlined by some participants above – she called herself a 'parent' and her partner 'the mother'.

She considered her relationship to their child to be different from her partner's, although this difference was not reflected in financial contribution or carework. In Lisa's view, the question of her place in the child's life was constructed as problematic or unknown by society, but would be easily worked out between herself and the child over time:

I mean there is a difference, it's not that em it's not two mothers, it's a mother and you know another person that, I think that my relationship with Astrid [child] will be something else, but I don't think that it has to be complicated necessarily [...] in the beginning when it was more abstract you know [when] she [partner] was still expecting I'd be thinking what will my role be and, but then I think that my role will be quite uncomplicated because we are living together so you know we're going to get to know each other in a very natural way and it's more society that is asking like what is your role and [...] I don't think that she [child], perhaps when she'll be five or so, people are going to ask her and then she's gonna start thinking, asking questions, but but em, I think that instinctively she's not going to have a problem with my role.

- Lisa, Swedish participant and co-parent

In this excerpt, Lisa constructs a distinction between public and private domains. In the family realm, her relationship with her child and 'role' are unproblematic, but outside 'the home', her child may encounter questions about who, or what, Lisa 'is'. This demonstrates the difficulty of forming a new kind of relatedness in the context of a society where kinship is clearly delineated along the lines of a social/biological distinction and heteronormative family form.

However, some co-parents considered it very important to be identified as 'mother'. Anita, a Swedish participant, was very upset by the absence of a new name for herself on the birth of her daughter. Initially she was to be called Anita and identified as a second parent, whereas her partner was the 'mother'. After some time however, they decided that this was an unnecessary distinction and chose to call themselves both derivations of 'mother'. For Anita, being two mothers represented a more radical alternative than one mother and an 'extra parent':

After the baptism ceremony we were sitting and everyone had a name, a new name, like grandmother or grandfather blah blah blah and I was Anita you know. When they were talking about me with Alexandra [daughter], there was one mummy and one Anita and I didn't accept that. I got so angry, upset, sad. I was crying a lot because I felt I'm not an

Anita, I'm a very important person to her so of course I should have a name. But instead of having mother and mother for Alexandra it was mamma och [and] mamsan<sup>94</sup>, we made it.

- Anita, Swedish participant

For Anita, a new name conferred a particular status as a parent. The lack of a clear name undermined her parental role. The title 'mother' validated her place in their family. However, most co-parents appeared unperturbed on this point. Swedish women were more likely to use the terms mother, father and 'extra parent' than Irish women, but often also deployed alternative strategies in signifying the co-parent's role as a parent, for example with surnames.

Last names were also a point of discussion. In most cases, the child had the birth mother's last name, but there were exceptions. Some Irish and Swedish participants used a double-barrel name with both female parents' last names, or the co-parent's last name was used as a middle name. Several Swedish participants took their partner's name upon becoming registered partners - in one case the co-parent's name - and some Swedish couples created an entirely new name for themselves and their children:

So we took a brand new name. And [new last name] is the name of the place where my mother grew up [...] it's kind of emotional that my children have the name from my side of the family, as we don't have this legal or biological connection we have this, this connection. We have the same name and it's the name from my side of the family. It felt important and I definitely wanted to have the same name as my children to make this connection.

- Beatrice, Swedish participant and co-parent

This is an example of a creative strategy for overcoming the power imbalance resulting from the non-legal recognition of co-parents. By using a last name that originated from the co-parents' family background, she appropriates generative power and establishes her place figuratively in their children's 'lineage'.

Interestingly, unique to Swedish participants was a reference to the creation of a new name specifically for co-parents by children, based on a version of their first name similar to 'mamma'. So for example, if a co-parent's first name was 'Susanne', she might be called 'Sussa' by the child. Among participants with

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<sup>94</sup> The appellations 'mamma' and 'mamsan' are similar to 'mom' and 'mommy' respectively.

older children, naming rested on terms that children preferred to use themselves. Particularly where children were very young, it appeared that many co-parents were still establishing what they would be called and particular denominations often changed or developed over time. Children frequently played an active role in this, by deciding themselves what they wanted to call their parents. Many participants emphasised their children's agency in deciding how to describe their parents and what names to use to refer to them:

It wasn't anything that we had decided, they decided to call to me mamma and her Ylva [co-parent] and when they talk about her they call her their extra mam, in Swedish 'extra mamma'. Some, someone called it medmamma [co-mother], but we say extra mamma, or they have invented it.

- Elin, Swedish participant

Some of them [child's friends] go 'how come she calls you her mom and Geraldine [partner] her mom?' So I say because she's got two moms so I think a lot of the time I tend to use that more because I'm used to explaining to the other children and it's also how Lorna [daughter] describes us.

- Aoife, Irish participant

Overall, Irish participants were more likely to both be called 'mom' or by their first names by children, whereas Swedish participants used the terms 'mom' and another term for the co-parent. This may be related to the norm of having involved donors in Sweden, reflective of reproductive decision-making that more strongly retains elements of a one mother, one father vision of parenthood. Among Swedish participants with involved donors children often had a last name from their father as well, illustrative of his parental role. This was occasionally described as a concession to the donor, particularly if he was not a residential parent.

He has his father's name and Eva [partner] has her name and I have my name [...] I wanted that because if I put my name on him then Eva gets more out [excluded] and when we were thinking about this I thought that the one who is most outside, that's the father. So because of that he got his father's name so he shall be more in.

- Regina, Swedish participant

This example suggests that power may reside primarily with the mother and co-parent in a Swedish context, as usually the primary carers and residential parents. While the donor/father is perhaps marginalised, the co-parent's relative power however derives from her status as a partner, in addition to carer.

Although birth mothers could claim the term 'mother' unproblematically, for co-parents this was a more complex negotiation. While the term mother is interpreted in a conventional sense as the person who gives birth, the relational meanings attributed to this term rarely differ from those of the co-parent. Even when a 'special bond' during breastfeeding and infancy was endorsed, this was viewed as something that faded over time. As the previous discussion illustrates, there were no clearcut categorisations here and certainly naming practices changed and evolved over time, particularly as children got older and themselves 'named' their parents.

Lewin (2001: 660) refers to lesbians '*who eschew the normalising nomenclature of kinship*' as a challenge to normative understandings of lesbian life stages. I would argue that it is not simply the abandonment of categories that is of interest in a context where lesbian parents are struggling for legal rights. Rather, it is the creative reformulation of these categories that has much to reveal about contemporary relatedness. The expansion of kinship terminology to encompass non-biological relationships constitutes a resistant discourse. The complex dynamics of nomenclature in lesbian parent families suggests that naming and identity follow complex trajectories that may both repudiate and confirm heteronormative discourses of the family. It is the unstable and self-conscious nature of this dynamic that gives rise to new understandings of the content of these terms.

### **Sharing and Caring: challenging an exclusive motherly 'niche'**

The automatic conferring of motherhood to biological mothers was a striking feature of interview accounts. Thus, birth mothers potentially had the power of choosing whether to share parenting with a partner or not. This was illustrated by birth mothers' assertions of their partners' parental status, a claim not made in reverse by any of the co-parents. Whereas the co-parents' role had to be continually reiterated, that of the birth mother was taken for granted. Some birth mothers commented reflexively on their awareness of a need to include co-parents in parenting:

I breastfed him for about six months so there was that kind of bonding that Caoimhe [partner] wouldn't have been able to have as well. But I'm very conscious of things like that that I wouldn't want Caoimhe to feel left out and you know she's as much say, like I wouldn't have the last word, if I feel like what she said makes more sense well eventually I'll say okay [laughs] but you know things like that, I'd be very conscious that I wouldn't want her to feel left out and that it's as much her child as mine.

- Aisling, Irish participant

I'd say I've been very very much aware of, since she was born, how important it is to let Sara [partner] in all the time. It's like when she was born in the hospital, I gave Bodil [daughter] to Sara straightaway and she actually had her more in the hospital than I did, just to sort of, to show to her, because I, I've thought about it a lot during my pregnancy that I thought that just that time in the hospital when she's actually, or we thought it was a boy, when he's actually out, that's the time when it's really going to be important that I sort of prove to Sara that it's her child as well, that I don't just take a, breastfeed her and she's mine. I've thought about it a lot and it's very very important, just these first few days sort of, that I give her to Sara and let Sara be with her as much as possible and eh to make her feel that she's really a parent.

- Åsa, Swedish participant

Gabb (2002) when referring to the birth mothers in her study of lesbian motherhood in the Yorkshire region, UK, states that they often "*jealously guarded 'special time' such as child(ren)'s bedtime routines, seeing them as 'quality time' which they did not want to relinquish, similarly Mother's Day. Such routines were always associated with 'birth mothers' and underpinned the 'birth mother'-child 'bond'.*" (p. 1). While this is undoubtedly related to the fact that her sample consisted almost entirely of lesbian step-families, where children were conceived in a previous heterosexual relationship, it is notable that I did not encounter many examples of such overt 'ownership' of mothering work/traditions in this study. Although a small number of participants referred to occasions when birth mothers had exhibited a sense of possessiveness around being the primary carer, these incidents seemed to be rare. If anything, participants appeared delighted to share parenting with a partner, which is perhaps illustrated by the very small proportion of lone parents in the sample.

Among Irish participants, one couple unusually divided carework along a full-time breadwinner and full-time caregiver model. However, it was the birth mother who decided to return to work when their child was one month old, whereupon the co-parent became the full-time carer. In the following extract

Gillian, the biological mother, reflects on people's expectations that she might feel 'concerned' about her partner Ciara being the primary caregiver:

I think people respond not to whether you're close or what you look like or, it's how you behave and in the context of this situation Ciara [co-parent] behaves much more like the mother than I do, people are kind of going Gillian, is she concerned or whatever and I'm like no Ciara is much better at this sort of thing than I am and I think the fact that I was the biological mother was purely that I was willing to do it and that we were on a trajectory where we were doing it and everyone was really happy and I was really happy about it and I had a really easy pregnancy so there was never a point where I thought oh this is a terrible decision, this is stupid. And I also never thought oh I'm going to stay home and take care of this child because there was no way!

- Gillian, Irish participant

In this excerpt, Gillian invokes a traditional understanding of the mother as a primary carer and notes that her exclusive motherhood status is undermined by the fact that her partner performs this role. For Gillian, becoming a biological parent had been an enjoyable, rather than a necessary aspect of parenting. She did not find her partner's decision to take on a more traditional mothering role threatening. In fact, I frequently noted the openness participants seemed to exhibit towards their children and the large extended kinship networks surrounding them. A striking aspect of these families was the number of people involved in raising a child. In addition to a biological mother, there were different constellations of family forms, including a female co-parent, biological father, male co-parent and the extended biological families of all these parents. In addition, there were the close friends and 'chosen kin' of lesbian and gay friends. One participant for example referred to her son's many 'lesbian aunties'. I was struck by how open and generous participants were with their children, welcoming other people's involvement. A friend of a couple who participated in the study, was in another room caring for their child during the interview. Afterwards she commented on exactly this point, remarking that she enjoyed how unpossessive the parents were of their child, welcoming friends' involvement. Interestingly, inviting more parents into a child's life necessitated relationships with their kin as well.

I really like the feel of it, instead of us, me feeling very isolated like in a very traditional nuclear family type structure, like I think I'd hate, you know me, I think I'd feel that's too tight. Whereas I like this, how broad it is, I like how many people are involved in his [son's] life and, you know, in terms of like three families involved in his life, just a lot of people

sharing an interest and love of Seán [son], you know. So it feels very broad you know, and broad enough for him, just love and affection and attention and diverse you know, different ages, male, female, lesbian, gay, straight. I love the whole diversity of what's in his life and I think that's very extended and I think it's great, I love it.

- Maeve, Irish participant

G: We really love them [fathers] as friends and they are really near friends to us now and if something happens we always call them

H: And we help each other if we have a hard time or something like that and their parents are also very involved in our kids, both Jens' and Albert's [fathers] parents are very involved in our kids, just the same as my mum and yours. So we have to relate to this big family you know. But mostly it's positive, it's very positive.

- Gunilla and Hanna, Swedish participants who parent with two active fathers

However, contact with extended families occasionally presented challenges. The involvement of donors in Sweden could raise specific difficulties for co-parents, who were potentially more marginalised in a family that already consisted of 'one mother and one father'. For example, some participants referred to difficulties in having co-parents acknowledged by the donor's parents, who treated the two biological parents as a kind of couple:

Some people, they saw Mattias [donor] and Regina [birth mother] as a couple, straight people did. Mattias' parents, they saw Regina and Mattias as a couple, they didn't see me as an equally big part of this thing. That's what I felt you know, they didn't say it you know, but that's how I felt when we visited Mattias' parents.

