

**BEING AND BESPEAKING KIN:  
EXPERIENCES OF FAMILY IN  
THE LIVES OF BISEXUAL, LESBIAN,  
AND GAY ADULTS**

by

**ANDREA CURRIE**

**B.A., Mount St. Vincent University, 1990.**

**Thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Education (Counselling)**

**Acadia University  
Spring Convocation, 1998**

**© by ANDREA CURRIE 1998**



**National Library  
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services**

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

**Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et  
services bibliographiques**

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file Votre référence*

*Our file Notre référence*

**The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.**

**The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.**

**L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.**

**L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.**

0-612-27579-5

**Canada**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements .....  | vi  |
| Dedication .....  | vii |
| Introduction .....  | 1   |
| Methodology .....   | 18  |
| Methods and Procedures .....  | 45  |
| Ethical Considerations .....  | 48  |
| Introducing the Participants .....  | 50  |
| Starting at the Beginning: Life in our Families of Origin .....                         | 67  |
| Becoming Family .....   | 99  |
| Family of Choice Meets Family of Origin .....   | 145 |
| Relationships with Family of Origin: An Endless Process of<br>Negotiation .....         | 174 |
| Experiencing Family .....   | 189 |
| Having Children .....   | 230 |
| How Bisexual, Lesbian, and Gay Adults Talk About Family: An<br>Emerging Discourse ..... | 271 |
| Conclusion .....  | 309 |
| Bibliography .....  | 314 |
| Appendix .....  | 322 |

## **ABSTRACT**

Different experiences of family in the lives of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults are explored in this thesis, which is based on data gathered from six participants, each of whom was interviewed twice. The sample was chosen with diversity in mind, and includes individuals who identify as bisexual, lesbian, and gay; one of whom is Mi'qmaq and one of whom is African-Canadian. In the first interview, family of origin experiences were the focus, leading to discussions about the process through which each individual's ideas about family were shaped. The second interview investigated the present-day experiences of family in the lives of each participant. The researcher/author's experience of family appears throughout the work, foregrounding the nature of her interest in this topic and providing the reader with the opportunity to see the questions and experiences that have informed the project.

Life in our families of origin is presented as the starting point for the unfolding of our experiences of family in our adult lives. As we clarify what family means to us now, the process through which we become family with non-biological kin is identified. Interaction between our families of choice and our families of origin is explored as another dimension of our experience of family. The ongoing process of negotiation that characterizes our family of origin relationships throughout our lives is also discussed. The presentation of the seven stories continues in an investigation of what it is like to experience family in non-traditional ways in our daily lives, and how having children is a part of this for some of us. Finally, some preliminary questions and insights about the significance of language and discourse in the family experiences of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults are addressed.

The thesis concludes with a call to counsellors and therapists to be aware of the depth and breadth of the diverse experiences of family among their bisexual, lesbian, and gay clients, and indicates several areas requiring further research.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to express my gratitude to the members of my committee. A special thanks goes to David MacKinnon, who was the first to know of my interest in this area, and who was unequivocal in his encouragement from the start, sharing with me his belief that this was a piece of work that needed to be done. Thanks also to Toni Laidlaw, whose blend of rigour and passionate engagement with the work made shooting the intellectual whitewater of our committee meetings a pleasurable adventure. And thanks to Blye Frank, whose presence and voice in the academic world and in the community in which we live has always been an inspiration to me, for supporting my work in both the academic and professional realms.

And to the six extraordinary people who gave so generously of themselves to make this project possible. It has been an honour to be entrusted with your amazing stories. I hope I have expressed this in the way that I have woven them together. Thanks for all that you've taught me.

## **DEDICATION**

**For all of us who continue to do what needs to be done  
to create the space in which we can be ourselves.**

**I am in awe of our tenacious faithfulness to our visions,  
amazed at our resourcefulness and resilience,  
and concerned about our wounds.**

**May this work contribute to our healing,  
and the building of support for all of our possibilities.**

## INTRODUCTION

I am interested in how to put to work my skills and privileges in the service of contributing to the making of a space from which the unvoiced/unheeded can be said/heard. (Lather, 1991, p. 124)

Everyone experiences family in some way. We all originate from the bio/logic of procreation, and grow up in our biological or adoptive families of origin, or with the state as our pseudo-parents. Part of developing our identities as individuals is coming up with a description of our family background, like a preface to the story of our own life. Most of us expect to continue to experience family throughout our lives, whether or not we follow the prescribed conventions of heterosexual marriage and childrearing. Increasingly, the mythological character of The Family is being recognized. At last, we are openly acknowledging that the emperor is, indeed, wearing no clothes. There is no monolithic The Family; families have a diversity of forms.

This increasing expansiveness must not be romanticized. The institutions and practices of our collective political, economic, and social life still favour the conventional choices, and those who live in families that do not fit the norm are still severely disadvantaged. Single mothers and their children come to mind immediately as members of our communities whose lives are made incredibly difficult by archaic, patriarchal attitudes and policies.

Even more on the margins of recognizable family life are those of us whose sexualities place us outside of the norm: bisexual, lesbian, gay, transgendered, and transsexual people. It is very difficult for us to speak about how we experience family, and to imagine the ways we may want to create family in our lives. Not too long ago, the CBC Radio current affairs program "As It Happens" covered the story

of a Florida judge's decision to award custody of a child to her father who was a convicted murderer, rather than to her lesbian mother. Clearly, it is still somewhat unimaginable and unspeakable that persons who are not heterosexual could be parents and have healthy, loving family lives.

And yet, our own experience tells us that we desire affiliation, companionship, understanding, and intimacy. We are not psychologically different from heterosexual people in this regard. The small but growing body of literature related to queer studies<sup>1</sup> reflects this (Berzon, 1988, p. 7).

It is these largely unvoiced/unheeded desires that I wish to create space for, in this study. Living our lives as we do, in the half-light around the edges of community recognition, respect, and support, how do we experience family? What are we keeping, throwing away, inventing, in the creation of families in which we can be ourselves? How do we speak of it, and when, and to whom? And how does all of this shape our lives, our choices, and our well-being in the day to day?

The purpose of this study is twofold. Firstly, I want to explore the experience of family in the lives of a small sample of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults. Secondly, I want to offer the results of this exploration a) to others whose sexuality places them outside of the norm, as an affirmation and a resource for personal growth, and b) to counsellors and therapists working with bisexual, lesbian, and gay clients, to expand our awareness of the issues that our clients may be dealing with and to deepen the pool of questions from which we draw in our work.

Before introducing the people whose stories make up the content of this thesis, I will review some of the most significant schools of thought in past research and writing in the area of family, and in the area of the family-related experiences of bisexual people, lesbians, and gay men. Hopefully, this will equip the reader with



some sense of the theoretical context in which this project is taking place.

I will also outline the methodological tools I have used throughout the course of the project, explaining why I feel these particular epistemological approaches were most suitable.

And I will describe the actual research methods and procedures I employed and why.

Then I will introduce the reader to the seven of us whose stories form the substance of my discussion of this topic. We—the six participants and I—are the reader's guides on a journey through this uncharted territory of being and bespeaking kin—the experience of family in the lives of bisexual, lesbian and gay adults.

In conducting a research project on the topic of family, the first task appears to be to clarify my definition of the term. But it is extremely difficult to define family. Scholars from different academic disciplines and schools of thought approach this challenge in various ways. Some derive a definition from an emphasis on the legal, economic, or social aspects of family life. With the growing consensus that the ideal of a happy and healthy nuclear family has been mythologized (Rossi, Kagan & Hareven, 1978, p. vii), and that the outcry over the often-predicted demise of the family is incongruent with the research data, it has become generally accepted that families are diverse and subject to change. Historical accounts indicate that families are resilient and adaptable, largely biologically defined but also socially constructed in relation to specific characteristics of their environments (p. 58).

Brigitte and Peter Berger have pointed out that defining family is difficult because "human beings have difficulty defining the subjects that are closest to them." Berger and Berger link the issue of defining family to the practical matter of needing a way to talk about family and families (1983, p. 98).

Gubrium and Holstein further develop this link with their claim that, "while family has its legal and biological definitions, the everyday reality of the familial is produced through discourse. Thus family is as much a way of thinking and talking about relationships as it is a concrete set of social ties and sentiments" (1990, p. ix-x).

The fact is that the concept of family—like the social groupings it describes—is contextual, dynamic, and evolving. Recently in North America, the rate of change in families has intensified as a result of developments in reproductive technologies, the trend of more and more households depending on two incomes, the increased sexual activity of youth resulting in more teenage pregnancies, increasing expectation and incidence of divorce and remarriage creating single-parent households and blended families, changes in the practices associated with adoption including more open adoptions and adoption reunions, and increases in the life-span of the majority of North Americans, resulting in a growing elderly population. Faint but present in this picture, challenging hegemony by our very existence, are those of us whose sexuality places us outside the norm, and our families.

When we acknowledge that families have always been changing, it seems that to ask what family means to anybody today, is like asking for a description of a piece of land that is in the middle of an earthquake. It is my premise that family, even in the midst of such intense change, is still a major part of the life experience of most individuals.

Acknowledging the constancy of change, I let go of the belief that I need to define family, and shift my focus to integrating into my awareness the theoretical coordinates that define the starting point for my project.

I will look at three areas in this overview: structural functionalism and family

theory, the impact of feminism on family theory, and family discourse and social constructionism as a theoretical framework for understanding family. What follows is in no way an exhaustive literature review; the family studies field is very broad, with a long history and many interdisciplinary connections. What I can do is highlight some of what I believe are the most significant influences shaping our ideas about family.

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski published *The Family Among Australian Aborigines* in 1913, using his observations of sexual and familial interactions among the aborigines to refute the claims of social evolutionist thinkers who argued that "primitives" were incapable of having families because they were sexually promiscuous. Malinowski's study documented norms governing sexual relations and parent-child relationships that indicated that Australian aborigines had marriage, and differentiated between marriage and casual relationships. Based on this research, Malinowski made the claim that he has become famous for, i.e., that "the nuclear family is a universal human institution because it functions to fulfill a universal human need, the nurturing of children" (Thorne & Yalom, 1982, p. 78).

Malinowski's emphasis on the role played by the family in society foreshadowed the developments in sociological theory that followed. By the 1930s, structural functionalism was becoming the dominant theory of society, prioritizing a concern with the ways different parts of society relate to the whole, and how equilibrium is maintained (Douglas, 1973, p. 80-81).

Talcott Parsons is credited with applying this theory to the study of families. By the 1950s, Parsons was integrating the widespread industrialization that had taken place in Europe and North America into his theory. Parsons wrote about the function of the family, claiming that "the conjugal or nuclear family is the only type of family that does not conflict with the requirements of an industrial economy" (Cheal,

1991, p. 5). Parsons believed that the nuclear family fulfilled this function through the socialization of children, and the "personality stabilization" or "tension management" of adults. Another attribute of the nuclear family that was thought to contribute to its usefulness in the industrialized world was its small size as a social group, enabling mobility (Cheal, 1991).

These two theorists laid the groundwork for what has come to be known as the standard theory of family life, in which "the family is believed to be an adaptive unit which mediates between the individual and society" (Cheal, 1991, p. 4). Although Parsons' ideas are largely out of vogue, his influence is still felt in current thinking about sex role socialization (Thorne & Yalom, 1982, p. 8).

The next major influence on family theory came from what is often referred to as the second wave of feminism—the women's movement that began in the late 1960s and which continues to this day, fueling the academic activism of many women working in the social sciences. Feminists have had a profound impact on family theory. Although not the first or only critics of the monolithic ideology of the family, feminists are responsible for pointing out the connections between that ideology and the oppression of women (Thorne & Yalom, 1982, p. 4). Feminists "have rejected the functional emphasis on a smoothly working social order and have emphasized power, conflict, and change" (p. 8). To the functionalist narrative's claim that the nuclear family is a necessary adaptation to the needs of industrial societies, feminists have answered that concern about the future of the family is really concern about the future of caregiving and nurturance in a fragmented and impersonal capitalist system. Rather than challenge the system, social control is exercised to maintain the idealized family with the nurturant mother at its core (p. 19). The "family crisis" is reframed in feminist thinking as a larger social crisis which, if addressed, would require major political, economic, and social change.

Feminists have also identified the social construction of sexuality, reproduction, motherhood, gender and gender differences, and the sexual division of labour as elements of the "sex/gender system" that underlies family organization, and shown how family organization perpetuates this system (Thorne & Yalom, 1982, p. 9). Feminist scholarship has raised the spectre of compulsory heterosexuality and called for women's right to choose not to mother and for the legitimation of lesbianism as an expression of sexuality separate from reproduction (p. 11). It is feminists who have revealed what is underneath the "greeting card image of the smiling family" (Bridenthal, 1982, p. 234): love that is "complicated, corrupted, or obstructed by an unequal balance of power" (Thorne, in Thorne & Yalom, 1982, p. 13), the idealization of "motherhood while isolating and marginalizing mothering" (Bridenthal, 1982, p. 232), and "the irony that ... the place where nurturance and noncontingent affection are supposed to be located is simultaneously the place where violence is most tolerated" (Collier, Rosaldo & Yanagisako, 1982, p. 36). This violence takes many forms: rape, sexual assault of children, battering. In short:

the feminist perspective ... has revealed far more complicated relationships within family and between family and other social formations than had previously been understood. (Bridenthal, 1982, p. 235)

Feminist scholarship has not been the only source of the challenge to the monolithic concept of the family. This challenge has also come from cross-cultural studies of families, and studies of families from different social classes. One study that is widely referred to in the literature is Stack's research into family and kinship in an African American neighbourhood in the Midwest. Stack (1974) found that kinship ties did not reflect the dominant notion of the nuclear family. Other researchers have found that "social class variations ... challenge any simple understanding of

the family as isolated and set apart from the rest of society" (Thorne, in Thorne & Yalom, 1982, p. 17).

It is, however, feminist critiques of family theory that have shown how, building on work in the area of the social construction of gender, the notion of The Family, which is founded on the "sex/gender system", is also a social construct. Others have taken this up and added the dimension of discourse analysis to come up with a theory and method for understanding family that is framed in social constructionism and family discourse (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990, p. 10).

Gubrium and Holstein build on the ways in which the role of language has been incorporated into previous critiques of family theory. Feminists have pointed out the uncritical use of terms like "sex roles", "female role", "male role", the distorting and protectionist connotations of terms like "family violence" to refer to violence that statistics indicate is most often male violence against women and children, and the problem with the use of the term The Family, itself, which some authors capitalize as a textual technique for rendering the term problematic. [I have chosen to do the same, when I use the words "the" and "family" together, without qualifiers, referring to the popular wisdom that there is one definable family form.]

Gubrium and Holstein take up the questions raised in this critique of the language used to refer to The Family, exploring the relationship between discourse and the social construction of family. They posit that family discourse is "not just a mode of communication but also assigns meaning to the actions we take on behalf of social ties designated familial" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990, p. 14), and that it is a discourse that "persuades as well as informs" (p. ix). Another aspect of this is that "If discourse assigns meaning to everyday life and thereby instructs our actions, life's potential meanings are limited to the discourses available" (p. 16).

This perspective is one that may be particularly valuable in analyzing the

words and stories of participants in this study, given the marginalization of our family experiences, and the silencing that is part of that marginalization. When an individual's—or family's—experience is not often or easily expressed in the dominant discourse, what is our family discourse like? In what ways are we limited by the available discourse? And how does this affect how we create and experience family?

In the following section, I present a partial overview of the literature in the area of the family experiences of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults.

The publication of research and writing on the topic of family and kinship as experienced by those of us whose sexualities place us outside of the norm, is a recent phenomenon. What has been written so far has come primarily from academics who situate themselves in queer studies—not from those whose research interest is families. Kath Weston's work challenges the prevalent biologically based notion of kinship, and the view that family is grounded in heterosexual relations:

If heterosexual intercourse can bring people into enduring association via the creation of kinship ties, lesbian and gay sexuality in these depictions isolates individuals from one another rather than weaving them into a social fabric. To assert that straight people 'naturally' have access to family, while gay people are destined to move toward a future of solitude and loneliness, is not only to tie kinship closely to procreation, but also to treat gay men and lesbians as members of a nonprocreative species set apart from the rest of humanity. (Weston, 1991, p. 22)

Weston's work on gays and lesbians and kinship has an anthropological flavour, indicating an emerging discourse related to gay (read: gay and lesbian)

families, that is distinct from the dominant discourse (1991, p. 17). This anthropological approach suggests that the same recognition and respect is due this culturally-defined discourse as would be appropriate vis a vis any other culture.

The notion of kinship that Weston uses is based on David Schneider's study of "American kinship", in which he suggests that kinship is found in the contrast between "the order of nature" which manifests in blood relations, and "the order of law" which manifests in customary codes of conduct. Weston (1991) states that heterosexism and homophobia place gay and lesbian experience "outside law and nature", and refers to this as the "cultural positioning" of lesbians and gay men (p. 3-4). This could also be described as the social construction of the cultural space in which lesbians and gay men live their lives.

To locate bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults outside of law and nature, acknowledges that we are "out of order", that our sense of intimacy and family structure is shaped by different relations with procreation and customary codes of conduct. These different relations marginalize us and make us subject to discrimination; they also place us outside of the normal constraints on human experience, and on human imagination. Envisioning alternatives is part of how we survive. From this place on the margins, a discourse is emerging that challenges the dominant one.

For bisexual, lesbian and gay adults, coming out has been seen to equal renouncing family, both family of origin (since coming out usually threatens these relationships), and parenting. In the words of therapist and writer Betty Berzon (1979), "from early on, being gay is associated with going against the family" (p. 89). Not only are we considered to be outside of the realm of family, we are actually considered to be a menace to family (Weston, 1991, p. 51). This is the context in which studies like this one take place.



Because bisexuality and transsexuality are only recently beginning to become visible, the published literature dealing with these is scant. Every attempt will be made to reference what is available, and data from the interviews will bring this area into the picture. Unfortunately, it will not be possible to triangulate these data with findings from other research to the same extent as will be possible with lesbian and gay men's experiences.

Even lesbians' and gay men's experiences of family have not been studied very much; Weston's is the only book on the subject of family and kinship that I was able to find. The experiences of bisexual and transsexual persons were not part of her research. Published research articles are few. The subjects that have received the most attention in the area of the family experiences of lesbians and gay men are: relationships, coming out to parents and extended family, and parenting. And, with the exception of Weston's book, *Families We Choose*, these elements have not been brought together to be analyzed as a holistic experience of family.

