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DONOR INSEMINATION FAMILIES:

**A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF BEING LESBIAN PARENTS  
RAISING SPERM DONOR CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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## DECLARATION

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masterø of Social Sciences (Counselling Psychology), in the School of Psychology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

I declare that this research project is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Masterø of Social Sciences (Counselling Psychology) in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

---

Carryn Suckling

30 May 2010



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## ABSTRACT

This research aimed to explore the parenting experiences of lesbian women who chose to have children through artificial insemination. While this study aimed to explore the experience of being a lesbian parent in South Africa generally, its intent was to be primarily vigilant of the particular challenges that face lesbian parents having children (through sperm donation) within the broader context of heterosexuality in South Africa. Using the voice-centred relational method of analysis, two separate interviews with a lesbian parenting couple were analysed. The findings revealed a number of expected and some unexpected challenges that lesbian parents of sperm donor children reportedly contend with. The overall finding was that lesbian parenting is a significantly challenging experience. Whilst it can be argued that parenting for all individuals is fraught with difficulties, what this study highlights is that for lesbian parents, typical parenting difficulties are exacerbated by societal judgment and lack of support. It is hoped that this research will contribute to filling the vast gap in South African literature relating to lesbian parenting as well as provide the impetus for further research relating to this topic to be conducted within South Africa. This research also intends to provide an educational resource to potential lesbian mothers as well as to lesbian parents who may possibly seek solace in the awareness they are not alone in terms of the challenges which they may face. Last but certainly not least, it is hoped that the insights of this study may assist psychologists in improving their competency in working with same sex parent populations by cultivating knowledge, understanding, self reflection and empathy skills.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

This research study aimed to explore the experiences of lesbian parents within South Africa who are currently raising children conceived by insemination from sperm donors with concealed identities. Whilst it aimed to research their stories in their entirety, particular focus was placed on the challenges and difficulties accompanying such a role. The study takes into account the insemination process as being part of that story, but places more emphasis on the experiences and challenges post conception.

While South African statistics relating to lesbian parenting are difficult to come by, international data indicates a global increase in the number of lesbian families. Cleveland-Hall (2005) indicates that the wider availability of donor insemination has in all probability contributed to a lesbian baby boom internationally. It is estimated that approximately 1.5 million lesbians are rearing children in the US alone (Navarro, 2006) and 1483 lesbian couples were found to be living with children conceived via artificial insemination in the 1996 Australian census (Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise, 2002). The 2001 Canadian Census (Egale Canada, 2001) also documented a significant rise in the number of female same-sex couples choosing to have children ó 15% of the 15 200 lesbian couples were co-parenting at the time of data collection. The same Census referred to a similar trend in New Zealand and in the United States (Egale Canada, 2001). It is hard, however, to obtain accurate estimates of the number of lesbian mother families because they are a group that does not readily self-identify (Cleveland-Hall, 2005). Furthermore, although statistics relating to self insemination via fertility clinics are available, there is no way of knowing how many of these children were born to lesbian couples due to the private nature of artificial-



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al marriages have now been legalized in South Africa  
t allow all women including lesbians to make use of

donor insemination, it would appear logical to predict an increase in the number of lesbian parents of sperm donor children (Juta& Statutes Editors, 2006; African National Congress, 1994). Whatever the precise figures, one can accurately conclude from international and national literature that lesbian parents represent a sizable and growing population worthy of further exploration.

Historically, little attention has been given in terms of research to the experiences of parents and to the context in which they carry out their functions (Louw, 1991). This gap in the understanding of parental experience appears to be even more prominent when examining lesbian parenting and the related challenges within the South African context. These family forms are challenging many societal institutions such as the medical and judicial establishments, school systems, adoption agencies, and the media to address the needs of these families. Lesbians who choose to become parents are also challenging the heteronormative standards of society as a whole ó there is a normalized notion of what a family is and this is infused by heteronormative constructs around male and female partnerships and impregnation through vaginal penetration (preferably in a marriage). The experience of being same-sex parents who choose to have a child through technology are challenging the heterosexist norms of society in general, that is, that the world is largely seen and experienced through the lens (or discourse) of heterosexuality.

This relatively new form of family unit also poses challenges for the South African psychological profession. Psychology has unfortunately contributed significantly in the past to construct homosexuality as being an illness. Lubbe (2007) points out that even presently

number of psychological orientations as being the  
regard, Lubbe (2007) reminds Psychologists of the value  
of being aware of non-traditional family structures and of the different ways of conception.  
Lubbe (2007) goes on to outline how Psychologists should not only be aware but that they  
should also be proficient in working therapeutically with individuals from different  
backgrounds, even if such backgrounds are in some way dissimilar from their own.  
Furthermore, Lubbe (2007) continues to highlight the importance of Psychologists  
demonstrating sensitivity to varied family forms so as not to partake in or sustain negative  
societal discourses that may undermine their clients emotional and psychological welfare.

The overall aims of this research were, therefore, twofold: on the one level it aimed to gain  
insight into the lived experiences of lesbian mothers/parents so that their needs can be better  
understood and to disrupt the tendency for psychologists to practice from a heteronormative  
position. In this way it, secondly, aimed to open up for contestation wider constructions of  
what we consider to be a normal family and in this way expose the socially constructed  
-nature of what we so easily consider to be a natural, normal given.

The following research questions framed this research:

1. What is the lived experience of being a lesbian parent of a sperm donor baby in South Africa?
2. Will they report challenges relating to this relatively new family form?
3. If they report challenges, what will such challenges primarily be?
4. Will the participants focus on any positive aspects of being lesbian parents within South Africa?

research is as follows: Chapter two focuses on literature  
lesbian parenting and specifically pertaining to common  
challenges of lesbian parents which various authors allude to. Furthermore, literature  
focusing on the social construction of families is examined and summarized. Chapter three is  
a description of the study's research methodology including design and procedure, a detailed  
depiction of the participants who agreed to partake in the study, the method of data collection  
and subsequent analysis, ethical considerations and finally the credibility, transferability and  
dependability of the results. Chapter four contains the analysis and discussion of information  
obtained via the two separate interviews. The voice relational method of data analysis is  
implemented and throughout the reporting of findings over the five separate readings,  
reference is made to commonalities or differences between my research findings to those of  
other authors and/or researchers. Chapter five provides a summary of the project in terms of  
procedural and analytic content. Conclusions are highlighted and recommendations for future  
research and interventions are made in terms of the current research findings.

#### Relevant Terminology:

- Artificial insemination Refers to any form of attempted conception that falls outside of the traditional copulation method entailing the insertion of a penis into a vagina
- In vitro fertilization The fertility procedure involving a process by which ova are fertilized by sperm outside of the uterus, in a laboratory setting. The resulting embryo is then introduced into the uterus and develops normally into what is commonly called a "test tube baby"

A process where semen, obtained through masturbation,  
is placed in a woman's vagina through the self use of  
some kind of syringe

- Medical insemination      A similar procedure as the one alluded to above with the exception that medical equipment and personal are utilized to insert the semen in close proximity to the cervix
- Sperm donor baby      Refers to a child conceived via the use of artificial insemination, where sperm obtained by masturbation from either a known or anonymous source is utilized.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter reviews literature that is relevant to the current study. The review starts by examining background literature relating to the various options available to lesbian women who wish to fall pregnant as well as the history pertaining to this relatively new family form. The subsequent literature review is organized in terms of dominant themes which appeared within various literature sources. Cognisance was made of the fact that most literature relating to lesbian parenting generally and lesbian parenting of sperm donor children specifically focused almost exclusively on the challenging nature of such a role. Little mention was made of positive aspects associated with being a lesbian parent. This chapter will also review social constructionist theory in relation to this topic ó specifically in terms of the construction of the family.

#### 2.1 Background

It was not so very long ago that the phrase 'lesbian mom' was largely unheard-of, as the picture of lesbians being non-procreative individuals opposed the dominant image of the procreative heterosexual mother. The possibilities and opportunities of parenthood for lesbians have, however, increased through changes in legislation and increased availability of reproductive technology. Available options for lesbian women in terms of artificial insemination now include not only self insemination but also clinic-based insemination or the use of IVF (In Vitro Fertilization) should the other two options be consistently unsuccessful (Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise, 2002). Sperm to be utilized can be obtained from numerous sources including an ex male partner, friend, an anonymous donor (sperm bank) or an acquaintance or family member of the prospective mother's partner (Dempsey, McNair,



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insemination is a relatively simple procedure in which sperm is introduced through the use of a syringe as opposed to intercourse

(Smith, 2005). Participants in this particular study made use of medical insemination with sperm obtained from an anonymous source (sperm bank). According to Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise (2002), the majority of lesbian women prefer this method of impregnation firstly, due to their belief in the safety of the procedure of sperm screening because storage removes any risk of sexually transmissible infection via the insemination process. Secondly, Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise (2002) continue to highlight that this method is reportedly chosen over others due to donor anonymity as opposed to negotiating insemination with a known man which often entails personal and legal complications.

Lubbe (2007) outlines how a number of difficulties and societal changes within South Africa have altered understandings of what a traditional family unit is. Lubbe (2007) refers to challenges that include divorce, migrant fathers, the impact of HIV/AIDS as well as crime and unemployment and how such challenges have largely forced the family unit to diversify. New family forms now include arrangements ranging from child headed households to single parent households where there is no male figure present (Lubbe, 2007). Lubbe (2007) argues that as little as half a century ago, such arrangement would not have been acknowledged as being legitimate families. Knoesen as cited in Lubbe (2007, pg. 266) indicated that prevailing definitions of the family unit are being replaced by more inclusive definitions that take into account (amongst other factors) the role of culture, gender, history, sexual orientation, autonomy and religion in determining family relationships. The lesbian family is obviously one type of non-traditional family form that has significantly challenged society's conventional concept of what a family means.

homosexuality and gay and lesbian parenting has been  
country, societal attitudes in general appear to have  
remained somewhat negatively staid. Croucher (2002) indicates that while there have been  
both positive and negative responses to the legal changes relating to the rights of lesbians  
within South Africa, religious leaders and many African authorities in particular have made  
their disapproval of lesbian relationships and their newly appointed rights to marry and have  
children overt. It would appear that many members of the general South African public share  
and support these disapproving discourses and that such judgements frequently become  
aggressive in nature. Mufweba (2003) reports that corrective rape and assault of lesbian  
women is a daily occurrence within Johannesburg townships. Mufweba (2003) states that  
such acts of violence are attempts to force lesbians to change their sexual orientation.  
Harrison (2009) also refers to the prevalence of hate crimes within South Africa and indicates  
that lesbians are increasingly under threat particularly within the townships where  
homosexuality is "largely taboo" (p. 1). Lubbe (2007) examined a number of media articles  
and concluded that societal bias relating to lesbianism also continues to remain evident in the  
media. Examples that Lubbe (2007) provides in this regard include newspaper articles,  
television discussions relating to the family unit and the way that the family is typically  
depicted in school textbooks as well as magazine articles.

Blake (2005) alludes to the fact that whilst modern culture has evolved from the days when  
parenting was considered the sole right of heterosexual couples within the bounds of legal  
matrimony, general public opinion within America has not followed suite and  
heteronormativity remains evident. Blake (2005) continues to state that although lesbian  
parenting has received some positive media coverage, the American society appears to  
"tenaciously hang onto the heterosexual image" of the family unit (p. 1). Such a societal



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the South African context which is traditional and still being prominent, powerful, visual, and valued

(Lubbe, 2007, p. 2). Although legal and political progress has been made, Morgan and Wieringa (2005) state that negative thoughts and expressions towards homosexuals are still prominent within the heterosexual society. Lesbians are hence forced to identify themselves with respect to certain overt discourses, namely "normal" heterosexual sexuality (embracing concepts of morality and normalness) and "perverted" sexuality, which is literally anything besides that. Heterosexuality is seen as being normal and morally correct and consequently homosexuality is viewed as perverted, unnatural and morally wrong. Lubbe (2007) documents that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, although researchers began to show an interest in homosexuality, most of this early research focused on either gay identity issues or homophobia. Lubbe (2007) continues to outline that little attention was given to lesbian parenting options and/or their experiences.

Generally, as alluded to by Almack (2006) literature supports the fact that lesbian parenting via sperm donation is on the rapid increase internationally. Society still, however, even given the growing prevalence of gay headed families does not seem to want to accept homosexuals as parents (Cleveland-Hall, 2005). Such negativity must surely spread and contaminate the experiences of lesbian women raising children in general and children resulting from sperm donations in particular. As outlined by Lubbe (2007), it is not challenging to imagine that the segregation and discrimination that surrounds gay life will not also exert a negative influence on gay family life.

The theoretical framework of this particular project is social constructionism. Social constructionism is a theoretical framework of knowledge which attempts to understand how groups and individuals interpret and participate in their reality. It encompasses the way social realities are created and naturalised by people and how reality is hence socially created (Burr, 2003; Maines, 2000). This view therefore gives discourse a central role in the construction of both the self and the surrounding world. The self is not viewed as being a unified or singular unit but rather as being fluid and versatile (Fay, 1996; Kitzinger, 1987). As such the identity process is seen as being a perpetual negotiation, where both personal and social variables play a role in one's experience of the world and individual identity (Cerulo, 1997). With regards to the sexuality of parents and the structure of the 'family', the social constructionist framework does not view such experiences as being static and natural, but rather that these experiences are specific to surrounding sociopolitical, historical and cultural contextual factors. Social constructionism has frequently been adopted by those interested in issues of subjectivity, identity, personal and social change as well as power relations (Burr, 2003).