- Eva, Swedish participant

In addition to instances whereby co-parents were not acknowledged by biological grandparents, co-parents' families of origin occasionally exhibited a certain ambivalence in 'claiming' their non-biological child as a grandchild, although this usually changed over time. As 'grandparents' got to know a child, a strong affection often developed on both sides:

There were tensions as I say around, at the beginning, with my family around whether they'd [children] be part of the family or not but that evaporated once they knew them if you see what I mean. It was all about, are they really blood relatives, which of course they're not.

- Deirdre, Irish participant and co-parent

While negotiating kinship with extended families presented challenges, it was overall viewed as a very positive aspect of participants' lives. The openness to

having many people involved in a child's life, may have contributed to relieving the burden of care among interviewees, who often had large resources of friends and family to help out in practical terms. The isolation and feeling of being overwhelmed associated with first-time motherhood or parenting small children was no doubt ameliorated as a result.

### **'It's My Child': Power and vulnerability in relationship break-ups**

The writing of a 'moral contract' was common practice between parties during pregnancy. Such contracts outlined the parents' (including fathers where appropriate) agreements about the sharing of custody, carework and the financial costs of raising a child and also indicated who they would like the guardian(s) to be in the event of the death of the biological mother. These signed documents technically have no legal standing but could theoretically be used as a statement of intent in the event of a break-up or the death of a biological parent. Should a biological parent die before a child reached adulthood, her extended family, or the donor, could fight for sole custody.<sup>95</sup> The practice of writing these contracts is an interesting example of the reflexive nature of egalitarian politics within these families. Parenting in the absence of legal recognition of one primary parent, meant that partners were forced to acknowledge not only the legal vulnerability of the co-parent in the event of bereavement, but also the possibility of breaking-up at some point in the future. All participants, when discussing these kinds of preparations were certain however, that they would not have embarked on this arrangement without complete trust that the biological parent would not attempt to use their legal status as sole parent against them.

In the following table numerical data concerning custody arrangements among participants after a relationship ended is presented:

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<sup>95</sup> This situation has since been ameliorated with the introduction of second parent adoption in Sweden in 2003. However, this option was not available to participants during fieldwork.

	Biological mother primary residential parent	Shared custody – 50/50	Co-parent primary carer	Total
Swedish	4	0	0	4
Irish	1	2	0	3
Total	5	2	0	7

**Table 7.2: Custody arrangements after the break-up of a relationship.**

Despite the common practice of writing a contract together during pregnancy, the legal vulnerability of co-parents was poignantly highlighted in these cases. The higher numbers of biological mothers retaining primary custody after separation does not reflect an unwillingness on the part of most co-parents to share custody more equitably. Rather, it illustrates the biological mother's decision-making power on this point. Nonetheless, participants on the whole reported being on good terms with their former partners, although for those who had more recently parted issues remained to be resolved. Numerous writers have documented how former lovers remain close friends and become part of 'chosen kin' networks in lesbian and gay communities (Weston, 1991; Weeks et al, 2001). Certainly, this appeared evident in several cases, where former partners continued to parent together and maintained an intimate friendship.

For example, Niamh and Evelyn, an Irish couple, not only decided to continue living together after their relationship ended, they went on to have another child. They continued to share financial resources and had recently bought a home together. The reason given for this arrangement was that even though their relationship as partners had ended, they wished to retain the same practical care and kinship arrangements. Evelyn described this when she said: "*We continue to function as a family, but we're not a couple*". Evelyn was the birth mother of their older child. Their second child was born to Niamh eighteen months after their relationship ended. The fact that they had considered the possibility of not staying together forever before having their first child, had been helpful in negotiating the ending of their relationship as partners and forging a new life together as parents:

Because you know you just don't end up sort of like a heterosexual couple where you're having a child and you sort of haven't thought about the possibility of what will happen if we don't stay together. So I suppose from that we had actually thought about it and we had sort of at least had a thought that you know, if we should, that should happen, where we have been ourselves, em, or what would we have wished for Cormac [son], you know, in the middle of that, if we did, if we did split up. And I suppose that in some ways was a guiding, it was a guiding point for us.

- Evelyn, Irish participant

Another participant, Malena, was a co-parent whose relationship with her former partner, Annika, ended when their daughter Karolina was two years old. Six years later, at the time of the interview, she regularly went on holiday with Annika, Karolina, the biological father and also Annika's current partner. In addition, Malena had another long-term relationship with a woman called Rakel after she broke up with Annika. When her relationship with Rakel ended, Karolina continued to see Rakel on a regular basis. Although she shared custody of Karolina and remained on good terms with Annika, her former partner, the separation had made Malena painfully aware of her vulnerability as a co-parent. In the months immediately following their break-up, Annika said several times during arguments 'It's my child'. Her legal status remained a source of concern even though she now felt reasonably secure that Annika would not exploit this:

In a way, I mean, it is, just to know that I don't have any rights, makes me kind of nervous sometimes, because I have to behave, otherwise Annika [former partner] could always say, okay I don't want you anymore, leave me and my child alone and I couldn't do anything and she could do it if she wants to, she has that power and that makes me afraid and nervous sometimes, I mean I don't think she would, but just knowing that she could is scary.

- Malena, Swedish participant and co-parent

Not all participants were equally clear about the role they would play in their children's lives after the breakdown of a relationship. This is at least partly attributable to changing discourses about lesbian parenting with LGBT communities over time. Agneta, a Swedish participant, had two children in a former relationship. These children were among the oldest in the study. Both she and her former partner were biological mothers and their children were aged two and four years old. After their separation, Agneta began to doubt for a time whether she wanted to play a full parental role in the life of her non-biological child, but this passed. Her former partner, Selma, never doubted her parental status regarding both their children.

Not from Selma [former partner], she has been very strong all the time but I think I had a period of my life when I was em not so sure, it wasn't like I didn't want her to be my daughter, but I wasn't so sure that our bond was so, was strong enough. I think I was a little bit confused. But now I think that, now it's no, she is my daughter.

- Agneta, Swedish participant

On the whole however, co-parents emphasised their unambivalent sense of commitment to their children and vulnerability because access and guardianship were not legally secure. Catherine, an Irish participant, felt that she had stayed in a relationship with the biological mother of her children long after it should have ended, because of her feelings of vulnerability as a co-parent, with no legal recognition. She needed to wait until the children were older and actively acknowledging her place in their life, before she felt comfortable leaving the relationship and security of a shared residential home. The children now stay with her half-time. When the children were infants, she was seriously ill for a time and during that period of her life, wondered whether her presence in their early life would have any meaning for the children if she died. A biological mother's life and death might be a source of curiosity and affect children's identity as adults, because of the way in which motherhood is continually signified as a central relationship. However, as a co-parent she felt at risk of being erased from the children's lives because of dying before they were old enough to remember her:

I think the thing is from the beginning, I would have been worried, especially when I was ill you know that I'd just die and they'd forget me anyway, that there wouldn't be the things there that would prop you up and support you in being mum and at the same time if we'd have split up when they were any younger you know, would that have been, would it all have been maintained. It wasn't till the actual children, I was sure of the children's own response, their own, assured in their love or whatever, that then that made me very different yeah, the choice you know, that you do have the choice of whether or not I am their mother in a way. They don't have that choice with Jean [former partner], but they do have that choice with me and so it makes it even more powerful if they do choose that.

- Catherine, Irish participant and co-parent

In this above extract, Catherine constructs the biological tie as unquestioned and therefore powerful, whereas the co-parent's status is characterised by choice. However, biological mothers were also vulnerable in terms of non-recognition of co-parents', in that they could not assume that their former partners would continue to reliably fulfil parental responsibilities, for example financial

contributions, in the event of a separation. Thus, power was not simply unidirectional and exerted by the biological mother 'over' the co-parent. Veronika, a Swedish participant and biological mother, had recently split up from her co-parenting partner, soon after the birth of their son. They were still coming to terms with their separation and trying to work out what role her former partner, Ingeborg, would play in the child's life. Veronika felt disappointed by the reduced role that her former partner has played in her son's life since their break up. Ingeborg visits once or twice a week to spend time with him, but does not contribute financially – she is on a very low income and therefore says that she simply cannot afford to pay any maintenance at this time. So Veronika and the father share the costs. Ingeborg's parents however see themselves very much as grandparents and visit at least once a fortnight:

I've asked her [Ingeborg] how it's gonna be and I've said that you are going to lose the contact with him, I think so, but then she gets very angry and says no I'm not, so let's just wait and see. It's hard to know what she is going to be to him. Before she was his parent, that was, I thought so, but now I don't know. It's really confusing.

– Veronika, Swedish participant and biological mother

Participants' narratives concerning the experience of separation and negotiating custody emphasise issues of inequality and vulnerability. Although complete trust may be a feature of relationships, the realities of separation are a stark reminder of the power difference between co-parents and their former partners. Power does not reside solely with biological mothers however, who upon separation must also depend on co-parents to fulfil their obligations in the absence of a legal framework that requires them to do so. Nonetheless, after a relationship ends, co-parents are dependent on their former partner's goodwill to ensure regular contact with their children. Unlike biological mothers, a co-parent's place in a child's life is not continuously validated in society and is therefore more vulnerable to displacement.

## Conclusion

The salience of biology to lesbian parenting discourses illustrates its continued importance to contemporary notions of kinship, even in contexts where the symbolic value of biology to concepts of relatedness is also undermined. Biology therefore becomes a signifier of a power imbalance between partners in parenting couple arrangements. However, the relative unimportance often ascribed to consanguinity in lesbian parenting desires, means that this power imbalance may be externally imposed (by researchers for example), rather than a necessary function of couple relationships where one partner is the biological mother. The potential undermining of the parental status of co-parents as a result of her non-legal status often fails to invalidate their relationships in the everyday practices of lesbian parents and their children. Power is certainly a feature of lesbian parenting narratives, but it does not necessarily take the form of tension and conflict with regard to biology in couple relationships that might be expected.

The appropriation of biology as a signifier of relatedness by lesbian parents suggests that 'substance' and 'code', or biology and the social regulation of kinship, are not simply distinctive arenas, but rather are made meaningful in relation to one another. The discrete and singular categorisation of biology and the law is challenged in a context where both elements may be discursively constructed in myriad ways. Contradictions and diversity in lesbian parent narratives suggest that biology, parenting and the law are concepts that may be invested with diverse meanings and mutually constituted in the complex terrain of cultures of relatedness. However, while lesbian parents may often reinvent and resist heteronormative concepts of kinship, alternative discourses regarding biology and relatedness are not exclusive to lesbian families. The concomitant changes in family patterns among heterosexual parents, for example the growth in step-families, are reflective of challenges to the centrality of biology in families across the spectrum of society. In addition, it is clear from the interview narratives that lesbian parents may also appropriate conventional discourses.

It will be interesting to see if the laws conferring potential legal recognition of co-parents in Sweden influence lesbian parenting discourses. Will second-parent

adoption make any difference to the enactment of these relationships? While legal recognition is clearly both of political importance and a practical necessity for co-parents and their children, this research suggests that families are as much what they 'do', as what they are defined to be. The meanings attributed to motherhood are diverse and contested. There is no one universal mothering identity, although there are hegemonic discourses which can be acquired or repudiated. In negotiating the social regulation of kinship and the biological 'tie', lesbian parents highlight the socially constructed nature of these categorisations. The dynamics of sameness/difference with regard to lesbian parent practices and experiences will be explored further in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Challenging Heteronormativity: Gender flexibility and lesbian parenting**

As noted in Chapter Two, previous research on non-heterosexual families has largely focused on the children of lesbian and gay parents. The majority of this research has been used to refute homophobic myths about lesbian and gay parenting. Typically, these studies have concluded that there is little or no difference between the children raised in LGBT-headed families and children raised by heterosexuals. This research has been used effectively to counteract homophobic myths about these families and has been politically strategic. For example, it has been utilised in custody cases where an LGBT parent has been at risk of losing custody or access due to homophobic assumptions about their children's well-being. However, more recently researchers have been critical of the impulse in research to 'prove' that LGBT parents are 'just like' heterosexual parents. Firstly, it has been argued that this 'assimilative' research emerges (albeit understandably) from a highly defensive position that ultimately endorses heteronormative ideals by implicitly taking a particular version of heterosexual parenting as the normative standard against which all families should be judged. Secondly, this approach serves to deny positive differences that may exist between LGBT and other families. More recently, some authors have focused on such positive differences in the form of a 'transformative' model of lesbian parenting. However, this perspective has also been criticised for neglecting diversity in research samples. Another methodological criticism of both perspectives is that they draw on a positivist tradition in which gender and sexuality are treated as external variables that exist beyond discourse. Finally, I would argue that research in this area rarely addresses the role of the state in mediating lesbian women's possibilities for the equitable division of labour. In this chapter, I will examine these sameness/difference debates and problematise both assimilative and transformative models of lesbian parenting. These issues will be explored with reference to empirical material on the gendered division of labour and the pedagogical practices of gender in lesbian households.