The literature on relationships among bisexual, lesbian and gay adults basically states that we share the desires of heterosexual people for companionship and intimacy. The factors that work against the establishment of healthy, intimate relationships are numerous. Fear plays a big role in our lives. Berzon (1988) marvels at "the ingeniousness with which people solve the special problems of same-sex relationships" (p. 3).

Support for relationships is important. Socializing with other couples becomes not only a pleasantry, but the creation of space in which to be oneself with one's partner outside of the private sphere of the home. Increasingly, it is being recognized that public knowledge and celebration of significant milestones in the life of the relationship, are another important form of support: anniversary announcements can be found in some print publications and commitment ceremonies are becom-

ing more common (Berzon, 1988, p. 327-329). Bisexual, lesbian, and gay couples are creating their own rituals. Also on the rise are supportive, community-based services. Psychoeducational programs, like couples workshops and parenting support groups can be found in larger centres. More counsellors and therapists are promoting themselves as lesbian/gay/bi positive; couples therapy is a part of this (p. 7). There are now legal and financial services, in some larger centres, for example, insurance counsellors. And many community organizations include advocacy as a major part of their mandate, often with paid staff available to help community members. AIDS service organizations provide advocacy and counselling to people infected or affected by the AIDS virus; again, some of these services are especially for couples.

The relationships that we have with our families of origin are—as they are for everybody—formative. For many, secrecy develops in our families of origin regarding our sexuality. This secrecy can be maintained by daughters and sons who realize their sexual identity places them outside of the norm, out of fear of rejection and in an effort to preserve a relationship of some sort (Weston, 1991, p. 42).

One study found that 90% of parents surveyed said they would be upset if they found out that their daughter or son was gay. In Weston's research, talking about coming out to families was second only to AIDS in eliciting an emotional response (Weston, 1991, p. 47). For many, coming out to family is asking for acceptance of something they have not completely accepted themselves (Berzon, 1988, p. 285). Coming out involves claiming adulthood, agency, and self-determination. The dominant culture tends to equate heterosexual marriage with adulthood; it can be extremely difficult for adults whose sexuality places us outside of the norm—even when we are in our thirties and older—to get our parents to see us as grown-up, simply because we have not done what they always thought we would

do when we grew up (Berzon, 1988, p. 307).

In the research that examines peoples' coming-out experiences, a theme that emerges is that it is a test of kinship, i.e., the person who comes out finds out how connected they really are to that family member (Weston, 1991, p. 44). If the connection is not what they hoped it would be, there is loss to deal with and grieving that must be done (Berzon, 1988, p. 294). The research also documents positive responses of family members. Some parents recognize the need to relinquish their adherence to the myth of the ideal family, and some go further and value the experience as a major source of liberation from truncated thoughts and feelings (Griffin, Wirth & Wirth, 1986, p. 137-139). All of the research concurs that coming out is a lifelong process for bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults.

The option of parenting is presented in the research as a positive choice for us, even with its many challenges and difficulties. What are the positive aspects of parenting for bisexuals, lesbians, and gay men? The same as they are for heterosexual parents, and equally as hard to express in words. The rewards of nurturing a child and caring for them as they grow, the fascination (Pollack & Vaughan, 1987, p. 273), the humour and fun, the presence of a non-adult perspective in one's life.

And what do the children think of this? Here are the words of a fifteen-year-old about her mom being a lesbian:

It's really no big deal—just another fact about her. Her being a lesbian *in itself* has never bothered me. The way other people react to it is the problem. (Pollack & Vaughan, 1987, p. 268)

And a twenty-one-year-old, about having to leave her lesbian mom at nine and go live with her father:

I missed mother's friends and their close-knit world in which I felt safe. I kept no secrets from any of them. In New York, it seemed that everyone that Tommy and I knew regarded homosexuals and lesbians with disgust. (Rafkin, 1990, p. 88)

The research suggests that the special problems for children of lesbians and gay men are no greater than those for children of any minority group (Berzon, 1988, p. 322), and that the benefits, in terms of learning to embrace difference and be open minded and critical thinkers, are substantial (Pollack & Vaughan, 1987, p. 273).

The issue of whether or not to parent is, however, a controversial issue for some, and I am not referring here to homophobic responses to queer parents. The controversy within the ranks seems to be related to the need to critique the institution of the family and the institution of motherhood, which has emerged out of feminist analysis. Similar to the way in which being married is a symbol of normalcy, having children can have the effect of giving an individual status and enabling them to pass as heterosexual (Pollack & Vaughan, 1987, p. 53).

In a critical look at lesbians choosing motherhood, Nancy Polikoff refers to the cultural norms regarding motherhood, and suggests that motherhood is no more a matter of choice for women than being heterosexual is. Polikoff, a lesbian mother herself, thinks that what has come to be known as the lesbian baby boom is actually a threat to the women's movement, because of the loss of the energies of former feminist activists who become occupied with childrearing. She finds it problematic that "political action and change is not a prominent part of lesbian discussions about whether or not to have children" (Pollack & Vaughan, 1987, p. 49-50).

Others are of the view that parenting in a way that raises a child's consciousness about the need for social change is, quite simply, good parenting, i.e. beneficial

to the child and the community. Considering childrearing as part of a lesbian feminist agenda sounds exploitive and unethical. When she says that she is separating herself from her lesbian sisters when she chats about children to another parent (Pollack & Vaughan, 1987, p. 53), Polikoff has created a false dichotomy between lesbians and heterosexual women that denies the diversity of our lives: what about heterosexual women who do not have children, and other lesbians who do?

One of the difficulties reported by lesbian mothers is the intolerance and exclusion of boy children, among some feminists and at some women's movement gatherings. Acknowledging the need for women-only space, it has been at events not advertised in this way that this form of discrimination has been upsetting to some lesbian mothers (Pollack & Vaughan, 1987, p. 150-151).

Parenting issues seem to play themselves out differently for gay men. In a study comparing the value of children to gay and heterosexual fathers, Bigner and Jacobsen found that gay fathers were more likely to view having children as an enhancement of their masculinity. The reasons that gay men might have difficulty finding support for themselves as parents, relate to the way in which gay culture is single-oriented. Gay peers may be more likely to consider children as an impediment to their lifestyle. Bozett claims that gay fathers must develop "integrative sanctioning", which involves finding acceptance of their gayness among non-gay parents, finding support for their parenting among gay peers, and integrating these two aspects of their lives. One study found that 20-25% of gay men are fathers (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989, p. 164).

Another difficulty is the lack of support for parenting from the parents' extended family. Some parents report that homophobia in schools, playgrounds, workplaces, is not as intense or difficult to deal with as not having the approval and affection of the extended family.

Disapproval from families is a reflection of societal attitudes toward parents who are lesbian and gay, that often leads to heartbreaking child custody decisions in the courts in which, too often, parents are separated from their children due to homophobia. Case law is beginning to accumulate that supports the right of gays and lesbians to parent, by not considering sexual orientation as a criterion for assessing the fitness of a parent (Lesbian Rights Project, 1985). Some First Nations lesbians and gay men experience losing custody of a child due to their sexual orientation as a painful reminder of how many children in their communities were removed from their parents' care as part of state education and assimilation policies (Pollack & Vaughan, 1987, p. 31-37).

Clearly, many adults whose sexuality places us outside of the norm have the desire to parent children. There are research data that suggest a correlation between the sublimation of this desire and the disproportionately high numbers of lesbians and gay men in the helping professions (Berzon, 1988, p. 319).

The legal issues, child custody being the most well-known, are also being researched and written about. Issues such as owning property together, spousal benefits, preferential tax treatment, durable power of attorney for the spouse should their partner become incapacitated, and getting insurance, are all issues of concern to lesbians, bisexual people, gay men, and their families. In order for an intimate relationship to be recognized by the state, it has to be verifiable; cohabitation and economic integration are the two elements of a shared life that are easiest to establish (Berzon, 1988, p. 266-276).

Changes are taking place, largely as a result of activism within queer communities, that are making it more possible for bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults to have healthy family lives. The general trend toward demythologizing the family, openness to different ways of conceiving children (Rossi et al., 1978, p. vii-ix), a

growing trend toward thinking of human sexuality on a continuum (Weinberg et al., 1974, p. 40), and increasing consciousness of the need to embrace diversity in society (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991, p. 159), are all part of this.

Given the shifting landscape of family studies, and the under-researched and therefore largely unspoken family experiences of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults, how does one approach a study such as this? In the next section, I will explain the epistemological ideas that combine to form my methodology.

### **Notes**

1. I use the term "queer" in recognition of the limitations of the terms "lesbian", "gay" and "bisexual" identified by some of my participants and me. As Donna Penn says, "The challenge of 'queer' to the hegemony of the 'normal' might provide the space in which to begin retheorizing categories of inclusion and exclusion that guide our ... work." See Penn, 1995.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Combining Phenomenology and Feminist Poststructuralism**

Various methodologies lend themselves to a qualitative study such as this one: ethnography, narrative, even participant action research, if the project were to focus on social action like lobbying to change human rights legislation and social policy. Reviewing the available options, phenomenology stands out as the methodology that best fits my research question: how do bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults experience family? Phenomenology asks: "What is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced?" and emphasizes the importance of the context, or "lifeworld" of the research participant (Van Manen, 1990, p. 40, 7). This approach is very compatible with the philosophical and political perspective and ensuing style of interviewing people and gathering data that I have evolved for myself as a researcher and writer.

Poststructuralism emphasizes deconstructing established categories and both poststructuralism and feminism insist on foregrounding the research process. In reflecting on and writing about the stories I have gathered, I want to combine a phenomenological orientation with a feminist poststructural deconstruction of the ideological frames that have traditionally prescribed and limited our experience and learning. I view the existence of families outside the conventional heterosexual norm as a concrete expression of the deconstruction of the idealized concept of The Family, making the use of a poststructural perspective a logical choice.



## More About Phenomenology

I first encountered phenomenology in a book by Max Van Manen titled *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*. I was struck by Van Manen's emphasis on orienting oneself as a researcher to the uniqueness of the experience of the individual, to their context or lifeworld, and to the depth of meaning to be explored in their lived experience.

Van Manen's research approach is largely based on the thinking of Edmund Husserl, a Moravian Jew who lived and taught in Germany, mostly, in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In 1933, he was stripped of his professorship and teaching privileges by the Nazis; after his death in 1938, his widow, several of his students, and the Prime Minister of Belgium had to conspire to get his manuscripts out of Germany and into Belgium where they are housed in an archives at Louvain.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I was telling a friend of mine that I was working on this section, explaining to her that I had to show where Van Manen got his ideas, basically trace the lineage of the phenomenological thought I am using in my approach. I was telling her that he was a student of Husserl's ideas, who was influenced by Descartes, when all of a sudden I stopped. "This kinda sounds like the Bible, doesn't it?" I said. "It really does!" my friend exclaimed. "You know, Descartes begat Husserl, and Husserl begat Van Manen, and you know what? They're all guys, same as in the Bible!" We had a good laugh and then agreed that it is a useful thing to establish the context in which we are doing our work.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Husserl's work began with an interest in the foundation of mathematics, and evolved into the development of his phenomenology. He died in 1938, but by the mid-1970s, his ideas about phenomenology were considered by many European scholars to be the most influential philosophical approach on their continent, and interest in phenomenology in the English speaking world was growing rapidly.

I felt an instant affinity with Husserl when I read in an introduction to *The Paris Lectures*, that his texts are considered difficult to read because "language and culture have failed to focus on those aspects of experience that he analyzes; he must consequently invent his language" (Husserl, 1975, p. ix). It has been my experience that the questions I am most interested in asking are often difficult to formulate, because the areas I want to explore are largely unscripted in language, e.g., the family experience of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults.

Husserl, himself, was influenced by Descartes. Descartes' method of systematic doubt is expressed in his "Second Meditation":

I shall proceed by setting aside all that in which the least doubt could be supposed to exist, just as if I had discovered that it was absolutely false; and I shall ever follow in this road until I have met with something that is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing else, until I have learned for certain that there is nothing in the world that is certain. (Descartes, 1927, p. 95-96)

One of Husserl's key concepts, that of the phenomenological epoche, echoes this idea. The word "epoche" comes from the Greek word for bracketing, and Husserl used this term to refer to the reflective, disengaged attitude that must be adopted in order to apprehend the meaning of experience. A significant difference between Descartes and Husserl is that Descartes claimed to be laying aside all his beliefs while in the process of philosophical inquiry—hence the Cartesian version

of objective knowledge. Husserl was slightly more realistic and claimed that in the phenomenological epoche, he was simply suspending judgment about the experience he was reflecting on and analyzing.

While Descartes and Husserl shared a sense of the significance of subjectivity, i.e. the ego as central in the process of pursuing philosophical insight, they differed in their method. Descartes applied the principles of deductive reasoning in his thinking, and Husserl distinguished between the deductive nature of mathematics and the more mysterious aspects of experience, leaning toward description as the way to learn more about a particular experience (Husserl, 1975, p. xvi-xix).

There are several key concepts in Husserl's phenomenology that seem relevant to my project. One is the aforementioned phenomenological epoche, which refers to the bracketing and setting aside of beliefs, theories, and judgments about the experience we are investigating, in order to engage with that experience as presupposition-less as possible. While I understand the importance of referring to past scholarship that relates to my topic of inquiry, I am most interested in engaging with and reflecting on the experiences of my participants and myself without theories or hypotheses. I believe this is especially necessary when the subject matter has been so ignored in academic work that has been done, to date, in related subject areas. I wish to avoid the imposition of a theoretical framework on an aspect of lived experience about which we know so little. There is a quality of freshness in this approach that seems appropriate.

**What first of all characterizes phenomenological research is that it always begins in the life world. This is the world of the natural attitude of everyday life which Husserl described as the original, pre-reflective, pre-theoretical attitude. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 7)**

The concept of intentionality is also central in Husserl's thinking. By intentionality, Husserl (1975) was referring to the "active participation of the ego in the structuring of our experience" (p. xxx). Intentionality signifies the outward moving, projecting quality of consciousness, the relating of self as subject to the object of our attention. In Husserl's view, intentionality is the structure of consciousness. And the intentionality of our experience emerges when we apply the phenomenological epoche to the act of experiencing and perceiving, when we pause to observe ourselves (p. xxxi). Moments of conscious intentionality are woven throughout the text I have created: when I interrupt my own narrative with a personal reflection, trying to make transparent the ways I am relating to the work.

This leads to the next concept in Husserl's phenomenology that relates to my work: transcendental subjectivity. Transcendental subjectivity refers to the observer that is always present in our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Husserl described the integral nature of subject and object, neither existing without the other, and both becoming one—a unity of experience—in the act of relating to each other.

There is no meaning to the pure subject or isolated ego.  
A subject is what it is because objects are presented to it. To be a subject means to confront an object, just as to be an object means to be perceived by a subject.  
(Husserl, 1975, p. xxvii)

I have chosen to foreground myself as the researcher in this project, partly for reasons that are explicated in poststructural thought and which I will discuss in the next part of this chapter, and partly because I ascribe to this tenet of Husserl's thought. In Husserl's own words:

the *epoche* changes nothing in the world. All experience is still his [sic] experience, all consciousness, his [sic] consciousness. (1975, p. 12)

In phenomenology, the person asking the question becomes part of the experience that is being studied, acknowledging that the act of asking and perceiving changes that which is being perceived. While there is an attempt to engage with that which is being researched as presupposition-less as possible, there is also the inalienable presence of myself as a person, with all that I bring to the question:

phenomenological research does not start or proceed in a disembodied fashion. It is always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 31)

In my synthesis of Husserl's and Van Manen's ideas about phenomenology, I attempt to bracket theories, assumptions, and judgments, but I question at the very same time, the extent to which I can make myself presupposition-less. I accept that as a goal, and make my limitations apparent as I strive for it.

Van Manen takes Husserl's phenomenology and adds a couple of other dimensions to it, namely hermeneutics and semiotics. He describes the roles of the three elements of his research approach as follows:

Phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the "texts" of life, and semiotics is used here to develop a practical writing or linguistic approach to the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics. (1990, p. 31)

In my view, this enriches Husserl's approach by further developing his ideas about subjectivity to include reflection on how interpretations are made, and by flagging the rich domain of language and its role in the construction of knowledge. I have tried to integrate both of these dimensions into the process of doing my research and writing this text.

According to Van Manen (1990), "phenomenological research consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life" (p. 4). This resonates so clearly with the task of exploring the experience of family in the lives of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults.

So phenomenology is not about coming up with answers. It is more aimed at broadening the field of perceived experience about which we may want to ask questions. This makes it an appropriate choice as part of the methodology that informs my work.

In his or her phenomenological description, the researcher/writer must "pull" the reader into the question in such a way that the reader cannot help but wonder about the nature of the phenomenon in the way that the human scientist does. One might say that a phenomenological questioning teaches the reader to wonder, to question deeply the very thing that is being questioned by the question. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 32)

The one aspect of phenomenology that does not ring true for me is an emphasis on trying to apprehend the *essence* of the lived experience. While not as linear in his thinking as Descartes was with his deductive reasoning, Husserl still believed that through the process of *philosophical reduction* —the step-by-step detaching of all philosophical theories from the object of inquiry, the researcher

could arrive at the core or essence of the experience. The concept of the essence of the lived experience is present in Van Manen's thinking, too, although his understanding of being presupposition-less seems to make room for the possibility of deconstructing that frame as well:

The methodology of phenomenology is such that it posits an approach toward research that aims at it being presupposition-less; in other words, this is a methodology that tries to ward off any tendency toward constructing a pre-determined set of fixed procedures, techniques, and concepts that would rule-govern the research project. (1990, p. 29)

If we consider the concept of a fixed essence at the core of every experience as a concept that could, potentially, "rule-govern" my research project, and we adopt instead the notion that deconstructing these frames is necessary if we are to really open up our work to all the possible interpretations, Van Manen has provided a segue into a discussion of the relevance of poststructuralism.

### **More About Poststructuralism**

The terms "postmodernism", "poststructuralism", and "postpositivism" are often used interchangeably, which can be quite confusing. For the purposes of this discussion, I have opted to use the definitions of these terms that feminist poststructuralist Patti Lather (1991) uses. She uses the term "postmodern" to refer to the present era we are in, which is characterized by "a crisis of confidence in western conceptual systems" (p. 87), and a growing acceptance of the limits of rationality. In epistemological thought, the modern era, brought on by what is called the Enlightenment was a time when positivism reigned and was thought to be the

"one best way" (p. 87).