Hepburn (2003) explains that social constructionism incorporates a historical and cultural variables in terms of understanding how society functions. Established discourses concerning sexuality unconsciously force individuals to identify themselves with regard to such discourses, namely 'normal' heterosexual sexuality being morally correct and 'abnormal' sexuality being morally incorrect. Burr (2003) stipulates that discourses can be viewed as 'a set of meanings, images, metaphors, stories, statements and representations that in some way work together to produce a specific version of events' (p. 86). She continues to outline that discourses refer to a type of depiction of an event, group or individual and how there may be a number of different discourses each with a different story to tell about the object or subject

presenting it to the world. Burr (2003) argues that there are

discourses surrounding a person's life. Combining identities

offered by such various discourses can either be done with ease or with difficulty. For

example, a young person entering tertiary education may effortlessly adopt the identity of

student because the prevalent discourses of education as well as youthfulness have many

commonalities. She compares this example with that of a middle-aged individual who

chooses to return to university at a mature age and after many years of employment and

highlights how there may be difficulties here with the adoption of the identity of student due

to the fact that the usual discourses surrounding "middle age" do not typically fit with those

attached to the identity "student". In much the same way "usual" societal discourses with

regards to parenting do not readily adapt to the "different", "new" or "atypical" family form

created by lesbians utilizing sperm donation. Discourses surrounding parenting may typically

entail such themes as marriage between a man and woman, heterosexuality, having a known

father figure and words such as "mom and dad". Discourses surrounding lesbian parenting in

comparison may include such themes as homosexuality, having an unknown father figure and

words such as "mom and mom". In fact discourses around "family" often clash with those

around "homosexuality" because "family" is so strongly associated with "heterosexuality".

The framework indicates ultimately that language structures a person's experience and

informs what individuals take being a person to mean (Burr, 2003). Such discourses

concerning a person's sexual orientation surely also govern what is considered a normal or

abnormal family as lesbian families created by sperm donation pose a threat to the dominant

heterosexual norm (Burr, 2003, Hepburn, 2003).

Numerous discourses, therefore, surround any object, individual, group or practice and each

discourse aims to construct it in a different way. Each discourse magnifies certain aspects,

er of implications with regards to things being  
way. Knoesen (2003) outlines the four dominant  
discourses within society that act to oppose both homosexuality and same-gendered families.  
The first relates to procreation which describes marriage as an institution created for the  
purpose of procreation. The second is that of religion which views homosexuality as a moral  
sin. The final two discourses relate to the disintegration of the family and the negative impact  
that such families will have on the healthy development of children.

Vorster (2003) states that social constructionism emerged from a type of "radical doubt" (p.  
78) and acted as a form of social condemnation. It asked that commonly accepted beliefs or  
understandings that received their merit through observation be suspended. In other words it  
challenges the bias of conventional knowledge and promotes the notion that assumptions  
about reality arise through discourse. Homosexuality is usually represented in language as  
"different", "perverted", "odd" and "sick". The power that such words hold and the related  
emotional and psychological challenges that they must inflict cannot be overestimated. Even  
the term homophobia can be critiqued as being challenging and insulting. Such discourse  
involves location of the "problem" within the homosexual individual so that they are depicted  
as having a "condition". It could be argued that a more accurate reality would be to locate  
such a "problem" within the heterosexist society and its tendency to expect all individuals to  
conform with little tolerance for individuality that is not sanctioned as being "normal".

Clarke's (2002) journal article entitled, "Sameness and Difference in Research on Lesbian  
Parenting", outlines how most psychological research on lesbian parenting highlights  
similarities and differences between lesbian parents and heterosexual parents. The authors  
work is based on a social constructionist framework and highlights the influence of political



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g lesbian parenting to heterosexual parenting. Clarke  
al constructionist viewpoint, "truth" is not based on

empirical evidence but rather on social processes and political agendas. Clarke (2002) argues that such an understanding of "truth" means that it's possible for homosexual parenting to be constructed in a number of different ways and that each may represent a version of "truth" or reality depending on one's unique perspective.

Clark (2002) identifies four specific dimensions of difference that inform such research and resultant understanding of lesbian parenting. Clark's (2002) work does not focus on which of the four constructions of lesbian parenting are "correct" but rather explores what purposes such constructions may serve, including how they are used to either challenge or support the suitability of lesbian women to parent (Clark, 2002).

The first dimension that Clarke (2002) identifies is the construction of lesbian parenting as being no different from heterosexual parenting. Such work emphasises the similarities between heterosexual and lesbian parents. Clarke (2002) maintains that such a construction of lesbian parenting actually reinforces, however, through its focus on similarities, the notion that difference is deviant and that consequently sameness is advantageous. The second construction of lesbian parenting constructs the lesbian parent as being different. Clarke (2002) argues that such work promotes the construction of the lesbian as being pathological and that this pathology may have a negative impact on the family unit, the children and traditional family values. This construction promotes the notion that difference is ultimately bad. The third construction is that lesbian parenting is different from heterosexual parenting and transformative. Clarke (2002) indicates that most of this work is found mostly in lesbian feminist work. Such work frequently accuses others of denying the differences of lesbian

like lesbians more invisible. Such constructs aim to parenting and rather aim for transformation of parenting and families as opposed to equality with heterosexual mothers and fathers (Clarke, 2002). The fourth construction of lesbian parenting is one that places lesbian parenting as different from heterosexual parenting purely because of oppression. Clarke (2002) stipulates once more that this sort of construction merely emphasises difference but here the difference isn't merely chosen but is in fact socially imposed through oppression. This construction postulates that lesbian and heterosexual families are exactly the same which enables lesbians to fit into society and constructions of family and that it is their sexual orientation that rather leads to oppression. This understanding assumes that this oppression would disappear if society was transformative and lesbian parenting normalised. Clarke (2002) suggests that whether or not lesbian parents are actually different from or similar to heterosexual parents is not a particularly interesting aspect to research. She believes rather that the ways in which lesbian parents are constructed as being different as well as the political purposes that are served by such constructions are far more salient.

Berkowitz (2008) contends that 'feminist scholarship' (p. 3) is vital in order to provide marginalized families such as lesbian families with a voice. Berkowitz (2008) states that a feminist analysis of lesbian planned families can help to deconstruct the 'essentialized notions of motherhood' (p. 4) which bring about harm and political disapproval to such families that don't fit within the 'ideological code' (p. 4). Berkowitz (2008) continues to write about how motherhood is to a lesser extent being written about as a natural phenomenon and that it is increasingly being viewed as being located in a societal context. She argues that even though there has been a shift away from the naturalisation of motherhood, straight women who choose not to have children are viewed as a threat to the so



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ise, Berkowitz (2008) highlights the paradox that while  
e to remain childless are seen in some way to be

resisting the ideal heterosexual code, gay women opting for motherhood also represent a similar yet contradictory challenge to established family norms. It seems that unless women follow the path prescribed by society in terms of expectations, ones choices are bound to be frowned upon.

Berkowitz (2008) is of the opinion that examining lesbian headed households more closely may throw light on how motherhood can be deconstructed when the definitions and practices of being a mother are distorted and no longer duplicate the ones associated with societies ideological code (p. 5). Dunne (2000) contends that when a feminist lens is employed to deconstruct motherhood, it is important to remember that dominant heterosexuality dictates that any alternatives to the norm are undesirable. Dunne (2000) points to research which has reportedly indicated that when women parent together, the absence of polarisation to inform traditional gender scripts allows for women to construct parenting with no rules, allowing them to construct new ways of mothering (p. 6). Dunne (2000) therefore highlights that lacking gendered prescriptions and rules for mothering, promotes a more imaginative parenting style to emerge. Interestingly this was the first positive account of lesbian parenting found during the literature review which may highlight a natural inclination even within the field of academics to presume that the lesbian parenting experience is primarily negative in comparison to the dominantly accepted heterosexual option.

Social constructionism has been heavily influenced by the work of the philosopher Michel Foucault and it is for this specific reason that this approach has frequently be termed Foucauldian (Burr, 2003, p. 63). Sawicki (1991) offers a Foucauldian analysis of



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ki (1991) discusses the negative critiques reproductive  
inists. For example, she describes Corea's *The Mother*

*Machine* as an extremely negative critique of reproductive technologies. This analysis views women's bodies as medically manipulated objects that are at the mercy of male doctors attempting to own the reproductive power over women. The critique maintains that the advertised choices that such medical technologies place on offer are nothing more than an illusion. The author continues to propose that the discourse of such options are more likely hiding the underlying procedure whereby women's bodies are being controlled by male doctors on an escalating basis. The Foucauldian perspective, however, as explained by Sawicki (1991) disagrees with this radical critique that new reproductive technologies are the result of a wish to possess and maintain control over women's bodies and in so doing own the rights of procreation which was previously associated with feminine power. The Foucauldian feminist perspective shifts from a condensed focus on dominant discourses surrounding medical fertility experts to a more inclusive account that includes these notions, but also incorporates various resistances resulting in the transformation of such practices over a period of time such as shifts in legislation allowing lesbian women equal rights to reproductive options. Reproductive technologies can therefore also be viewed as sites of possible resistance and lesbian women who utilize these options can be seen as challenging the dominant norms of heterosexist society by demanding equal access to reproductive technologies. When viewed in this manner, reproductive technologies may be viewed as enabling and not merely as part of a plan to control women's bodies (Sawicki, 1991). Sawicki (1991) sums up the facts that although reproductive technologies may threaten to exacerbate existing power structures, they also create sites for resistance and change. These new reproductive technologies may contribute towards weakening current understandings of motherhood and families and may furthermore create opportunities for justifying optional

man choosing to conceive by means of medical  
jecting new reproductive technologies, according to

Sawicki (1991) may not in fact assist women in making choices and adjusting power imbalances.

### **2.3 Challenges Relating to the Decision to Become Lesbian Parents and Conception**

Given that heterosexism and heterosexual parenting remains the dominant norm within the South African society, homosexuality and homosexual parenting is bound to be seen by such a majority as being "different" and "abnormal" in comparison to well accepted and traditional interpersonal practices. Almack (2006) illustrates that lesbian parents are aware that their choice to have children is, from a societal perspective, seen as being "outward" (p. 19). Almack (2006) argues that in making a decision to parent via the utilization of sperm donation, such homosexual couples are negatively influenced by expectations associated with the responsibilities of motherhood. As such Almack (2006) states that lesbian mothers may feel that they need to work harder than heterosexual mothers to show or prove that their child's welfare is not being jeopardized in any way. Almack (2006) goes on to indicate that when contemplating to parent a child via the method of sperm donation, lesbians are generally faced with a number of "needs statements" (p. 7) that form an essential and challenging part of homosexual parenthood. Such needs according to Almack (2006) include, firstly, the societal expectation that children have a right to know their genetic origins which is in most countries (including South Africa) constrained. Secondly, Almack (2006) states that there is the view or opinion that a child needs a male father figure with the connected concern that fatherless families in some way pose a danger for the stability of society as a whole due to the absence of a traditional disciplinarian or control figure. Lastly, according to Almack (2006) there is societal pressure relating to a child's need for stability



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is reported by Almack (2006) to be linked to the idea of with biological parents within this legal unity. Surely then

it would be reasonable to assume that parenting as lesbians would entail the same as well as additional challenges in comparison to heterosexual parents? Surely the discrimination that remains prevalent towards homosexuals as individuals and within romantic relationships also seeps into the realm of their parenting experiences?

According to Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise (2002), lesbians who were planning to be parents expected significantly more hardships for themselves as opposed to those anticipated by heterosexual parents. These authors indicate that common challenges described by lesbian mothers include fears and actual experiences of prejudice, social rejection, discrimination at schools, lack of acceptance by family members, an absence of legal recognition and little social support on the whole. They further alluded to lesbian parents feeling as if they were "under scrutiny" (p. 47), and feeling as if they were required to prove themselves to a larger extent than heterosexual parents. Blake (2005) supports the findings of Dempsey et al. (2002), by stating that there are a number of negative assumptions regarding lesbian parenting including that the home environment is immoral, that the parents sexuality may confuse their children, that homosexuality will negatively affect the children's peer relationships and that lesbians may sexually abuse their children. Blake (2005) continues to outline that lesbian mothers generally face two broad issues that heterosexual women are not subjected to in their experience of mothering - that being homophobia and societal attitudes. Homophobia is a term which describes anti-homosexual experiences which, according to Hepburn (2003) result from individual pathology and not phenomena included in social structures and relations. Blake (2005) states that these two issues (societal attitudes and homophobia) "elicit self-doubt, mixed feelings and a sense that a prospective lesbian mother



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heterosexual counterpart (p. 9). One can imagine, as

h/pull scenario depicted here where the mothering

aspect of a lesbian woman may be accepted by the "straight" community and the gay side of a lesbian woman may be accepted by the lesbian community but the lesbian parent as a whole person may often not be acknowledged or supported completely by either side.