## The Assimilative Model of Lesbian Parenting

There is a long history of discrimination by the legal system against lesbian (and gay) parents. Typically, lesbians (and gay men) who came out after having children in the context of heterosexual relationships could expect to lose custody if challenged by their former heterosexual partner. Although the judicial system has improved enormously in this respect, it still remains a factor for many LGBT parents.<sup>96</sup> The concern expressed by many Irish participants regarding their potential vulnerability in a custody battle was outlined in Chapter Five.

In this context, the substantial body of research indicating that the development trajectory of children with LGBT parents is the same as children raised by heterosexuals has played an important role. Studies comparing children raised by lesbian and heterosexual mothers repeatedly find little or no distinction in the child's gender identity, sex role socialisation, or personal sexual orientation (see for example Golombok et al. 1983; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). This research has repeatedly emphasised similarities between LGBT families and heterosexual families, and in some cases the superior performance of lesbian parents in terms of parenting, social support and family members' psychological adjustment. In Patterson's (1992) comprehensive review of outcome studies, she reported that children of lesbians rated comparably to children of heterosexual mothers on all measures of psychological adjustment, including separation-individuation, emotional stability, moral judgment, object relations, gender identity, and sex-role behaviour. The Swedish SOU commission report (2001: 10) also concluded that a lesbian or gay identity does not affect a parent's ability to provide children with a nurturing and caring upbringing.

There have been numerous methodological criticisms of many of these studies. Some of the research is based on psychological tests that are highly problematic in terms of their cultural and androcentric biases. Many studies have largely focused on children born into a heterosexual arrangement, which some have

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<sup>96</sup> This is illustrated by the notorious case of Sharon Bottoms in the US. Sharon Bottoms' mother sued for custody of her grandson when her daughter came out as a lesbian. The courts concluded that living in a lesbian household was harmful to the child and awarded full custody to the maternal grandmother with restricted visitation rights by the mother in 1995.

argued prevents the research findings from being generalised onto children born to openly lesbian and gay parents. There are also difficulties in finding research participants and researchers often recruit through LGBT organisations and publications and snowballing. Homophobic critics and other 'sceptics' have pointed to the selection process in their attempts to undermine the research findings. For example, in response to the Swedish SOU commission report (2001: 10), the National Board of Health and Welfare in Sweden criticised the selection of research studies and the methods applied in them. The individuals surveyed in these studies had not been chosen at random. The committee that examined the issue on the government's behalf had sought contact with 'homosexuals' via advertisements and with the help of gay associations. The Board therefore claimed that there was a risk that the committee report presented an overly-favourable picture of the situation (Froman, 2003).

Although they are supportive of lesbian and gay parenting, Stacey & Biblarz (2001) are also critical of the prevailing trends in research in this area, partly on methodological grounds. They argue that heterosexism has hampered the progress of research on lesbian and gay parent families. They suggest that there may in fact be many positive differences between these and other families but that researchers have been afraid to acknowledge difference due to the prevailing homophobic social climate and that this is the reason for the proliferation of studies emphasising these children's similarity to their peers raised in heterosexual families. They point to findings indicating difference among lesbian parents' children that have been downplayed in research, such as departure from gender-based norms in adolescent sexual behaviour (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). It is their view, based on an assessment of the literature, that '*the sexual orientation of mothers interacts with the gender of children in complex ways to influence gender preferences and behaviour*' (p. 170). They further argue that researchers are reluctant to theorise such findings. Interestingly, both positions - the homophobic/sceptic approach and the sympathetic 'rigorous' approach - rest on a positivist view of knowledge production and treat gender and sexuality as variables that are 'acquired' by children independently of discourse, rather than as sets of complex ideas and discourses in a post-structuralist sense (Hicks, 2003).

So how is difference theorised in research on lesbian families? Clarke (2002) argues that there are four dimensions of difference that inform research and theorising on lesbian parenting. These perspectives construct lesbian parenting as: (i) no different from heterosexual parenting; (ii) different from heterosexual parenting and deviant; (iii) different from heterosexual parenting and transformative; and (iv) different from heterosexual parenting only because of oppression. The second category is exemplified by a recent publication from The Christian Institute in the UK (Morgan, 2002), which argues that having lesbian or gay parents is detrimental to children's well-being. The poster campaign accompanying the publication asked 'If you died, who would they give your children to?' and was accompanied by a photograph of a gay couple, Barry Drewitt and Tony Barlow, who conceived twins via surrogacy in the US in 1999. The publication coincided with UK government discussion regarding the revision of adoption laws to include same sex couples. This publication was soundly critiqued by Hicks (2002; 2003), whose edited volume (1998) containing personal accounts of lesbian and gay fostering and adoption was used by Morgan to substantiate some of her claims. Similar publications have been critiqued in academic circles for their anti-lesbian discourse and lack of academic rigour (e.g. Herek, 1988).

The fourth category outlined by Clarke (2002), which constructs lesbian and gay parenting as different from heterosexual parenting only because of oppression, argues that lesbian parents' difference is not chosen; rather it is socially imposed through oppression. According to Stacey (1996), the only difference between the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents derives 'directly from legal discrimination and social prejudice' (p. 135). However, this means that ultimately lesbian and heterosexual families are the same. These two categories are important in that they are illustrative of the widespread prejudice against these families, albeit in different ways. The 'different and deviant' approach itself constitutes a form of homophobic aggression against lesbian and gay families. The fourth model refers to the existence of discrimination. Nonetheless, the vast majority of academic research in this area falls into the first category of Clarke's typologies, supporting the claim that these children are no different from the children of heterosexuals.

This latter research has played a vital role in challenging commonplace homophobic assumptions about these families. The production of publications such as Morgan's (2001) by researchers associated with organisations that are ideologically opposed to LGBT parenting and that are produced at politically sensitive times, is indicative of the widespread prejudice that remains. It also illustrates the need for rigorous, informed research that can effectively counter homophobic myths and arguments with regard to LGBT parenting. Some of the authors of these studies have themselves called for new forms of research about LGBT parenting (e.g. Patterson, 1992; Kitzinger & Coyle, 1995) that go beyond assessing the well-being of children in these families.

What I have termed the 'assimilative' perspective, where the super normative performance of LGBT parents is emphasised, is clearly politically expedient. But it may also reinforce an acceptance of the ideal (hetero)norm against which all families must be measured, in terms of family practices and configurations. Queer theorists have placed considerable emphasis on the importance of subversion of heteronormative ideals. The idea that LGBT families are no different from any other family could therefore be interpreted as a failure, by conforming to heteronormative standards. Early lesbian feminist work critiqued the role of motherhood as a source of women's oppression (Firestone, 1971; Rich; 1976). More recently, feminist writers have begun to acknowledge and explore the complexity of women's experiences of motherhood, in both its positive and negative aspects.

However, lesbians who choose parenthood face a new form of criticism from within the LGBT community – they may be viewed as conforming to prevalent notions regarding the importance of biological kin and children to what constitutes a 'real' family (Warner, 1994; 1999). Weston's (1991) work in a US context suggested that lesbian and gay kinship is characterised by configurations where biological ties are decentered and choice, or love, becomes the defining feature of kin relationships. In a British context, Weeks et al. (2002), argue that LGB people's kinship networks are increasingly characterised by an emphasis on choice, with friendship forming the basis of long-lasting relationships. Similarly,

the existence of non-biological co-parents challenges biological ties as the basis for parenthood. Arguments for the distinctiveness of a lesbian and gay kinship system often privilege non-biological ties as the more radical queer alternative. While recognising that transitions to adulthood in Western societies are intricately bound up with a parenting role, in a context where LGBT parents are largely unsupported, lesbians who become parents are hardly conformist. Malone and Cleary (2002) suggest that this emphasis on 'families we choose' in recent postmodern literature may also be a reflection of 'America's obsession with individual voluntarism' (p. 280). Gabb (2002), who interviewed lesbian parents in the Yorkshire region of the UK, found that most of her respondents relied on biological kin and extended family support, as opposed to the 'friends as kin' model reported in other studies. This is an area that requires further exploration in research. Certainly, participants in my study often reported improved familial relationships upon becoming a parent, with children often acting as a 'bridge' between participants and their families of origin. This did not however mean that their biological kin were the only important participants in their family lives. One respondent for example referred to her son's many 'lesbian aunties'. Gabb suggests a move towards a notion of 'family as friends', rather than construct 'families we choose', as the more 'radical' kinship notion. The two concepts are not diametrically opposed; rather together they suggest the complexity of contemporary kinship networks.

Another critique of the prevailing research focus in this area is that it ignores the role of sexuality in these families, effectively de-sexing the queer, who becomes a 'safe', asexual parent (Warner, 1999). This perspective rests on a socially constructed binary between kinship and desire. According to this binary, 'kinship' (particularly state-recognised forms) is associated with heteronormativity and lesbian parents with children represent the social realisation of these values, whereas the radical queer resists all attempts at 'normalisation'. This is also often implicit in arguments made by queer activists opposed to lesbian and gay marriage for example. This dichotomy therefore renders lesbian desire within the family invisible and provides a prescriptive understanding of what constitutes resistance. As Malone & Cleary (2002) point out, previous research on lesbian and gay parenting that emphasises similarity

between these families and heterosexual ones, does so ‘*in a manner that promotes an erasure of the internal difference within the family and by neutering the parents*’ (p. 283, bold added). Certainly the obsession with the effects of lesbian and gay people’s sexuality on their ability to function as parents, invokes the spectre of the queer ‘Other’, whose ‘dangerous’ sexuality may damage the child. In particular, the conflation of a gay male identity with paedophilia in homophobic rhetoric is one illustration of this. It may be the case that lesbians are perhaps marginally more acceptable as parents than gay men due to the traditional relegation of women to the private sphere and the essentialist construction of womanhood as caring nurturing femininity. The denial of internal difference within the family fails to address the potential power differential between biological mothers and co-parents in lesbian-headed families, where only biological kin relationships are recognised by the state.

Sedgewick (1994) suggests that the contemporary lesbian and gay movement has theorised gender and sexuality ‘*as distinct though intimately entangled axes of analysis*’ (p. 72). To some extent, this has been a necessary strategy, exemplified through the assertion that a lesbian, *as a woman*, desires another woman; that a gay man desires another man *as a man*. This assertion has been important in the context of a history which collapses gender and sexuality as categories, suggesting that anyone who desires a man must therefore be feminine and anyone who desires a woman must therefore be masculine. Yet as she points out, recent strands of contemporary psychoanalysis that pathologise an atypical gender identification do so by distinguishing between gender and sexuality in much the same way as lesbian and gay movements have. She argues that one problem with this way of distinguishing between gender and sexuality is that while it deconstructs the necessary association between gender and sexual object-choice, it renaturalises gender. However necessary this assertion has been to challenge the idea that gender and sexual preference are indistinguishable, Sedgewick (1994) suggests that this strategy may for example leave the effeminate boy as the haunting abject – ‘*this time as the haunting abject of gay thought itself*’ (p. 72). This is because it reinforces a normative notion of gender as a particular masculine or feminine performance correlating to a particular sexed body. So for example an ‘acceptable’ gay man may be attracted to men,

but remains a ‘masculine’ man. I would argue that butch/femme couples are often implicitly stigmatised in the assimilative discourse on lesbian parenting in much the same way that the effeminate boy becomes the ‘abject other’, as Sedgewick suggests. Taking a Butlerian approach to gender, whereby gender is not inscribed upon a prior sexed body, rather the sexed body is itself discursively constituted via ‘acts of repetition’, enables a consideration of gender discourses among lesbian parents that does not renaturalise gender.

While the assimilative approach has in many ways proved useful politically, it is also problematic. In addition to the reinforcement of the hegemony of heteronormative family ideals that it often provides, it relies on an erasure of sexuality within the family. This is not to deny that there may be overwhelming similarities between lesbian and heterosexual parent families. My intention is rather to problematise the recourse to normative performance as a discursive resource. The assimilative approach in research also downplays the possibility of these families engaging in challenges to heteronormativity that may be realised in unconventional discourses and practices. The next section explores this point further in relation to perspectives emphasising the transformative potential of lesbian parenting.

### **The Transformative Model of Lesbian Parenting**

In contrast to the assimilative approach, a new model of lesbian parenting – the transformative model - has recently emerged. Research falling into this category suggests that not only is a lesbian identity compatible with effective parenting, but that lesbian and gay couples may be more likely to engage in family practices characterised by equality (Dunne, 1998a; Heaphy et al., 1999); that in this way LGBT parents can be positive role models for all parents (Dunne, 1998a; 1998b); and that queer families challenge kinship systems based on biological ties (Weston, 1991; Weeks et al., 2002).