Positivism refers to the work of Comte in the early 1800s to extend established scientific methods to the social sciences, so postpositivism is the "opening up of paradigmatic alternatives for the doing of social science" (Lather, 1991, p. 87) and includes many methodological approaches, e.g., symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminist, participatory, critical, poststructural. Postpositivism covers the range of methodologies available in this time of epistemological shakedown, and describes the atmosphere in which scholars are engaging in critical thinking and in which the limitations of positivism are beginning to be understood. An increasing interest in the role of language in the construction of knowledge is part of this, too.

To be clear, positivism is still dominant as a way of thinking about the social sciences, but the notion that it has to be measurable and quantifiable in order to be fact no longer holds sway with the majority of researchers. Even if we have yet to become really adept at understanding and utilizing new methodological approaches.

Lather defines poststructuralism as the practice of working with academic theory, in the postmodern environment or culture. It is an approach that favours "gaps, discontinuities and suspensions of dictated meanings in which difference, plurality, multiplicity and the coexistence of opposites are allowed free play" (Lather, 1991, p. 91). I feel that my textual choices, which inform and are informed by my analysis, reflect a poststructuralist perspective, in that I am committed to interrupting the conventions of text and the reading of text. By doing this, I am hoping to undermine of the authority of my own voice as the researcher/writer, and create space in which the authority inherent in my participants' experiences can be heard, as multiple voices with different interpretations.

The proponents of postmodernism declare that bias in scholarship is inevi-



table; the terminology of postmodernism includes reworked meanings for location, site, and frame. What I resonate with most strongly in postmodern thinking is the clear naming of the power that is exercised in the name of objective science. By pointing out that the formation of criteria for determining the legitimacy of knowledge is a political act, postmodernists have shown us that power is exercised in pervasive and sometimes subtle ways in the construction of knowledge.

In fact, Foucault (1977), in an interview included in the *Power/Knowledge* collection, wonders whether there is any difference between power relations and warlike domination:

Shouldn't one therefore conceive all problems of power in terms of relations of war? Isn't power a sort of generalized war which assumes at particular moments the forms of peace and the State? (p. 123)

By naming the power relations inherent in our collective life together, postmodernists make the status quo problematic. Assumptions are to be questioned and underlying biases are to be exposed. Sometimes this is called "foregrounding". Because I am a poor observer of my own biases, I have tried to provide enough personal glimpses of myself in the work so that the reader may be able to perceive my biases, even when I cannot.

Patti Lather is a woman who taught high school for several years and loved it except that she was prevented by the bureaucracy of the system from being as creative as she wanted to be in her teaching. She went back to school to become a teacher of education and teach teachers, hoping to change education so that teachers can bring their full potential to the classroom. Her probing questions about the nature of learning and the politics of the production of knowledge have led her to become a researcher and teacher of research.

Her book, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern*, was very useful to me as I clarified my thinking about what I would be doing in this research project. She has been influenced in her thinking by Habermas, widely regarded as the source of the beginnings of critical theory, French poststructuralists Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and Irigaray, and feminist inquiry in women's studies, which also challenges positivist hegemony. The work of the feminist philosopher of science, Sandra Harding, is often referenced in Lather's thinking.

From Lather, I gain a sense of the importance of vigilance in our attempts to stay aware of our use of our power as researchers, and innovation in subverting the relations of power of which we are a part. This requires a radical honesty and a workable comfort level with my limitations, and the reward is better, more grounded, work that avoids perpetuating privilege as much as possible.

Given the postmodern tenet of how we are inscribed in that which we struggle against, how can I intervene in the production of knowledge at particular sites in ways that work out of the blood and spirit of our lives, rather than out of the consumerism of ideas that can pass for a life of the mind in academic theory? (Lather, 1991, p. 20)

Lather (1991) sees in postmodernism an opportunity for the marginalized to claim some space in the

conjunction of de-centred subjectivity and multi-sited agency within a post-paradigmatic diaspora. The resultant opening up of ways to produce and legitimate knowledge has profound implications for research and pedagogy aimed at interrupting relations of dominance. (p. 121-122)

This resonates with my vision of making space—psychically, socially, linguistically, textually—for stories of the experience of family in the lives of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults.

I also resonate with Lather's sense of the importance of not being certain, of leaving questions open. It seems to me that it is our *orientation* to learning and creating knowledge that matters. Lather quoted her colleague, Grosz, saying of Luce Irigaray's writings, that they "resonate with ambiguities that proliferate rather than diminish readings" (Lather, 1991, p. 10). She writes of her own work, "My hope is to create a text open enough, evocative enough on multiple levels, that it will work in ways I cannot even anticipate" (p. xx). It is my hope to do this, too.

One of my strategies is to deconstruct the authority of the text by featuring the voices of the six participants in regular, dialogical excerpts. My wish is that the reader can "hear" them speak as free from the filter of my involvement as possible.

a deconstructive approach links our "reading" to ourselves as socially situated spectators. It draws attention to the variety of readings, the partiality of any one view and our implications in historical social relations. This works against naturalizing, essentializing and foregrounds positionalities. (Lather, 1991, p. 142)

Deconstruction subverts the dominant discourse and provides space for as yet unheard voices.

To deconstruct the desire that shapes a particular act of enframing is to probe the libidinal investment in form and content of the author-text relationship. It is to mark the belief that our discourse is the meaning of our longing. (Lather, 1991, p. 83)

Lather also integrates language into her inquiry, describing it as “the terrain where differently privileged discourses struggle via confrontation and/or displacement” (1991, p. 8). This is another point of connection to my work, specifically to my conviction that I must incorporate some reflections on language when I write up our stories—knowing that discourse is a daily site of struggle for us, whether it is deciding whether or not to speak, what to say, when to say it, or how to say it.

### **More About Combining the Two Methodological Approaches**

In reading Van Manen's *Researching Lived Experience Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, and Lather's *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern* the reader discerns echoes of each other's underlying principles. To illustrate this, I will now present some of their words in a dialogue I have constructed. I locate myself in the dialogue as a speaker stating the nature of my interest in research, and then in commentary in which I explain the significance of these methodological ideas to my study.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Van Manen:** the method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator [researcher] (1990, p. 2).

**Me:** My interest is in creating a space in which marginalized voices, including my own, can engage in expanding our collective sense of what is possible, as we go about the task of creating healthy communities on this planet. This inevitably involves confronting and challenging

existing power structures, to make space for our speaking, and our actions for healing and change.

**Lather:** For many of those second wave feminist researchers, the methodological task has become generating and refining more interactive, contextualized methods in the search for pattern and meaning rather than for prediction and control (1991, p. 72).

**Van Manen:** Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks, "What is this or that kind of experience like?" (1990, p. 9).

**Lather:** Context and meaning in everyday life are posited as co-constructions, multiple, complex, open and changing, neither pre-given nor explainable by large scale causal theories, but made and re-made across a multiplicity of minor, scattered practices (1991, p. 42).

**Van Manen:** meaning questions can never be closed down, they will always remain the subject matter of the conversational relations of lived life, and they will need to be appropriated, in a benefit from such insight (1990, p. 23).

**Me:** That's a lot of openendedness and uncertainty to accept as part of the process of learning more about something.

**Lather:** The courage to think and act within an uncertain framework, then, emerges as the hallmark of liberatory praxis in a time marked by the dissolution of authoritative foundations of knowledge (1991, p. 13).

\* \* \* \* \*

While phenomenology and poststructuralism are compatible, there are aspects of the research process that phenomenology speaks to more clearly, and aspects of the process that poststructuralism speaks to more clearly. What captures my sense of the interaction of the two epistemological approaches is the metaphor of the lens-making machine at the optometrists office: the big apparatus that the person getting glasses looks through while the optometrist figures out their prescription by flipping different kinds of lenses on and off, until the combination that makes for optimum sight is found. I predict that I will use several phenomenological "lenses" and several poststructuralist "lenses", in different combinations, at different points in the research process.

Drawing from both Van Manen and Lather, I propose the following eleven operative assumptions as guidelines for my work.

### **Operative Assumption #1**

**This study is taking place in a historical moment in which dominant epistemological practices are being challenged.**

**Van Manen:** Much of social science produces forms of knowledge which fixate life by riveting it to the terms and grammar of forms of scientific theorizing that congeal the living meaning out of human life (1990, p. 17).

**Lather:** Western logocentrism with its dependence on oppositional relations with Otherness, its assumptions of self-presence, its pretensions toward mastery, totalization and certitude has begun to implode (1991, p. 163).

The foundational assumptions of Western knowledge are being questioned and this makes space for creative possibilities. This period of change in the history of epistemology is part of a broad-based change that can be seen in other disciplines, e.g. quantum physics. Quantum physics has opened its borders and become more friendly with its neighbours, mysticism and spirituality. The categories in which we have organized our thoughts and experiences for many years are collapsing into one another.

The bigger picture is the rapidly changing political and social face of the world. The dissolution of the U.S.S.R., the fall of the Berlin Wall, the evolution of women's consciousness through the second wave of feminism and the challenges this has presented to men in the Western world, the challenges presented to Western feminists by women from developing countries, and the developments in communication technologies that are happening so fast it has become almost impossible to keep up—these are just a few examples of the kinds and degree of change the global community is experiencing. Economic and environmental crises characterize our clumsy attempts to adjust to all this intense change.

## **Operative Assumption #2**

**What I am constructing is a lens, or combination of lenses,  
rather than a frame.**

**Van Manen:** The methodology of phenomenology is such that it posits an approach toward research that aims at being presuppositionless; in other words, this is a methodology that tries to ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques, and concepts that would rule-govern the research project (1990, p. 29).

**Lather:** the business of those engaged in experiments at the limits of their disciplines is to resist the rigidity and pretention of rules, to interrupt received categories and procedures (1991, p. 98).

In times of epistemological uncertainty, it has been suggested that practice is what moves innovation forward. Poststructuralism rejects all the current categories as inaccurate, distorting and limiting, and rather than create another framework, focuses instead on techniques of knowledge production that can create a "becoming space" for not only new understandings, but new ways of understanding. Luce Irigaray refers to this as a "detour into technique" necessitated by the transitory nature of epistemology at this time (Van Manen, 1991, p. 7). I will be using phenomenological and poststructural techniques to explore the experience of family in the lives of a small number of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults.



### **Operative Assumption #3**

**This study will focus on the creation of space in which the participants' experiences can speak to the reader, as theoretically unfettered as possible.**

**Van Manen:** What first of all characterizes phenomenological research is that it always begins in the lifeworld. This is the world of the natural attitude of everyday life which Husserl described as the original, pre-reflective, pre-theoretical attitude (1990, p. 7).

**Lather:** [we need to] take responsibility for transforming our practices so that our empirical and theoretical work can be less toward positioning ourselves as masters of truth and justice and more toward creating a space where those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf (1991, p. 164).

Although I am interested in the ways in which these data relate to already established theories of family, I will be more attentive to the ways in which these data open up spaces that may not have been theoretically categorized to date, and the ways in which I, as researcher, can use my position to facilitate this. To the extent that my research takes place within an academic context, and in a language that overtly and covertly signifies power inequities, my ability to eradicate unequal power relations is limited. However, attention to, and innovation in analytical and textual technique is the best strategy available for deconstructing these power relations and making as much space as possible for the creation of new meanings.

#### **Operative Assumption #4**

**Doing research in this way is a political act.**

**Lather:** We must shift the role of critical intellectuals from being universalizing spokespersons to acting as cultural workers whose task is to take away the barriers that prevent people from speaking for themselves (1991, p. 47).

It is a basic tenet of postmodernism that we are inscribed within that which we struggle against. Lather takes us beyond this realization to suggest that we must now minimize the ways in which we, as researchers and writers, get in the way of the work that needs to be done. This means abandoning rhetoric and trying to think outside of existing frameworks, while realizing—and foregrounding—that this is impossible. There are strategies that are beginning to be developed, such as increasing specificity and emphasizing context, in an attempt to bring participants' concerns and aspirations to life in the work. I want to make use of the strategies already being tried, as well as evolve some of my own in the research process.

The fact that I am also responding to the research questions I am asking places me alongside the participants, as co-contributor of data. In the writing up of my findings, I will play with form to expose the dominance of my perspective, and allow who is speaking to come across just as clearly as what is being said. Combining this with excerpts from the participants' responses to the questions, I hope the reader will hear multiple voices, and that the power and authority usually inscribed/ascribed to the researcher/writer will be dislodged.

## **Operative Assumption #5**

**There is a dynamic, epistemological relationship  
between the particular and the universal.**

**Lather:** By resonating with people's lived concerns, fears, and aspirations, emancipatory theory serves an energizing, catalytic role. It does this by increasing specificity at the contextual level in order to see how larger issues are embedded in the particulars of everyday life (1991, p. 61-62).

**Van Manen:** A universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars of instances as they are encountered in lived experience (1990, p. 10).

It is not one of my goals to generalize from this study to come up with statements that could be applied to all adults whose sexuality places us outside of the norm. However, it is one of the tenets of phenomenology that the greater the specificity in the phenomenological description, the more possibility there is that readers may be able to take something from it that applies in their own context, or in the situation of someone they know. I have tried to represent the stories of the seven of us with enough detail to enable the reader to be able to at least approximate our lifeworlds, in their imaginations. The degree to which the reflections the participants and I offer will apply to others will be determined in the interaction between the reader and the text.

### **Operative Assumption #6**

**There are limits to what is available to our understanding; I accept the existence of mystery.**

**Lather:** quoting White, 1973, 32: [there is] the crucial disparity between the being of the world and the knowledge we might have of it (Lather, 1991, p. 66).

**Van Manen:** The project of phenomenology is ... to bring the mystery more fully into our presence. Such a project has to make use of language in such a way as to make present to us what is inherently pre-linguistic and therefore essentially not transportable into a set of precisely delineated propositional statements (1990, p. 50).

The limitations I will be dealing with in this study will be delineated in part by the silence out of which the data will emerge. Family theorists have long discussed the indefinability of family, and the difficulty people have seeing clearly that which is so close and fundamental in our lives. It is my view that the marginalization of my participants' experiences of family, and my own, and the silence around these experiences, situates them in an even more remote pre-linguistic place. I find it useful to foreground the notion of mystery, as a way of keeping my own limitations in mind, as well as the limitations of other researchers and writers.

### **Operative Assumption #7**

**What I will come up with will be some possible meanings of the family experiences I explore with my participants.**

**Van Manen:** We need to realize, of course, that experiential accounts or lived-experience descriptions whether caught in oral or written discourse—are never identical to lived experience itself....So the upshot is that we need to find access to life's living dimensions while realizing that the meanings we bring to the surface from the depths of life's oceans have already lost the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence (1990, p. 54).

**Lather:** Deconstructive pedagogy encourages a multiplicity of readings by demonstrating how we cannot exhaust the meaning of the text, how a text can participate in multiple readings without being reduced to any one, and how our different positionalities affect our reading of it (1991, p. 145).

Experience is transformed, as well as described by, language. I find the semiotic terminology—signs, signifiers and codes—useful in this sense. The connotation of these terms is that all our attempts to clearly express an experience or thought use signs and codes that must be read, interpreted, decoded. The process of interpretation is subjective, informed by factors which vary with each reader or listener. Therefore, any derived meanings are examples of possible interpretations, of which there could be many.

Again, the usefulness of the work depends on the degree of specificity in the descriptions of the process and the phenomena being studied. Every detail provides a possible entry point for the reader who, it is hoped, interacts with the text by relating what they are reading to their own experience and forming their own interpretation.

## **Operative Assumption #8**

### **All texts are social constructions.**

**Van Manen:** If all experience is like text then we need to examine how these texts are socially constructed. Interpretation that aims at explicating the various meanings embedded in a text may then take the form of socially analyzing or deconstructing the text and thus exploding the meanings (1990, p. 39).

Acknowledging that the text I will produce in the study is a social construction is what makes deconstructive practices necessary. My stamp is on this research project, indelibly, beginning with the choice of topic, through the choice of committee members, the choice of methodology and the development of the research design, the choice of questions that formed the interview guide, the dynamics of the interviews in which I have picked up on certain responses and chosen to probe certain areas further with the participants, and—most of all—in the analysis process where my own background and values inform what I perceive to be significant in the data.

The deconstructive practices of poststructuralism draw attention to the social construction of the project. Interrupting the text with personal reflections, playing with language in ways that render taken-for-granted terms problematic—these are techniques to create the atmosphere of a construction zone around the project. The text is not a fixed entity; it is under construction and the reader is made aware of it.

### **Operative Assumption #9**

**The text I create must foreground what forms the boundaries around my understanding, and at the same time, leave the borders open.**

**Lather:** Instead of commenting on a text or practice in ways that define it, a deconstructive approach links our 'reading' to ourselves as socially situated spectators. It draws attention to the variety of readings, the partiality of any one view and our implications in historical social relations (1991, p. 145).

**Van Manen:** The essence of the question, said Gadamer (1975), is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities. But we can only do this if we can keep ourselves open in such a way that in this abiding concern of our questioning we find ourselves deeply interested (inter-esse, to be or stand in the midst of something) in that which makes the question possible in the first place (1990, p. 43).

This is the desired effect of employing deconstructive practices. As the reader is made to see (in ways that may sometimes feel awkward or uncomfortable) that this text is not claiming to be authoritative in the way that conventional academic texts often do, that the researcher/writer is visible and is owning her limitations as well as her insights, then the possibility of the reader creating their own interpretation is also there. I actually hope to go further than this in the text and create a sense of invitation and respect for the possible interpretations that will not come from me.

### **Operative Assumption #10**

**Language is problematic, and all of our discourses  
are politically uninnocent.**

**Lather:** The recent linguistic turn in social theory focuses on the power of language to organize our thought and experience. Language is seen as both carrier and creator of a culture's epistemological codes. The ways we speak and write are held to influence our conceptual boundaries and to create areas of silence as language organizes meaning in terms of pre-established categories (1991, p. xx).

**Van Manen:** Phenomenology, like poetry, intends to be silent as it speaks. It wants to be implicit as it explicates. So, to read and to write phenomenologically requires that we be sensitively attuned to the silence around the words by means of which we attempt to disclose the deep meaning of our world (1990, p. 131).

Language gives shapes to our thoughts, even before we attempt to share them with others. Sometimes I find myself prefacing a contribution to a discussion with, "I haven't really thought this through yet, but...", when, quite often, what I mean is that I have been unsuccessfully groping for the right words to express my thoughts. Language regulates and polices our imaginations. It is a very important to be aware of this when exploring an area that is still as taboo as the family lives of adults whose sexuality places us outside of the norm.

A worthwhile exploration of my research questions must include an examination of the language used in the expression of my participants' responses, as well as in my own writing and reflection. The limitations of language inform the discourses that particular uses of language create. What is said and what goes unsaid is just as important to examine as how what is said, gets said.