According to Smith (2005), lesbian parents—particularly those who have had children via sperm donation, display a considerable preoccupation with the secret relating to their child's genetic father and the emotional costs relating to this secrecy. Smith (2005) argues that one's genetic heritage contributes to one's sense of identity. Smith (2005) continues to state that to inform a child created via donor insemination that their father is and always will be unknown, denies them of a vital part of themselves which can impact on their sense of self. Smith (2005) indicates that this may result in emotions such as guilt in the lesbian parent. Smith (2005) further suggests that the process and identity of the donor is kept a secret from family, friends and the child, for a variety of different reasons which is also seen in the adoption process. Aside from legal reasons relating to anonymity, a further reason for secrecy, according to Smith (2005) relates to some lesbian parents' conscious or unconscious objections to the societal idea that children need to be raised by heterosexual parents to ensure optimal development. As stated by Smith (2005), should lesbian parents subscribe to this notion, it may be felt that they are also supporting the idea that biological parenting is superior to any alternative. She takes a very strong position on this challenge and states that the most disturbing aspect relating to donor insemination is the issue of secrecy (relating to the method of conception, the identity of the father and the reasons for his eternal anonymity). It can be imagined that secrecy of this nature must be challenging and probably exerts negative pressures on the lesbian parents. As stated by Sky (1994):



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ate bonds, isolate, connect, and estrange. Secrets produce and affect coalitions, triangles, insiders and outsiders. Keeping a secret can make us feel powerful, superior, special and loyal ó or anxious, burdened, guilty and ashamed. (pg 9)

Almack (2006) claims that even though legislation in the UK changed with regards to allowing lesbians to choose artificial insemination, few maternal clinics actually changed their practice and as such frequently refused lesbians access to their services. Almack (2006) outlines that a major challenge in choosing artificial insemination was lesbian women's awareness that their children would never know who their father was and the associated guilt of depriving their child of that basic knowledge. Participants within Almack's study chose self insemination (SI) where the father was known as opposed to donor insemination (DI) where the father is anonymous. Although the participants were reportedly aware of the advantages of anonymous sperm donation such as disease screening and overt legal boundaries, they still felt that the importance of their child knowing who their father was held more weight. Almack (2006) indicates that for many lesbians however, SI is not an easy or possible option. Almack (2006) goes on to outline that aside from the advantages of DI referred to above, the practicalities of finding a man who is willing to donate sperm is not simple. Almack (2006) reports that participants described this process as being "incredibly difficult, time consuming, draining" (p. 10). Hence, according to Almack (2006) the reason why many choose the seemingly easier route of DI. One cannot fail to recognize, however, the long term challenges in which this choice could result. Guilt relating to the fact that children born via anonymous sperm donation will never know their true identities and that

...culty and emotional burden is a concern for many

## 2.4 Challenges Relating to the Practice of Parenting

Blake (2005) argues that lesbian parents generally don't experience the "skewed role balance" (p. 21) frequently seen in heterosexual couples as for the most part they earn relatively equal salaries, the household duties are more evenly divided as are other home related responsibilities. Although Blake (2005) suggests that alienation between the two partners of a lesbian couple is less common in comparison to a male/female partnership, the further complication or challenge is that only one member of the lesbian couple will be genetically related to their child. Whilst this challenge could possibly be present in lesbian headed families, one cannot automatically assume this to be the case considering the successful experience of many step parents of heterosexual or homosexual. Pelka (2005), however, also labels this reality as being one of the most significant emotional challenges facing lesbian couples who choose to have children via sperm donation. Interestingly, it was difficult to locate articles that focused on the actual practice of lesbian parenting within the home. This led me to assume that this area is probably not that significant in relation to their experience.

## 2.5 Challenges Relating to Social Supports

For heterosexual women, becoming a mother is generally a celebrated and positive occasion. For lesbian women, however, becoming a mother appears to be a difficult process and one which seems to not be viewed by society in a positive light. Almack (2006) alludes to the opposition or non-acceptance by family members as being one of the main sources of difficulty for lesbian mothers. Almack (2006) states that there appears to be a global anxiety relating to the diversity of family life and a concern over "what is happening to the family"

) goes on to outline that a powerful tool, that being the  
k, 2006, p. 6) seems to be utilized to repeatedly support  
and show bias for the traditional family unit, which remains constructed as the most  
appropriate type of family in terms of meeting children's developmental needs in an optimal  
fashion. Within societal discourses therefore, Almack (2006) states that homosexual parents  
are often portrayed as neglecting their children's needs and are further viewed to be selfishly  
prioritizing their own wants over and above the prospective child's. Such views appear to  
fuel societal resentment and anger and contribute to the lack of support for lesbian parents of  
sperm donor children.

McVannel Erwin (2007) indicates that lesbian mothers are often excluded from the wisdom  
and experiences shared and communicated by heterosexual mothers due to fear, disapproval  
and even hatred. McVannel Erwin (2007) also stipulates that guidance that is usually passed  
down from mothers to their daughters who have children is often not made available to  
lesbians who have been rejected by their biological families due their disapproval of their  
choices to bear children. It would make sense that these circumstances result in lesbian  
parents frequently needing to turn to professionals like Psychologists or Counsellors for  
support due to a lack of familial involvement or emotional encouragement. Blake (2005)  
notes the prevalent occurrence that lesbian individuals who come out about their sexuality  
to their families are rejected. Likewise, Blake (2005) stipulates that children of these  
individuals will in all probability have little if any involvement with their grandparents too.  
Mitchell (1995) cited in Laird & Green (1996) found that after reviewing a number of articles  
relating to planned lesbian families, that close and supportive family members often became  
detached and rejecting when their lesbian daughters expressed their intentions to fall  
pregnant. Literature points to a number of problems parents may have in accepting their



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child. Parks (1998) refers to a concern of parents of  
anxiety and lack of social acceptance. Laird & Green (1996)

report that parents and other family members of lesbian mothers express concern that they will not know what to inform other people regarding their grandchild's father's identity. Laird & Green (1996) also argue that introducing a child born to a lesbian family member may stimulate previously denied or ignored themes of homophobia to come to the fore.

## **2.6 Challenges relating to Interactions with Institutions**

Due to the ongoing widespread homophobia in society, it would appear that lesbians face a number of varied challenges both before and after they give birth to their children. While it is accepted that raising children is a challenging process for all women, lesbian mothers seem to also face additional stressors related to institutional homophobia. Nelson (1996) states that institutions can be conceptualized as "a web within which lesbian families exist and within which they struggle both to identify themselves and to achieve recognition and acknowledgement from others" (p. 29). Navarro (2006) contends that the problems faced by lesbian parents begin outside of their home environments when they are amongst society. She is of the opinion that it is within the surrounding society that lesbian parents have to contend with the most complex challenges, both for themselves as well as for their respective children. Navarro (2006) goes on to suggest that deliberateness is for the most part vital in formulating as well as sustaining some sense of family union within a global society that social and in some places legally does not recognize or accept the lesbian family. Hequembourg (2004) states that lesbian-headed families are faced with similar challenges as heterosexual families but differ too in that they encounter difficulties in terms of their interactions with institutions such as schools due to their "incompletely institutionalized status" (p. 739). Navarro (2006) suggests that schools can be a key source of anxiety for



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ng task finding schools that accept their family forms  
educational system is not comfortable in dealing with gay

and lesbian issues (p. 8).

Cleveland-Hall (2005) differentiates between an "achieved status" which is the social position individuals gain through actual activities and an "ascribed status" which is the position an individual occupies due to specific innate characteristics. Cleveland-Hall (2005) continues to argue that heterosexual women are automatically given both such statuses when they become mothers. In comparison, Cleveland-Hall (2005) indicates that lesbian parents do not naturally receive these statuses when they have children. From a social point of view, there appear to be a number of institutions that have some form of informal authority to recognize and acknowledge people as mothers. Such institutions appear to hold such power due to their association with moral teaching and standing, guidance in terms of societal rules and general respect that society holds for their influence. Schools and religious institutions seem particularly significant in this regard.

Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007) draw attention to the fact that there are few studies that effectively deal with issues experienced by lesbian parents and families in relation to their access to and experiences within educational and social services for their children. They continue to stipulate that there is however evidence within the small amount of available research that focuses on this topic that points to the fact that entry into the school system is taxing for non-normative families in general and for homosexual families in particular. Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007) report that lesbian parents commonly fear that their children will experience discrimination due to their parents' sexuality. Ryan & Martin (2000), are of the opinion that such fears are not all together groundless, as there are few school systems



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...nce, comfort level, or even willingness to address the transgender-parented familiesö (p. 207).

Casper (2003), while discussing the institutional challenges faced by lesbian mothers, argues that choosing to have a child may compel lesbian mothers to disclose their sexuality outside of the safety of their home environments and gay communities. Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007) also refer to how interaction with child related institutions like schools highlights the personal issue of visibility which is an intricate challenge in homosexual communities. Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007) continue to outline how the issue of visibility is concurrently liberating and intimidating. Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007), highlight the tendency of teachers to address lesbian parents as if they were in heterosexual households even though they know otherwise. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) state in this regard:

This lack of ability to see difference in sexual orientation is a mechanism of regulation that operates below a conscious refusal of Otherness. It is important for educators to understand, however, that when they render key aspects of a person's identity invisible, the recipient experiences a form of symbolic violence at a psychic level (p. 41).

Skattebol and Ferfolje (2007) go on to argue that a large degree of the political activism within homosexual communities intends to tackle the so called "symbolic violence that stems from this ontological denial" (p. 15) and hence alter the power difference between gay and heterosexual identities. Griffin (1991) states that in order to avoid such emotional challenges, lesbians learn to be somewhat skilled in terms of switching between visible homosexual and invisible heterosexual acts and that such performances are felt to be particularly necessary within institutions associated with their children. Doane (1987), for example, argues that

their true sexual identity in a particular context is too  
and to be heterosexual. Doane (1987) states this to be a  
common action amongst lesbian mothers. Doane (1987) further indicates that these  
performances of portraying a fake self are named as "passing", "playing it straight", or  
remaining "closeted" (p. 2). Such terms refer to the action of pretending to be someone that  
one is not. Doane (1987) states that this "is a strategy for achieving the necessary distance  
between oneself and one's image to avoid discrimination" (p. 2).

Obviously, as outlined by Cowan & Cowan (1992), all new mothers enter a foreign emotional  
territory when they become parents which entails numerous new duties including support and  
protection. Cowan & Cowan (1992) state that such a transitional phase can be experienced as  
a considerably stressful time. As Casper (2003) suggests however, this stress may be  
exaggerated for lesbian parents who may have witnessed or experienced homophobia  
directly. As such, Casper (2003) indicated that lesbian mothers may fear that their children  
may possibly have to suffer similar negative experiences which could be as distressing or  
even more distressing than experiencing homophobia oneself due to the need to protect their  
child from physical and emotional pain.

Within the lesbian household there is a typical composition of one or two parents who take up  
the responsibility for the routine day to day needs of the house and child, however, according  
to Skattebol and Ferfolje (2007) diversity in terms of this family structure is not rare. As  
previously discussed, the term "family" is more and more often being used to indicate  
something which is far broader and varied than the traditional relationships which are based  
upon the foundation of a heterosexual marriage. Such a shift in family formations globally  
necessitates significant shifts in the cognition of a number of childhood practitioners who



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that there is only one correct or acceptable family, that

## 2.7 Conclusion

It has already been noted that historically homosexuality has been pathologised as well as marginalized on a global basis, and that South Africa is no exception in this regard. The fact that homosexual marriages have now been legalized in South Africa and that changes in the Human Tissue Act now allow for all women including lesbians to make use of donor insemination implies a degree of societal acceptance for homosexuality. Regardless of changes in the constitution, lesbians who choose to become parents are challenging the heteronormative standards of society. Heteronormative standards continue to prevail on a powerful basis and exert discrimination on a conscious and unconscious level against those who are *different* and in relation to this research, against those who are homosexual. There remains a normalized notion of what constitutes a family within South Africa and this is a heteronormative construct. Lesbian parents are challenging the boundaries and exposing the heterosexist nature of society.

The literature review conducted for this research indicates a global increase in the number of lesbian families. Given the recent legal changes with regards to homosexuality, as alluded to above, it probably wouldn't be a large jump to predict a similar trend occurring within South Africa, regardless of the lack of local statistics. This relatively new family form points to the need for in-depth research into the experiences of being a lesbian parent generally and, more specifically, into the challenges such a role may entail given the heteronormative society within which such a family is embedded. Such an understanding would allow for the provision of well informed and relative support and/or psychotherapy. The literature further



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ive understanding of the lived experience of lesbian  
It due to inclination to hide one's sexual orientation.

The literature also indicates that there is a lack of local research and academic literature pertaining to this topic and that there is, therefore, a need to research and document the lived experiences of lesbian parents.

### 3.1 Research design and procedure

As this research project aims for depth rather than quantity of understanding, a qualitative, interpretivist approach has been chosen (Henning, 2004). Rowlands (2005) outlines that qualitative research is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of techniques that aim to describe, decode, translate and somehow come to terms with the meaning, rather than the measurement or frequency of phenomena (p. 81). Rowlands (2005) continues to state that whilst it is possible for qualitative research to be either positive or interpretive, interpretive research is based on the premise that knowledge is obtained through social constructions (p. 81) like discourse and commonly shared meaning. Interpretive research also recognizes the relationship between the researcher and that which is under investigation and the influence of such an interaction (Rowlands, 2005).

Interpretivist design is predominantly beneficial when one is aiming to access sensitive information which this particular study intends to do (Rowlands, 2005). This project aimed at exploring the participants' experiences through an analysis of their personal lives (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). As alluded to previously, qualitative researchers, argue that the world is socially formed and can therefore best be explained and understood through the examination and interpretation of meanings (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). By adopting the interpretive approach it is assumed that the participants' experiences are not objective with known properties or dimensions (Rowland, 2005, p. 83). Rather, it is believed that the world is interpreted by people within varied contexts (Rowlands, 2005). The interpretive approach is hence overtly suitable to this particular study. By selecting this



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le that subjectivity plays in personal experience and that  
measure and define with standard quantitative

instruments.

A case-study was the design of choice for this particular study. Case studies, according to White (2000) are inductive in nature in that they report on the particular as well as the specific and then attempt to relate that to the general and larger picture. The emphasis is on arriving at a complete account and an in-depth understanding of the constructs being studied, despite the small numbers of persons involved (Stuwig & Stead, 2001). This is consistent with the social constructionist theoretical framework of the presented research which emphasises detailed understandings of how groups and individuals interpret and participate in their reality.

Yin (1984) states that case studies are particularly useful when intending to explain or explore a specific situation or describe a certain phenomenon which this study intends to do. Yin (1984) continues to outline that the advantages of this method include its applicability to real-life human situations as well as its public accessibility in that case study results can relate easily and directly to the **lay** reader. Amongst other advantages of using a case study, considering one of the objectives of this research is to provide a reading resource to lesbian parents, the suitability of this design is apparent. According to White (2000) advantages of a case study also include the fact that it can be carried out by the single researcher due to its affordability. A case study is also time efficient in that it enables you to collect data and transcribe it in a relatively short period of time which is advantageous given the time restrictions within which I had to work. Choosing a case study was a necessity in a context where participants are difficult to come by which reduced the time I had available to conduct



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that sourcing lesbian parents to participate in this study, proved to be particularly challenging, points to the need to

hide ones identity in context of discrimination. This indicates, even before the commencement of the research the need for lesbian families to protect themselves.

According to White (2000), what is also significantly valuable about a case study is that it looks at the whole situation and the researcher has the opportunity of viewing the inter-relations and interpersonal dynamics amongst the research participants as they occur which gives the work a "reality" (p. 42). Such a reality includes the opportunity of viewing emotions and interpersonal dynamics as they occur.