Dunne’s (1998a) work is perhaps the most well-known example of this kind of research. In a study of lesbian couples with children, she found that childcare and housework was shared equally among partners and that they found new

alternatives for achieving this. Couples in her study chose to work part-time hours so that they could contribute equally to domestic responsibilities, rather than relying on a breadwinner/caregiver or dual-earner model. Numerous other studies have documented findings similar to Dunne's regarding egalitarian practices among lesbian couples (e.g. Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Kurdek, 1993). However, Dunne's research departs from the body of work examining the egalitarian division of labour among lesbian parents in two ways. Firstly, the methodology deployed in her study is particularly appropriate for addressing the research question – Dunne used time-diary studies, as opposed to interviews. Clearly time diary studies are a more accurate method of ascertaining 'who does what' in a particular household. The second departure of her study in the literature is her theoretical interpretation of her findings. She argued that her results indicated that lesbian couples were less confined by traditional gender divisions in relationships and that this facilitated a particular creativity that could lead to more egalitarian family practices.

Some authors have expressed doubts about generalisations concerning the challenges to heteronormativity posed by lesbian and gay parents. Hicks (2003: 26) for example states: *"Whilst any challenge to the heteronormative and heterosexist order is to be welcomed, the idea that all gay parents represent this and that their children acquire it is rather utopian"*. Lewin (2001) has also been critical of the notion that lesbian and gay families are particularly 'queer'. She suggests that this illustrates the pointlessness of essentialised identities: *"The impulses that move lesbians and gay men toward benign domesticity also animate their psychic lives, and these are no different from those that shape the emotions of nongay people[...]In the end, lesbian and gay love, family life and domesticity are so dull that they barely fit the label 'queer'. This very dullness is worthy of note, for it finally makes all essentialised identities the nonsensical creations of bigots"* (2001: 661). This perspective is interesting in that it could perhaps challenge the idea that the sameness approach is purely assimilative – for Lewin, this standpoint undermines the homophobic view that there are essentialist differences between lesbian and gay families and other family forms. Nonetheless, it ignores the alternative possibilities of lesbian parenting and the literature addressing this. I disagree with her assertion that lesbian and gay

motivations to parenting and domestic life are no different to those of heterosexuals – this may be the case, but it has not been ascertained. It appears that the pressures that heterosexual women face, particularly those in long-term relationships, to have children are not experienced in the same way by lesbian women, who are struggling for social support for their parenting, rather than against social pressure to become parents. Participants in my research often referred to the assumption on the part of family and friends that they would never become a mother after their coming out. Clearly, social expectations for heterosexual and lesbian women regarding becoming a parent are different.

Another potential problem with a normative model of lesbian parenting based on the transformative model, is that it may place even more pressure on LGBT people to be 'outstanding' parents. As a group that is already under scrutiny, they must be not only 'as good as' heterosexual parents, but even more 'perfect'. Similar to the assimilative perspective, this approach takes heterosexual families as the norm, thus implicitly reinforcing heteronormative hegemony. While not as blatant as a homophobic approach which construes LGBT families as inherently deficient compared to straight ones, there is nonetheless a potential for a more subtle heterosexist bias in research which promotes an upbeat view of lesbian families as ones that display their own unique strengths. It places these families under considerable pressure to live up to a particular ideal in order to justify their existence, rather than directly challenge the homophobic assumptions that suggest they are inadequate parents in the first place. Participants in my research referred to the scrutiny that they experience as lesbian parents – they are subjected to extra surveillance because society doubts their ability to parent effectively:

**S:** [...] being a lesbian parent, it also put some kind of higher pressure on the parenthood, because you really have to be a good parent when you are a lesbian parent, you have in a way to show them that we are really good parents, nobody tells us but it's something in our minds, we know that we, we have the eyes on us

**H:** All the time

**S:** people at the preschool, doctors and nurses, they have an extra eye for us. Are they really, and what about the girl, is she alright, you know? And it's something that they never say it, but we can feel that we have eyes on us and have to be good parents

- Sara & Helena, Swedish participants

It is important to note that the transformative model of lesbian parenting is based on an egalitarian politics, as opposed to a conservative heteronormative model that delineates gendered divisions of labour or gender performativity along traditional lines. In this way, the transformative model renders heteronormativity visible by problematising gendered power dynamics. As the quote from Sara and Helena above suggests, many lesbian parents are aware of the 'extra eye' upon them. It appears that any non-normative parent, including lesbian parents, have to be not only as good as, but even better than heterosexual parents. One problem with utilising the transformative model as a political strategy is that if lesbian parenting only becomes acceptable on the basis of conforming to a particular egalitarian ideal, a double standard which takes heterosexual parenting as a 'right', in contrast to which lesbian parenting must be continually justified, remains.

In addition, a transformative-normative model can serve to silence the complexity of lesbian women's experiences of power and difference in relationships. As Malone & Cleary (2002: 274) point out, '*The ideal of equality masks issues of power and difference and seems to participate in dispossessing lesbians of any taint of untoward sexuality (any pleasure and danger that might invade the happy home)*'.<sup>97</sup> This relates to the point made earlier about the desexualising or 'neutering' of lesbian parents. Butch/femme couples for example may become Otherised - either explicitly or implicitly - within this particular approach for engaging in a division of labour based on traditional heterosexual norms. Nestle (1992) and Munt (1998) have pointed out that butch/femme identities undermine the rigid distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In addition, butch lesbians performing masculinity and femme lesbians performing femininity challenge the notion that a particular gender relates to a specific sexed body and 'opposite' sex desire. I would further argue that butch women who may act as masculine 'role models' for example can challenge conventional gender discourses in new ways. It is also important to note that butch/femme is a diverse category, incorporating a wide variety of

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<sup>97</sup> Issues of power and difference within lesbian couples regarding biological parenthood, were explored in the previous chapter.

behaviours and practices. A couple who identify as butch/femme do not necessarily engage in an unequal division of labour. While often implicitly construed as retrogressive ‘unacceptable’ lesbians by research favouring the transformative model on the one hand, butch/femme couples are also liable to be derided as the apotheosis of the heteronormative system and as proof that lesbians do not follow ‘more equal’ trajectories in their personal relationships than heterosexuals. However, butch/femme may potentially subvert heteronormative discourses in complex ways.

Gabb (2002) raises some provocative questions regarding what she perceives to be prevailing trends in contemporary research on lesbian parent families. In contrast to previous studies whose research findings illustrated the egalitarian nature of lesbian parent families, she found quite different results in her research on lesbian families living in the Yorkshire region of the UK. Interestingly, childcare and housework were not shared equally among the lesbian couples in her study and biological mothers often “*jealously guarded ‘special time’ such as child(ren)’s bedtime routines, seeing them as ‘quality time’ which they did not want to relinquish*” (p. 3). Clearly this is related to her research sample, which consists almost entirely of lesbian stepfamilies. Claims regarding the egalitarianism of lesbian stepfamilies in comparison to heterosexual stepfamilies have not been made in the transformative model literature. The egalitarian model claims based on previous research that she refers to predominantly originate from studies of families with children that are conceived in the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle. There were only three AI families in her study, with most children conceived in previous heterosexual relationships. Nonetheless, her research does raise an important point – that a lesbian identity does not necessarily guarantee equality in a relationship. I would argue that this point undermines essentialist accounts of lesbian experience – not all lesbian relationships are characterised by equality, any more than all heterosexual relationships are characterised by inequality. But this does not in my view invalidate the interesting insights regarding gender and sexuality that have been raised by Dunne (1998a) and Oerton (1998). Indeed, in her work Gabb does not attempt to undermine research findings in previous studies, but rather to argue for greater diversity in sampling frames.

Oerton (1998: 79) argues that “*virtually no woman escapes the processes and practices which constitute women (even lesbians) as having a gendered relationship to family and household work*”. Taking the role of the housewife as a starting point, she argues that although analyses often assume that lesbians cannot be housewives, due to the absence of a male head of household, this approach is limited in that it ignores or disguises the caring and household work done by lesbians for family and kin. She suggests that lesbians, like heterosexual women, do work for their families and in their homes, and must be analysed as gendered subjects, rather than non-heterosexuals. The assumption that lesbians can be analytic subjects only in terms of their sexuality, obscures the ways in which sexuality and gender are interrelated. I would further argue that to ignore the significance of gender to lesbian experience is to render a construction of lesbians as Other, by reinforcing the notion that the category of woman is inherently heterosexual. This theorising of the interaction between sexuality and gender is an important development. The debate has shifted from the effect of gender on sexualities, to the influence of alternative sexual identities on constructions of gender. When applied to the area of lesbian and gay parenting, this theoretical shift transforms the kinds of research questions formulated about queer families.

The ways in which lesbian couples negotiate parenthood may be quite distinct from many heterosexual couples. Unlike many heterosexual parents, lesbians who choose motherhood are raising children in the context of relationships where dichotomous gendered parenting scripts are potentially reconfigured, if not absent. As the current wave of lesbian parents building families are a pioneering generation, they may be less constrained by normative ideologies. The construction of new family forms reflects the interaction between wider societal scripts and the creative potential of pioneering families. Malone & Cleary (2003: 274) suggest that “*Isn't queering really the moment when a norm is not exactly repudiated, but rather subverted – if not ironically (as in Butler), then through being realised slightly askew? If so, this would mean that we take up gender and sexualities with lesbian families differently*”. In the following sections, I will argue that the participants in this research both subvert and, occasionally, (re)produce heteronormative discourses in complex ways. Rather than ‘slightly

askew' realisations and articulations of gender, instances of reinventions of gender dynamics are noted, in ways that could be either transformative or heteronormative, or both, but where gender relations are always contested.

### **The Division of Labour in Lesbian Households**

The idea that same-gender couples are more likely to share housework equally has been around for some time. Research on lesbian couples has shown that they tend to divide household labour on an equal basis (e.g. Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Kurdek, 1993). Most of these studies have focused on lesbian couples without children. Studies of heterosexual couples with children have often found that the transition to parenthood is typically associated with a movement towards increasing specialisation of roles (e.g. Gregson & Lowe, 1994; Sullivan, 2000; Sundström & Duvander, 2002). In a study of 26 lesbian couples' division of labour, Patterson (1995a) found that although couples shared housework and decision-making tasks equally, some biological mothers reported greater involvement in childcare and correspondingly co-parents reported spending longer hours in paid employment. The families where couples participated equally in childcare and paid labour reported greater levels of satisfaction with the division of labour. The author concluded that even under the pressure of child-rearing responsibilities, lesbian couples seemed to maintain relatively egalitarian division of household responsibilities in a number of areas. In this way, lesbian couples with children resembled lesbian couples without children.

Several studies have found that both biological and nonbiological lesbian mothers were more involved in childcare than heterosexual fathers (e.g. Chan et al., 1998). Tasker and Golombok (1998), studied the role of co-parents in children's lives by comparing the role of co-mothers in fifteen British lesbian mother families with the role of resident father in two different groups of heterosexual families (forty-three families where the study-child was conceived through donor insemination, and forty-one families where the child had been conceived 'naturally'). Their results indicated that co-parents played a more active role in daily caretaking than did most fathers.

Most Swedish and Irish participants described an equal division of labour in their relationships. It is interesting to note that an egalitarian division of labour did not necessarily imply that both partners performed the same tasks equally. While participants referred to equal divisions of labour, they often expressed a preference for particular tasks. However, these preferences did not usually fall along traditional gendered lines (as in many heterosexual relationships or perhaps butch/femme dichotomies). For example, one partner might prefer ironing, while the other enjoyed cooking. Both are stereotypically ‘women’s labour’ with the same (lack of) value attributed to them in society. But rather than share household tasks along a rigid distribution of equal participation in all work, participants were capable in all areas and chose their preferences in ways that were not based on gender dichotomies. Sullivan (1996) found a similar pattern of flexible division of labour based on preference among 34 lesbian couples, where equitable practices among couples was the norm. However, there were a minority of couples in her study (n=5) who divided labour along a primary breadwinner/primary caregiver model. She concluded that the experience of this minority of couples highlighted the powerful negative effect of economic dependency on women who are full-time caregivers. The division of labour among these couples was linked to the relative earning power of the women and complex factors such as one woman in the couple being more highly motivated to become a parent than her partner.

Most Swedish and Irish participants in this research described their division of labour in egalitarian terms. Katarina, a Swedish participant, stated: “*We share the housework very equally...we try to do as little as possible, both of us!*” She later qualified this statement by explaining that both she and her partner had an aversion to work that was stereotypically female and resisted expectations that they should conform to social expectations regarding housework. She attributed this in part to her experience of living in a lesbian lifestyle, which she felt had made her aware of traditional gender roles in relationships:

**I think both of us have a kind of problem with ordinary housework, like we both feel uncomfortable to do this ordinary female work, neither feels comfortable to be the housekeeper. [...] I don't have to play this female role [with partner]. But sometimes I miss it**

too [...] it's a role that you are growing up with, that you know that you are nice, cute, that people like when you play the role so you get attention when you play it. I think I have found it very positive about being aware of those different roles and that I have learned a lot that other people don't seem to think about.