### **Operative Assumption #11**

**It is my responsibility to use my privilege as a researcher to find the connections between my research and action for change.**

**Van Manen:** to become thoughtfully or attentively aware of aspects of human life which hitherto were merely glossed over or taken-for-granted will more likely bring us to the edge of speaking up, speaking out, or decisively acting in social situations that call for such action (1990, p. 154).

**Lather:** The question of action, however, remains largely unaddressed in postmodern discourse (1991, p. 12).

Lather echoes the often heard feminist critique of postmodernism that it is a diversion into the quagmire of relativism and away from the agenda of social and economic change that has been identified by feminist, critical, and participant-action oriented epistemologies. Does not being able to know anything with certainty preclude working for social change? Like Lather, I don't think so. The epistemological landscape has always been shifting; it is just our awareness of this now, and postmodernism's rejection and deconstruction of the illusion of certainty, that is different. Our capacity to work for change is no different than it ever was. I am reminded of the post-Cold War bewilderment of a Canadian Forces general who was once quoted in the *Globe and Mail* as saying that he felt he had lost his sense of purpose. Does the fact that we no longer have a monolithic enemy mean that there is no longer a need to be concerned about world peace and quality of life?

Questions and reflections about needed change will be part of the interviews in this study. Specifically, I hope to produce a text that will be useful to those whose lives are similar to our's, as we grow in our understanding of ourselves and our families, and to therapists and counsellors who are working with adults whose sexuality places us outside of the norm. It is my hope that my work will assist therapists and counsellors to wonder more deeply about family in the lives of their queer

clients, in ways that will enhance the therapeutic process.

Other possibilities for action for change may emerge through the course of this study. My commitment is to examine my role and responsibility vis a vis these possibilities.

## METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The main methods I have used in this study are taped and transcribed open-ended interviews, and coding of these transcripts in a way that combines techniques developed in conventional ethnography with a phenomenological reading for themes (Van Manen, 1990, p. 87-88). I also attempt, in the last chapter, a preliminary discourse analysis of the text generated by the participants and I.

I conducted these interviews with a sample that I knew, from the beginning, would be small. Seeking to get as much diversity in the sample as I could, given its size, I began by interviewing a gay man in his mid-twenties and built the sample as I went along, following the questions that emerged in the process. Word-of-mouth was the only form of publicity for the study that I used. I sought diversity in current life situations (that is, single, partnered, with and without children, living in familial settings with a family of choice), ages, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic classes. I also created a gender balance in the sample.

I ended up with a sample of six people: two men who identified themselves as gay, one woman who identified herself as a lesbian, one man and one woman who identified themselves as bisexual, and one woman who vacillated between identifying herself as a lesbian and as bisexual. One of the participants is Mi'qMaq; one is African-Canadian. They range in age from twenty-one to forty-eight. Unfortunately, I did not manage to include experiences from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds; only one participant came from a low-income family, the rest, including me, would identify as middle-class.

Still, the emphasis is clearly on diversity. I am not seeking to formulate generalizations. Hopefully, as stated earlier, the specificity of the descriptions of these different experiences will keep open the possibilities of connection with many read-

ers' life situations.

I interviewed each participant twice, for two reasons. In my experiences interviewing lesbians and bisexual women about their health care experiences, many of the participants mentioned how stimulating the interview process was and how it made them think about things about which they did not often reflect. The same held true in this project, because the dynamic was similar: the interviews became opportunities for the participant to think about and talk about issues that, in the day-to-day, are taken for granted, acclimatized to, or socially unspeakable in the settings in which participants find themselves. The second interview provided a way of picking up on remembrances and thoughts that surfaced in the participants' minds as a result of the first interview.

Secondly, I needed to ask the participants about the families they grew up in as well as who family is to them at this point in their lives. I discovered, during my pilot interview, that the family of origin stories are so powerful and many people have such a need to talk about that aspect of their experience, that it was not possible to move the focus of the interview to the experience of family in the present, within one interview. So I conducted one interview which focused on the participant's experience of family in their family of origin, and a second interview in which the participant reflected on their experience of family in the present. In the first interview, I constructed a family genogram with each participant. A genogram is a diagram of a family's history, designed to illustrate relationships and patterns across generations:

The genogram helps both the clinician and the family to see the "larger picture", both currently and historically, that is, the structural, relational, and functional information about a family on a genogram can be viewed both horizontally across the family context and vertically through

the generations. (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985, p. 2-3)

I also invited each participant to read the transcript of their interview, and provide me with written comments, that may highlight certain points, shift the emphasis, clarify, add, or delete certain parts. My intention was to allow the participants to do an initial layer of reflection on their interviews, before I began to read them for themes. Four of the six participants did this; one participant lost his partner to AIDS shortly after his second interview and did not, and another participant moved away and was unable to follow up on this.

After receiving these reflections from the participants, I read each transcript carefully, making notes about the content of their comments in the margins. Then I compiled those notes, including transcript and page references, into a master list of themes, grouping the participants' comments in subject areas. The chapters emerged from the subject areas, or themes that came up most frequently in the transcripts.

In writing up the process and the data, I employ some creative textual practices to subvert my authority as the researcher/writer to the extent that this is possible. My own personal reflections on what I am writing appear, italicized and indented, interrupting my report on the participants' stories and making it evident that the author is interacting with the material she is working with in a very personal way. Using what some people have referred to as a magazine format, I have placed quotes from related literature in a large margin on the left-hand side of the page, forming an alternate text that is intended to dialogue with the stories of the participants' experiences. I also use the space in that margin to point to areas in the work that need further investigation, beyond what I am able to do within the scope of this project. And I use the same space to insert brief reflections related to discourse, bringing this into the consciousness of the reader as they read the text, so awareness of discourse dynamics is in place when they come to the discourse chapter.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

I have identified and addressed three major ethical concerns in this project: 1) confidentiality, 2) sensitivity to the emotional nature of the subject matter and what it is like for participants to explore and talk about these issues with me, and 3) the question of who will benefit from this study.

In regard to confidentiality, each participant read and signed an informed consent form before the interview process began. The informed consent clearly explained to the participant that I am the only one who will listen to the tapes, that they will be stored in a secure place where nobody else will have access to them, and that I will destroy them at the end of the project. I also took time to discuss and resolve any confidentiality-related concerns they had, prior to beginning the interview. In reviewing the informed consent form with them, I also made it clear that each participant had the right to choose not to answer any question, the right to ask that the tape be stopped at any time during the interview, and the right to terminate the interview at any point. I assured them that even after signing the form, the invitation to raise and address any concerns with me was always open.

In attending to the issue of the well-being of the participants, especially regarding the possibility of emotional or psychological distress that could arise for them in their exploration of the meaning of family in their lives, I used my skills as a counsellor and facilitator to create an atmosphere of safety, trust, empathy, and respect, while being clear about my role as researcher, i.e. I was not in the role of counsellor/therapist in the interview setting, or in the working relationships I developed with the participants in the course of the project. I let each participant know that if a situation arose in which it seemed that they needed some support, or further opportunities to work feelings through, beyond what I could offer in the lim-

ited role of interviewer, I would take responsibility for ensuring that the participant had access to the appropriate services in the community.

I struggle with the issue of who will benefit from this project. It is clear to me that the most concrete benefits will come to me, granting that this thesis satisfies the requirements for the Masters of Education (Counselling) degree. I will provide copies of the thesis to all the participants, but this does not really satisfy my requirements for sharing the benefits of this work. I also want to make some copies available to professionals working in the field of counselling and therapy. There will be opportunities to share what I have learned through the project, with interested parties.

I am still living with the question: how can I honour the depth and breadth of what these six people have shared with me in their interviews, in a way that maximizes the benefits for as many people as possible? How can I take these amazing stories and use them to create more space for the family experiences of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults? I am committed to continuing to explore the ways this project could be of use, especially to adults whose sexuality places us outside of the norm, and to counsellors and therapists working with clients like us.

Now I am ready to introduce to the reader the six individuals whose contributions form the substance of my work. Their voices will join with mine, throughout the text, in a discussion of various aspects of our experience of family. I hope you will come to appreciate their uniqueness, their courage, their humour, and their commitment to moving toward a more inclusive vision of family.....as I have.

## Daniel

**"My idea of family, today, has taken on a whole new dimension. \_\_\_\_\_ and her dog are my family. My best friend, \_\_\_\_\_, is my family. Her kids are part of my family. \_\_\_\_\_, the first woman I ever told I was gay, is part of my family. I've taken the definition of the relationships, the importance of the relationships within a family, like your abilities to rely on people, your ability to trust people. You know, the links that are supposed to be there in what we call a traditional family. I've taken those links, and just applied them to people who aren't in my immediate family. So for me it's the same thing, except they're not blood-related."**

Daniel is a twenty-six-year-old gay man of European descent currently living in Halifax. He is a fun-loving person, as well as a serious, critical thinker. He enjoys exploring gay culture, from the latest art, cinema, and literature created by queer artists, to the bar scene which he navigates with ease. He sometimes questions the dominant values in the gay male world, which he feels emphasize physical appearance and sex, yet he remains optimistic about meeting a mate with whom he can connect in greater depth.

After completing his undergraduate education, he did social work for a few years. At present, he is attending a computer studies program and is hopeful about getting work in that field. He was raised in an affluent family, and his expectations of comfort in his life have been shaped by that experience.

Daniel grew up in a rural Maritime community, in a traditional Catholic family. He has two sisters and his mom and dad are still together. Daniel knew he was gay at a very young age and had an active sexual life as a young boy. He has had a positive sense of himself for as long as he can remember. Although he felt isolated and unknown in his immediate family, he never thought there was anything wrong



with him.

At the time of the first interview, one of his sisters was still living at home; she has since moved out. Daniel still struggles with traditional expectations from his family of origin. They expect him to be in touch regularly and to come home for all the traditional holidays. Since coming out to his friends about six years ago and beginning to participate openly in the gay community, he has come out to his two sisters. Coming out to his parents is something he wants to do, but the right combination of circumstances and the groundedness and energy required has not yet presented itself.

Daniel relates to the term "family of choice" and has given a great deal of thought to what it means to be family. He speaks enthusiastically about the people who have become family to him. So far, the people in his family of choice are almost all straight friends, mostly women. He is finding it quite challenging to find and create family with other gay men. Just as he is aware of how his family of origin experience has shaped what he is seeking in his life in a family of choice, he is also aware of how the quality of his relationships with members of his family of choice have affected his relationships with members of his family of origin. He hopes for a deepening of those relationships and looks forward to a future in which all aspects of family in his life can be integrated.

**"And I've often said to people, the day that I tell my parents will be the day that I am fully confident in my family of choice. I don't use that term, but I know that's the expression. When I know, that I have a support system underneath me that will hold me up in a time of crisis ... like my family has done for me at times."**

## Sara

**"I guess it's clear that, as far as most families go, I had a really good one. And, although we had some bad things, and some difficult things, for me, in particular, I think ... uh, I think I'm pretty lucky. As far as families go. And, uh ... generally, I think my parents are very supportive, in most cases."**

Sara is a thirty-two-year-old lesbian of European descent, who grew up in the Halifax-Dartmouth metro area and has settled in the area with her partner of eight years. They own a house together, where they live with their daughter and the family dog and cat.

Sara is the oldest of five children; she has two brothers and two sisters. The two youngest children are adopted, one of whom is hearing-impaired. Sara's family of origin held family meetings to set house rules, make vacation plans, and even to consider and decide about adopting the two youngest kids. There were also often other children living with them for awhile; Sara's dad was a school principal and sometimes brought children home who were in need of a caring living environment. There was a large extended family on both sides and, as a child, Sara and her siblings spent lots of good times with their cousins at big family gatherings.

Sara's partner's family background was not as happy. Her partner was the youngest of several children in a poor family, an unexpected child, and remembers feeling that her presence meant that there was less for everybody. It took some doing for her to agree to co-parent a child with Sara; the decision-making process lasted several years.

Sara and her partner accessed alternative insemination services from the infertility clinic at the local hospital after being referred there by their physician.

After a couple of tries, Sara conceived and all was going well for the first five months of her pregnancy. Then, at twenty-three weeks, there was a series of complications that resulted in the baby being born, barely viable, at just over twenty-five weeks. The story that Sara tells of the months that followed is an incredible story of hope, despair, fear, and courage, focused on the amazing determination and resilience of their (very) little baby girl. Needless to say, the experience was certainly not what Sara and her partner had prepared for, in all the thought that they had put into becoming lesbian parents.

Life has settled down for Sara and her family since then. The little one is doing very well, and they are thinking about having another child. Family life, for the three of them, revolves around meeting the daily challenges of parenting and running a two-career household. Their sense of family is grounded in the three of them, extends outward to include close relationships with most of Sara's family of origin, and incorporates some particularly close friends who have crossed over into being considered family.

**"I think the thing that I feel most proud about is that ... we're doing what we want to do, anyway. You know? We wanted to make our own family, and we're doing it. And we wanted our own house, and our own spot, and we're doing it. And ... there's been a lot of hard things along the way, and it would have been, in a lot of ways, a lot easier just to not do it. Just to ... I mean, I could have married a man, and ... been ... content. You know? No, no. I'm not going to say content. But, I mean ... I could have ... I could have done it, and gone through the motions. And in a lot of ways, it would have been a lot easier. And I'm proud that I didn't."**

## Peter

**"I can remember coming to visit my mother when I was fourteen, and she was living here in Halifax, and I was here one summer and I was, uh, very sad and I was depressed. And during my life I had a couple of ... if not breakdowns, close to breakdowns where there were two or three suicide attempts in my life. And this was after one of the suicide attempts and, I came and ... and I tried to tell her what was wrong. Why I was so unhappy. That I was in love with this man but he was married, and, uh, he could never love me. And she said, you'll find somebody eventually that will. She ... you know, that was the first time that I had ever talked to her, really, about it. And she was, uh, quite accepting ... But at the same time, she said, you know, the sad part about this, Peter, is that once we die, we'll never be able to be together again, because I'll be in heaven and you'll be in hell."**

Peter is a forty-eight-year-old African Canadian who grew up in New Brunswick. His mother was chronically ill; he and his sister were adopted. Both children are biracial, born of white mothers; the societal stigma associated with having a biracial child led to their being given up for adoption. Actually, Peter's sister was abandoned as an infant, but, thankfully, found soon after in the shed where she had been left.

Peter's father is Black, his parents having emigrated from Barbados in the late 1800s, his mother as an indentured servant. Peter's mother's cultural heritage was mixed. Although her father was East Indian, and her mother Black and Mi'qmaq, she identified as Black.

As an African Canadian, Peter grew up with many experiences of racism, systemic and invisible, and overt. Peter spent his childhood in the relative safety of the Black community, in which his family had a certain amount of status due to his father being the first Black man to own his own business in New Brunswick.

Peter's memories of his childhood are full of ambivalence. Pride and appreciation of his father's achievements are mixed with negative feelings about his father's behaviour. Peter refers to his father as sex-aholic, who has had numerous children with numerous partners over the years. His mother was expected to bear all this, while being ill herself, and her interactions with her children were not always nurturing. Peter has had to come to terms with what was actually an emotionally abusive relationship with her. All the while, Peter's nuclear family maintained the image of being a successful, upstanding family in their community. Between his mother's health problems and his father's affairs, his emerging homosexuality, and being Black in the Maritimes ... growing up in this family was difficult for Peter in many ways. He has worked hard at being healthy and is emerging with enough self-love to be able to have some compassion for his parents. He has, however, pretty much rejected the language associated with family when referring to his own life as an adult. He doesn't want to call these people "family" because of the ambivalent connotations that word has, for him.

Peter recalls happy times in his childhood, when he and his sister visited their grandparents. His memories of times spent with friends includes resourceful adaptations to racism that sometimes turned out to be fun, like the ritual of getting together to go to a dance as a group.

He refers to the people who are in the inner circle in his life as his loved ones. His closest loved ones are some of the African Canadian women and men who grew up in the same community as he did. Part of what distinguishes these relationships from other close friends is the fact that they have a shared history and understand where each other has come from. This is very significant for Peter.

Peter was married as a young man for a short time. His first long-term relationship was with a man and lasted eight years. He was on his own for several

years before meeting his partner of six years, who died of AIDS during the course of this research process. As I write this, Peter is grieving and sorting through the details one is left to attend to when a spouse dies. My heart is with him.

Recently, Peter's time has been spent caring for his ailing mother, who died last year, and his partner. He has experienced the death of two of his family members in a short period of time.

Although Peter has not had any children of his own, he has several committed relationships with the children of some his loved ones. In some of these relationships, Peter regards himself, and is regarded, as a co-parent. He really values having children in his life.

Peter's family consists of his loved ones, who are closest to him, his father, his sister, his nieces, and their families.

**"And I don't regret any experience. I feel that experiences are ... there ... there's a reason why we experience everything that we experience. It enriches our lives."**

### **Luke**

**"I think that I've done a lot of integrating of things for myself. Based on a lot of the stuff with my parents, the positive stuff with my parents, that anybody who's family is somebody of my choosing. Uh ... it has to be substantial. It has to be something that's real. In other words, it's like, the closer I get to them, the more they know about me. I don't really believe in family, for family's sake. And when I met \_\_\_\_\_, one of the first things I had to do and I almost shlt in my pants, was come out to her. I was like, I'm bi. And it was, like, oh yeah? I am, too. And I went, what?! One of the down sides of being bi was that I fantasized about relationships but I didn't really think that I'd meet**

**another bi person, or person who would understand.”**

Luke is a twenty-seven-year-old bisexual man of European descent, currently living in the Halifax metro area and attending university. He was born in the States and lived there for much of his childhood. He is an only child of parents who are estranged and distant from their families of origin. His father was also an only child. Now that both of his paternal grandparents are dead, there are almost no connections to extended family on Luke's dad's side. The extended family on Luke's mom's side has experienced a great deal of tragedy and abuse: his mom's three brothers all died in accidents in their late twenties or early thirties, in three separate incidents. Luke's maternal grandfather is a power-monger within the family and a perpetrator of sexual abuse who has victimized almost all of his children and grandchildren over the years, including Luke. Luke has periods of lost time in his childhood, years for which he has no conscious memories.

He describes the atmosphere in his immediate family as characterized by a what he calls a siege mentality, a shared sense of having been victimized and continuing to be victimized by life. Luke experienced some personal tragedies as a teenager that could have reinforced this: His first male lover committed suicide when he found out he was HIV+ and a close female friend and lover was murdered shortly thereafter. In spite of all of this, Luke has managed to differentiate himself from the generalized feelings of disappointment, distrust of people, and lack of hope that still define his parents' lives. He sees himself as being in a position now to try to teach them how to think positively.