A well known limitation of a case study, however, is the fact that generalization of results needs to be handled with particular caution. A case study design focuses on process more so than on outcomes, on context rather than on a specific variable and on investigation rather than on confirmation. Case studies are distinguished from other types of qualitative research in that they are thorough descriptions and analyses of a singular unit or restricted system like an individual or community. (Sharan Merriam cited in Henning, 2001).

### **3.2 Research Participants**

The researcher conducted two interviews with a lesbian couple who are parents of a 5 year old child conceived via sperm donation. Both parents are white, English speaking South African women who reside within the Durban area and come from relatively conservative, upper class, Christian families. They are 35 and 40 years of age. The participants have been together for 7 years. The decision to have a child was mutual. The decision of who should conceive first was based on the fact that one of them is older and hence had less of a time

I have provided each participant with a pseudo name.

referred to as 'Sue' whilst the non-biological mother will be referred to as 'Kim'. Their child will be referred to as 'Cate'. Both women are professionals with post graduate qualifications.

### 3.3 Method of data collection

This project aimed at exploring participants experiences through an analysis of personal experiences (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). In line with an interpretivist study, interviews were selected as being the most appropriate method of data collection. It was felt that interviews would provide a deeper and more authentic insight into lesbian parents' experiences as opposed to merely measuring attitudes, perceptions and beliefs in a quantitative fashion. According to Wisker (2001) interviews can provide both comprehensive information as well as interesting information that relates to context. In this case, unstructured or non-directive interviews were employed which are modelled on a conversation and therefore provide more in-depth data (Wisker, 2001). Terre Blanche & Durrheim (1999) indicate that implementing an interpretivist design is especially beneficial when attempting to access sensitive information which this study attempted to do. Kreuger (2003) alludes to the hazards of eliciting sensitive information via the examination of personal narratives as she outlines how personal narratives can frequently act to reinforce prevailing ideologies. Such an understanding therefore suggests that personal narratives derived during the interview process should be understood through interpretation, a view supported by Frizelle and Hayes (1999), and one which matches with the voice relational method of data analysis.



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read and signed a letter of consent (Appendix 1) prior to being interviewed together on two separate days approximately three weeks apart and each session was audio recorded. The first interview was two and a half hours long, while the second interview was one and a half hours long. The reason for the second interview was that it was believed that a time lag between the two meetings would allow the participants to reflect further upon experiences shared during the first interview and hence provide an opportunity to elaborate further upon such experiences. It was also believed that a second interview may provide opportunity to relate information which may have been omitted from the initial interview. It further allowed the researcher to ask clarifying questions. In this way the first interview formed the basis of a later and more in depth interview (White, 2000). The initial interview was commenced by asking a broad question as recommended by Burns and Grove (1999). The question asked was "Could you please describe for me your experience of being lesbian parents?". My role as researcher thereafter was to encourage the subjects to continue talking and sharing using techniques such as nodding or gesticulating or verbalising to indicate interest (Burns and Grove 1999). The second interview was commenced by stating "Some time has passed since our first interview together and I was wondering if you could share your subsequent thoughts since that time".

### **3.4 Method of data analysis**

The voice-centred relational method of data analysis was used to analyse the fully transcribed interviews. This method holds at its heart the idea that human beings are embedded in a complex network of intimate as well as extended social relations (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998). Mauthner and Doucet (1998) indicate that the emphasis is placed on understanding individuals within their social contexts and on investigating the duality of social actions. The

process of transforming the personal lives of the research  
while at the same time acknowledging the researcher as a  
co-creator of knowledge. The voice-centred relational method generally entails four  
separate readings of the data which focus on different but interacting aspects.

The first reading is known as 'reading for the plot and for our responses to the narrative'  
(Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p.126). Here, the researcher firstly attempted to understand and  
elicit the general plot and themes in the participants account of their experiences as lesbian  
parents. During the reading the researcher also 'read' for herself in the text in that she  
reflected on her own experiences and background in relation to the participants and was also  
aware of her feelings and emotional responses to the participants. Such a process of  
reflection allows for awareness of one's own views and assumptions and how such views and  
assumptions may influence interpretation of the participants' accounts (Mauthner & Doucet,  
1998).

The second reading is called 'reading for the voice' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p. 128).  
Here, the researcher focused on how the participants felt about the experience of lesbian  
parenting of sperm donor children by analysis of the use of pronouns. Reading for such  
personal pronouns allows for the parents voices and underlying understanding to be heard as  
opposed to the danger of the researcher imposing pre-set categories of analysis and  
understanding from an individual point of reference and from literature review.

The third reading is a 'reading for relationships' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p. 131). This  
phase looked for how participants spoke about their interpersonal relationships with others  
such as partners, relatives and other social networks (the school setting, religious groups,



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ends etc), which is important within the social

The final reading is called 'placing people within cultural contexts and social structures' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p. 132) and during this reading the researcher attempted to locate the participants' experiences within the wider political and cultural context surrounding their lives.

Once all four readings had been completed, findings were integrated and written into a comprehensive and coherent whole. The voice-centred relational method allowed for multiple readings of the transcribed interviews which allowed for a deeper and richer understanding of how the participants experience lesbian parenting.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

As outlined by Babbie (1995) social research is typically associated with a degree of intrusion into people's lives due to the disruption of the subject's normal activities of daily living. Furthermore, such research can be threatening and/or personally intrusive due to the fact that private information is often required to be revealed to strangers – as is the case with this particular research. Babbie (1995) states that it is for these reasons that participation needs to be voluntary and unforced. The lesbian couple interviewed for the purpose of this study were willing volunteers. As recommended by Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999), the nature of the dissertation as well as its purpose and goals were clearly explained to the two participants. This firstly occurred verbally prior to interviewing and secondly such information was briefly outlined in the consent form. Furthermore, it was explained to the participants exactly how the information would be gathered and interpreted and the couple were both informed that they would be allowed to have full access to the dissertation upon its completion.



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required to provide their informed consent (see  
ed. This consent form highlighted all necessary and

important ethical implications.

Babbie (1995) notes that research should never injure the people who are being studied. In this instance, such an ethical consideration refers primarily to the possibility of psychological or emotional harm. Revealing personal information is at the very minimum likely to make people feel uncomfortable (Babbie, 1995). The participants were hence advised that they would be able to make use of the free Student Counselling Centre at the University of KwaZulu Natal should they find the research process disturbing in any way (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). In this regard, ongoing tact and sensitivity was continually upheld and reflected upon throughout the research project. It is further noted that ethical considerations needed to take place regularly during the project, from proposal writing up to the dispersing of such research. Regular supervisory consultation and discussion was subsequently utilized throughout the entire research project as recommended by Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999).

Anonymity, according to Babbie (1995) is also a vital concern in the protection of the participant's interests and welfare. All raw data obtained, personal details and audio tapes were securely stored. Only the researcher has access to these. It was thoroughly outlined to the participants that the results are not completely confidential as they would be documented within the research, but their anonymity was assured through no use of specific identification details as well as through the use of pseudonyms. Post analysis, interpretations will be fed back to the participants via means of a feedback session and copies of the project will be made available to the participants.



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the ethics of research to take cognizance of both the research as well as of the ethics relating to knowledge relations. An important question to continually reflect upon is whether or not the researcher is able to represent a group to which they do not belong, as once the participants accounts have been interpreted and documented through an external lens, they are no longer those of the participants but rather become second hand subjective descriptions. In this regard it is important that the researcher acknowledges her position in relation to the research participants and furthermore makes overt to them the aim of recording, interpreting and documenting their accounts (Rohleder and Gibson, 2006).

Lastly, the sociopolitical objectives of the study were communicated. Specifically, it was expressed that the aims of this particular research were to contribute towards filling the knowledge gap surrounding this relatively new family form within South Africa. In so doing, it was hoped to not only provide a valuable educational resource to potential lesbian parents and members of the health professions but also to deconstruct the concept of homosexual abnormality and heterosexual normality especially in relation to parenting and hence contribute towards a more democratic and ethical discourse.

### **3.6 Reliability and Validity**

Lincoln and Guba (1985), as cited in Whitemore, Chase & Mandle (2001) describe the criteria for testing the validity and reliability of all research. As such, they translated quantitative criteria into qualitative terminology. These translated criteria have remained the vital criteria used to assess qualitative studies and as such this research project has attempted to adhere to them. Lincoln & Guba (1985) as cited in Whitemore et al (2001) translated

nal validity to transferability, reliability into  
nfirmability.

Whitemore et al. (2001), however, argues that there are difficulties with these criteria because although theoretically sound, their practical application is reportedly questionable.

Whitemore et al. (2001) have subsequently argued for an integrated system in terms of qualitative research validity and reliability. The result being the detection of primary and secondary validity and reliability criteria. The authors outline that these primary criteria refer to credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity. Secondary validity and reliability criteria allude to explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity. The authors explain that whilst all primary criteria are essential for validity and reliability, secondary criteria will be necessitated based upon the epistemological positions of the research. Due to the fact that this study maintains a critical theorist perspective, the secondary validity and reliability criteria required include sensitivity, explicitness and vividness according to Whitemore et al. (2001). The following questions for primary and secondary validity and reliability criteria were subsequently used in this study.

#### *Primary Criteria*

1. **Credibility:** do the results of the research reflect the experience of participants in a believable fashion? The researcher was careful in terms of making an accurate interpretation of the data via an adherence to the participants' actual words which was also facilitated by the voice-centred relational method of data analysis.
2. **Authenticity:** does the representation of perspective display awareness to the small variations in the voices of both research participants? By means of the voice-centred



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ysis, the researcher was able to explore and explain  
red within the participant's narratives. At the same time,  
this particular method further promoted specific observations to emerge from the two  
participants and different experiences were allowed to be explored.

3. Criticality: does the whole research course of action show evidence of critical evaluation? This research process entailed regular supervision which facilitated critical appraisal. The reading for 'reader's response' during analysis allowed for the researcher to evaluate her own reactions to the participants' narratives, prompting the researcher to be critical of any possible biases emanating from personal factors.
4. Integrity: does the research reflect recursive and repetitive checks of validity? This process was ensured once again through the supervision process and through the 'reader response' section of data analysis.

#### *Secondary Criteria*

1. Sensitivity: has the research been conducted in such a way that demonstrates sensitivity to human, social and cultural contexts? The research was conducted in a familiar setting to promote comfort and a sense of security, ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the process and the researcher was cautious in terms of the potential negative effect that the research may have on the participants.
2. Explicitness: have any methodological decisions, interpretations, and/or investigator biases been addressed? Methodological decisions related to this research have been outlined and warranted in the methodology section. The application of the voice-



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analysis is also outlined and justified and any researcher

dealt with through via the reader's response section of

analysis, as well as through consistent collaboration with a supervisor.

3. Vividness: have thick and faithful descriptions been portrayed with clarity? The researcher is of the opinion that such descriptions have been depicted in this study as will by the substantial number and frequency of participant quotes utilized during the data analysis and interpretation.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The transcripts that were analysed were comprised of very rich accounts of the lived experiences of the two lesbian women that participated in this particular study. The use of the voice-centred relational method was utilized which attempts to analyze and unpack the data through the process of four separate readings. The four readings can be viewed as separating the obtained information into four broad themes. It must be realized, however, that most of the themes do not fit definitively within any one specific reading but rather flow across the readings and as such it was challenging to compartmentalize information neatly into one particular reading analysis. This illustrates just how complex and multifaceted the data and experiences of lesbian parents are and how various interpretations can subsequently be made (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) explain that any interpretation can occur in a number of diverse ways and that all research contains both biases and principles relating to the study's aims and the researcher's individual positions. This particular research has chosen to analyse a few dominant themes thoroughly, as opposed to a descriptive analysis that could cover a broader variety of themes. Although the chosen themes were elected due to their recurrent presence in transcribed data, the researcher is aware that the choice of such themes may also have been impacted on through her own personal, theoretical and political responses (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

#### 4.1.1 Reader response

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) explain that the first reading allows the researcher to place herself with her own personal narrative in relation to the research participants. The researcher reads the obtained narratives with attention to how she is responding both emotionally and cognitively to the participant(s) within the study. The purpose of this process is to obtain some control over the greyness or vagueness between the participants' narratives and the researchers' interpretations of such narratives. To elaborate, I am a white, heterosexual, educated and economically advantaged female and therefore am similar and different to the participants whom I interviewed. I needed to be particularly reflective of my role in a study of homosexual women because of the likelihood that I would respond from my entrenched experience of heterosexuality. Rohleder and Gibson (2007) indicate that from an ethical point of view it is vital to acknowledge that my positioning may have sensitized me, even if subconsciously, to a particular reading and hence interpretation of the script.

This was a challenging section of the write up for the researcher for a number of reasons. Firstly it required personal reflection which can be experienced as quite intimidating. Such feelings made me acutely aware of how vulnerable the participants in this study must have felt. Furthermore, the processes forced me to become aware of and analyse my own preconceptions and assumptions around homosexuality and lesbian parenting. This was particularly difficult for me due to my personal closeness to the topic as I have a lesbian sister who is interested in creating a family via sperm donation. I found myself feeling somewhat offended and angered by the realization of how staunchly influenced all experience is by the heteronormative standard. I was subsequently extremely sensitive and empathetic in terms of the stories of the participants as their accounts were relayed with such depth of emotion I

but also related to their accounts because I am so acutely  
regards to having a family as a homosexual woman  
within South Africa. I, however, had to be careful that I was not, because of my own  
positioning and experiences, over sensitive to the challenges of these parents. My supervisor  
consistently reminded me of the importance of not only focusing on the challenges and  
difficulties of these women. She encouraged me to also be aware of their positions of power  
and resistance within a wider context of heteronormativity. In addition, I was reminded to be  
vigilant for positive experiences so as not to run the risk of pathologising the experience of  
same-sex parenting.