- Katarina, Swedish participant

Although the majority of Swedish and Irish participants followed an egalitarian pattern of preference-based division of labour, there were exceptions (n=4). An interesting example, are Julie and Deirdre, an Irish couple who had three children, including one foster child. Their current division of labour followed a more traditional full-time breadwinner/part-time caregiver model. This is particularly striking as both women had been involved in radical feminist activism and expressed a strong awareness of gender inequalities. At the time of the interview, Julie performed more of the everyday household work, while Deirdre referred to herself jokingly as more of a '*sugar mommy*', in that she was the main breadwinner, worked much longer hours in paid employment and performed fewer of the day to day chores. They described their current arrangement as similar to a '*modern-day heterosexual situation*' and Julie said of Deirdre that '*she does more than my father ever did*'.

Their division of labour had changed more than once during the course of their relationship. For example, Deirdre did the majority of carework required for their foster child, Mary, who came to live with them as an adolescent. Mary was extremely disturbed when she moved into their home and required an enormous amount of care and attention. They also had two infant children at the time and decided that Julie (the birth mother) would be their main caregiver, while Deirdre concentrated more on Mary's needs. So for some years, while they focused on different areas, they both made significant contributions to the emotional and practical demands of raising their three children. Since Mary had moved out as an adult however, Julie had begun to work part-time and had more household responsibilities, while Deirdre moved into an area that was very lucrative and required full-time or almost full-time hours. This imbalance was something that they were aware of and actively negotiated. While on the one hand, Julie was sometimes upset because Deirdre did less cooking than she did, she also felt that Deirdre behaved unconventionally in a gendered sense by being less restricted to

feminine norms regarding responsibilities for housework and Julie respected this in a woman. This is obviously contradictory, in that Deirdre's ability to avoid cooking and cleaning were premised on relying either on Julie to do it or on eating out, or by hiring a cleaner. They were both adamant that they would not tolerate this behaviour in a man, but that in general they were satisfied with the division of labour in their relationship:

D: We have gone up and down, we have changed around our roles at different times like when Mary was here I did most of the caring for her and Julie didn't but then you did have the other kids certainly [...]. It does feel easy, it does feel like we choose what we do.

J: [who has been murmuring agreement throughout] Definitely. And we talk about it as well I think, I mean that's I suppose like you say because the option's there we've always talked about it. So for example Deirdre O'Connell will not clean, she will not clean, that's it. I was led into this very early on in my life, really.

D: I'll pay cleaners, I don't mind paying cleaners.

J: She'll gladly pay a cleaner which, there have been times in our lives when we've had cleaners. I hate having cleaners. I hate cleaning yeah, but I hate having cleaners more. I would rather do all the cleaning than have to be subjected to a stranger coming into my house and cleaning up my shit

D: Whereas I don't have any problem with this

J: And my having to run round knowing that she's going to come in at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, having to spend the evening before running around and tidying and cleaning the house before she does it.

D: I don't have a problem with that either! [laughs]

J: [...] She [Deirdre] really, she doesn't cook except when she wants to cook, when she feels like cooking, when she fancies cooking, which is usually on a weekend. So often during the weekend, Deirdre will cook up a big slap up meal and it's lovely, but she won't cook when she doesn't want to cook. And I think I respect, I like that, I love that, I think that's powerful in a woman, I think that's absolutely wonderful, great, why not, you know to have that choice and to make the choice, that's wonderful. So I get pissed off with it as well, I get pissed off with always having to be the one who does the cooking, to think, maybe think what are we going to have for dinner kind of thing but because it's Deirdre and because she's a woman I'm quite happy to facilitate it. I would not facilitate that in a man.

D: Oh Jesus neither would I.

J: No way!

D: I'd have the man chained to that sink! [laughter]

J: So yes in that way it is, it's very different, it's very different. I wouldn't support a man in that at all.

- Julie and Deirdre, Irish participants

In one way, Deirdre is privileged by her gender in her relationship because her partner as a feminist views her behaviour as non-conforming to gendered social conventions, while at the same time they both believe that Deirdre does more than most men in terms of domestic labour. This example is interesting in that the division of labour is problematised and discussed in relation to equality, but nonetheless played out in a way that could be interpreted as oppressive. However, it would be a mistake to simplistically construe Julie as a passive victim, or Deirdre as a casual exploiter, although the quote above does perhaps suggest a certain defensiveness on her part: '*you did have the other kids then certainly*'. Their experience is also premised on subtle challenges to gender norms and clearly in terms of Deirdre's work with their foster daughter, not always along traditional demarcations of the gendered division of labour. Julie later referred to her children seeing her '*working under a car*' and engaging in traditionally male jobs around the house and although she did most of the housework at this time and her partner worked longer hours in paid employment, they both participated in activities, such as DIY work for example, that would traditionally be a male-gendered activity. In addition, their division of labour has changed over time, with the current arrangement being a more recent one. Nonetheless, this couple does not follow the equality model of most other couples in the study.

Another Irish couple - Ciara and Gillian - followed a breadwinner/caregiver model, but it was Ciara, the co-parent, who cared for their child full-time. So in contrast, to Patterson's (1995a) study where if there was an imbalance in the division of labour, it was the biological mother who participated more in childcare, with the co-parent working longer hours in paid employment, in this case, the co-parent was the primary caregiver. Gillian, the biological mother, found that she did not like staying at home full-time and returned to work a month after their child was born. Ciara was unhappy in her working life and had been considering a change for some time. She also had an independent income, as she owned a rental property. In addition, her family had provided much of the capital for the purchase of the house they lived in. So she continued to have an independent income despite no longer being in paid employment. This was a significant factor for her, as she felt that financial dependency was implicated in power relations. Although her partner was currently the main breadwinner, her

own financial contribution remained important. She enjoyed the time spent with their child and also the freedom it gave her to pursue other interests. This example is also illustrative of the fact that not all women have equal access to satisfying paid employment. For this particular participant, her job role required very long hours and an unsatisfactory worklife balance. Crèches in Ireland are very expensive and it was financially practical to stay at home with the child. Her career trajectory had reached a point where caregiving and pursuing other interests felt more personally fulfilling than continuing to work in an area that was no longer pleasurable. She intended to take up part-time employment when her daughter began school, but wanted to 'be there' when she returned home from school, as they had gone to great lengths to have a child and she wanted to enjoy as much time with her daughter as possible. However, she also referred to a model of motherhood whereby the ideal situation for a child is to have a caregiver who is at home at the same time as the child:

**C: And then we went to so much trouble to have her, it just seems crazy to boot her off to a crèche and then go back and I think you know [industry she previously worked in] just isn't the same anymore and I just don't enjoy it as much, so.**

**R: Are you planning on staying at home with her until she goes to school?**

**C: Em yeah I would put her into something social a couple of mornings a week or something and I'd like to do volunteer work or something like that but that would be, yeah, I would be here. Even when she goes to school or something, I would only take a job where I would be here when she comes home every evening at three o'clock. I think I was brought up in that.**

- Ciara, Irish participant, co-parent

In contrast, her partner Gillian felt that full-time caregiving was not for her and had no desire whatsoever to do so. They did however refer to discussions they had had regarding retraining for Ciara, which Gillian encouraged, but which Ciara expressed no interest in. In this case, their individual career paths and personal preferences around parenting as well as Ciara's financial independence led to the decision to share childcare in this way.

Ciara's depiction of a parent 'being there' when a child returns from school, is clearly an Irish discourse, referred to in numerous policy and media discussions. It may be true of many countries with a male breadwinner norm and contrasts

with the Swedish case, where female caregivers of school-age children are regarded as performing an antiquated mode of femininity (Elvin-Nowak, 1999). But her choice also raises the issue of state-provided childcare and the degree to which equality of care is supported or hindered by the state. For some Swedish participants, it was not possible to share parental leave when their children were born, as at that time it could only be divided between legally recognised parents. Nonetheless some managed to circumvent these regulations. For example, one couple owned a business jointly where they both worked and simply 'swapped places' halfway through parental leave without alerting the social authorities. Alternative strategies were also developed by Irish participants to enable equal participation in carework. For example, one Irish couple both chose to become full-time caregivers during their child's infancy, articulating their choice in similar terms to Ciara, above. Others chose to reduce their working hours, similar to participants in Dunne's (1998a) work. The parental leave rules in Sweden have since been changed, enabling registered partners to share it, apart from the compulsory leave (two months each) that must be taken by the biological mother and father. But this places pressure on lesbian parent couples to become registered partners, whereas Swedish heterosexual couples do not have to marry, or even live together in order to share parental leave equally.

Some Swedish participants who parented with involved fathers spoke of the benefits of this in terms of sharing childcare as this enabled them to have more time both for their relationship with their partner and for themselves:

I think it's perfect to have a known man [...] Because like if over the summer, they will go away with the fathers somewhere and you can do things that you cannot do with children. Because I think, I mean if you have a relationship and children, the relationship doesn't live by itself, you have to feed it with different things and if you don't, then it's, you can dump it because it's, it's like a flower, if you don't give it water it's going to die. And you have to have the time to do it

- Birgitta, Swedish participant

It's nice to have a third adult around sometimes because then the two of us [Lena and her partner] have time together.

- Lena, Swedish participant

One lone parent in the study shared custody equally with the father of her child, so their son spent half the week with each of them. This arrangement enabled her

to complete a university degree and although she referred to herself as a 'single mother', she differentiated between her situation and that of other solo mothers that she knew. Her own mother was also available to help:

I could ask him [the father] to take him two more evenings and it wasn't a problem, but they had no father to call, he was living in Stockholm or he didn't exist. They were having a tough time and I told them, they were having really a much tougher time than me. They said oh you're a single mother and no I'm not, not in the same way. Really I was really not spoiled, but it was like being without a child sometimes I could ask him to take him anytime or my mother could take him, if I needed to study more.

- Stina, Swedish participant

There were two instances of unequal sharing of childcare among the Swedish lesbian couple participants. One Swedish couple - Sofie and Beatrice - followed the breadwinner/caregiver model, in that Sofie the biological parent took all of the parental leave. However, this was because she was unemployed prior to the birth of their children and they felt that it was not economically viable to share parental leave. Beatrice had managed to create a flexible working pattern, which enabled her to spend more time at home during the day. They said that if they had both been in paid employment prior to the birth of their first child, they would have liked to share parental leave. In this case, Beatrice, who was in paid employment, felt that she had missed out on precious time with their children due to their economic situation. They suggested that their division of care was a result of economic necessity, rather than choice.

Another Swedish couple in the study, Elin and Ylva, had a traditional division of labour in the home, in that one person - the biological parent, Elin - was primarily responsible for day to day domestic chores that are usually gendered as feminine, while her partner did more of the work that routinely involved 'fixing things'. On the one hand, Elin referred to the division of labour as arising from personal preference, but then she also suggested that it follows a pattern which she is less than satisfied with:

E: I mean you do what you are best at, and that means that she never cooks, I do the cooking [laughs]. She is very good to fix things so she I mean, eh I mean I think every family has, in these discussions about who is doing the dishes or whatever it is, em I don't think we ever decide that you are doing that or you are doing that I mean it just, well we do what we are best at.

R: It's not a problem, you are comfortable with that?

E: Comfortable? No, maybe not. I mean I think we have the same problem that many heterosexuals do that if the woman stays at home, it's her to, it's em all the house things, the things that you do in the house, is more on the person that stays at home and then when I started to work, I would like it to be more equal but sometimes you just you know...

R: ....fall into a pattern?

E: Yeah.

R: And has that changed?

E: ....Eh not at first but now I think because now when I'm in school<sup>98</sup> I just have to have time on my own, yeah, it has changed a little bit maybe.