Luke became aware of his bisexuality as a teenager. The social group of young men and women he was a part of at that time were open to many variations on friendship and intimacy, and the seven of them had a shared sense of

connectedness to everyone in the group. When Luke moved with his parents to Canada and went to university, he found his social comfort zone at the campus women's centre.

Luke is now married to a woman. His partner is also bisexual, and they are both still interested in experiencing intimacy with a same-sex partner. They have talked about how other relationships could be incorporated into their life together and remain committed to supporting each other in this. They both see their relationship with each other as primary.

Having recently moved to the Halifax metro area where his partner's family of origin lives, Luke's experience of family these days is largely about being part of that extended family. He speaks appreciatively about the healthy things he is learning from this family. He hopes to share some of this with his parents over time. He also has a few very close friends whom he considers to be family as well and is interested in the potential for discovering and developing more of those types of relationships.

**"My experience of family in the present is one of a dynamic ... constantly in flux, sort of ... being alive ... the very essence of being alive. The way I look at family now, is sort of ... a support system. I guess the predominant thing I think of when I think of a family is love. And understanding. Honesty. Support. Things like that. But it's something that's dynamic, because new people will come into my life, or I'll move, or something like that will happen. It's ever changing. So, in that sense, it's very alive, always growing, never quite the same."**



## Natalie

**“My earliest thoughts about family ... I always wanted kids. Um ... I always wanted something stable and the white picket fence kind of way. I mean, I guess it changed over time, too. When I was a little kid, I just thought I was going to get married to some man, and that was going to be the way it was going to be. And then ... probably at twelve, thirteen, I had these moments of panic, going, oh my god, I'm attracted to women. If anyone finds that out, I'll never be able to get married. And ... since then, I've kind of gone way to the next ... no, I don't think I'll ever get married. But I've always seen myself in this partnered, stable, long-term type of thing.”**

Natalie is a twenty-four-year-old bisexual woman of European descent, living in Halifax and working on a Masters degree. She grew up in Toronto with her two parents and a younger sister. Her mom worked full-time and was away from home a lot; her dad was self-employed and was the primary care-giver.

Natalie's mom's family of origin also live in the Toronto area, and extended family gatherings were common if not pleasant. Natalie describes her mom and her siblings as having difficulty coping with the expectations of their parents, who emphasized material success. Her mom and her mom's siblings struggle with this in different ways, relying on prescription and illegal drugs among them. Natalie speaks candidly about the superficiality of this extended family's relationships with each other.

Her dad's family all live in Europe, and she spent summers with them throughout most of her growing up years. This provided her with a completely different experience of family, more traditional, and, she feels, more genuine.

She was thirteen when she first became aware of her attraction to other adolescent girls. She consciously repressed these feelings out of fear of what would

happen to her if anyone knew. She continued to date guys, moved away from her family, and eventually became engaged. By this time, she had decided that what she needed was an open marriage with a male partner who would understand her need to have women lovers "on the side." Her fiancé was agreeable to this.

During a period of separation from her fiance, she became involved with a woman and fell in love. Natalie struggled with remaining loyal to her fiancé and with being true to herself and her female lover in their relationship. The outcome of this was that she broke off the engagement and entered into what she hoped would be a meaningful and lasting relationship with her lover. At the time of the interviews, the dissolution of this relationship was fairly recent, and Natalie was still feeling stung by the experience.

She is now grappling with questions about how to integrate the stability she wants to have in her life and in a relationship with her need for openness to growth and change. At this time in her life, she identifies change as the only thing she can count on.

**"There was a real switch of gears for me when I told my mother, if you can't deal with who I am, if you're going to make my life hell, then we're not going to be close. Regardless of whether we're blood-related or not."**

### **Ellen**

**"I remember a lot of good times, like when every Sunday, it would be a family thing. We would go for drives, and most times, we would go to Eskasoni, and of course, Eskasoni has beautiful beaches. And when we would go on these little outings, if we would see our friends on the street, we would pick them up and take them with us. We had this great big station wagon, and it would be just packed with kids. And all the kids would just be on the beach,**

**having a grand old time. And I think that's where the drinking started. So there was, like, the extremes. All those good times, when there was no alcohol involved, and where the alcohol was involved it was very violent. I remember those times, that fear."**

Ellen is a forty-year-old Mi'qmaq woman, who sometimes identifies as lesbian and sometimes as bisexual. She is the fourth oldest in a family of five girls and four boys. One younger brother died when he was sixteen from a heart attack caused by complications related to cancer. Ellen has good relationships with all her siblings. One of her sisters is bisexual, and another sister is just beginning to come out as a lesbian.

Both Ellen's mom and dad came from large families. Her mom was the youngest of ten and the only child in her family that did not attend the Shubenacadie residential school. Her dad was the oldest of five children from his father's first marriage; there were four more siblings from a second marriage. These younger siblings were very close in age to Ellen and her brothers and sisters and they grew up together more like cousins than aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews.

Ellen has many happy memories from her childhood. She also remembers a lot of violence during a period of time when both her parents were drinking. Eventually, they stopped drinking and their family life improved. This experience had a big impact on Ellen. It is the one thing she wishes could have been different in her family, yet she acknowledges that she learned a lot from it.

Close relationships with extended family members is the norm in Ellen's community. Her mom and her dad come from two of the largest families on the reserve, so Ellen is related to a lot of people in the community.

She has a daughter who is now in her early twenties and still lives in the home Ellen and she have shared since she was a little girl. Ellen's daughter's boy-

friend has moved in, too, and it looks like they intend to stay for the foreseeable future.

Ellen has been in a long-term relationship with another woman in the community for the past eleven years. Her partner, who is a survivor of sexual abuse, has three teenage daughters. She and Ellen maintain separate homes. Ellen has worked in Halifax for the past four years, going home for weekends as often as she can. When she is home, her partner comes and stays with her at her house. Ellen is finding it hard that she and her partner do not live together. In fact, she identifies this as a major issue that they are currently trying to figure out.

Ellen and her partner are out to their families and experience their support to greater and lesser degrees. Ellen is particularly close to her mom. Ellen's family considers her partner and her partner's daughters to be part of their family.

Ellen also has a sense of family with a close network of other gay, lesbian, and two-spirited Mi'qmaq men and women. This family is quite separate from the family she connects with when she is back home in her community. Although most of these family of choice members have met her family of origin, they tend to get together mostly in the city.

Ellen and her partner both had children when they met, so they have never been together without having to juggle parenting responsibilities. She looks forward to a time when all their children are independent and they can spend some time, just the two of them.

**"My vision of my future? I know there's going to be some old dyke sitting there, me and \_\_\_\_\_ on the beach. (laughs) We talk about that. We talk about those times. You know, how we're going to be. In, like, our future. And I know, I realize that, I mean, we're just having some difficulties now, but I think, even when I think about it, I think we're going to be together, um, for-**

**ever. 'Til ... we're going to be little old ladies, I think, together. Even if we're not together. If we happen to break up, I think that we will remain friends, for the rest of our lives. Regardless of whether or not we're together. But I think our lives will still be together, and I want them to be that way."**

These are the six people whose stories are the basis of the following discussion of how bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults experience family. They will appear in the text, speaking in their own voices. I have tried to create textual conditions that maximize the ways in which they can speak for themselves. Unavoidably, however, what is most interesting and important to me will shape this work, more than anything else. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as long the reader is aware of that. I will try to create a text full of reminders that there are many different ways to think about these things, and that invites the reader to engage in their own way.

Part of how I must equip the reader for this journey into my work is to provide background information about myself. In this way, the text that I create can be understood as emerging from my own experience of family, and interpreted accordingly.

### **Andrea**

I am a thirty-seven-year-old bisexual woman of European descent, living in Halifax, and finishing up a Masters degree in Counselling. I have lived in Nova Scotia for almost twenty years and it has become home. Most of my work has been with marginalized groups of people in community-based organizations, working for social change and community development.

My birthmother was a Franco-Manitoban working-class woman, who had seven children before she had me. The first five went into the care of the child

welfare system. She and my father had two children before me whom they kept. I was given up for adoption and adopted at the age of eight months.

I grew up in a traditional, middle-class family in the suburbs of Winnipeg. My parents made some very conscious attempts to have a healthy family life: lots of time spent together doing recreational things like camping, going to the cottage, making music, having extended family gatherings. This was anchored, for my parents especially, in active involvement in our Catholic parish community.

All of this was dramatically marred for my younger brother and I by frequent corporal punishment (spankings) that evolved into less frequent, but more frightening physical assaults as we got older. I have worked long and hard to try to make some sense of the beginnings of my emotional life. Although my mother and I enjoy a loving and mutually supportive relationship now, my relationship with her during my growing up years was a constant source of unhappiness, stress and loneliness for me. I do not know what or why, but there was definitely something about me that my mother strongly disliked. She did and said many things to me over the years that made it very hard for me to feel good about myself. I began to feel comfortable with myself only after I left home. My dad is absent from so many of my memories, off on the sidelines somewhere, dangling between innocence and culpability.

I believe that my parents did the best they could, but both had inherited a rigidity that precluded reconsidering the parenting tradition of "molding" your children into the people you believe they should be—even when this was obviously not working! I was a sensitive and intelligent child, and as soon as I was able to articulate my feeling that something was wrong, my mother's attempts to undermine my sense of myself became more overt.

The reliance on physical force and coercion to get cooperation from my younger brother broke down when he became a teenager and it was more difficult

to overpower him physically. My parents' efforts to deal with this dilemma resulted in him being made a ward of the state again, when he had just turned fifteen. I left home as soon as I could after that, at seventeen, without my parents' knowledge or permission. My parents and my older brother functioned much more harmoniously as a family unit without us.

Up until a little over a year ago, my younger brother had been purposely out of touch with everyone in the family for a period of about ten years. In August of 1996, he and I reconnected and re-established a relationship as sister and brother that is more precious to me than words can express. My parents' denial of their violence toward us as children is deeply disturbing. We have both spent a lot of time, as adults, learning how to deal with its effects on us. He and I are unique to each other, in that we can and do affirm each other's speaking of the truth of our experience, as well as our resourcefulness and resilience in becoming healthy adults.

My renewed relationship with him has shifted things in the family constellation. I have broken the silence my parents have imposed on us regarding the negative aspects of the past. When my mother pressed me, on a recent visit, to tell her what I think his absence has been about, I told her and my dad about how he and I have both had to struggle to come to terms with our childhood experiences of their violence. They seem to have no idea of the impact this had on us and no willingness to acknowledge any responsibility. In fact, they claim to have no memory of most of it, although they sometimes contradicted themselves in the discussion so it wasn't really clear how much they remembered and how much they forgot.

Even though there was no resolution, speaking my truth with them was incredibly freeing for me. The relationships I have with them have become more real since then, because I am present in them as a whole person.

I have always wanted to have a child. It is a longing in me that I have lived

with for many years. I have tried to conceive three times, unsuccessfully. I currently do not know if or how I will fulfill my longing to be a parent. It is a deeply emotional issue for me. I have a strong sense that I am meant to be a mom.

During the course of this project, I have undergone several profound shifts in my own experience of family. I reconnected with my younger brother after many years without contact, I talked with my parents about my experience of their violence, I spent a year-and-a-half trying to conceive a child with a much-loved friend and then decided to stop trying, and my dad was diagnosed with an incurable lung disease and is—as I write this today—nearing death.

Throughout all of this, the extraordinary people—of which there is an abundance—with whom I share my life on a daily basis have continued to be and become family to me. Their companionship, caring, and support give shape to my life on a daily basis in ways that fill me with gratitude.

How all of this comes together as an experience of family is still evolving, and is the ground in which my questions grow.



## **STARTING AT THE BEGINNING: LIFE IN OUR FAMILIES OF ORIGIN**

The longer I pursued my research, the more I became convinced that gay families could not be understood apart from the families in which lesbians and gay men had grown up. (Weston, 1991, p. 3)

Often what is not said but just implied, is more powerful hypnotically, because it goes in without resistance, so if I don't ask my client anything except about their trauma, I am implying that they are their trauma. (Yvonne Dolan, therapist/author, in a talk given in Halifax, June 1997)

The families we grow up in are our first teachers about what family is. For most of us, the lessons we learn about family in our family of origin are taught without much conscious deliberation, or acknowledgment that we are learning something that will continue to shape our lives for years to come. Family gets talked about, and there is a discourse about family that we learn, the who's who of roles and relationships. There are also the messages that never get articulated verbally because they function on the level of assumption. For instance, the idea that the people in your family are the people you celebrate the milestones in your life with, is an example of a message that gets communicated in the subtextual spaces in our family of origin interactions.

The tacit nature of this learning contributes to its power. It's not as if the ways of our family are presented to us as children as one of many possible ways of being family.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I have a vivid memory from the early days of Grade 5, when I had just started school in a new neighbourhood and was making new friends. One day after school, I went over to Susan's house to play. During the course of*

*our conversation, Susan mentioned to me that her family didn't go to church. I have always remembered how I felt at that moment. I couldn't tell you which room in her house we were playing in, or what we were doing. But I remember the shock I felt at the realization that not everybody went to church. I had been encased in the hegemony of my family of origin's beliefs, and that day, a crack appeared and a red flag went up in my brain to mark it. For the first ten years of my life, I thought everybody went to church. What other differences among people was I unaware of?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Until we have an experience that leads us to question the authority of what we are learning about family, what we see and live at home is all there is. Personal experience, hearing stories from other people, and studying developmental psychology have led me to see this as part of the natural, developmental course for children: the universe, as perceived by children, starts off being very small and gradually gets bigger and bigger.

How is this experience different for those of us who come to know ourselves as bisexual, lesbian, and gay? What were our childhood experiences of family like, and how did we integrate those experiences with our evolving self-knowledge? What kinds of families did we think we would be a part of when we grew up, and how has that changed? And how has all of this

contributed to who we are and who our families are in our adult lives?

In exploring these questions with the six participants in this study, and in myself, the first thing that became evident is the diversity in our experiences. We were each taught, explicitly and tacitly, that a family is a heterosexual couple with children, and we each worked with this in different ways. First, we envisioned ourselves in families of our own as adults, and later, we moved into actively shaping our adult lives.

Some of us certainly thought we would eventually meet a mate of the other sex, marry, and bear and raise children together.

**Natalie:** I just thought I was going to get married to some man, and that was going to be the way it was going to be. I always wanted kids.

Some of us were aware of our attractions to people of the same sex at a very young age and tried to imagine our future relationships and family lives accordingly, adapting the information we had about our options as best we could. The traditional roles of husband and wife were present in the imaginings of some of us, and less so for others.

**Discourse Analysis:**

"...I could see  
having a husband."

The heterosexist constriction of imaginable adult roles begins limiting us at a very young age, "bonsai-ing" our visions of the future to try to ensure that we grow in an acceptable direction.

By "fixing" the world conceptually, language at once frees thought to think and permits it to think in only one of an infinite number of logically possible ways. (Cocks, 1989, p. 29)

If discourse assigns meaning to everyday life and thereby instructs our actions, life's potential meanings are limited to the discourses available. (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. 16)

**Daniel:** I could see ... I envisioned myself with, like, living with a man ... and having a male ... having a husband ... and that's all from the traditional family, you know? I think as a kid I thought about having a husband.

**Ellen:** When I thought about, uh ... family ... I always thought that I would be with a woman.

Luke grew up in an atmosphere of cynicism about family, and for him, an emerging consciousness of being bisexual introduced a sense of flexibility and openness into thoughts about the future, and how sexual intimacy and companionship could be combined.

**Luke:** I also thought about having companions, as in a commune.

For Peter, growing up as an African Canadian meant that concerns about his future, when he was a child, often centred on how best to escape the crippling effects of racism. Racism, externally experienced and internalized, and heterosexism combined to form layers of prescriptions for the future.

**Peter:** They would ask me ... who are you going to marry? They didn't really want me to marry Black. They didn't want my sister to marry Black. And ... my brother-in-law is a very dark man. You know, at least you could have got a lighter one.

Ironically, much of what I've learned about color I've learned because I have a mixed-race child. Because she is lighter-skinned, straighter-haired than I, her life—in the racist, colorist society—is infinitely easier. And so I understand the subtle programming I, my mother, and my grandmother before me fell victim to. Escape the pain, the ridicule, escape the jokes, the lack of attention, respect, dates, even a job, any way you can. And if you can't escape, help your children to escape. Don't let them suffer as you have done. And yet, what have we been escaping to? Freedom used to be the only answer to that question. But for some of our parents it is as if freedom and whiteness were the same destination, and that presents a problem for any person of color who does not wish to disappear. (Alice Walker, 1983, p. 291)

**TO BE EXPLORED  
FURTHER.....**

There was a double-barrelled prompt in this social script: to marry and to marry away from Blackness. As a Black young man who was attracted to men, these directives from his parents alienated Peter from himself in two ways. There was also, in this message, an emphasis on the form rather than the substance of a relationship, that troubled him.

The reality of living in a racist culture dominated Peter's family's thoughts about the future in other ways, too. Talk about the future often meant discussing, not marriage and family, but access to an education, and debating whether or not it was a good idea for a young Black man to pursue post-secondary education. The role of education in shaping the future did not carry as much weight in the thoughts and discussions of children of European descent and their parents. In my interview with Peter, we reflected on how it can take a few generations for the imaginations of the people to catch up with expansions in the realm of possibilities. There is much to be explored in this area of understanding. Peter found talking about memories of racism as a child very painful, so we didn't spend a lot of time on it.

What I learned from Peter in this area of my questioning is that experiences of racism add complex layers of prescriptions to the heteronormative

model of family we are all presented with as children. Lessons about how to deal with or escape racism are interwoven with lessons about family, in the lives of children who grow up as targets in a racist culture.

Each of us assimilated the heteronormative model of family, provided us by our family of origin, to varying degrees and in different ways. Adding to the diversity of our experience and ideas about family, were specific characteristics of our families of origin that made their way into what each of us thought family was about. For instance, a family that has a tradition of family secrets may not overtly teach the children in the family that keeping secrets is a good thing. However, the children grow into a tacit understanding of what does not get discussed, and this shapes a person's sense of openness, trust, privacy, confidence, and shame. Different individuals will integrate this type of lesson differently.

Five out of the seven of us have experienced keeping family secrets in our family of origin, and the effects of this experience manifest in our adult lives in different ways. Peter chose to keep most of his loved ones (loved ones is his term for what I am calling family of choice) quite separate from each other. When asked about this, he talked about needing to maintain

a sense of privacy and perhaps even mystery in his life.

**Peter:** I was always very protective of my territory and of my space and of my friends. And I'm not completely sure, though, you know, through therapy, I'm starting to understand that a little bit better. What that's all about. It's a control issue, among other things ...