As such, I found myself entering the interview process with these considerations in mind. In  
accord, it was assumed that emotions representing strength may also come to the fore, such as  
anger and resentment. The most prominent emotions displayed by the participants, however,  
were that of overt sadness and a sense that both women, despite attempts at the contrary, were  
extremely vulnerable to criticism and isolation. This in turn made me aware that perhaps the  
positioning of myself and my supervisor represented societies incorrect construction of  
lesbians generally and lesbian parents in particular. We may incorrectly assume that they are  
strong and resilient due to years of practice in terms of building resilience within a  
discriminatory context when in fact such continual exposure to judgment may actually serve  
to wear them down.

#### *4.1.2 Reading for general themes*

This reading is the second element of reading one and was concerned with exploring the main  
plots and sub-plots that emerged in the participants' accounts of their experiences. During  
this reading I was vigilant for recurrent images, words, metaphors and contradictions that

oucet, 1998). After repeated readings of the transcript such themes appeared to be offshoots of an overpowering

plot that lesbian parenting is a particularly challenging experience. The three major emerging themes were:

- Difficulties of one partner not being biologically related to the child
- Fears and concerns for their child
- Secrecy

Taken together these three themes form the emotional backdrop for the rest of the analysis. These themes illustrate that negotiating being lesbian mothers has challenging and difficult dimensions for Kim and Sue.

#### *4.1.2.1 Difficulties of one partner not being biologically related to the child*

Both parents felt that Kim not being biologically related to Cate presented a significant challenge to the parenting process. As Kim is not genetically related to Cate, she appeared to feel most strongly about this issue. She stated the following:

She is not mine and that is reinforced a lot in society because essentially and mostly legally Sue is her biological parent in every sense of the word. Passport, signing for operations, even signing a consent form that she can go into the gym with me, it has to be done by Sue. I will never feel like a parent in the true sense of the word, and it's hard, and it's hard for both of us. Cate calls me her stepmom and I see that as my role but at the same time I am acutely aware that she is not my flesh and blood and I was not directly part of bringing her into the world.

s statement reflecting the negative impact that not being  
d on her as a parent. She also adds at a later stage, "I  
always felt like an outsider," indicating her experience is one of perceived exclusion in terms  
of the family unit. Sue during the second interview stated:

Kim not being biologically connected is hard. I thought maybe if she had a child of  
her own one day, she would know what it was like to truly be a mother because with  
that understanding comes a whole lot of unconditional stuff that you cannot explain to  
anybody. And it is that that allows you to cope with a child when you know your  
child is difficult. Your child isn't part of your partner and your partner isn't part of  
your child even though you desperately want them to be, they aren't going to be.

The use of the words "truly be a mother" here, indicate how Sue may also not view Kim as  
being an authentic parent due to the lack of a genetic bond. In other words, she has  
internalized the commonly held view that you can never be a true parent unless you are  
biologically related to the child in your care. Hence, both Sue and Kim are describing this as  
being a significant difficulty within their experience of lesbian parenting.

Whilst both parents also acknowledged that this situation is not unique to gay parenting in  
that step parents in heterosexual families probably feel the same way, they did, however,  
again reflect on how all their problems in comparison are exacerbated by surrounding  
negative discourses, lack of support and isolation which heterosexual families may not have  
to contend with.



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g related to Cate formally also exerted an influence on  
role in Cate's life. She shared the following in this

regard:

It's hurtful though the way things work, you know. I mean, I will be at a family function in the queue for food and someone will say "oh, go and find Sue so she can dish up for Cate", like, hello, what am I, chopped liver? I mean, I spend just as much time with Cate as Sue and I am as capable of dishing up as she is.

Kim appeared very angry and hurt when relating this scenario and her view seems to express an opinion that time and effort spent with a child should count in terms of gaining acceptance as a parent and one's competence within such a role. Sue responded to Kim by stating that she felt this example was just a further reflection of societal homophobia as opposed to non-acceptance of Kim's role in Cate's life. Literature, however, does point to society constructing lesbian parenting as being a negative and irresponsible choice, and as such one can anticipate how such a construction may play out against Kim in terms of societal acceptance of her legitimate role as a co-parent. In this regard Almack (2006) stipulates that there is a large amount of societal pressure promoting optimal stability for a child. Such stability is, according to Almack (2006) linked to the concept of marriage and the presence of both biological parents within a child's life. Obviously, in the sperm donor baby scenario it is not possible to involve the father of the child even if the lesbian mother wished to do so. In relation to literature from Almack (2006), this would automatically label the lesbian family unit and the context it provides a child with as being "unstable" in comparison to a heterosexual family where both parents are ideally present and actively involved. Ironically



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heterosexuals, but is clearly seen as deviant when

#### *4.1.2.2 Fears and concerns for their child*

Kim and Sue's fears and concerns for Cate revolved around two prominent themes. The first being the possible impact of Cate not being able to know who her father is and the second related to the impact of secondary discrimination from society with regards to having lesbian parents.

In relation to the first fear, society may contribute to exacerbate such concerns. Almack (2006) states that when making the decision to become a parent of a child via the method of sperm donation, lesbians are required to contend with many "needs statements" (p. 7) that form an important part of the challenges relating to homosexual parenthood. Such needs according to Almack (2006) include, firstly, the societal expectation that children have a right to information about who their genetic parents are. Secondly, Almack (2006) states that there is the opinion that a child needs a male father figure which is connected to the concern that fatherless families in some way pose a danger for the stability of society as a whole due to the absence of a traditional disciplinarian or control figure. Almack (2006) further outlines that a major challenge in choosing artificial insemination is the awareness that children will never know who their biological father is and the connected guilt of depriving a child of such personally relevant knowledge. Participants within Almack's study (2006) subsequently chose self insemination (SI) where the father was known as opposed to donor insemination (DI) where the father is anonymous. Sue initially chose the same route for the same reason but was forced to change her mode of conception as the father who she originally selected and who willingly agreed, passed away prior to her impregnation.



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...ing to Cate not knowing who her father is. Apparently  
 ...t his identity is his general appearance, eye colour etc,

his race, his medical status, preferred hobbies and his qualification and/or occupation. Sue indicated that when they were on holiday Cate was asked by another child where her 'daddy' was, to which she apparently responded by pointing to a 'random' man passing by and said 'there he is'. In relation to this incident, Kim stated:

I felt terrible. I felt very very guilty and very very sad for her and my heart really, you know, panged for her that she had to make that instant makeup in that split second in order to feel like a normal child and that she had to have that compensation for herself. And that she had to lie as well to make the situation OK. And how hard to never, never ever know who her father is, not what he looks like, not what his name was.

Cate's 'instant makeup' is a sad reflection of the powerful hold the heteronormative has on society. A child has learnt to 'cover up' in the same way that gay people are expected to conceal their identity to avoid discrimination. Kim uses the word 'very' repeatedly to describe her high levels of guilt and sadness. Smith (2005) indicates that in a society where individual's genetic inheritance is considered to be significant for one's sense of identity, parents of children created through donor insemination are prone to feeling certain levels of guilt. Kim's use of the word 'normal' suggests that not knowing one's father somehow constructs a child as being 'abnormal'.

Much of the literature that views same sex parents as problematic tends to focus on the possible negative impact that having two mothers and no father may have on children's



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however, felt that aside from such children feeling  
s lacking an important piece of their sense of self

puzzle, there were no practical advantages of having a father figure around regardless of the sex of the child. In this regard, Sue's response was:

Look at rural South Africa too, how many households have father figures in them?

This quote highlights that Sue possibly knows at a certain level that a present father is not necessary and that people cope without them. This insight is expanded on in the following interaction between Kim and Sue. Kim makes the following appraisal about boy children brought up by lesbian mothers:

We have seen our lesbian friends bring up boy children too and there doesn't seem to be any problem with them. Ok maybe they won't be innate cricket players due to the fact that they haven't been bowling since they were two and a half

Sue continues with the following explanation:

I don't hold any interest in clothes, jewellery, makeup and Cate just loves that stuff, if you bought her a set of makeup you would be her best friend. She hates bikes and sport and wouldn't climb a wall if you threw her at it and being sporty is my whole life, so I don't buy into this gender modelling thing.

Such information highlights that Kim and Sue are aware at a number of levels that the disadvantages of not having a father as a child are not practical in nature and that being in a

the child's development. The primary concern appears society as being "abnormal" because such a male figure

is unknown and absent.

In relation to the fear of secondary discrimination, Kim and Sue's concerns confirm research findings discussed in the literature. Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007), for example, report that lesbian parents frequently fear that their children will suffer discrimination because of their parents' sexuality. Casper (2003) also suggests that this stress may be exaggerated for lesbian parents who may have either witnessed or had personal experiences of homophobia and as such fear that their children may be required to endure the same negative experiences which could be as distressing or even more distressing than experiencing homophobia oneself due to the tendency of parents wanting to protect their child from physical and emotional pain.

Presently, both participants feared that Cate was being socially isolated due to their sexual identities. Sue expressed that Cate does not get invitations to other children's parties. Kim responded to this by stating:

Sue and I have looked at this closely from both sides, You know, Cate can be assertive and bossy with other children in games so maybe it is the fact that she doesn't always play nicely with some kids. But then, every single child? I mean, this entire year she hasn't been invited to a single birthday party. Before at her other school, there was a time when I don't think people knew what type of family she came from and then she was invited to a few parties.



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that Cate is apparently òmore verbal now about her  
Cate didnòt receive invites because parents didnòt want

to answer questions relating to why she has two mothers or what the nature of their relationship is. She went on further to say:

I think for them it just creates a situation where people donòt naturally want their kids to be exposed to that element of society, they want their kids to be exposed to the positive things, the stuff that is good for their development, the positive side to society and not that which is marginal or questionable.

This depicts how Kim is of the impression that lesbian parenting and lesbian families is socially constructed as being ònegativeòand òuntowardòand not conducive to teaching children what is dominantly seen to be òsocial correctnessò

Sue explains that Cateòs exclusion and social isolation makes them feel òquite guiltyö. She further adds:

She has started out with handicaps where people are looking at her because of her different circumstances which she doesnòt really need because she has a complex personality already to go with it.

Kim responds to Sueòs statement by saying:

She doesnòt need additional baggage to take with her, especially in the next few years when she will become more aware of it. She will have to deal with being teased

n and she has two moms and all this sort of stuff that  
deal with. I know that every single child has a unique  
family that they need to deal with, some a lot more difficult than ours, but I still think  
that given the type of child she is, it is a pity that she didn't have something, a family,  
that was more optimal for her.

Firstly, Sue makes use of the word "handicap" in relation to lesbian parenting in general and  
in this instance in relation to the alleged secondary implications for Cate. Such a word as  
well as Kim's use of the word "baggage" suggests emotional weight and a sense of  
abnormality associated with the lesbian parenting experience and the perceived impact on  
their child. Kim's statement in addition reflects a view that because societal discrimination  
exacerbates the difficulties accompanying most families' lives and adds additional pressures;  
their family is possibly not an "optimal" or appropriate system within which to raise a  
difficult child.

Kim also expressed a concern for Cate in terms of how she will cope with difficulties in the  
years to come. There was a sense, that both participants anticipated that things in this regard  
will get harder. Kim stated:

I often wonder how Cate will cope with our situation going forward, will she make up  
something for herself and advertise that to other people and keep us a secret or if she is  
going to be open and declare it and basically shoot anybody that comes near it or  
opposes it, um, or if she is going to try and find some sort of way of coping in between?



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ed to coping, mirror coping strategies adopted by Sue  
ity and the negative constructions surrounding it.

Yoshino (n.d.) argues that these coping techniques of concealing one's identity or pretending to be something or someone else is referred to as "covering" which is stated to be the last stage in forcing minorities or so called exceptions to conform to traditional norms existing within our society. There is an unstated assumption that their child may need to adopt the same coping strategies as they have utilized over the years and a sadness surrounding that realization.

#### *4.1.2.3 Secrecy*

The theme of secrecy was apparent throughout both interviews with Kim and Sue. Whilst Sue was less vocal in this regard, she did, however agree with a number of statements made by Kim. Whilst secrecy was less of a concern for Sue generally, both partners expressed a need to withhold their sexual identity and the nature of their family in the Church setting. Kim felt a stronger desire to hide their homosexual status from parents of Cate's school friends due to personal concerns as well as fears of secondary discrimination against Cate. Generally speaking there was a sense too that such details were withheld from numerous members of society with whom a family naturally interact such as their hairdresser, their work colleagues and fellow students. Kim described keeping such secrets as being "hard". Sky (1994) states the most disturbing aspect relating to donor insemination is the number of secrets that are typically present within lesbian-headed families that use this method to have children. Sky (1994) continues to state that keeping such secrets can exert significant emotional stress on lesbian parents including feeling isolated, nervous, disgraceful and guilty. Kim, in this regard complains that they are both "tired of pretending that they are sisters/friends". Kim and Sue are clearly skilled in what Griffin (1991) refers to as switching between visibility and

protect Cate which Doane (1987) indicates is a common  
the acts of portraying a false self are named as *ōpassingō*,  
*ōplaying it straightō*, or remaining *ōclosetedō* (p. 2). Again, such information is supported by  
my research findings. Kim referred to instances where Sue pretends to be a *ōsingle parentō*  
and Kim pretends to be a *ōsister/friendō*. Kim furthermore reports to have always assumed a  
heterosexual identity amongst her university classmates and work associates.

## 4.2 Reading Two: Reading for the Voice of ‘I’

This reading focuses on how the participants experience, feel and talk about themselves. As  
recommended by Mauthner & Doucet (1998) coloured pens were utilized during the reading  
of the transcripts to underline responses where the participants used pronouns such as *‘I’*  
*‘we’* and *‘you’* when talking about themselves and their experiences. The assumption is that  
*‘I’* is utilized when the participants feel strong or proud about themselves or various  
experiences and that pronouns, *‘we’* or *‘you’* are used when communicating challenges or  
difficult topics. Such transitions can furthermore be indicative of a collective description of  
an experience.