So for Elin and Ylva, the preference approach falls along traditional lines, or perhaps a stereotypical butch/femme model and is not characterised by equality. Yet Elin also suggested that it was important to counter sexist notions of women's capabilities:

E: It's also important to show that a woman can do everything a man can do [...] and I mean they [children] are very clear about the things that I'm good at and what Ylva is good at. If they wanted to have anything fixed or repaired, they don't [laughs], they don't go to me! [laughs]

- Elin, Swedish participant

These examples indicate the contested, rather than essentialist, nature of gender relations. While not all heterosexual couples have an unequal division of labour, not all lesbian couples follow an egalitarian model. Gendered subjectivities are unstable, rather than following predetermined patterns. However, the fact that most participants in the study did refer to democratic ways of sharing household responsibilities, suggests that the interaction of gender and sexuality in transformative ways is more representative of lesbian households, at least in this study, in the way that Dunne (1998a; 1998b) suggests. Nonetheless, researchers need to acknowledge the diversity of lesbian parenting and address dissonant cases that do not fall into the categories generally assumed to be characteristic of lesbian families. These cases can be interpreted from a queer feminist perspective to produce nuanced debates about the experiences of lesbian parents. Rather than judge these families as deviating from the only politically acceptable form of

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<sup>98</sup> Elin had recently embarked on full-time study.

lesbian parenting, their choices and experiences produce interesting insights about gender and sexuality, which enable theoretical discussion to move beyond simplistic binaries. Both Julie and Deirdre engaged with equality issues in relation to gender. Ciara and Gillian made different career and caregiving choices and appeared happy with their current arrangements. Elin and Ylva had not negotiated the division of labour in ways in which they contributed equally and this was a point of contention. While they felt that they performed tasks according to preference, the fact that in their case these preferences fell along traditional lines contributed to the unequal nature of their contributions. Nonetheless, they felt that their sons were taught that women could do anything a man could. These cases must also be analysed in terms of gendered moral rationalities (Duncan & Edwards, 1999), whereby nonmarket, collective relations and understandings about motherhood and employment inform women's choices around combining paid employment and carework. The role of the state in supporting particular family forms over others – for example, in the rules concerning who is eligible for parental leave or not – clearly impacts on these families in specific ways. Sexual citizenship, particularly in the terrain of 'the family', negotiates understandings of the public and the private. The welfare state, in supporting certain family forms in specific ways impacted on the extent to which the burden of care could be alleviated and participants could share childcare equally. Despite these obstacles, it is notable that the majority of participants shared domestic work and childcare equitably.

In the next section, gender performance and parenting practices will be explored. Participants' discourses regarding the division of labour indicate that particular activities are gendered and the division of labour is often negotiated with reference to other considerations. The significance of gendered meanings attributed to particular practices and the reinvention of gender in these contexts will be addressed.

## Gender and Parenting Practices among Lesbian Parents

In exploring participants' views on gender and parenting, it became apparent that there are ways in which gender may be taught differently in lesbian families in a positive way. Proponents of non-sexist parenting and education practices have often stressed the importance of exposing children to a range of activities, without attaching a gendered significance to them. For example, boys may be encouraged to play with dolls, or girls may be encouraged to play with trucks and so on. It is often considered important to teach children a variety of skills usually associated with the other gender. So for example, boys may be taught to sew and girls may learn how to construct materials. In this way, it is argued, children are able to develop all their abilities, rather than being forced to concentrate their energies in areas traditionally considered gender appropriate (Browne, 1986; Peets, 2000).

Interestingly, the lesbian parents interviewed often articulated their conviction that their children would be exposed to gender role models who themselves engaged in a wider range of activities. Participants viewed dominant social norms as encouraging a certain gender segregation in household and play activities. Having a partner of the same gender, necessitated the ability to perform a variety of household tasks, rather than only those stereotyped as traditionally 'female'. Furthermore, they were likely to find new models for achieving this, such as both partners choosing to work part-time in order to participate equally in childcare. As indicated in the previous section, participants expressed their domestic work arrangements in terms of equality and preference. Lacking the pressure associated with traditional gender roles in relationships, participants were skilled in housework *and* maintenance. If there were any areas in which they chose to concentrate their energies, it was usually based on personal preference and the other partner would compensate by focusing on another area. So for example, one partner might take care of the laundry, while the other did the ironing. For most participants, being freed from some of the confines of gender roles in relationships enabled them to share housework in a democratic way that was personally satisfying.

This was also perceived to be of benefit to their children, who saw women doing traditional tasks like cooking, but also fixing cars for example. In addition, the men they chose to be in their children's lives were also selected on the basis of the kind of masculinity they embodied. Gay men were often seen as more progressive role models than many heterosexual men.

**But in a way I don't like, I don't want my kids to have a stereotyped male role, I don't like that, or a stereotypical female role model, as it's seen in this society. I really love and like it that our kids are in a gay community as well and I think it's necessary for all kids to see all diversity and for example I really love to see my kids, that they see both their fathers or other gay men who are not these stereotype, not this macho, because they see that both their fathers like to knit and sew and all those things and they can build houses, and take care of the cars and making good food, taking care of their own clothes and clean and all these things, they see that when two men are living together they have to do all these things and they learn that it doesn't depend on if you're a man or a woman, if you want to do something you can do it because and it's okay. And it's the same way they see other men because, for example in the Pride Week and they see men dressed like women and transgender people and they see women running motorbikes and all this, I love it. I would like, that's the kind of role models I want to see because I want my kids to get, to be as free as they can be in this society and see that it doesn't depend if I'm a boy or a girl, whatever I want to do, I can do it and I see all these examples around me that it's possible. And that's the most important thing I think for our kids, not necessarily that they have fathers. Because we live in a gay community, they have all these things.**

- Hanna, Swedish participant

The gay community was seen as a positive resource for the production of non-oppressive genders. Gender in lesbian families was described as being transmitted in ways characterised by an emphasis on diversity and flexibility. Although society in general was associated with monolithic gender norms and roles, the lesbian and gay community provided a counterculture which emphasised the multiplicity of genders and provided a basis for a less rigid approach to the acquisition of gender. This is not to say that all participants articulated the belief that gender is entirely socially constructed, but that it was seen as largely socially determined and participants considered it important to enable their children to have a broader gender repertoire than the socially dominant norm. The result of this was that children would develop all sides of themselves, rather than repress some of their interests or aspects of their emotional life. The emphasis was on a more holistic approach to development and awareness of diversity, rather than the acquisition of traditional gender roles.

The potential outcomes of these practices and ideologies may be very similar to those of non-sexist parenting in heterosexual families. It must also be acknowledged that it is perfectly possible for lesbian families to engage in normative discourses and practices. It is not my intention to argue for an essentialist view of lesbian parenting, in which lesbian parents are constructed as the new normative ideal to which others should aspire. Rather, I wish to critically examine the ways in which gender and sexuality dynamics are discursively (re)constituted in the pedagogical practices of gender in lesbian families. Instead of constructing gender as a rigid binary relation, the diversity of gendered practices and support for choosing activities on the basis of enjoyment and ability rather than social norms, was a distinct discourse among lesbian parents interviewed. The ways that lesbian genders were seen to incorporate a broader range of skills was significant in their articulation of themselves as parents. This was irrespective of whether participants viewed gender as entirely socially constructed or expressed a conscious commitment to non-sexist parenting. Their parenting practices resulted from their gendered locations as lesbians, for whom gender was experienced in the context of a lesbian lifestyle. The prevalent social assumption that sex and gender are mutually determined was therefore continually destabilised.

Lesbian parents in Ireland were far less likely to have an involved donor than in Sweden. Nonetheless, while Swedish participants emphasised the importance of male role models, they did not view fathers as the only possible male role model. This was because of different discourses around the importance of having contact with a known biological father. Both groups considered it important for children to spend time with women and men. Men who were involved in the children's lives, whether they were donors, friends, or other kin, were chosen on the basis of the qualities they possessed as individuals, rather than as examples of hegemonic masculinities. Indeed gay men were often viewed as better role models in their subordinate masculinities than many heterosexual men:

*Yeah it's like, I don't know if it's typically for gay men but there are a lot of men who do things that aren't what you consider in today's society to be typically male and at the same time if you have a son and he sees this, my daddy does this as well and it's okay then you*

change an attitude in somebody and hopefully that, I would hope it makes the world a little better.

- Lena, Swedish participant

In families where donors did not play an active role, participants pointed out that children were taught traditionally male activities as well. One parent of two sons expressed this in the following way:

Yeah, they're lucky in a way, I mean they are lucky in a way because em as well as those things, em we've always done [...] a lot of DIY and so they've always had tools around and learned how to use tools so you know it's not, not as though it's only been the more 'female' in quotation marks, activities that they've been offered, they've also been offered the more traditionally male things as well and they've seen me under a car you know.

- Julie, Irish participant

This participant considered her sons lucky because they were exposed to a variety of activities and free to choose to concentrate their energies in areas that were personally appealing, rather than being socialised to follow gender traditional norms. The fact that her sons learned these traditionally male activities from women, rather than from a man, could be seen as a new form of pedagogy, where the dominant essentialist association between gender and certain activities is constantly undermined. Indeed, some lesbians expressed positive feelings about having sons, whom they hoped would share their enjoyment in certain traditionally male domains such as football. However, they acknowledged that daughters could be equally enthusiastic about this sport. In this way, lesbian parents were open to a multiplicity of gendered behaviours in their children, which were not necessarily dependent on biological sex. They also saw themselves as providing support and encouragement in different areas, not just traditionally female ones. Interviewees negotiated their practices in relation to a dominant social order by gendering certain activities. The necessary connection between gender and various activities was then destabilised through the pedagogical practices of parenting.

Participants pointed out that they themselves engaged in traditionally male-dominated activities, for example in their professional lives, as well as in domestic tasks around the house. This was considered to challenge sexist

ideologies about gender appropriate behaviour. One participant, who worked in a male-dominated profession, talked about her son's possible view on women and work in the following way:

I certainly don't think he'd see it as odd [having a mother who works in a male-dominated profession], you know I mean there's no way he could because I am a [occupation] and I prove a point just with what I do you know and em you know his friends are going to be the ones who might say god you know [...] I don't think he'd bat an eye at what a woman can do at all. But I think it won't be through me saying it to him, it will just be through my actions of what I do you know.

- Clodagh, Irish participant

An interesting aspect of this example is that she suggests that her son will learn that women are not restricted by their gender as a result of her actions, the way she lives her life, rather than through equality rhetoric.

Participants appropriated dominant narratives of gender, but reinscribed them with their own meanings in the context of their families. While gendering certain activities, they subvert this gendered significance by emphasising their abilities in both traditionally male and female areas, as a result of being in relationships with other women. By acting as a role model for their children in both traditionally male and female activities, the children are provided with a greater degree of choice, encouraged to develop their skills in all areas, not just those stereotyped as gender appropriate.

In both contexts, participants considered wider society to promote a view of gender as a binary divide with clearly segregated activities. This is perhaps to be expected, given the nature of gender politics in Ireland, but it seems surprising that participants did not relate to Swedish society as particularly deconstructive of gender norms. This may be associated with age – most participants in the study were in their late thirties and early forties. However it could also be argued that the experience of being lesbian or gay requires a significant re-evaluation of gender identity, as so much of what constitutes appropriate gender behaviour is intricately bound up with heterosexuality. All participants expressed awareness that gender roles are reinforced by social norms and expectations.

Participants expressed the view that their children were far more likely to be conventionally gendered than not, regardless of their home environment, as they will inevitably be raised in a predominantly heteronormative society. However, lesbian parents are under particular pressure to perform well as parents, as they experience extra surveillance by a society which challenges their very existence. Some participants referred to feelings of constraint as a result. One parent, who was often perceived as butch, felt particularly vulnerable. She described these feelings in relation to raising her daughter:

It would have been a lot easier for me to have a boy because I could never have come under the kind of finger pointing thing or accusation thing that goes along with like do you have to dress her so butchly? I make a big effort to not dress Danae [daughter] in anything boyish you know. And went through a big long stage, in the very early part of her life where everybody was saying how old is he, how old is he and I was feeling so paranoid about the fact that like everybody is thinking this butch dyke is dressing her beautiful baby [as a] boy and trying to turn her into a dyke as well or trying to corrupt her into this, so all that stuff.

- Sorcha, Irish participant

A Swedish couple, who had bought dolls and cars for both their son and daughter, found that their children nonetheless followed gender conventional behaviour in their interests. Despite having exposed them to a range of activities, Sofia expressed some relief at the fact that her son was quite masculine in his behaviour. However, she felt that this was a shortcoming on her part:

But in one way I'm pleased that he is so much a boy and that's a bit em, that's my problem, not his problem. Because if he was a girlish boy, I would think that everyone else would think that it's because we're lesbian, because he didn't have a father, it's our fault and so on. So in one way I'm a little bit pleased that he's not too girlish or so. But that's my problem.

- Sofia, Swedish participant

Heaphy et al. (1999) point out that power dynamics are inevitably present in lesbian and gay and indeed all relationships. However, they suggest that sexual identity may mediate awareness of power dynamics in complex ways. In their research, lesbian and gay participant couples identified an egalitarian relationship model that they strove for in the context of other forms of difference within their relationships – across 'race'/ethnicity, income and educational level for example. The authors suggest that it is the reflexive nature of participants' concerns with equality that enabled them to creatively negotiate more egalitarian relations.

They identify this equality model ideal as an emerging ethic within same sex relationships. Similarly, this process is apparent in the two quotes by Sorcha and Sofia, above. Both participants problematise their concern with normative readings of their children's behaviour. This awareness of their own conventional expectations is apparent because it is contrary to their own preferences and represents in their view a conformist compromise.