He expressed some uncertainty about why this was important to him, but noted it with interest. Natalie's response to family secrets in her family of origin has been to decide consciously to try to live in such a way that she doesn't need to hide anything. And yet, even though she has made that decision, when she read over her transcript, she was amazed at how guilty she felt about seeing so much information about her family of origin on paper.

\* \* \* \* \*

*In my family of origin, my parents never disagreed about anything in front of us kids. The only time I remember them arguing, in a heated whisper, was about me; they had different responses to something that I had asked permission to do. To this day, I feel intense anxiety and insecurity about anyone hearing or knowing when I'm arguing with my partner. I think this has combined with other factors, including heterosexism, in making me feel very isolated when there is conflict in a relationship with a same sex partner. I still function as if I believe that conflict should be kept secret. This affects both the conflict itself and the possibilities for its resolution.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Sara learned, in her family of origin, that differences that could lead to conflict could and should be talked out between the people concerned and that a collective commitment to something could be achieved this way. Her family of origin had family meetings to decide where to go on vacation, or whether or not to adopt a baby sister with serious health problems and special needs, among other things. In her interview, Sara spoke about discussing her desire to have a child with her partner—a process that took years—and evidently had faith that they could work out their differences on this question.

**Sara:** And ... probably ... about three or four years, I talked about it just more and more frequently, it was more and more important, and I think she realized it wasn't going to go away ... And then we began to really talk about it.

Ellen's mother taught, as a very strong value, that difference is to be accepted and everyone is worthy of appreciation:

**Ellen:** My mother is very understanding of people that are different. And I think, even when we were kids, um, she would get upset at us, if we would tease someone that was either, like, mentally challenged, or anyone that had a disability. She always told us that people are different. You have to appreciate people for who they are.



Ellen's adult life reflects this value in many ways: her appreciation for her parents, relatives, and community members, as wonderful human beings, her compassion for those who have wrestled with substance abuse; her home that has expanded to encompass her daughter's partner; her work in an AIDS service organization in a marginalized community; her emerging role in her community as a person from whom to seek counsel. Her ability to accept and feel part of several different types of families in her life now, could be evidence of the effects of early exposure to this tolerance of difference.

Some of us learned values in the conventional context of our families of origin that metamorphosed into meaning something important in our unconventional lives.

**Daniel:** My mom, always was, you know, as a Catholic woman, talking about the need to be truthful, to others and to yourself. And often talked about not caring what other people think, and doing what's right and what you know is right. Her version was within the church. My version was within me ...

I often say to her, but, you know, what you taught me to do, and I'm so happy you taught me to be true to myself, and to listen to my own instincts and to not pay attention to what other people have to say but to go with what is true in me, and explore that.

For those of us who have left a great deal of

what we learned in our families of origin behind, the values we hold dear as adults that can be traced back to our families of origin can be very precious.

We encounter our families of origin as our first teachers about family. Everybody does. We are taught specific things about what a family is and how it works, as well as things that, while they may not be about family per se, will affect our experience of family as adults.

Those of us whose sexualities are other than straight have some experiences that are not shared by our straight brothers and sisters unless they, too, are marginalized in some way, for example, due to being abused, or ostracized for being differently-abled. I have identified three particular types of experiences that came up so much and so consistently in the interviews that I have called them teachers in themselves; these are: isolation, danger, and coming out. Experiences that can be grouped into these three areas also teach us about family. Isolation teaches us about the importance of connectedness, danger teaches us about the importance of safety, and coming out teaches us about the importance of finding or creating space to be ourselves.

**Note:** To say that isolation and danger teach us things,

is not to say that they are, in fact, positive in some way. If the human spirit can prevail under such stark circumstances, imagine what could evolve if there were less hindrances and more encouragement.

### **Isolation**

As a young boy, Daniel loved to dress up in women's clothes. Hallowe'en was often the only time he could do this without reproof, so he looked forward to the holiday every year. He tells stories of how uncomfortable his father was with his annual choice to dress up as a female character. For Daniel, this and similar experiences translated, over time, into living in an atmosphere in which he was aware that members of his immediate family were uncomfortable around him. This led him to keep the almost constant harassment he experienced at school to himself:

**Daniel:** There were days when I'd come home off the school bus when I was in elementary school, and sit behind the house and cry and not want to go to school anymore. And I never showed that ... never shared that with anyone.

What does it mean to experience such private pain as a child? In *Emotional Intelligence*, author Daniel Goleman refers to the work of psychiatrist Daniel

Stern, who developed the concept of attunement. Children need to have a direct experience of expressing their feelings to an adult or adults, and receiving some communication back that lets them know that the adult has gotten the message about how the child feels. According to Stern, these interactions take place repeatedly in each day of a child's life, forming the child's first emotional lessons. Stern calls this attunement, and Goleman suggests that it is a necessary component of healthy emotional development in children.

**Daniel:** I never, ever, in twenty-two years, of being a member of my immediate family, ever felt like anyone understood me.

Daniel's resourceful response to this was to find space in which he could be himself. Spending time with his cousins at their grandmother's house, where they often slept over to keep her company after their grandfather died, was a reprieve from the discomfort and emotional flatness of home. The cousins' good times together included lots of sexual exploration that Daniel remembers as a positive experience of his homosexuality in the context of true caring. In fact, there may be a connection between the isolation experienced by a queer child, and the availability of space

in which to be oneself, and explore one's sexuality in childhood. Peter also spoke about a private social but primarily sexual world he inhabited, which he says began in elementary school:

**Peter:** Well, there were always older men. A taxi driver ... and then it was the janitor at the school. And that went on for a year or two ... And then it was boys my own age. You know, by the time I was thirteen, I was having regular sexual activity. Every single day, with one person or another, for a period of three or four years.

The isolation experienced at home can make a young person vulnerable—through their longing to be known, to explore their feelings and desires, and to feel connected with others—to social and sexual relationships in which there is an imbalance of power. It is not always with one's peers that this space to be oneself is found. Daniel's and Peter's feelings seem to be qualitatively different: Daniel remembers tenderness and fun; Peter feels pretty ambivalent. The need of children and adolescents with erotic feelings, including homoerotic feelings, to have some space in which to experience these feelings without judgment or shame, needs to be much better understood.

**TO BE EXPLORED  
FURTHER.....**

Isolation is created by, among other things, the unsatisfied need to be known. Natalie tells a story of how her father read her journal when she was four-

**TO BE EXPLORED  
FURTHER.....**

teen, "which was just screaming, you know, I'm not happy, help me, I'm not happy", and her father's response was so superficial that she was left to figure out what to do. Although the act of reading her journal was invasive, Natalie's need to be known was more powerful than her need for privacy. This raises questions about the possibility of developing a healthy sense of personal boundaries when one has a deep longing to be known, another indication that isolation can make us vulnerable.

A couple of years later, Natalie asked if she could move to Berlin on her own. Her parents consented because they thought it would help her grow up, and she lived in Berlin by herself at the age of sixteen, for just under a year. While she recounts this time as a good experience overall, she has negative feelings about the fact that her parents were so out of touch with her and apparently unconcerned.

Experiencing isolation in our family of origin led some of us to having a clearer sense of what we need and want in our experience of family in our adult lives. This may not happen for everyone, but the people I interviewed seem to have taken something from their experience of isolation in their families, and transformed it, in their emerging definitions of what family

is, into an emphasis on the importance of being known and experiencing *connectedness* with others. This came through in some of their descriptions of what family means to them in the present:

**Natalie:** It's that gut connection to someone.

**Daniel:** We were understanding what it means to be rejuvenated by nature. And what it means to be a part of your world, and the earth, and to be a part of the cosmos. That's a very spiritual thing.

**Luke:** It has to be substantial. Something that's real ... the closer I get to them, the more they know about me.

**Peter:** Over the years, I have developed really close friendships with four or five people. These friendships have lasted, one, thirty-eight years, another, thirty, another, twenty-five. And I feel a very deep connection with these people. I consider them family.

**Luke:** I wanted a companion where ... it was complete sharing.

**Natalie:** The family relationships I have take place at a deeper level. There is a tangible connection and exchange of energy.

## **Danger**

For those of us whose sexualities fall outside the heterosexual norm, there was a tension, as we were growing up, between being known or remaining unknown in our families of origin. We lived with this

tension as a constant. It coloured our childhood and adolescent experiences with different shades of danger and safety.

Natalie knew, as a thirteen-year-old, that nobody could know about her feelings for other girls:

**Natalie:** We were sitting one day and I was talking to my mother saying, isn't Diane beautiful? I think she's the most beautiful girl on our street, or whatever. And my mother looked at me and said, you know, you shouldn't be ... why are you saying that, or why are you thinking stuff like that? And I went, oh my god! Why am I thinking this, oh my god! That would be like ... and then all of a sudden, it was sort of a flash of—oh, wait a minute—those lesbians are people who, you know, like other women. Oh my god! And they're bad. And I just can't let anyone else know about that.

Natalie was in danger of being painfully ostracized by her family and friends. Peter's life was threatened:

**Peter:** He said, if I ever hear of you being with a man again, I will cut your head off with an axe. That's what my father said to me.

!!!!

After coming out to her parents, Sara felt that her sense of self would be in danger if she continued to live at home:

**Sara:** I guess I felt my sense of self was threatened there. And I didn't feel strong enough to defend it. And for that reason, didn't feel I could go back home.



How can the experience of fearing for your physical and psychic safety within your family of origin be adequately described? I don't think it can.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Another person I know, not among those interviewed for this project, was chased out of her home by her father, brandishing a shotgun, when she came out to him. What do you do with that? How does a person reconcile the experience of feeling unsafe with the people in their immediate family, with what we are all taught about the family as a sheltering, nurturing source of unconditional love and guidance? How does this affect the way we move in the world?*

*My memories of fearing for my physical safety as a child were expanded, with the help of a skilled therapist, to include memories of myself achieving an inner equilibrium that I retreated into when very afraid. Safety became associated with being inward and alone.*

*As I write this, I am amazed at our resilience, and concerned about our wounds.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel drew upon his inner resources, the source of which he was unable to identify in the interview, to keep his sense of himself intact:

**Daniel:** I thought they were off from the time I was, like eight, until I left home. I never, ever once said I'm the one with the problem.

Some of us are helped by the interventions of

**Cohort** *n.* Roman military unit, one tenth of a legion; band of warriors; persons banded together [F or L]

the angels in human form that we may be fortunate enough to meet along the way. With these significant cohorts, we are able to establish a provisional sense of safety, enough to get us through until we can create our own living environment. In Ellen's case, one of the people who was a significant presence in her life growing up, whom she later found out was two-spirited, had purposefully befriended her because he thought she might be lesbian or bisexual, and knew that she would need support:

**Ellen:** A lot of them guided me, without me knowing. This one guy in particular. Every time we met each other, he would sit and talk to me, and he would tell me about the old times, and stuff like that. And I never really knew that this guy was two-spirited, 'til only a few years ago.

Based on what the seven of us have experienced, it seems that surviving danger in our families of origin can help us—some of us, anyway—develop a capacity for critical thinking early in life. Survival requires a bottom-line kind of self-knowledge; we learn that we exist apart from what goes on around us because the need to figure out how to survive acquaints us with ourselves, however vaguely. For some of us, this leads, eventually, to the ability to see that we can choose to exorcise the problem from our identity, and

reject its implicit message that there is something inherently wrong with us. This need to become critical thinkers can contribute to the development of a sense of autonomy: we can come to see ourselves as the authors of our own lives, because, without rewriting the story, our lives are unlivable. Sometimes it takes years of therapy to achieve this, however. Some of us get there on our own. Some of us never achieve it. Some of us commit suicide.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm thinking about  
 The ones who aren't here  
 And won't be coming in late.  
 Home all alone  
 And the family  
 And won't be coming out tonight.  
 Wish I could know all the lovers and friends  
 Kept from gathering.  
 I think of you now  
 The ways you could go  
 We're all of us  
 Refugees

Telling myself  
 And the family  
 My friends and the folks on the job.  
 One by one  
 And it's never been easy  
 And me and everyone changed.  
 The hugs and the tears  
 When they show you their hearts  
 But some never speak again  
 Every pot off the wheel can't bear the kiln  
 And every love can't bear the pain

So let's pass a kiss  
 And a happy sad tear

And a hug the whole circle round  
 For the ones who aren't here  
 For the hate and the fear  
 For laughter, for struggle, for life.  
 Let's have a song now for me and for you  
 And the love that we cannot hide  
 And let's have a song  
 For the ones who aren't here  
 And won't be coming out tonight.

—Meg Christian

\* \* \* \* \*

Those of us who survive come out on the other side of our experiences of danger with some definite ideas about the *safety* we need, in our lives in general, and especially in our families:

**Daniel:** Safety's a big thing. Understanding, safety. Just total acceptance.

**Andrea:** Who the people you can count on are ... And for a lot of people whose sexualities fall outside of the heterosexual norm, your family of origin aren't necessarily the people you can count on.

**Sara:** Family? Connotations to the word, for me, are ... security ... warm, happy feelings ...

**Natalie:** What I get out of my family of choice relationships is this ... steadiness, security, um ... sense of a non-judgmental place to be.

**Peter:** We've found ourselves in situations where ... where other people may have doubted, or other people may have stood back. They [his loved ones] didn't. They were just there.

**Ellen:** If you don't have your family to back you up, who have you got?

## Coming Out

For the person who maintains an exclusively biogenetic notion of kinship, coming out can mark the renunciation of kinship, the shift from "family" to "no family." (Weston, 1991, p. 29)

At the same time, however, the fear of being disowned that so often accompanies coming out carries with it a potential for distinguishing the social tie of kinship from this biogenetic connection. (Weston, 1991, p. 78)

Many, if not most, lesbians and gay men of colour did not experience coming out in terms of any one-on-one correspondence of identity to community.... Whites without a strong ethnic identification often described coming out as a transition from no community *into* community, whereas people of colour were more likely to focus on conflicts *between* different identities instead of expressing a sense of relief and arrival. (Weston, 1991, p. 134)

We grow up in a culture that is either silent about homosexuality, or overtly damning. One thing I and the six people I interviewed have learned, is that we sometimes have to speak out loud about who we are in order to see who we can count on, and to identify or create space in which we can be ourselves. The fear that our families might disown us is a huge weight on the hearts of most of us when we are coming out to people in our family of origin. For many people, coming out to their families of origin means being prepared to be without family at all. Living in these conditions is like being surrounded by sharp knife blades and only one way through without getting cut. Loss of family is a deep cut.

For people of colour, the threat of loss of family extends outward to include the threat of loss of extended family and community in which their racial and cultural identity is acknowledged, supported, and celebrated, and in which they can feel safe.

For all of us, as our self-knowledge grows, we begin to think about if, when, and how to come out to our families. In the space in time in which we are considering these questions, secrecy develops in our families of origin regarding our sexuality. This secrecy can

be maintained out of fear of rejection and in an effort to preserve a relationship of some sort (Weston, 1991, p. 3, 51). It can also be the result of conditioning that prohibits talking amongst family members about anything related to sex (Berzon, 1988, p. 302). Whatever it is that props up this secrecy, its effects on us are destructive. We suffer from a lack of confirmation of our reality in our interactions with our families (Weston, 1991, p. 49), and the interactions we do have become unreal. Our silence buys into and reinforces the moral judgment that tells us that we are "bad" (Berzon, 1988, p. 96-298). It is impossible to cooperate with this silence and not be psychically wounded by it, to some extent. Besides having a negative impact on our well-being, this secrecy profoundly affects our experiences of family with our families of origin. We experience the secrecy in degrees; coming out does not eliminate it completely.

As time goes on, we come up against barrier after barrier, each of which must be negotiated somehow, if we are to be true to ourselves and not resign ourselves to being remade in society's heterosexual image. I describe my experience of this as living with the question of whether or not I can be myself front and centre, at all times; there are always decisions to be made.

Our coming out experiences teach us many things. Through these experiences, we gather specific and intimate knowledge of the exact dimensions of our oppression: its depth, breadth and scope, and where the cracks are wherein we might place a wedge. Several of the people I interviewed spoke about the information-gathering and relationship-testing functions of coming out:

Coming out to biological kin produces a discourse destined to reveal the "truth" not merely of the self, but of a person's kinship relations. (Weston, 1991, p. 44)

**Luke:** As far as I was concerned, coming out to my parents and my aunt had to have an effect on those relationships. I wanted it to make them more real. It was like, it was almost a test. Okay, you know, it was like, this is who I am. And I'd see what their reaction was.

The process of coming out can illuminate: the quality of our relationships, the attitudes of our family and friends, their capacity for openness and growth, and how the weight of assumption favours the difficulties these people may have with who we are, rather than our own difficulties just finding the space to be. Sara had come out to her parents and had worked very hard to maintain healthy relationships with them, but was still feeling unhappy about how things were going with her dad:

**Sara:** I wrote him another letter that basically said, I'm tired of being the adult in this relationship, and

being responsible for the relationship, and if you want to have a relationship with me you're going to have to do it. You're going to have to take it over and look after it. And gave him the letter and sat there while he read it.

And ... that was hard. And he had a hard time with that, and I said in the letter a lot of things I had wanted to say to him for years. And, I don't think he realizes ... well, he said, after reading the letter, well, you can't expect me to just accept this overnight. And at the time, it had been eleven years since the first time it had come up. Eleven years.

Aside from AIDS, no other topic encountered during my fieldwork generated an emotional response comparable to coming out to blood (or adoptive) relatives. (Weston, 1991, p. 43)

In spite of all this, the inner impetus is strong—the longing to be known and to be connected with others and to know we are safe. We often stake what is most precious to us—relationships, work, home—on our hope that we might be able to expand the space in which we can live in synch with ourselves.

There are so many aspects of people's coming out experiences that could be explored. For the purposes of this project, I have chosen to highlight those which seem to contribute most to clarifying what family means to us. For instance, the energy it takes to prepare to come out to one's family of origin is one such aspect.

Some of us tried to find allies, both within and outside of our families of origin. Sara had two bad experiences trying to find an adult in her school that she could talk to; her gym teacher, who Sara guessed was a lesbian, listened to her disclosure then ignored



it completely and asked her if she was coming to volleyball practice, and the guidance counsellor broke confidentiality and told her parents about her visit. When she decided to come out to her parents herself, she wrote a long letter explaining everything and took out the best books she could find in the library to give them with the letter. Before giving them the letter, she called her sister into her room and asked her to read it:

**Sara:** Well, she wasn't ... she wasn't supportive as I had hoped. She wasn't at all prepared for what she was going to read. She had no ... point of reference with which to compare what I had told her. She really did try. But I knew that she didn't approve, I mean, it was obvious. I guess what I was looking for was someone to go and stand beside me while I gave this to Mom and Dad. I didn't get the response I wanted.