### 4.2.1 *Difficulties of one partner not being biologically related to the child*

In relation to this difficulty, it was noted that Kim repeatedly made use of the word *‘we’*  
when speaking of problem solving related to raising Cate whilst Sue utilized the word *‘I’* in  
this regard. I interpreted this as indicating how socially constructed views of what criteria  
need to be in place in order to qualify one as a parent (ie. biological ties) have been  
internalized by Sue in that lack of acceptance of Kim being a *‘legitimate parent’* or *‘equal  
parent’* was represented unintentionally and unconsciously in her discourse. For example,  
Sue stated when talking about dealing with questions which Cate may pose about her father:



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beginning. Only she can deal with things, I can just give

to her that I am here, I love you and this is honesty. I

really wanted you and the only way I could have you was to get sperm from someone who was kind enough to want mommy to have a child and part of that agreement was that no one was allowed to know who he was.

In comparison, Kim stated we are going to have a problem explaining it to Cate. Kim's repeated use of the word we when relating to parental difficulties gives the impression that Kim is attempting to include herself as an equal in the parenting process via the use of discourse even though society has constructed her as being an outsider or inferior. It was further noted that Sue made use of the words I and my when referring to parental success stories or things she felt were going well with Cate indicating a sense of pride. She utilized the word we however, when pointing out areas of perceived failure or shortfall. For example:

The way I see it is that, the more you are involved with her and the more she can be proud of, the more willing she is to share you and be proud of you, like my involvement at her school which I mentioned.

As opposed to:

And we should be having more parties here but our lifestyles don't lend for it. We don't have a big house and two dogs and a picket fence you know and the accepted male figure.



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pronouns in a similar fashion. She utilized the word “I”  
 “we” appeared certain of in terms of parental tactics and opinions

but resorted to implementing the word “we” when there was a sense of uncertainty with regards to a decision or view. The difference is illustrated in the following two statements made by Kim:

*I don’t see the link between unconditional love and allowing your child to be disrespectful*

*It will help us in that we won’t have to butt heads with her all the time about routine, brush your teeth, you know.*

The difference between Kim and Sue’s use of these pronouns, however, differs in that it would appear that Sue’s implementation at times unconsciously excludes Kim from sharing in positive or successful experiences of their parenting process whilst Kim’s use does not minimize Sue’s role. This highlights, again, how Kim might possibly feel like an outsider or insignificant investor when opportunities of taking credit arise in their parenting experience, yet she is equally sharing the burden of difficulties, problems and perceived shortfalls. Such an imbalance which is at times alluded to directly by both Kim and Sue, is presumed to be a challenging experience for Kim. It is not by any means perceived that this is intentional on Sue’s part, rather, it is interpreted as an outcome of the prevalent and pervasive idea that it is the biological mother who is the “real” mother, a view perpetuated by much western thinking on the role of the “natural mother”. It must also not be ignored that a perception of sole onus of responsibility taking place on a conscious and unconscious level for Sue surely comes with its own share of hardships and challenges.

child

In relation to concerns that Cate would never know who her father was Kim seemed comfortable to utilize the word "I" when referring to her own guilt whilst Sue was more indirect about her own emotional reaction. Her guilt seemed more implied in her non-verbal communication. Sue sighed, rubbed her face, frowned and shook her head whilst relating examples of how not knowing her father may affect Cate. It is interesting that neither parent made use of collective pronouns when referring to fears and concerns for their child indicating that each parent may be dealing with emotions such as guilt in uniquely personal ways. In relation to Kim making use of the word "I" in her reference to guilt, one could interpret this as a result of having internalised societal discourse which labels her as an unauthentic parent. Such discourse may act to rob Kim of perceiving herself as having a direct role as parent and hence removes a portion of responsibility with regards to difficulties that their child may experience. This interpretation is fitting with Gabb (2004) who states that in many instances, it remains the "birth mother" who is "figuratively and literally left holding the baby" as traditional understandings and experiences of family persist (pg 1).

Kim stated during the interview process that "I will never feel like a parent in the true sense of the word". The following statement also depicts her sentiments with regards to her role in Cate's life:

She is not mine and that is reinforced a lot in society because essentially and mostly legally Sue is her biological parent in every sense of the word.

With regards to Kim and Sue's concerns for how Cate may be discriminated against because of their homosexuality, Kim once more referred to "I" whilst Sue referred to the emotional



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stated "And all this makes us feel quite guilty". This and her own guilt difficult to come to terms with and

hence there may be some safety in sharing the ownership of such a challenging emotion.

#### 4.2.3 Secrecy

Doane (1987) states that pretending to be heterosexual or withholding one's homosexual identity, "is a strategy for achieving the necessary distance between oneself and one's image to avoid discrimination" (p. 2). In relation to the issue of secrecy, Kim makes use of first person pronouns:

*I* feel it's very hard because *I* always feel like, even if you wanted to confess it to people, it just creates an unnecessary dynamic and people just start having all these preconceived ideas in their heads. But if you are dishonest, or not dishonest, maybe just omitted that information then things are usually much easier and fine.

The use of first person pronouns generally indicate pride or strength of conviction in what one relates, and one would expect that Kim would not take pride in the need for secrecy and accompanying lack of self freedom. In this instance, however, it appeared that Kim owned this theme more individually as it appeared to be of greater concern to her than it did to Sue and hence the use of the word "I" and "you" as opposed to "we" or "us". The move from "I" to "you" in the above quote, however, might also suggest that Kim recognises the need to be "dishonest" as a shared experience amongst gay people, or, perhaps, that she is willing to own the need for secrecy, but is not comfortable to individually own the strategy of dishonesty.



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the issue of hiding their homosexuality within certain statements relating to secrecy made by Kim both verbally

and non-verbally, she refrained from offering her own examples in this regard. Sue referred to Kim on more than one occasion as not being comfortable with her homosexual status. Furthermore, Sue appeared to be slightly less concerned in general of what people thought about her sexual preference or status as a lesbian parent. Her concern appeared to be more related to discrimination that her daughter may experience as opposed to societal judgments of herself. She stated:

I have never been accepted for being gay or quirky in terms of my personality so I don't really give a damn what the world thinks

Here, Sue's use of the pronoun "I" depicts strength and a sense of pride in her "I don't give a damn" attitude towards societal judgements of her as a homosexual and as a so called "quirky" individual. This depicts strength of conviction around her identity as a gay person and also resistance against the wider heteronormative. Sue, was, however, as motivated as Kim was to keep their homosexual status a secret when attending certain churches for example and frequently acknowledge the downside of openness and honesty in relation to being lesbian parents especially in terms of judgments perceived from Cate's friends and cousins parents. Again, however, her focus appeared to be more directed towards difficulties which Cate may experience, rather than concern for herself. Kim held the same concern but in addition was overtly aware of how such societal discrimination impacted on her own emotional world. Sue's convictions were attempts at motivating Kim who appeared more affected by the challenges of homosexuality and lesbian parenting in general.

Whilst both Kim and Sue used first person pronouns in descriptions of discrimination experienced separately as lesbian individuals, they utilized collective pronouns when depicting how society viewed their homosexual relationship and parenting as lesbians. For example, Sue states:

Abnormal, not yet developed or maybe one day they will grow up and realize that this is wrong, or one day they will grow up and actually get married to a man or as if it's a passing phase instead of hey, this is me and I didn't choose to be this way. I mean if I had a choice, I would not be gay because God it's hard.

It is evident within this statement that Sue makes use of the collective pronoun "they" when relating negative judgements perceived from society about their relationship. In some way this points to a type of "safety in numbers" stance. Sue then, however, switches to using the first person pronouns of "me" and "I" when she takes a stand against such discrimination indicating pride in her individual conviction and strength in opposing the "abnormal" label which society has constructed lesbianism to be. She made use of another collective pronoun when she stated "They see them as retarded in society and not able to function as other human beings do". Kim frequently utilized this strategy when talking of discrimination which illustrates powerfully that she experiences herself as "other" in relation to the dominant heterosexual population

### Feelings of isolation

Collective pronouns were frequently and almost exclusively used when relating to a lack of social support and feelings of isolation. For example, Kim stated in relation to opportunities of social interaction:

It just won't happen, and at the same time we didn't have true straight friends or family members who we really felt comfortable enough to be around that would end up accommodating us as being a different kind of family either and it kind of left us having no place to like grow as a family or be as people.

The use of collective pronouns appears to be the result of the fact that Kim and Sue view their isolation as a consequence of their union as a family and hence it is seen as being a collective problem. Individually they have a social niche within which they fit. In other words, as lesbian women they have a community of other lesbian women with whom they can socialize and relate. Likewise, should they be heterosexual mothers, they would have a group of other mothers and their families within which and with whom they could mingle. Combining the two, however (that is, being a lesbian, *and* being a parent) appears to have resulted in a large sense of isolation as they depict an impression that they simply don't fit into either world. They *both* relate that there aren't many lesbian parents whom they know and can befriend and heterosexual groups reportedly isolate them both as a family and even as individuals since making the decision to have a child. The use of the collective pronoun, therefore, suggests that Kim and Sue recognize that this tends to be an experienced shared not just by Kim and Sue, but by the wider gay community who choose to become parents.

Although at one point during the interview process, Kim stated *we* barely got any of that in reference to family support when Cate was born, indicating common hurt which they both shared, Kim and Sue most commonly utilized first person pronouns when describing the lack of family support in relation to their decision to be and experience of being lesbian parents. The use of collective pronouns confirms again that this is recognized as a shared experience with other gay women who are likely to feel unsupported as parents. The use, however, of the first person pronoun suggests a deeply personal experience of isolation on the part of both Kim and Sue who both have individually experienced a lack of support from their respective families.

#### 4.2.7 Institutional discrimination

Both parents utilized pronouns such as *we* and *our* and *us* when describing institutional discrimination which, for the most part, reportedly related to the Christian Church. Sue commented at one point:

How do *we* as a family fit into a church? *We* have been to four churches. *We* have been to straight churches that don't accept *us* as gay parents but accept Cate and *we* have been to gay churches that accept *us* but have nothing, no facilities for Cate. So spiritually, how do *we* grow as a family? *We* can't! There is no place for *us*.

The use of the collective pronoun *we* in this regard seems logical as this problem is a collective experience that affects them as a family. Again, the use of the collective pronoun serves to illustrate the powerful impact the church has had on their own family as a unit, but also on family units in general. It is clear from their account that both Kim and Sue are



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ction around the needs of the assumed heterosexual

(and Sue) feel different to the church. As Sue points out,

their family is unable to grow spiritually because there is no church that caters for their needs as a family unit, with perceived negative implications for the family as a whole.

#### 4.2.8 Use of humour

It was noted throughout both interviews that both Kim and Sue made use of humour when relating particularly sensitive information such as judgement and distancing from family and community members. It is known that one of the ways people engage in and cope with talking about difficult subject matter is through the use of humour, and Mauthner and Doucet (1998) describe this in their own studies. Within this project it was overtly obvious that many harsh and emotional situations were referred to in a humorous way and this highlights the areas that are probably most difficult for the participants to discuss. This was a tactic used frequently by both Kim and Sue. The method behind such use is the unconscious belief that the voice of humour detaches the anxiety-provoking experience from the participant.

### 4.3 Reading Three: Reading for Relationships

The third reading focuses on how Kim and Sue spoke about their interpersonal relationships with their various partners, immediate and extended relatives as well as broader society and institutions. This particular reading focuses the analysis on the way in which experiences are negotiated within systems of interpersonal relationships. This reading hence allows the researcher to tap into how individuals' understandings are contextual, how knowledge is continued by social procedures and how reality is formed not by single acts but rather by complicated and ordered patterns of interpersonal actions (Burr, 2003).

the persistent discrimination which they experience as lesbian women generally and as lesbian parents particularly. They were of the opinion that although legal changes had been made within South Africa, the negative social construction of lesbianism had remained prominent which supports Morgan & Wieringa (2005) view that although legal and political progress has been made, there is still much negativity held towards homosexual individuals by the heterosexual society that lesbians interact with. Lubbe (2007) also states that South Africa is still a conventional and family-based society where the traditional family unit is "prominent, powerful, visible, and valued" (p. 2). The participants further related that having a child as lesbians merely exacerbated such discrimination. As Kim stated:

That is how society sees gay people. They see them as retarded in society and not able to function as other human beings do. You add a child to that and it just enhances the pathology.

Sue at a later point in the interview makes a similar comment in this regard:

Sad that society is so homophobic. Parenting just exaggerates it. Now you are perpetuating the disease pattern and you will inflict it on a child.

In the following quote Kim uses "sarcasm" to illustrate the limits of society's "tolerance" of homosexuality. Kim and Sue's quote demonstrates that while heterosexual (and perhaps even some homosexual) people may have become more "tolerant" of the idea of same sex relationships, the idea of having a child is considered to have "gone too far". This illustrates



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homosexism and the power construct of homosexuality as

And now they are going to have to take the repercussions of your decisions. It's all very well for you to make those dodgy decisions, but now look what you have done!

Kim makes reference to 'dodgy decisions' reflecting the perception that societal discourse constructs homosexuality as not being a legitimate sexual orientation, but rather a 'bad decision' implying irresponsibility and deviance that results in negative consequences. Both Kim and Sue's uses of the words 'retarded', 'pathology' and 'disease' which collectively paints a recurrent image of 'illness' or 'abnormality'. Such words reflect a powerfully negative message constructed by society which echoes an assumed forgotten past of an old nation which inflicted racism and discrimination towards perceived difference. Whilst a number of legislative changes as well as amendments within the field of psychology as seen in the restructuring of the DSM IV suggest progression from a time of pathologising homosexuality, the statements made by Kim and Sue demonstrate that such perceptions remain rampant within social discourse. This ongoing construction is not surprising when we consider that even within the territory of research lesbian parenting has been constructed as 'pathological' and 'threatening' for children who might be exposed to it (Clark, 2002).