These two examples show how the interpretation of lesbian parenting practices can be linked to homophobic myths and that these assumptions must be challenged on a multilevel basis. Returning to the debates about assimilative versus transformative approaches to parenting that I began the chapter with, these examples illustrate that it is important to address the complexity of people's experiences and acknowledge how powerful gender binary norms can make it difficult for those who transgress them, particularly in parenting. While participants seemed to welcome the prospect of unconventionally gendered children, they were realistic about the possibilities of this occurring. Further, they were aware of the difficulties they would face as parents of children who engaged in transgressive gender behaviour. In the case of Sorcha, her awareness was also based on her own history as a butch lesbian and the particular prejudice she had encountered throughout her adult life as a result. This further indicates the importance of discursive interventions that challenge gender norms. Lesbian parents may find themselves in a difficult position of trying to pass on particular values to their children, while negotiating parenting in a homophobic and sexist world.

## Conclusion

There is a large body of research that refutes the homophobic assumption that children thrive only in heterosexual families. The notion that queer families are a 'deviant Other' whose parenting must be constantly subjected to scrutiny on the basis of their sexuality, has been challenged on numerous grounds. More recently researchers have turned their attention to more productive aspects of lesbian parenting experience. In this chapter, discourses of gender and equality among lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland were explored. Relatively little attention

has been paid to the role of social policy in mediating lesbian parents' choices regarding the equitable distribution of domestic labour and caregiving. This research indicates that policies pertaining to the combining of paid employment with obligations of care can affect the ways lesbian parents share caring responsibilities. Nonetheless, despite different constraints the care and household practices of most participants were characterised by equality.

Participants emphasised the flexibility of gender and undermined hegemonic discourses about sex roles through the pedagogical practices of gender in their families. In this way, heteronormative ideologies and codes were continually challenged and critiqued. However, there were also instances in which lesbian parenting could be normative. These cases provide interesting critical insights when contextualised in relation to the particular social pressures faced by lesbian parents. While much previous research on LGBT-headed families has implicitly assumed that these families may be marked differently in a negative way - often a homophobic assumption - lesbian parent families may also exhibit positive traits, as the work on the gendered division of labour in these households suggests. However, it is possibly the case that there are more overall similarities than differences between lesbian parent and heterosexual families, given the mundane practices of care common to all families and the role of wider society in shaping children's identities and behaviours.

Although research about gendered practices in lesbian parent families suggests a move away from the emphasis on normative performance in previous research, nonetheless both areas remain imbued with similar theoretical concerns about sameness and difference. What does the teleological nature of discourses of sameness/difference and assimilation/transgression to considerations of lesbian parenting reveal about the discursive landscape in which lesbian familial modes of relatedness are constructed? I would argue that it is indicative of the socio-political context in which lesbian parenting occurs. Further, it is illustrative of the emphasis on subversion and transgression within much queer theory. In this chapter, I have attempted to unravel these dichotomies and reconceptualise notions of resistance in view of the contexts within which lesbian parenting is enacted. The emphasis on sameness/difference in debates about lesbian parenting

also highlights the particular norms that are central to all forms of parenting. The actual diversity of family forms in contemporary society is not always evident within theoretical debates and empirical trends pertaining to lesbian parenting, which often assume a particular heteronormative standard to be representative of all non-lesbian/gay families, irrespective of whether a particular author is sympathetic to lesbian parenting or not. This obscures the plurality of heterosexual family forms.

Munt (1998: 9) argues that '*the profound jubilation/melancholia that attends lesbian identity evolves from the pride/shame dichotomy which is implicit within models of outside and inside*'. This perhaps provides another perspective on the centrality of sameness/difference to theoretical discussions of lesbian parenting. If Otherness is characterised through an implicit lens of relative difference, then the Other may utilise the discursive resources of sameness/difference in efforts to assert subjectivity. In this chapter I have attempted to disrupt this dichotomy by contextualising lesbian parenting experiences and examining the significance of inside/outside binaries to ontological understandings of gender, sexuality and parenting. Thus, the heterocentric polarity at the heart of this binary is also displaced, challenging the centrality of the heteronormative model or 'inside', which often functions as the inherent comparative standard for all families.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Concluding Discussion

This dissertation began with an acknowledgment of the apparently growing phenomenon of a new generation of lesbians embarking on parenthood in the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle. The preceding chapters have attempted to contextualise lesbian parents' experiences and unravel some of the implications of this relatively new family form for theoretical and policy debates in relation to gender, sexuality and kinship. While much previous research has been centrally concerned with the effects of lesbian and gay parental sexuality on children, this study has integrated lesbian parents' narratives into contemporary theoretical analysis and debate. The relational choices and perspectives of lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland have been explored. Their experiences have been addressed with reference to the importance of socio-political context and place. In addition, the teleological nature of discussions concerning the relative similarity or difference of lesbian parent families to their heterosexual counterparts, or to a heteronormative standard, has been challenged through a deconstruction of the heterocentric polarity at the heart of these debates. This concluding discussion consists of five sections, in which the implications of the research findings and theoretical concerns of this work are explored: a brief overview of the key findings; suggestions for further research; a reconceptualisation of lesbian Otherness; implications for social policy; and finally a reconsideration of the question 'Is kinship always already heterosexual?' (Butler, 2002).

### Overview of key research findings

The comparative dimension of this research project has explored patterns of similarity and difference between the two samples, thus highlighting the significance of culture and legislative frameworks to lesbian women's reproductive decision-making and experiences of parenting. A consideration of lesbian parents' narratives in two different national contexts has not been solely concerned with comparing their relative similarity or difference however. The comparative nature of this research enabled lesbian parent narratives to be at the

forefront of analysis. Previous research has largely compared lesbian parents' experiences to an implicit heterosexual norm. By examining participants' narratives relationally according to country of residence, this heteronormative focus was displaced.

Notions of place have not been restricted to the comparative aspect of this study. The nature of 'the field' in methodological considerations was addressed in relation to ethical dilemmas encountered in research. The different ways in which lesbian parents negotiated visibility in Sweden and Ireland became evident during the recruitment process. The ongoing concerns that this wrought for the researcher challenged notions of 'the field' as a spatially bound terrain and in fact highlighted the ways in which the identity and situatedness of the researcher and political context and commitments converge to create an interactive field that exists across time and space. The different experiences of recruitment in Sweden and Ireland also questions the extent to which the 'gayby boom' is occurring cross-nationally. It appears that lesbians are more likely to embark on parenthood in Sweden than in Ireland. However, I would argue that this will probably change with time and perhaps younger generations of Irish lesbians will be more inclined to embark on parenthood than their older counterparts.

The implications of (in)visibility were again highlighted in a spatial analysis with regard to the everyday contexts of lesbian parenting. The narratives of lesbian parents in this research suggests that the emphasis on visibility in previous work is insufficient for analysis of the spaces of lesbian parenting. Their parenting practices are not for the most part enacted in spaces either exclusive to lesbian parents, or where they constitute a visible group or presence. This does not render these spaces any less significant in the shaping of their identities as *lesbian* parents however. In addition, a spatial analysis of lesbian parent experience provided new understandings of the rural, challenging the metrocentrism in much queer theory.

New research questions have also been posed with regard to kinship formation among lesbian parents. Previous authors have raised the possibility of new forms of relatedness in lesbian and gay families. This research project has enabled a

sustained critical interrogation of the symbolic function of biology, gender and kinship among lesbian parents. Perhaps the most striking finding of this study with regard to the comparative component of the research is the contrasting nature of discourses of fatherhood among Swedish and Irish lesbian parents. Clearly, the emphasis on involved donors among the majority of Swedish participants reflects the nature of fatherhood debates in Sweden generally and the evolution of a model of participatory fatherhood which has achieved particular hegemony in contemporary Swedish society. In contrast, Irish women expressed considerable self-confidence in their ability to provide sufficient security for their children independently of male involvement. However, in both contexts a preference for knowledge of paternity was largely retained, irrespective of whether the donor participated in parenting or not. This highlights the continued importance of biological origins to notions of self and identity in lesbian parent narratives in relation to considerations informing their concerns for children's well being.

However, traditional conceptualisations of biology were also continually undermined and reinvented within these families. In particular, the relative lack of importance attached to biological motherhood compared to social parenting, was a recurring feature of participant narratives. This is not to suggest that there was no distinction made between biological mothers and co-parents, rather that this distinction related to an associated difference with regard to legal recognition and wider validation that was socially constructed, in addition to biological relatedness. Within couple relationships, this difference was openly acknowledged and negotiated, rather than constituting a sensitive issue that could only be tacitly recognised. This contributes to understandings of motherhood as a fluid concept. For many participants, a mother was not simply a female parent. Participants articulated a plurality of identifications that were often ostensibly contradictory. The multiple applications of terms were however internally coherent and congruent to participants, highlighting the complex and contextualised meanings of kinship terminology.

In this dissertation, 'motherhood/mothers' and 'parenthood/parents' have been used at times interchangeably but also to refer to specific relationships. When

used in the latter way, this has been explicitly demarcated – for example in the discussion of the meanings of motherhood in Chapter Seven. However, an interesting finding of this research relates to the preference among many co-parents for the term ‘parent’ to refer to their personal identity, rather than ‘mother’, particularly among Swedish participants. As discussed, this was to acknowledge a particular biological relatedness, but the meanings attributed to this biological ‘difference’ varied. This did not appear to delineate a difference in either carework or emotional relationship, but represented an attempt to negotiate hegemonic concepts and understandings. The utilisation of the terms ‘lesbian mothers’ and ‘lesbian parents’ therefore acknowledges those co-parents and biological mothers who claim ‘mother’ as a personal identity, but also illustrates some of the complexities of these discussions and attempts to incorporate all participants, irrespective of biological relationship to children, within an inclusive terminology. The analytic tensions arising from this endeavour highlight the unstable and constructed nature of kinship appellations.

As a pioneering generation of lesbian women embarking on parenthood, these women are developing new understandings and conceptualisations of kinship, which are continually evolving. Many of these families did appear to create new ‘cultures of relatedness’, where biology and kinship were reconfigured along axes of identity, parenting practices and affective bonds or relationships. However, irrespective of whether lesbian parents did challenge the hegemony of biology to kinship in Western society or not, the discourses of relational possibilities among participants highlight the ways in which the legal regulation of kinship and biology relatedness are mutually implicated, rather than exclusive entities. It also illustrates the elasticity of biology as a concept within lesbian parent families, where it may be deployed in variable and fluid ways, rather than as a singular entity.

An interesting aspect of this research is the way similar debates regarding sameness/difference recur in different guises across disciplines and thematic explorations. The binary opposition underlying debates centred around lesbian parents’ relationship to practices of assimilation or transformation was further deconstructed in the chapter on gender flexibility. An examination of the

division of labour among lesbian couples and the pedagogical practices of gender in lesbian parent families, highlighted the ways in which hegemonic narratives of gender were destabilised in these families. However, the implicit comparison with heterosexual families underlying considerations of sameness and difference with regard to lesbian parent families is illustrative of the heterocentric polarity at the heart of much research on lesbian parents and their children. It also reveals the particular heteronormative standards by which all families are judged in hegemonic normative discourse. It must be noted however that the heteronormativities implicitly related to in participants' discourses throughout the research are also a reflection of their own situatedness as ethnic (primarily white) actors and as geographical citizens. A sample of lesbian parents belonging to ethnic minorities for example might have yielded different understandings of, or variations on, hegemonic normative discourses of gender and kinship.

### **Suggestions for further research**

This research has explored a wide range of areas pertaining to lesbian parent kinship, practices and experiences. However, this dissertation work represents only a fraction of the data material. The comparative component of this research project and limitations of a single PhD thesis informed decisions regarding which themes to concentrate on in this analysis. Other aspects of the material will be developed in future publications. Numerous areas for further research remain, particularly in relation to diversity in lesbian parent families. This dissertation has contributed to knowledge of diversity among lesbian parents by challenging the US/UK hegemony in research. However, notable gaps in the overall literature remain, including the lack of attention to 'race', ethnicity and other axes of difference within research on lesbian parenting.<sup>99</sup> Another area of lesbian parent experience that could be examined further in theoretical analysis is that of lesbians who conceive in the context of a heterosexual relationship. Although there are numerous anthologies containing experiential accounts by these women, rather less attention has been paid to the theoretical implications of their life experiences. In this research, several participants had children from previous

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<sup>99</sup> A publication in progress from this research study explores narratives of whiteness among Irish and Swedish lesbian parent participants.

heterosexual relationships. Their narratives were fascinating in their own right and I have often reflected that it is a pity that more work has not been done to explore their experiences from a queer feminist perspective. In addition, much research on lesbian parenting has focused primarily on couple relationships, another imbalance which could be redressed.