Once we come out, we often end up being the caretakers of those we have told, when we are the vulnerable ones who have come to them with our need for recognition and support. With parents, this sometimes amounts to a reversal of the roles of parent and child. Daniel experienced this when he and his mother stumbled into a conversation about the church, which led to his mother declaring that homosexuals "brought us AIDS."

Individuals from working class backgrounds tended to experience coming out somewhat differently. If they had determined to live openly as lesbians or gay men, they often perceived this not so much as declining to copy their parents' lives, but as departing from their parents' dream of upward mobility. Believing that heterosexism and anti-gay discrimination might render that dream unattainable, they saw themselves failing to reproduce not their parents' situation but rather their parents' ambitions. In the process, they sometimes began to question the value of those ambitions (Weston, 1991, p. 202).

**Daniel:** And I remember sitting down and gripping the towel in the bathroom and holding it really, really tight, and laying my head against the wall and thinking, where do you go from here? We're starting at fuckin' step number one. You know? If that's what she really believes, then she is stupid. And I'm going to have to start teaching. And it's the reversal of the roles. Of parent to child, that happen at that moment, that really freak you out.

The process of coming out is continuous and unending. How this gets played out in our families is affected by a combination of variables like gender, race, class, and family history. A unique combination of these variables makes up our own particular context.

Sometimes, coming out happens in stages, i.e. some family members know before others. It could be that our immediate family know first and then we have to figure out how to let everyone else know. Or, in some cases, we tell members of our extended family first, and they may even help us tell our immediate family members. Ellen found it very hard to broach the subject of her lesbianism with her daughter.

**Ellen:** What happened was that my mother and my sister, they sat down with her, and they explained to her that, okay, um, your mom's a lesbian. Live with it. Adjust to it. And, after she was told that, by my mom and my sister, she was able to adjust better.

At any rate, coming out is fraught with concerted energy, strategizing, and worry. And sometimes, there is the mixed blessing of realizing afterwards that we had underestimated our family of origin member. Mixed because although it is good to feel accepted beyond what we hoped was possible, the fact is we have already suffered through our fear.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Several years ago, at a time in my life when I identified as a lesbian, I came out to my mother. To map out the aftermath in myself, I wrote the following poem:*

***the day I told my mother who I am***

*the day I told my mother who I am  
was a plain day.  
I was tired and distracted,  
my mind crowded and blank.  
she was quietly waiting  
and ordering food.*

*fear:  
sharp as sudden light.  
i peer at her through the slats of our small  
talk  
what is it that she saves me from?  
i speak,  
fumbling in and out of focus.*

*then,  
politely, she asks,  
tell me, dear,  
are you lesbian?*

*the word:  
a protruding root she trips on.  
her mind is squinting, her heart*

*suspended*

*i control my panic,  
caught like a breath in my throat.*

*yes,  
i am.*

*scrambling around now,  
for the beginning of this story.*

*i continue:  
visions, practicalities, justice, intimacy.  
love made more real with women,  
trust come undone with men.  
she asked intelligent questions.  
in between tender and dangerous moments,  
a waitress brought us lunch and coffee,  
cleared away plates.*

*my body:  
a loose bundle of shivers,  
shaking out my words.  
words which refuse to speak of my body.*

*several years of stumbling  
in a fog of what we thought we knew,  
ended, without ceremony.  
the tension gathered itself up and left.  
we wiped the corners of our mouths with the  
linen napkins.*

*she: anchored by motherhood.  
i wobble and float  
in the space i have so bravely cleared.*

*i stood up and put on my coat,  
light-headed,  
as if i hadn't just eaten.*

*as we left the restaurant,  
she composed a grocery list out loud.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Living with the fear that keeps us from being ourselves affects the quality of all of our relationships. Daniel reflects on how not being out to his mom limits their relationship:

**Daniel:** It makes it tough because, um, sometimes I ... I don't think she understands or believes how much I love her. And it makes it really hard for me to express love and, um ... and be ... it's really difficult to love someone and not be able to tell them everything about yourself.

Even our relationships with people to whom we are out are affected by the fear we live with about being found out. With queer friends who are out to greater and lesser degrees, we have to negotiate how out we are when we are together. With straight friends, we have to watch for assumptions they might make about our comfort levels being out in different situations we might find ourselves in together. Living with this fear also affects our well-being in more fundamental ways:

The alternative to fantasy is reality. The alternative to denial is truth. The alternative to silence is disclosure. It is my belief that fantasy, denial, and silence about who we really are represent the enemies of growth in the development of every gay and lesbian person. (Berzon, 1988, p. 296)

In fact, simply wanting to reduce the amount of

Through the fear and sometimes the experience of being disowned or rejected after coming out to blood relatives, many lesbians and gay men come to question not so much the "naturalness" of a biological tie, but rather the assumption that shared biogenetic substance in itself confers kinship. This heightened awareness of the selectivity incorporated into genealogical modes of calculating relationship has shaped the constitution of gay families as families we choose, and allowed gay people to argue that their chosen families represent something more than a second-best imitation of blood ties. (Weston, 1991, p. 211)

fear we feel, and the scope of its influence in our lives, is a major factor in our motivation to come out.

How do our experiences of coming out shape our emerging sense of what family means to each of us? What some of us learn through coming out, about the environment we live in and our family and friends, is that *being able to be ourselves really matters*, that *finding or creating the space in which this is possible is really important*, and that *our quest for this space and for companionship in it, may lead us beyond traditional notions of family*. These learnings were also reflected in descriptions the seven of us came up with what family means to us in the present:

**Daniel:** What makes my relationships with people in my family of choice different from other friendships? They know. That I'm gay. They know what it means to me to be gay. And not only do they know. They accept everything about me, unconditionally. I never have to explain. I can be just 100% me.

**Ellen:** I have friends here that are Native and that are two-spirited. And ... I find a closer kinship with them, than I would with anyone else. They're my family. They have a better understanding of who I am.

**Andrea:** The people in my family accept me, but they also stretch me ... when I am with them I am not always the one on the margins, presenting the challenge. They challenge me to further growth.

**Luke:** I think there was such a focus on structure, when

it comes to family, and, you know, that's what's got to change. Because more and more people are being honest about it and saying it's not structure, it's meaning.

**Metamorphosis** (pl. metamorphoses) change of form, esp. by magic or natural development; change of character, conditions, etc. [from the Greek (*morphe* form)]

Knowing what we need and want fuels the metamorphosis of family in our lives. Some of our knowledge comes through our family of origin experiences and the particular teachings of isolation, danger, and coming out. Some of our knowledge exists in us in vague intuitive bits that we know are there, but which we can't always see clearly in the half-light generated by our truncated imaginations.

For instance, many of us experience a gaping disparity between the expectation that we will place top priority on our relationships with our families of origin, and the fact that it is only with our friends that we actually feel able to be ourselves. In the absence of language to express how this feels, we find ourselves unconsciously, or semi-consciously comparing our experiences of going 'home' for visits with our families of origin, to our experiences of coming home to the lives we have created since we left. This stresses the system of beliefs about what family is and means that we each have absorbed in both subtle and explicit ways. The framework for family that we have grown up with starts to crack and get shaky, and we

***Discourse Analysis:***

In the absence of language, meaning has its beginnings in areas of our experience that are beyond our cognitive reach, like a psychic itch, that our minds have to stretch to scratch.

begin to sense that our foundation and support may not come primarily—or at all—from our families of origin. We are becoming family with other people in our lives.



## BECOMING FAMILY

In the interviews, participants identified several aspects of becoming family. For some, having a long-term partner is central in their vision of family for themselves. For others, their sense of family could include a partner but is not dependent on whether or not they have a relationship of this type. For all of us, thinking about whether or not we will have children is part of the process of creating and becoming family.

The whole notion of a family of choice was talked about differently by different people. Several of us find the term helpful and use it comfortably. The three people who are in long-term partnerships, two of them with children, put less emphasis on the concept of a family of choice, although they use it to refer to the inner circle of close friends that surrounds the nuclear families they have created. One person rejects the term completely, because his family of origin experience was not positive and so the word "family" has negative connotations for him:

**Peter:** I feel closer, I feel much closer, in some ways, to the people who I've developed deep, meaningful relationships with, over the years. Uh, than I do ... my family, my blood family. When I include these people that I have deep feelings for ... if I start including them under the word, or along that text, as "family," it's almost like a disservice to them.

We all find some way to describe our experience as accurately as possible, with whatever language we can find. Whatever our lifestyle choices and language, we are all creating families of our own by becoming family with the people who are most important to us. And because the heteronormative way of being family is presented as the only way, we are all social outlaws:

**Familial ties between persons of the same sex that may be erotic but are not grounded in biology or procreation do not fit any tidy division of kinship into relations of blood and marriage. (Weston, 1991, p. 4)**

This results in the cultural positioning of bisexuals, lesbians, and gay men "outside both law and nature" (Weston, 1991, p. 5). It needs to be noted that this is experienced somewhat differently by bisexual people when they are in relationships with people of the other sex, and may enjoy the benefits of having a relationship that is considered socially acceptable. For Luke and his partner, this includes the legal sanction of marriage. In my experience of being in a relationship with a man after several years of only being involved with women, this acceptance and approval is tenuous at best. I was acutely aware of how quickly social support would disappear if my relationship sta-

**I use the phrase "the other sex" because I do not want to reinforce the dualistic, polarized way of thinking about sex and gender differences connoted by the phrase "the opposite sex."**

tus changed and I found myself in a same sex relationship again. History bore this out.

Those of us whose sexualities fall outside of the heterosexual norm are all in uncharted territory as we create and become family. Let's begin by looking at how having a partner figures in this.

### Partners

Only two of the seven of us whose thoughts and experiences are represented in this project have a vision of family in which having a partner is not central. Three participants are in relationships with partners with whom they have made a life-long commitment. The other two are hoping to find someone with whom they can make that type of commitment. In our culture, most of us grow up thinking that we will mate and spend most of our adult lives with a person with whom we will share love and support, sexual intimacy, family rituals, and economic ties. People in general are less comfortable with adults who have chosen to remain single, or who have ended up single for circumstantial reasons. In Mary O'Brien and Clare Christie's anthology of essays by women, *Single Women*, Mary Ann Cejka writes about how women often experience this:

#### **Discourse Analysis:**

"...we will mate..."

Language is delimitation, a strategic limitation of possible meanings. It frames; it brings into focus by that which goes unremarked. (Lather, 1991, p. xix)

These ideological frames that some of us speak ourselves into—in the context of compulsory heterosexuality—are fictions, social constructions. Even in our resistance to them, these frames are organizing principles in our lives.

But many of us who are single do not need to look to scientific studies to know that we often face prejudice—usually subtle, but sometimes blatant—simply because we are single. The prejudice stems from stereotypes based upon the suspicion that something is psychologically wrong with women who never marry. (O'Brien and Christie, 1993, p. 4)

For those of us who want to establish healthy, long-term intimate relationships, the factors working against this are numerous. They include: the lack of social and legal support, the lack of visible role models (Berzon, 1988, p. 7, 14), the lack/inadequacy of language in which to express and thereby make visible our relationships (Currie, 1987, unpublished), the lack of gender role guidelines and confusion about gender roles resulting from socialization based on gender stereotypes (Berzon, 1988, p. 82-88), and the tradition of failure that permeates our consciousness and often manifests in a pervasive pattern of using the threat of dissolution as a way to deal with conflict. The process of identity formation and the struggle to grow with a positive sense of oneself, in a heterosexist and homophobic culture, also affects the process of establishing healthy relationships. (Berzon, p. 10, 15, 16-18)

As already mentioned, fear plays a big role in our lives and weaves itself into the very texture of our

intimate relationships. Betty Berzon, a therapist and writer who specializes in gay and lesbian issues, marvels at "the ingeniousness with which people solve the special problems of same-sex relationships." (1988, p. 3)

One of the women who is in a long-term relationship with another woman spoke of a strategy that she and her partner use to help ensure longevity in their relationship:

**Sara:** Well, after the first couple of years, this was a ... for the both of us, we wanted this to be a forever thing, and that breaking up was not an option. And it wasn't something that we allowed each other to use as a weapon ... We agreed, a long time ago, neither of us will do that. And we've stuck to that agreement. We might have a bad month, we might have a bad year. But that we were committed to working at it.

For a great many same sex couples, breaking up is a familiar part of the repertoire of possible solutions that is brought to conflict resolution. For Sara and her partner, not entertaining this possibility on a regular basis may be part of what has enabled them to get through rough times and stay together for the past nine years.

For Ellen, growing up in a Mi'qmaq community meant internalizing values that place family as a very high priority in one's life. Even though there was vio-

Significantly, many lesbians and gay men in the Bay Area cited a relationship's ability to weather conflict as itself a sign of kinship. (Weston, 1991, p. 196)

lence in her home, and in the homes of some of her relatives, there was also a very strong family bond:

**Ellen:** I don't think I can ever remember saying or thinking that I want another family. I knew that this was my family, and I had to take them.

Ellen's parents are both in recovery from alcoholism, which is one of several things that makes her proud of her family of origin. The way her family works now, the extended family does not permit serious rifts to take place among family members that could weaken the sense of connection among the whole family. If two people are in a conflict situation that persists, members of the extended family will intervene.

Ellen has maintained this belief in the importance of family in her relationship with her partner. The two women have maintained separate houses for the eleven years they have been together. Initially, this had to do with their being closeted; more recently, it has been about keeping the home environment as stable as possible for her partner's teenage daughters. Ellen feels a great need to live with her partner now, which she associates with getting older; her partner is not eager to make this change. Even though it isn't clear what will happen, Ellen brings to this dilemma the same kind of belief in the importance of

Only one participant integrated non-monogamy into his vision of family for himself. It is evident in the literature that many lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people have chosen to explore non-monogamy, and take up the challenge of learning the skills needed to have healthy relationships with more than one lover. For some, this means having several lovers at any given time. For others, like Luke, a committed primary relationship is what they want, with both partners being open to either one having other sexual and/or otherwise intimate relationships.

family, and a commitment to each other over time, that she experiences in her family of origin and their extended family.

One of the bisexual people I interviewed talked about how permanence with his partner, who is also bisexual, means creating space in their relationship for the possibility of each of them pursuing a same sex relationship at some time. For each of them, what they desire is an intimate relationship of some depth with a person of the same sex, that could include sex, without the emphasis being on the sexual aspect of the relationship.

**Luke:** When I reflect on my life, it seems that most of my relationships with women have been kind of in depth, and my relationships with men have been more sexual. I still want to experience intimacy that is more than sex, with a man.

Luke and his partner, to whom he is married, talk about how they would distinguish between other relationships and their relationship with each other. They have decided that they would only be willing to conceive children with each other. Like Natalie, the other bisexual person I interviewed, Luke expects change to be his constant companion, as he navigates life as a bisexual man:

**Luke:** But I'm not a person who, um ... some people like to just be satisfied and be tranquil, and, uh, sort of reach a space of contentment. For me, life isn't that. And especially family isn't that ... Life and family is something that's always happening, it's always changing, and, uh, I feel like it's going in very positive, open ways.

Natalie is less certain about living with constant change:

The hardest aspect of being bisexual is that there is little known precedence. But in the free flow of feelings there are times when one would like to be the wife of a wife or the husband of a husband. And the lack of precedence provides tremendous freedom and flexibility on the one hand, but also from time to time creates a tremendous vacuum. (Girard, 1991, p. 169)

**Natalie:** Some days I'm thrilled with that. That there are no parameters. It's amazing, it's fun, it's far more free in a lot of ways ... and then I have other days when I just haven't got the energy to even visualize which way I should be going.

Peter, like myself, places less emphasis on having a partner when speaking about family in his life. His loved ones—the friends he grew up with in an African Canadian community in a New Brunswick city, and some friends he has made since then that have been important to him for years—are the constant in his life. They have been there through his coming out as a gay man, through an earlier relationship that lasted eight years, through periods in his life when he was single, through his most recent relationship which lasted six years, and through this last partner's recent death due to AIDS. The centrality of these loved ones in Peter's sense of family came through when I asked him to describe his experience of family, in the present:



Shared history testifies to enduring solidarity, which can provide the basis for creating familial relationships of a chosen, or non-biological sort. (Weston, 1991, p. 36)

**Peter:** Well, you know, there still is the, uh ... the family in the traditional sense. You know, I still have my dad and my sister and my nieces, uh ... on a more, I don't know if you'd call it a more spiritual level, I think I have family with friends, that, uh, I have had for a long period of time. Over the years, I have developed really close friendships with four or five people. These friendships have lasted, one, thirty-eight years, another, thirty, another, twenty-five. And I feel a very deep connection with these people. Uh ... I consider them family. And I consider their families—whether it be traditional or people that they know and are close to—that I'm now close to, as family.

The significance of having a partner in a person's overall sense of family varies. Certainly, we have all been affected by the social prescription that says that normal adults should be with a mate. But some of us are naturally inclined to put our adult lives together in a different way, and some of us question our experiences in relationships to the point of wondering whether a long-term commitment makes sense in the context of our lives.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I have wondered, for some time now, if I will ever have a healthy, long-term relationship. Maybe, unlike the loons and the Canada geese, I will not mate for life. Increasingly, when I visualize my life a few years down the road, I am still on my own, at least in terms of a relationship. These visions do not trouble me. They do not appear in my imagination to be missing anything. There may be a child or children in the scene. Whether or not I am*

*parenting, there are numerous connections to a splendid array of wonderful people. And a strong, passionate relationship to a place, a piece of land, with woods, and a body of water of respectable size nearby. And there is always work that I love, in my vision of my future. I am finally feeling like being on my own is something I can explore, rather than take as a sign that there is something wrong with me that I need to fix.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Just as we all engage with the idea of having a partner, whether or not we end up seeing that as central to our experience of family, we all also engage with the idea of having children, whether or not we end up being parents.

### **Thoughts About Having Children**

This section is titled the way it is because I am making a distinction between thinking about having children—which is something all seven of us do or have done—and actually having children, an experience that is not shared among all of the six participants and myself. Whether or not we are, or want to be parents ourselves, our stories speak to the ways that our thoughts about having children shape our families. I will treat the subject of actually having children, later.

As for our different ways of thinking about chil-

So many of us simply sublimate the natural need to parent by working in occupations that give us the opportunity to nurture others. It is no accident that so many millions of gay men and lesbians are teachers, nurses, doctors, social workers, psychologists, or in some other helping profession. (Berzon, 1988, p. 319)

This quote is problematic. I have a strong, negative reaction to Berzon's use of the word "natural" to refer to a person's need to parent. It certainly raises the spectre of the "nature vs. nurture" debate. But more than that, it doesn't fit with my experience that there are people who are able to envision themselves as equally happy with or without children and people who feel a distinct need to *not* be parents.