In the following quote Kim makes use of a metaphor when describing the extra pressure she feels to convince the world that she is an able and capable mother despite being lesbian. This metaphor unlocks a deeper understanding of the lesbian parents' experiences. As Cazal and Inns (1998), argue metaphor is 'one of the keys to studying how humans ascribe meaning to events and to the world by working on the basis of similarities, association and substitution' (p. 189). Kim again illustrates her perception that being a gay parent is viewed in a similar

When she compares herself to a well known, disabled swimmer, she is able to participate in able bodied swimming events despite her disability.

We feel a bit like Natalie Du Toit, because she has half a leg and has chosen to be a swimmer, she had better swim flipping well or else everyone is going to laugh at her because she only has half a leg. So I think it is the same as a gay parent. Because you are only starting off with half a leg, you had better make sure that you bring this child up flipping well or people on the side of the pool will constantly be saying 'you are going to sink! You can't swim straight!'

Such a statement again reflects how these lesbian parents feel they have been constructed as being less capable or less 'normal' in comparison with heterosexual individuals or parents because of their sexual orientation. Her use of the word 'straight' in the sentence 'you can't swim straight' is perhaps not coincidental but an unconscious slip of the tongue referring to how heterosexual parenting is constructed in society as being 'correct' or more functional and effective whilst homosexual parenting in comparison is constructed as being 'skewed'. Kim powerfully reflects on the pressure she feels as a lesbian parent, to work extra hard to prove she is capable of parenting in the 'straight' world. Kim constructs herself as, like Natalie du Toit, starting off with 'half a leg' and having to work 'flipping' hard not to face the criticism of the 'spectators'. The pressure felt by Kim confirms that homosexual mothers often feel the need to work harder than heterosexual mothers to demonstrate and prove that their child's emotional welfare is not being jeopardized (Almack, 2006).

Sue makes regular reference to her need to 'compensate' for Cate being 'disadvantaged' in terms of her family life. Navarro (2006) similarly found that lesbian parents tend to feel the

parent. Almack (2006) refers to this as rhetoric of  
reproduces the idea of the traditional family unit as the  
most appropriate and healthy family unit for developing healthy children. As Almack (2006)  
points out, women in homosexual partnerships are frequently portrayed as neglecting their  
children's needs whilst prioritizing their own. Such an argument is also supported by Kim's  
earlier reference to feeling that society views their choice to have a child as a "dodgy  
decision" suggesting that such a decision is both irresponsible and selfish.

Kim feels that it is a misconception to suggest that discrimination is held mostly by the older  
generations within South Africa. She is of the opinion that discrimination and judgment of  
"difference" is equally pronounced within the younger generation and states that anti-gay  
sentiments are "prolific" within her youthful class of post graduates. Lesbian parents are  
obviously aware that their choice to have children is, from a societal perspective, seen as  
being "unfoward" even if it is not communicated to them openly (Almack, 2006). The use of  
the word "prolific", however, points to Kim's frequent experience of "anti-gay" sentiments.

Both parents during both interviews made reference to feeling like they were being judged by  
the parents of their child's school friends. Their accounts gave the sense that such parents in  
some way feared their children being in their presence or under their supervision. Sue  
provided the following example in this regard after inviting a little girl around to play with  
Cate:

The parents came over and I got a million questions about who I was, what I did and  
who I lived in the house with. Eventually the parents agreed to go about two hours  
into this party and when they agreed to go, they left for an hour and walked around



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the gate. If I was there with a husband, there would have

Sue points out that this ‘vigilance’ and ‘policing’ would not have been present if she had, had a husband. These parents’ suspicions reflect a strong heteronormativity that positions heterosexual parents as normal and above reproach, while homosexual parents are positioned as ‘abnormal’ and potential ‘criminals’

Blake (2005) argues that negative presumptions and fears relating to lesbian headed families include that lesbians provide an immoral environment for children to learn from and that lesbians may sexually abuse children. Sue also noted another incident where a little boy was playing with Cate and the two of them proceeded to dress up in ballet clothes. Upon arriving to fetch his son, the father was apparently irate and said to Sue ‘No son of mine will learn to dance, I don’t have gay children in my family’. This powerfully illustrates the idea that homosexuality is something that will be ‘caught’ through interaction with gay people or by engaging in practices that are associated with homosexuality like male ballet dancers. Most early research, such as studies conducted by Forel (1908) and Bloch (1909), (cited in Kitzinger, 1987), focused on identifying the causes of homosexuality which include ideas of genetic influence, disease, psychoanalytic fixation and hormonal problems in an attempt to then find a treatment and ideally ‘cure’ the afflicted or ‘unwell’ individuals. This indicates how the emphasis on homosexuality has traditionally been placed on some form of ‘illness’ implying the potential to be ‘passed on’ or ‘transmitted’ to others.

### *Feelings of isolation*

Both participants expressed a sense that they didn't quite "fit" into either the straight or the gay community as lesbian parents and as such lacked an adequate social network. As Blake (2005) puts it, a lesbian woman may be accepted by the "straight" community and a lesbian woman may be accepted by the lesbian community, but the lesbian parent as a whole person may not be approved of or supported completely by either side. Kim shared the following in relation to this theme:

I know kids put a strain on most relationships but I think it is more so in gay relationships because you don't have a lot of friends with kids that you can just merge up with and spend an afternoon at a bri. You will never have a whole big gay get together with kids running around playing. It just won't happen and at the same time we didn't have true straight friends who we really felt comfortable enough with to be around that would end up accommodating us as being a different kind of family either and it kind of left us having no place to like grow as a family.

This statement not only highlights a sense of social isolation which is felt to differentiate their experience from that of heterosexual parents and gay people in general, but also the similarities shared with heterosexual parents in relation to parental difficulties. In this instance the similarity is that children place a strain on the parents' relationships with each other. Kim and Sue, however, clearly feel that they are in a space that does not foster support from either other heterosexual parents or the gay community. This social isolation perpetuates the strain on their relationship due to the fact that there is no support to assist in neutralizing the difficulties that accompany having children. As McVannel-Erwin (2007) argues, lesbian parents' support system may not include other lesbian mothers and fear,



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heterosexual mothers from sharing their experiences in a

Kim and Sue's lack of social support is not only related to friendships, but also to general neighbourly interactions and reciprocity, which Sue and Kim feel is enjoyed by heterosexual parents. Kim states:

With straight parents the person next door might help out..down the road, õoh shame, new family, lets help out. Such a lovely couple and ja, you look after our baby one night and we will look after yours, such a lovely arrangementö. But we don't have that. õWell you two decided to do this so off you go then, go and do it, your responsibility, none of us said it was a good ideaö.

Sue responds to Kim's statement by subsequently adding:

Ja, like õyou lay in that bed so now you must sleep in itö, kind of like you have a sexually transmitted disease or something.

Sue's reference to a sexually transmitted disease again highlights the tendency to see homosexuality as a -diseaseøthat keeps people away and has a certain amount of blame and revulsion attached to it. Whilst Kim agreed with Sue's statement, she then uses her own metaphor to explain their experience of lacking social support and the subsequent isolation:

You know, they don't have to accept it, or appreciate it or buy into it, but the minute you stop accepting and supporting, individuals in that family, like ours, will just get



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this, like rowing boat in the middle of the lake all alone you, and it is just so tiring and everything you do is on your own.

Describing her experience as rowing a boat on her own illustrates her feelings of isolation and loneliness. She goes on to describe how tiring it is not to have any support. There was also a strong sense of frustration and resentment while they shared their experiences, especially with regards to the comparison between their journey as parents and that of heterosexual parents who are described as having a far easier time. Sarcasm was often utilized when Kim and Sue reflected on typical scenarios of support which they feel are enjoyed by heterosexual families.

#### 4.3.3 *Lack of family support*

According to literature the resistance or non-acceptance by family members appears to be one of the main sources of conflict for lesbian mothers. Evidence gleaned during both interviews strongly supported this assertion. Sue was of the opinion that immediate family members saw her homosexuality and her choice to become a parent as being abnormal whilst Kim stated that although at times there is a degree of family support 'at face value', she felt there was 'a lot of, this is flipping ridiculous going on behind the scenes'. Sue further outlined that the general message from family was that her decision to have a child was unnatural and that they expected failure.

Mitchell (1995) found that after reviewing a number of articles relating to planned lesbian families, that loving and supportive family members frequently became detached and rejecting when given the news that their gay daughter was planning to become a mother



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is regard Kim explained that when the news of Sue's  
 their reaction was a combination of "woops, oh dear,

let's see how this works out. In the following quote Sue's reference to the curtain coming up after she had Cate, illustrates how having Cate served to "expose" her brother's underlying concerns with homosexuality. A once supportive brother cuts off communication:

The curtain definitely went up after I had Cate. I was very close to my brother, very very close, but as soon as I had her there has been very little, if any, communication. Not even when I fell ill. Never bothered to come over. There was that "you have taken it too far now".

Parks (1998) indicates that parents of lesbian mothers show concern for social judgement. Kim's reference to her father's attitude supports this statement:

I very much doubt my father would say at work "ja, my daughter is coming over for Christmas with her lesbian partner and her lesbian partner's difficult child", but he would say at work "ja, my daughter has this boyfriend who has a real nightmare of a lighty and they are coming over for Christmas dinner".

McVannel-Erwin (2007) also stipulates that traditional advice that is often transferred from mothers to their daughters is frequently not made available to lesbian parents who are rejected by their biological families due to disapproval of their decision to bear children. Kim differentiates between practical and emotional support in the following quote:

know even with babysitting. With straight parents  
bysit, they lend money and time and they lend empathy

to a new family. Lots of it. You know ðOh shame they are just starting out and it is  
so hard, remember when we first started out, life's toughö and yet for us we barely got  
any of that.

Both Kim and Sue primarily expressed that their families principle concerns related to the  
decision to have a sperm donor baby were that they viewed it as being ðunnaturalö  
ðirresponsibleö ðembarrassingöand generally ðabnormalö They also stated that family  
members tended to feel pity towards Cate because, according to Kim, of ðher difficult set of  
circumstancesö (being raised by lesbian parents).

#### 4.3.4 Institutional discrimination

Cleveland-Hall (2005) states that whilst heterosexual women are normally given a type of  
elevated status when they become mothers, lesbians parents are not. Furthermore, Cleveland-  
Hall (2005) states that from a social point of view, there are a number of institutions who are  
in some way informally authorized to acknowledge people as mothers and that each of these  
institutions carries a different weight of authority. Navarro (2006) stipulates that schools can  
be a significant source of anxiety for lesbian mothers and that same sex parents have a  
challenging task locating schools that support and accept their kids. Findings related to this  
research, however, did not support Navarro's (2006) statement, which came as a surprise.

Both Kim and Sue described the schools and teachers they have worked with as being  
ðfantasticöwith regards to their alternative family and the inclusion and acceptance thereof.  
They were of the opinion that teachers did not make a ðbig thing of it at allö and adjusted  
their curriculum activities to accommodate all variants of the family - not just lesbian



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such as Fathers day for example or Mothers day were  
ents were made with ease and without attention being

drawn. In relation to Mother's day, Cate apparently arrived home with two cards and on Father's day, she was reportedly encouraged to make a card for her Grandfather instead. Sue shared the following impression:

I have found school to be my biggest support system. They have been great because they don't impose anything on the kids, they are obviously used to dealing with all sorts of different families.

Lubbe (n.d.) states that schools could possibly provide ideal settings for gauging how far a society may have progressed in terms of acceptance of diversity. As alluded to above, results from my research show that Sue and Kim experience little discrimination and judgment within the school setting which, based on Lubbe (n.d.) may presume significant progression in the wider South African society in terms of acceptance of homosexuality generally and homosexual parenting specifically. It must be noted, however, that while Kim and Sue feel surprisingly supported by the school, this is not their general experience. It is likely that the particular school that Cate goes to is an exception to the rule, rather than an indication of transformation at a wider level in society. Lubbe (n.s.) argues that same-gendered families are for the most part absent from the school curriculum which may likely suggest that same-gendered families are absent from the consciousness of both teachers and learners, and this maintains the erroneous assumption that all parental couples are heterosexual (p. 46). Kim and Sue's experience suggests that it is only when a school is confronted with the reality of these families that the curriculum changes and a consciousness of diversity is generated.

bed their experience with regards to the psychology  
the opinion that the psychologists which they had dealt  
with had been completely accepting of their sexual identity and of their choice to parent. This  
is encouraging considering that Lubbe (2007) has found the psychology profession as being a  
problem area for lesbian parents. Again it is important to note that the particular  
psychologists that Kim and Sue have engaged with are both aware and accepting of sexual  
diversity. Whilst Kim and Sue's experiences are promising, they cannot be taken to mean  
that all psychologists have this insight and level of acceptance. Research by Lubbe (2007)  
confirms that heterosexuality is still upheld in much of psychology as the "normal" form of  
sexuality.

Whilst Sue and Kim described their experience with the fertility expert as being "negative",  
they felt this was due to the fact that the specialist with whom they dealt was a "chauvinist"  
who was anti-women in general as opposed to being specifically anti-gay. They related that  
their interactions with the majority of medical professionals post-conception had been  
positive and relatively problem free. It is, however, interesting to consider that perhaps  
sexism and heterosexualism and therefore anti-gay sentiments cannot be extricated from each  
other. It is likely that these "isms" intersect in powerful ways to reinforce the positioning of  
the heterosexual male.

#### **4.4 Reading Four: Reading for Cultural Contexts and Social Structures**

In the final specific reading it is attempted to place the participant's experiences within  
broader socially, culturally and politically structured contexts which shape the research  
participants attitudes and behaviours. Burr (2005) emphasises the important role that both  
history and culture play in the construction of meaning.



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h regards to broader socially, culturally and politically ed to be related to the Christian Church. Kim stated:

Families do things together like go to church. Our family canø.

Sue goes on to question:

How do we as a family fit into a church? We have been to four churches. We have been to straight churches that donø accept us as gay parents but accept Cate and we have been to gay churches that accept us but have nothing, no facilities for Cate. So spiritually, how do we grow as a family? We canø. There is no place for us.