Other areas for further research include gay fatherhood, another relatively neglected topic, despite important exceptions (e.g. Dunne, 1999, 2001). Given the need for appropriate policy provision, separation and break-ups among lesbian parent couples also constitutes an important area of research. Comparative work is not appropriate for every research topic, but has provided a useful means for centring lesbian parents' narratives in this research study. However, nation-state analysis necessarily has limitations given the increasing proliferation of globalising processes. An interesting area arising from this study and worthy of further exploration via transnational analysis is that of lesbian women's access to new reproductive technologies beyond national borders and the implications of this for international legislation and regulation.

### **Reconceptualising Otherness**

The distinctive ways in which Irish and Swedish participants negotiate local contexts have important implications for the theorising of gender relations and queer theory. As noted in Chapter Five, a construction of heteronormativity as a monolithic concept is an inadequate theoretical tool. The form of heteronormativity that participants resisted and subverted varied cross-culturally. Thus, *multiple heteronormativities* is a more appropriate conceptualisation. This enables an incorporation of varied contexts into queer analyses, acknowledging the different concerns of queer actors situated across a diversity of places and identities.

This further suggests a reconsideration of lesbian Otherness. In situating lesbian parents within the contexts of state policy and cultural frameworks, the multifaceted nature of identity becomes apparent. Thus, Swedish lesbian parents who reinvent discourses of fatherhood while simultaneously supporting

participatory fatherhood, are clearly engaging in notions of kinship that are grounded in broader understandings within Swedish society. Similarly, Irish women's self-confidence in their ability to provide for their children without the involvement of active fathers, reflects the genealogy of motherhood in Ireland. Lesbians are often assumed, as the Other, to be entirely outside social norms and conventions. Hegemonic discourses may construct them as the relational Other who renders the hegemonic ideal normative. For example, in the discussions about lesbian and gay adoption in Sweden, a discourse regarding the needs of adopted children was endlessly invoked, in which 'lesbian' and 'adopted child/person' were posited as oppositional categories. Yet the possibility of a lesbian or lesbian parent who had herself been adopted never figured conceptually in these debates. Lesbians, as the Other, were outside such a realm of possibility in the popular imagination. This research, in illustrating that lesbians engage with dominant kinship formulations, illustrates the extent to which sexuality is negotiated by context and identity. Thus, lesbian parents are not simply the Other, they are also individuals grounded in particular cultural norms and ideologies.

A construction of lesbians as exclusively Other ignores the multi-faceted intersectional nature of identity and their simultaneous sites of privilege and marginalisation. It further denies the possibility of lesbian subjectivities that are not solely characterised by a marginalised status. Heteronormative ontological frameworks in which lesbian is synonymous with Otherness, are dependent upon a mutually exclusive polarity between 'lesbian' and 'heterosexual', in which these categories are understood as monolithic entities, rather than diverse identifications. Thus, a failure to critically interrogate diversity among lesbian parents contributes to this understanding of lesbian as Other. Increased consideration of lesbian parents' axes of belonging is therefore necessary, in terms of both sites of privilege and diverse marginalised identifications.

### **Implications for social policy**

These research findings and theoretical concerns have numerous implications for social policy. Clearly, an equality perspective requires all parenting possibilities,

including adoption, fostering and access to NRTs to be equally available to citizens irrespective of their sexuality. The restriction of these domains to heterosexuals therefore constitutes homophobic discrimination. This research has explored some of the implications of these restrictions for lesbian women. Some participants were denied the medical assistance they required to conceive and were unable or unwilling to travel abroad for. Those participants who did avail of services such as IVF or DI abroad, found their emotional plight compounded by the financial and practical strain this involved. Restricting these services to heterosexuals will only prevent some of the most vulnerable lesbian women – those with the least financial resources – from obtaining this service and exacerbates an already difficult situation for those who can afford to travel for these services. The policy of compulsory donor identity disclosure in Sweden indicates a clear policy preference for known donors. Interestingly, by restricting these services to heterosexuals, the possibility of lesbian women choosing insemination by an unknown donor is increased, as the only other way of getting a known donor through DI is by importing from the Sperm Bank of California, an expensive addition to an already costly process.

While Sweden has made significant progress with the extension of adoption to lesbian and gay people, problems with the way this has been formulated remain. Although the Swedish debates focused primarily on international adoption, clearly second parent or ‘närstående’ adoption, is the most immediately relevant form of adoption for lesbian parents. However, while the introduction of this latter type of adoption safeguards the rights of co-parents, it is only applicable to cases where the father rescinds his parental rights and obligations and is therefore premised on the nuclear family two-parent model. Yet as this research suggests, many lesbian parents in Sweden appear to have a preference for a known and involved donor. Current legislative formulations therefore remain inadequate, despite important recent reforms. A more inclusive proposal would be to enable recognition of more than two parents. Some families in this research had two mothers and two fathers involved in raising a child collectively from birth, but only two parents can be recognised by law.

As the experiences of lesbian couples in this research whose partner relationship has ended illustrates, the lack of legal recognition of co-parents renders them particularly vulnerable. They are dependent on their former partner's goodwill in terms of visitation and should the biological mother die, their situation becomes even more assailable. The complex nature of power dynamics in this situation can also cause biological mothers to be dependent on their former partners' willingness to meet their financial and care responsibilities, in the absence of a formal framework for their obligations to children post-separation. Second parent adoption should therefore be made available retrospectively. This would enable couples who have already broken up but wish to avail of it to do so and would alleviate some of the vulnerabilities and inequalities of parties concerned.

Ireland's policy framework of relegating decisions regarding access to new reproductive technologies to the medical profession has enabled some lesbian women in the past to procure these services. However, a situation where adequate information and services are difficult to obtain is unacceptable. All such services should be available to women regardless of their sexuality. The current adoption laws also reflect a heteronormative discriminatory bias. The issue of second parent adoption is a particularly pressing one in an Irish context. Participants were keenly aware of their legal vulnerability. Unlike in Sweden, unmarried biological fathers have few formal rights before the law. Yet this did not appear to afford participants much sense of security should their guardianship or custody be challenged by a known donor. This highlights the necessity of a legislative framework that is clearly committed to equality and inclusiveness. Even when a lack of comprehensive guidelines – for example regarding NRTs – can accrue advantages to a limited number of individuals, the importance of more rigorous and non-discriminatory legislation remains.

Swedish participants experienced relative advantages in relation to labour market participation compared to their Irish counterparts, due to the widespread availability of affordable good quality childcare and generous parental leave provisions. However, the fact that a Swedish lesbian parent can only share parental leave with her partner if they are in a registered partnership is a heterosexist requirement, enforcing a particular normative ideology of kinship on

parents that unfairly imposes a differential expectation of them as parents compared to heterosexual couples. The strictures of a normative ideology are also evident in the case of adoption in Sweden, where only lesbian (and gay) couples who are registered partners can avail of adoption.

Participants in both countries experienced homophobia and prejudice in a wide range of contexts, including during medical care and at their children's schools for example. Clearly, there is a need for more diversity training and awareness among service providers in a variety of areas. Irish participants in particular felt more constrained in their ability to locate sympathetic service providers and this limited the extent to which they could integrate into particular communities and contexts.

### **So *Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?***

In the first chapter, Butler's (2002) analysis of the implications of the legal recognition of same sex partnerships was outlined. I will conclude by exploring the implications of her arguments regarding kinship recognition, in light of this research. She suggests that this recent legislative trend has problematic implications for queer kinship imaginaries. I return to these concerns now in order to reconsider the question of whether kinship is 'always already heterosexual'. Previous work on the legal regulation (and legitimization) of queer kinship has been centrally concerned with partnership regulation (e.g. Warner, 1999). This research study has extended this debate further by exploring the implications of legal regulation (and lack thereof) for lesbian *parents* in two different cultural and policy contexts.

Butler's concern with the possible foreclosures in queer kinship imaginaries entailed by legal regulation is a pertinent one. The legislative changes introduced regarding lesbian and gay parenting often reflect heteronormative constraints. Thus for example lesbian and gay couples wishing to avail of second parent adoption in Sweden must be registered partners, rather than a cohabiting couple (although marriage is a requirement that interestingly is also applicable to heterosexuals). Despite such patently problematic potential outcomes, I would

argue in favour of a continuing engagement with legal reform. Lesbian and gay parents must in my view continue to attempt to seek redress through the state in order to ensure the security of their families in possible eventualities. Scenarios such as custody disputes between co-parents and biological mothers in the context of relationship breakdown, or between co-parents and either biological fathers or the family of origin of biological mothers should the latter die prematurely, remain a serious concern in the absence of second parent adoption, or multiple adoptive parent possibilities. This is not to deny the constraints of configuring kinship through legal reform, whereby forms of kinship that are not legally recognised are therefore invalidated (or may be forcibly produced through their very marginality). The struggle to maintain identity in the face of legal invalidation constitutes a recurring theme in co-parent narratives. Nonetheless, the awareness of legal vulnerability also shaped their identities in particular ways.

If legislation is utilised as a resource for the protection of lesbian parent families, what are the possible effects of this, other than the obvious impact of legal protection should these efforts be successful? It would appear that more work is needed on queer kinship forms in order to inform social policy. Future research also needs to explore cultural variation and the impact of 'difference' on lesbian parent narratives across a range of locations and identities. As this research study clearly illustrates, the emphasis on participatory fatherhood in Sweden highlights the need for legislative recognition of multiple parents, rather than the two parents ideal intrinsic to the nuclear family model. Irish participants' feelings of vulnerability before the law and judicial system influenced their reproductive decision-making choices. Knowledge of similar complex dynamics informing queer kinship will also enable new forms of relatedness to become visible, challenging the heteronormative hegemony of contemporary kinship discourses. There is a further need to consider a wider range of kinship choices among queer parents, beyond those grounded in sexual partnerships. A critical engagement with legislative recognition requires more knowledge about queer relational possibilities. This research represents one contribution towards this goal.

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## **APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW GUIDELINES**

### **1. Background information:**

- Age of all parents and child/children
- Occupations of parents
- Educational attainment of parents
- Income bracket
- Length of relationship (if in a couple)

### **2. Reproductive decision-making process:**

- When was the decision to have a child made?
- Choice of method – insemination?
- What were the factors leading to that decision?
- Did lesbian orientation affect prior thinking about the possibility of having children?
- Where does the desire to have a child come from?
- What type of family arrangement did you most desire – known/unknown donor; involved/uninvolved father; to be in a relationship, etc.
- If a known father, did you request that he be tested for HIV?
- Feelings of co-parent in all of this, especially about a known donor.
- How did you find a donor? Describe the process.

### **3. The transition to parenthood:**

- Feelings of co-parents.
- Attitudes of family and friends to co-parent
- Feelings of biological parent.
- Attitudes of family and friends to biological parent.
- Relationship with known donor (if any) at this time.
- Was any legal contract drawn up? If so, what issues did it cover and has it been adhered to?

- Were people supportive of the co-parent's role? Did they acknowledge it? Has this changed over time?

#### **4. Medical and social personnel:**

- Did you encounter any discrimination at any time from medical (midwives, doctors, etc.) or social (social workers, teachers, etc.)? If so, please describe the incident(s). If not, were you surprised by this?
- Do you anticipate any problems with social authorities in the future?

#### **5. Division of responsibility within the family:**

- How do you share the financial costs of raising a child?
- Childcare and domestic work arrangements – who does what?
- Parental leave – who took it and why; who was entitled to it?
- Legal custody, access, amount of time spent with each parent, plans/expectations for the future.

#### **6. The gender of parenting:**

- What terms do you use to refer to yourselves and your family network? Mother, parent, father, co-parent etc.
- Do you think there is any difference between the relationship of the biological mother, biological father and female and male co-parents to the child? If so, how would you define/describe that difference?
- What last name does your child(ren) have? Why?
- When did you both begin to feel an emotional attachment to your child?
- Did you have any preference in terms of the gender of your child/children?

## **7. Coming out as a parent:**

- Were you out as a lesbian prior to becoming a parent?
- Are you out at work now?
- How did colleagues react?
- How has becoming a parent affected your worklife?
- Do you come out as lesbian more often now that you are a parent?
- Has becoming a parent changed your ideas about coming out in any way?
- How does the co-parent come out as a parent?

## **8. Legal and social issues:**

- Feelings about registered partnerships.
- What legal changes would you like to see take place?
- Would you like to see a change in the legal status of fathers in Ireland/Sweden?
- Have you discussed possible legal and visitation scenarios if relationships among parents should break up?

## **9. Personal:**

- At what ages did you come out to yourselves, families, social circle?
- Have you ever personally experienced discrimination because of being lesbian?
- How do you think being raised in a non-heterosexual family will affect the child (positively)?
- Do you have any religious affiliations?
- Are your friends mostly male/female, straight/gay, or equally distributed among those categories?
- Would you like to have more children? Why? If yes, what kind of arrangements would you like to make?