In relation to this, both participants felt that society constructs them as being immoral and yet when they attempt to participate in institutions which propose to instil or teach morality, they are rejected. Kim and Sue appeared to feel hopeless about such exclusion and overtly frustrated. Kim goes on to describe how "covering"up their sexual orientation is required to enable their family to attend church:

We are tired of pretending in the mornings that we are sisters/friends and that Sue is a single parent just so that we can go to a Church and Cate can attend the Sunday School. Half of which time the priest starts barking on about some speech about how unacceptable, or how they will tolerate the sinner/the gay person but not the actual practice about being gay. And we actually walked out of a service the other day.



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and fan the construction that being homosexual is

ard -barkingø paints a picture of aggression or

territorialism - like a dog barking at an unwanted -bad intruderø someone who needs to be chased away. Croucher (2002) states that whilst there have been diverse responses to the number of legal changes relating to rights of lesbians within South Africa, ranging from joy to anger, religious leaders have been overt in their disapproval of lesbian relationships and their rights including the right to marry and have children.

Sue was of the opinion that whilst presently Cate ödoesnot completely understandö what it means not to have a father figure, she did express that the heterosexual norm or culture that society promotes was proving to be problematic at this stage anyway. Specific reference was made to the dominant heterosexual messages unconsciously presented in and surrounding modes of childhood education and entertainment. This is noted as being the second problematic area identified in this reading. Sue expressed:

You read stories at night and itø hard you know. Like it will say öand mom and dad took Fluff and Nipö, all the stories will say ömom and dadö, its öMr Nutmeg and Mrs Mouseö. öMr and Mrsö, öMommy and Daddyö. You canø get away from it, even with dogs, even with cats you know.

This points to how society constructs the heterosexual family as being the -normalø family even within childrenø story books, in some way suggesting the aim of teaching children how this is -rightø or expected from a societal standpoint. One can imagine how this makes normalizing the alternative family difficult for lesbian mothers or other varied family units, as there simply arenø examples of this in childhood literature or in other forms of media

ing part of alternative family units can relate. One can  
highlight to a child of lesbian parents that they lack

something which is depicted or constructed as being naturally present for everyone and everything else in the world (people or animal representation), that being a father.

Sue felt that perhaps sending Cate to boarding school may help alleviate societal distinctions for her with regards to not knowing who her father is or not having contact with him. She stated:

In boarding school they all grow together in a system and there isn't that 'oh look, so and so has a mommy and a daddy and they all go out together three times a week'. That is what she will have to compare herself to all the time. 'Little so and so's dad picks her up from school and throws her around in the air, and she goes to her granny and grandpa's farm and her daddy takes her every second weekend too'.

Such an impression on Sue's part of anticipating that Cate would be better off in a separate system almost suggests that she feels that having no parents around would somehow be easier for Cate than having two lesbian parents and no father figure. Sue may feel that in such a school system or community Cate could possibly experience shared normality as she wouldn't be different (that is, at boarding school, everyone's parents are absent and in some way anonymous). This information made me aware of the fact that these women, like other women, buy into the psychological construct of normal development. Mothers in general feel pressure to be a good mother and to ensure the normal healthy development of their child. It is clearly even greater pressure for the lesbian mother, who to protect her child has to consider an extreme measure like boarding school.

The voice-centred relational method of analysis proved to be a valuable method of uncovering rich data relating to the experience of being a lesbian parent of a sperm donor child. As previously outlined, common themes arose cross the four readings of the data which will be revisited and summarized below. It must be noted that the final thematic integration has been included as part of the conclusion to this study. Furthermore, contributions believed to be made by findings will be stipulated here, limitations of the study will be examined and recommendations for further research will be made.

### **5.1 Integrated summary of findings**

Themes which appeared to be common across the four readings included the difficulties of one partner not being biologically related to the child, fears and concerns for their child, secrecy, discrimination from society, lack of social support and feelings of isolation, lack of family support and institutional discrimination.

There were many parallels between the findings in my study and those the literature reviewed. More specifically, the findings were similar to those of Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise (2002) whose research was conducted in Australia. Although one cannot generalize, it is interesting to note the similarities in findings across contexts. Globally South Africa has been historically noted to have lagged behind drastically in terms of democracy and liberation with specific regards to race and culture and much has been done within our country to ensure that we catch up to the rest of the world in the quest for racial acceptance and equality. Such parallels in research findings, however, may suggest that homosexuality



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y by societies on an international basis and not merely reputation of being discriminatory.

Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise (2002) indicate that common challenges of lesbian mothers include fears and personal experiences of prejudice by their communities, discrimination at schools, rejection by family members, lack of legal recognition and poor social support in general. They further refer to lesbian parents feeling as if they were "under scrutiny" (p. 47), and feeling as if they were required to prove themselves as satisfactory and effective parents to a larger degree than parents with a heterosexual background. Sue and Kim did not however in comparison focus on legal difficulties associated with lesbian parenting, nor did they identify schools as being institutions where difficulties were experienced which also differed to findings by Lubbe (n.d.). On the contrary, they outlined how supportive school staff in general had been. Both parents in comparison felt that church presented the most challenges relating to institutional acceptance. Kim and Sue also showed considerable concern for the impact that wider discrimination may have on their child, on the issue of secrecy and on Kim not having a biological connection to their child which Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise (2002) did not refer to as being significant in their findings.

Interestingly, the literature review did not reveal much in the way of the actual hands on practice of lesbian parenting in terms of positive aspects or challenges (that is, the actual parenting tasks that each parent adopts such as bathing, feeding, dressing, homework etc). Analysis of data obtained during this research project also found that this theme was not particularly relevant to Sue and Kim. Furthermore, it was anticipated, based on literature readings as well as personal experience, that immediate and extended family may judge and

not expect to find, however, was the reportedly high  
th experienced socially, particularly from other  
children's parents. It also came as a surprise that Kim felt discrimination was prolific  
amongst the younger and educated South African population, as the researcher expected that  
such judgment was more frequently owned by older, more traditional or less educated South  
Africans. Perhaps this suggests an assumption of equality that is possibly made by many  
South Africans generally. Politically a huge drive has taken place to construct all individuals  
regardless of difference as being equal and perhaps it is therefore assumed that younger  
South Africans will be more tolerant. Clearly, Kim's experience indicates that such policy  
has not yet filtered into practice. Lubbe (2007) states that South Africa remains conventional  
and family-based and that the traditional family is still prominent, powerful, valued, and  
valued (Lubbe, 2007, p. 2). Morgan and Wieringa (2005) also state that although legal and  
political progress has been generally made, negativity towards homosexuals continues to be  
abundant within the heterosexual society that lesbians interact with.

The most prominent emotion that came to the fore throughout the interview process were that  
of overt sadness and a sense that both women, despite attempts at the contrary, were  
extremely vulnerable to criticism and isolation. They both concluded their impressions  
related over the two interview sessions by stating that their experience of being lesbian  
mothers in South Africa had been hard. According to Dempsey, McNair, Perlesz and Wise  
(2002), lesbians who were planning to be parents anticipated significantly more hardships as  
opposed to those expected by heterosexual parents. Kim and Sue's comments concurred with  
this statement but in some way they expanded on it by indicating that parenting had in fact  
been so hard that if they had known what it was going to be like prior to making the  
decision to parent a sperm donor baby, they would probably not have gone through with it.



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of is the fact that a single variable cannot be isolated as . Rather, findings depict the multifaceted interplay of

variables in this regard. The different readings within the voice relational method of analysis allowed for the complexities accompanying lesbian parenting and their causes to be richly depicted. The readings facilitated a comprehensive autopsy of how wider social and cultural factors and various interpersonal relationships and encounters intersect to make lesbian parenting so nuanced and complex.

What finally needs to be commented on with regards to the integration of findings, are the positives present in the participants' narratives. Whilst there were no direct 'positive points' relating to being a lesbian parent expressed by the participants, Kim and Sue display continued enthusiasm and determination for raising their child. Despite the overt difficulties which they allude to and appear to face on a daily basis, they remain steadfast in investing effort into optimising their experience of parenting and Cate's experience of childhood. There was also a sense of pride indirectly related by them in their own courage for embarking on the journey of parenthood within a heteronormative society and in their strength at 'pushing on' despite the strong tide of opposition and negativity. In some way, both their initial choice to parent and the choice to continue with the challenge despite ongoing disapproval represents resistance and a firm stand against the heterosexual norm. Even the choice to participate enthusiastically in this study is indicative of resistance and the desire to speak out and take an active position against direct and indirect oppression. Berger (1996) states that the notion of a homosexual identity not only negatively categorizes acceptable or unacceptable behaviour but that the surfacing of a homosexual subculture also positively made it possible for people to achieve access to one another by means of identity. Berger (1996) goes on to state that this in turn helped to facilitate a method of resistance for



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1996) further described the reverse discourse of starting to speak for itself and demanding that its

legitimacy or naturalness be acknowledged (p. 280). Furthermore, whilst Sue and Kim's desire for additional social support is noted and understood, the development of incredible coping strategies both as a couple and as individuals needs to be recognised and admired.

## 5.2 Contributions made by findings

The study has alluded to how interactions with both the heterosexual society and the homosexual community have contributed to or moulded the parents' experiences. It has confirmed that the pathologising of homosexuality continues to pervade in society and that such pathologising filters down into same sex family units, channelled and fuelled by a number of different sources. Although the DSM has removed homosexuality from its list of disorders and formal South African policy has officially tabooed discrimination, heterosexual discourses evidently still permit discrimination at a social and personal level. Findings outline how such discourses contribute significantly not only to the construction of an abnormal self at an individual level but at a collective level too in that families created by homosexuals are also labelled as being abnormal. This in turn contributes to placing further strain on the already acknowledged difficult role of parenting.

It was evident during both interview sessions that the participants were provided with a safe space that promoted deep and open expression and hence investigation into their experiences. It is hoped that further studies such as this one may provide impetus for further change, be it at a level of awareness or direct intervention in terms of informed support. Whilst much literature is available internationally, South African literature relating to this theme is sparse. It is felt that in some way this may be due to an incorrect assumption that constitutional

at a grass roots level. Hence the secondary assumption  
has been dealt with and eradicated, as has the need for  
continued research into the experienced lives of populations constructed as falling outside the  
realms of 'normality'. This research contributes towards disproving such an assumption. It  
outlines how the 'bright colours of our new 'all accepting' rainbow nation may possibly be  
blinding us from viewing the blatant difficulties that many individuals constructed as being  
'different' are still facing on a daily basis.

It is hoped that this research may at the very least represent a single brick in the much needed  
foundation of understanding on which further research and ideally change may subsequently  
be built. By filling a small gap in the vast crevice in South African literature relating to  
lesbian parenting, this research further aims to provide an educational resource to potential  
lesbian mothers as well as to lesbian parents who may seek solace in the fact that they are not  
alone in terms of the challenges they experience. Furthermore, as argued by Lubbe (2007),  
psychologists need to be increasingly aware of the challenges that accompany being a non-  
traditional family unit in order to promote optimal and well informed therapeutic intervention  
and support. It is hence hoped that the insights of this study and further research may assist  
psychologists and other members of the health profession in improving their competency in  
working with such populations by cultivating knowledge, understanding, self reflection and  
empathy skills.

### **5.3 Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research**

In light of the conclusions mentioned it would be advantageous if in future similar studies  
were conducted and expanded. It must be noted that due to time constraints and difficulties  
with the original sample group, the researcher decided to conduct a case study as opposed to



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eralization of data. Hence, it is felt that further

age, or in separate future projects may be valuable.

Opportunistic sampling was also made use of and as such, it is acknowledged that this is a highly specific sample and that the experiences of these lesbian parents are as such not generalisable to all lesbian parents especially with regards to those with varying identity markers such as race or culture. Future projects could therefore be more expansive in terms of demographics and sample size.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Consent Form



Dear Participants

**Study Title: A qualitative exploration of being lesbian parents raising sperm donor children in South Africa**

Thank you for considering the invitation from me to participate in my psychology masters research project. As you can see from the above study title, my aim in conducting this research is to investigate the experience of being lesbian parents of sperm donor children in South Africa. In the research I have done relating to the literature on this topic I have discovered the space and need for accounts such as your own, in counteracting and setting straight more dominant heterosexist accounts of this lesbian experience. Furthermore there is a vast gap in terms of South African research relating to this important topic. We feel your views are particularly pertinent now, in light of the recent legalisation allowing equal access of lesbian woman to sperm donation.

Considering my use of what I uncover within our interview sessions for academic and possibly publication purposes, I cannot offer you complete confidentiality. I would however, like to promote confidentiality amongst yourself and your partner, and can offer you anonymity and the choice of a suitable pseudonym should you wish for any of the information at my disposal to be kept confidential. I wish to remind you that your participation within this research is voluntary and that you may withdraw from the project at any time should you wish to do so. Considering the potentially sensitive nature of my research topic, I can offer you free counselling at the counselling centre at UKZN. The interviews will be tape recorded but only I will have access to this material and it will be securely stored. Copies of my final research projects will be available to you should you wish to investigate my findings.

Thank you for your time and participation, it is much appreciated.



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Carryn Suckling

If you would prefer anonymity, please provide us with a suitable pseudonym to which we may refer:

í .

I, í (full name of the participant) hereby confirm that the contents of the above document have been explained to me verbally, that I understand the nature of the above contents, and that I consent to my participation within this project.

í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í .

Signature

í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í í .

date

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Witness

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date

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## Appendix 2: Ethical Clearance



RESEARCH OFFICE (GOVAN MBEKI CENTRE)  
WESTVILLE CAMPUS  
TELEPHONE NO.: 031 - 2603587  
EMAIL: ximbap@ukzn.ac.za

---

28 JULY 2008

MS. CN SUCKLING (208516457)  
PSYCHOLOGY

Dear Ms. Suckling

**ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPROVAL NUMBER: HSS/0344/08M**

I wish to confirm that ethical clearance has been approved for the following project:

"A qualitative exploration of the challenges facing lesbian parents raising sperm donor children in South Africa"

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years

Yours faithfully

  
.....  
MS. PHUMELELE XIMBA

cc. Supervisor (Kerry Frizelle)  
cc. Mrs. L Marriott