Still, I include this quote because I find the correlation Berzon makes, interesting. Is there a disproportionately high number of queers in human service occupations?

**TO BE EXPLORED FURTHER.....**

dren, whether or not we want to be parents, and how that has shaped and continues to shape our lives, I will present a brief profile of each person's thoughts and experiences. There are many ways to approach the questions associated with procreation and/or parenting, and other questions that we engage with, too, such as those related to having significant friendships with children, without being parents. The seven of us portray some of these different approaches.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Daniel:** Thoughts about kids come in and out. When my best friend, \_\_\_\_\_, used to start talking to me about kids and wanting kids, that's when I started to think to myself, how's this gonna ... what am I going to do? What will my life be like on that level? Part of becoming a teacher, for me, was to fulfill the role that I wanted to have, with kids. But there's something else I've had to acknowledge about myself which is, I think, something a lot of people don't think of before they get involved with having a child ... I don't think the lifestyle that I want to lead is conducive to having kids. Um, I want to travel. And I want to see this world. And I want to explore and do a lot of things. And a lot of what I want to do just doesn't go with it.

Daniel wants to enjoy relationships with children in his life, but he doesn't see himself becoming a parent. He had a moment of seriously considering making a commitment to coparenting, when a member of his family of choice thought that she might be pregnant. She wasn't. Since then, he has moved more decisively into a lifestyle that precludes parenting.

Daniel has moved twice since I began this project, and he plans to move again, to a large urban centre, in less than two months. He has entered a career that, if he wants to enter into it fully (and he does), will demand even more flexibility and mobility. He will be presented with opportunities that will depend on his ability to make himself available. He also hopes to travel to Amsterdam regularly, and he has identified other travel destinations as well.

Daniel knows that he will be a favourite uncle of his sister's children; he intends to spoil them.

Daniel also knows that having relationships with people younger than ourselves can be a source of comfort when we are old. Of the six people I interviewed, he was the only one whose thoughts about children were linked to his thoughts about getting old. He sees family as being very important to him, in his old age:

**Daniel:** When I feel full confidence in my family of choice, I will feel much better about growing old. It's got something to do with loneliness, and how to combat loneliness. As a gay man, I mean, I've often thought about growing old and not having that network of family around me. At ... at a time when, you know, my family of origin probably will have it. You know, my sisters are going to have children, who will have ... you know, they'll have grandchildren, and they will have that when they're sixty-five and seventy and seventy-five that I ... probably—not necessarily—but I ... you know, at this point I'm optimistic, but I don't know that

I'll have it, where they're quite confident that they will. So I ... I'm looking for that type of stability.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Sara:** Not having a child wasn't an option I considered. I knew I wanted to have kids. When I met \_\_\_\_\_, she didn't. And I was very up front about the fact that I wanted to have kids, and ... no, I knew I would, one way or another. And I was prepared to go out and sleep with somebody if I had to. I didn't know that you could get pregnant any other way. It was something I was going to do.

One result [of what has come to be known as the lesbian baby boom] has been the subtle reincorporation of biology and procreation within gay families as conceptualized as the products of unfettered creativity and choice. (Weston, 1991, p. 168)

Sara ended up convincing her female partner that they should have a child, and conceiving through alternative insemination. She would have been prepared to leave the relationship if her partner had flatly refused to welcome a child into their family.

As it turned out, Sara's baby was born prematurely, not expected to live, hospitalized for the first several months of her life, and sent home with an oxygen tank when she finally could go home. It was a crisis that lasted for months, and Sara's partner was a stalwart source of optimism and strength for Sara, and, with Sara, an abundant and consistent source of life-enhancing love for their baby. The little one pulled through against incredible odds and is now doing very well.

Sara's life is taking the shape she wants it to: raising a child with her partner in their home, supported by extended family and friends, and financed by the

two incomes of her and her partner, now that her career is getting underway. It is a picture of home and family that is very much like the one she grew up with, except that her partner is a woman, and she is not a stay-at-home mom.

She would like to have another child; she feels that she missed out on the experience of being pregnant the first time! And she was one of five siblings who had lots of cousins to play with, so she wants her daughter to have some companions in her own generation. Her love for children is linked to her desire to explore the potential of what she has to give:

**Sara:** The role that having a child plays in my life? I think, the biggest thing for me, is that I think I have a lot to offer a kid. I think I'm a really good mom, and ... I imagine a lot of people think similarly when they have their own kid. That there are lots of things that they won't do that their parents did ... I think I came from a really great, supportive family. And, there are certainly parenting things that I have taken from them, and there's lots of things that I have learned ... that I don't like. That I work hard at getting rid of. And one of those is a quick temper. And so I'm very ... well, I try to be aware when these things happen. And they do. But, all in all, I think my instincts are good. I think I'm full of genuine love and concern and care for other people. And I think I have a lot of really wonderful things to give a kid. Besides all the love and the warmth and that sort of stuff. You know, I think I have a sense of social ... justice that I want to pass on to somebody else. And I think that's really important to me. To be able to ... not that I want to tell \_\_\_\_\_ what to think, but I want to be able to talk with her about issues and try and have her think critically about what people say

to her or tell her or show her. And be able to make intelligent decisions about her own life, and how her life intersects with other lives, and to be able to do that responsibly.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Peter:** \_\_\_\_\_ [one of Peter's loved ones] and I have gone through a lot of, uh, wonderful, wonderful experiences together. \_\_\_\_\_'s family—\_\_\_\_\_ had six children—uh, I've been there for the birth of three of those children. I've named two of the children. I've been close to all of the children. The children are now—she has one daughter in India, who, like, I received two letters from in the last three days. She has two daughters in Toronto, uh, you know, I still get calls from them, and ... the kids that are here with her now, uh, there's always been a close connection.

Peter has no biological or formally adopted children of his own. None of his partners have had children, either. Peter is the only participant who said nothing about having thoughts of having children of his own. His relationships with children are a major part of his life, however. Along with the two women in the study who are biological mothers, and unlike the rest of us, Peter has ongoing parenting responsibilities. He has taken this on, voluntarily; it is part of how he commits himself to his relationships with his loved ones.

Peter sometimes wonders about where the boundaries are, between his chosen lifestyle of not having kids of his own, and the committed relationships he has with the children of his loved ones. How

Through cooperation in alternative insemination and coparenting arrangements, lesbians and gay men have challenged the centrality of heterosexual intercourse and a two-person, "opposite" gender model of parenthood to kinship relations. (Weston, 1991, p. 19)

**Discourse Analysis:**

One of my questions about the significance of family-related language and discourse is this: to what extent does the lack of language for anything but the heteronormative familial roles affect the evolution of these roles?

When the gay men and lesbians I met spoke of blood ties, they did so in ways that generally did not challenge cultural notions of biology as a static, material "fact." However, they considered a nonbiological mother, father, or coparent no less a parent in the absence of legal or physiological connection to a child ... Biological relatedness appeared to be a subsidiary option ranged alongside adoption, coparenting, and so on, within the dominant framework of choice that constituted families we create. (Weston, 1991, p. 188-189)

much support can he provide to a loved one who is a parent? How much time, emotional companionship, and financial help is reasonable? At times, he feels that he lives it right on the line beyond which he might begin to feel resentful. Sometimes, he enjoys getting an occasional break from these commitments, much like a parent. He is in a role for which no social script exists; he has to figure it out for himself, in the context of the most important relationships in his life.

I found it fascinating to hear someone who is not interested in having children of his own, speak so strongly about how important children and young people are in his life. It excites me to think about all the different ways we could be connected to and supportive of each other, in our communities.

**Peter:** The relationships I have with children play a very meaningful role in my life. Um ... I find quite often that, with children, I do a lot of reflecting. On my own life and my own past. I love the honesty, that comes with being a child. And, um, I like listening to children, because, if they, when they say something, they mean it. I love that they're so free to show their emotion, most of the time, which as you get older, you tend not to do as openly. So when you ask what role children play in my life, they bring a quality of honesty, that's refreshing, that's unique to children. And I think children need to have supportive people in their life ... And this may be a bit egoistic, to even think this way, but I like it when ... you know, somebody comes back to me, whether it be a year or two years later and they will say, you know, thanks, I'm really glad that we had that talk that day because ... or whatever. And that



does happen quite a bit. You know, one way or another, it sort of comes back and you feel that you've done something worthwhile.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Luke:** I always thought that children would be part of my life, but not necessarily mine ... The issue of having my own kids didn't really come up until recently, and it always seems to be people's second question when they hear that you're married. It's like ... this pressure to be a breeder. Aaagh! And it's just like, if I have kids, I'll have kids because I want to. I think just to have kids out of duty is the biggest mistake you can make for them, and for you, and your whole life.

For Luke, thoughts about having children of his own come and go. As a bi man, who is married to a bi woman, he is acutely aware of how the heterosexist script is handed to him and his partner to play out. He wants to maintain his queer identity in the face of this. He is also focused on getting post-secondary education and professional training in education and psychology. Still in his twenties, he has no intention of becoming a father in the near future.

As a child, he grew up in a family in which almost all of the women and children were sexually abused by his grandfather. He didn't know a lot of happy and healthy children. Since moving to the city where his partner's extended family lives, he has developed relationships with his partner's younger sister and brother that have inspired him to think more positively about having children of his own.

He enjoys children, as evidenced by his volunteer teaching in the religious education program at his church. Although he and his partner want to stay open to each of them having intimate relationships with same sex partners, they claim primary status for their relationship with each other, partly through a decision to only have children with each other.

**Luke:** And it's interesting because I see more and more gay couples having kids. One way or the other. There again, I think, people who are, I guess, gay, queer, or non-traditional, if they're having kids, they're having them because they want to have kids. Not because it's an obligation. Because they want to pass that feeling of being cared for, of being family, on.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Natalie:** I mean, right now, having a relationship with children has absolutely no interest to me. It's, um, the times that I've spent with friends' kids ... um ... I find more draining, energy draining, than I have the energy for. They're just too all over the place, and they talk too much, and they just require too much attention.

Natalie's life, in the past couple of years, has demanded great attentiveness to herself and her own growth: her decision to break off her engagement with her boyfriend of many years, an intense relationship with a woman that did not work out in the way she had hoped it would, and coming out to her family of origin in the midst of all this change. Having children is about

the last thing on her mind, right now.

When she thinks back to how she imagined her life as a grown-up, when she was a child, Natalie always thought she would have kids. She still thinks she will have children some day. For now, she is more focused on finding a way to integrate the change and fluidity that seem to accompany her bisexuality at this point, with the stability she wants in her personal life in the long-term.

She also mentioned, more than once, that she has no idea how women manage to have a career and still raise healthy and happy kids. She feels that she still has lots of time to figure this stuff out. She is twenty-four years old.

**Natalie:** Children? Not yet. Talk to me in ten years from now and I may be more on that wavelength. Because I certainly want kids. And if it means having them without a relationship, well, that would be fine, too. I mean, I don't know exactly how I'd negotiate that but ...

\* \* \* \* \*

**Ellen:** Oh god. I love children, actually. (laughs) Yeah ... I wish I had, at the time, when I was younger ... I wish I had a couple more children at the time. But ... I wasn't really ready, but ... now when I look back at it, you know, I would have liked to have had a couple more children. And that's not to say that it wouldn't still happen, right? But I can always remember my daughter asking me for, like, a brother or sister. And I said, no, I don't think so. (laughs) But I find that, in my own family, I'm really close to one of my sisters, and our kids have been brought up, sort of like, together.

The very variety of these arrangements reinforced the belief that no models or code of conduct applied to gay families (aside from love), leaving lesbians and gay men freer than heterosexuals to experiment with alternative childrearing methods and novel parenting agreements. (Weston, 1991, p. 191)

So they're almost like brother and sister, although they're first cousins.

Ellen had her daughter when she was seventeen, and continued to live at home, in her mom's house, with her daughter for another six or seven years. She met the woman who has been her partner for eleven years now, while she was living at home (her mom's house) with her little girl. They had been seeing each other for two years before she moved out of her mom's house into her own home on the reserve, just a few houses down the road. Ellen's daughter still lives at home, though she works and looks after herself. Her daughter's boyfriend has moved in, too.

Ellen's early thoughts about having a child were mixed up with anger at her mom, and wanting to get back at her by getting pregnant. When she had her daughter, she realized what a great thing it was to be a mother, and she settled down and reorganized her priorities. She credits having her daughter when she did with preventing her from getting involved in street culture in a way that she now sees would have been destructive for her.

Ellen's partner has three daughters, and their life together has been subject to some ups and downs due to their mother's struggle with substance abuse.

Ellen shares some of the parenting responsibilities, but the two women and their daughters maintain separate households.

Ellen and her partner have no idea what it would be like to be together without having to attend to the needs of their children. When they think about their life together in the days to come, they really look forward to having time without kids.

Ellen, like Sara, always knew she would have a child. As a teenager, her motives got tangled up in the rough time she was having with her mother, but underneath all that, was a strong sense that she was meant to be a parent:

...thinking of Sara, Ellen, Natalie, and I, and wondering about this:

Are lesbians immune to a culture of compulsory motherhood? Of course not. We were girls before we were aware lesbians, and we were raised by families that expected us to become mothers. (Polikoff, 1987, p. 49)

**Ellen:** I knew, at a young age, that I would have children. But I didn't know, um, at what stage, or when, or how many, or anything like that. But I knew that, um, that was a really big calling.

\* \* \* \* \*

*When Ellen said that in her interview, about having children being a really big calling, bells went off inside me. That's how I feel, too.*

*I can feel the part of me that is a mother, ready to come to the surface. I have had, and still have, very meaningful relationships with children in my life, on a personal level. I have also worked with children of all ages and different abilities and challenges. At one point, I remember thinking that the only age group I did not feel very confident with was teenagers. In the universe's sometimes quite marvellous way of addressing our needs, my*

*work for the following several years was with youth, in a number of different settings. I discovered a special love for these brave and funny people finding their way through the mine field of adolescence, and can honestly say that no aspect of parenting intimidates me now. There is nothing I can do to be more ready. The extent to which one can ever be ready for the dramatically life-changing event of becoming a parent, is limited, at best. Still, I have done all I can to prepare: found the right partner, got myself well-situated in the way of professional qualifications and work, settled into a good housing situation, and developed a broad, strong, and beautifully eclectic support network.*

*Send a soul my way, universe. I would be a good gateway.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Making choices related to having a partner, or not, and having children, or not, are only two dimensions of the process the seven of us have engaged in as we create family in our adult lives.

**Discourse Analysis:**

**"...I'd like to have another word, loved ones, or whatever."**

Implicit in a phrase like "loved one" is an open-ended notion of kinship that respects the principles of choice and self-determination in defining kin, with love spanning the ideologically contrasting domains of biological family and families we choose. (Weston, 1991, p. 183)

While not all of us choose to use the term 'family of choice', we all share experiences of having close friends move into an inner circle in our lives, in a way that makes us family. Once again, the lack of language leaves me in a dilemma: I don't want to use a term that one participant, Peter, has rejected, and I see his point.

**Peter:** I don't know if there's another word that I would prefer to use ... I'd like to have another word, loved ones, or whatever. You know? And then, if I want to

The language we invent (or reinvent) to refer to our non-traditional family relationships, may also enable us to speak about our family of origin relationships more precisely.

The point is that the definitions applied to our relations with others are not only ways of naming and making sense of them, but also provide courses of action. (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. 16)

***Discourse Analysis:***

Beyond the range of our ordinary speaking and writing there is the rich domain of the unspeakable that constantly beckons us ... We may have knowledge on one level and yet this knowledge is not available to our linguistic competency. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 113)

use that term to describe my feelings, or whatever, for certain family members, then that's okay, too.

Still, I need some way to refer to our created families. Uncomfortably, I will use "family of choice" since the rest of us find it either suitable or tolerable, and use Peter's term, "loved ones" when referring to him specifically.

**Creating a Family of Choice:**

**How Friends Become Family**

It was always interesting to ask, in the interviews, what distinguished close friendships from those relationships with close friends that became family. The looks that crossed the faces of the six people I interviewed, the quality of their silence before they began to speak, if I were able to convey this, would say more than the participants and I are yet able to put into words. Their responses to this question came from a place in themselves where—and they all this experienced this—they know something but they cannot yet express it. I had the feeling, with each of them, that I was digging deep, yet each person seemed to welcome the opportunity to try to bring their understanding of this process to the surface. The ideas that I present here are the product of these fascinating, if

awkward, discussions.

One aspect of the distinction between family of choice members and other close friends, according to the people I interviewed, is a combination of the amount and quality of time spent with these people:

**Peter:** I think it's the time invested in a relationship. The, you know, the history that goes along with it, I think plays a big, big part. I have some friends right now that are very good friends, very good friends. And I know, eventually, they will be people that I can say are loved ones. If they're not now. But they haven't reached ... and I don't necessarily mean it's something that they need to aspire to ... there are some people that I have known now for seven or eight years, and they're very good friends.

Sarah Hoagland, in her book *Lesbian Ethics*, defines attending as a way of being with each other that is fundamentally different from the use of power and control in relationships that is the trademark of patriarchy:

I am interested in engaging, not binding—in choosing to interact with each other rather than being forced to try to control each other because of an outside threat or internalized fears ... I am suggesting that by attending rather than controlling each other, we can interact in such a way that within limited circumstances we can empower ourselves and each other, and undermine [some of the] values of the fathers. (Hoagland, 1988, p. 156)

For Peter, close friends become loved ones after many years. Not every friendship evolves in this way, but for the ones that do, it is something that comes with time. Peter and his loved ones bring a remarkable quality of attentiveness to their relationships with each other. For instance, Peter and one of his loved ones, a heterosexual woman he has known for over twenty years, recently put aside a weekend to spend with each other. They just felt that they needed some quality time together so they went to a rural Nova Scotia community, checked into a bed-and-breakfast, and spent hours walking and talking.



In Sara's experience, the combination of amount of time and quality of time has been a bit different:

**Sara:** She was back here a couple of weeks ago, and having her back home again to visit just sort of brought all that up again, just how much I miss her. And we didn't ... when she lived here, we didn't spend a whole lot of time together. But the time we did spend together was ... really comfortable time, I guess. Like ... we could talk about anything, and we could be on different ends of the continuum of opinions, and it was quite okay and we could still have those discussions ... and did. But the fact that she was there when I really needed her, every day. And vice-versa. I've been there in situations where she's really needed me.

Sara is referring to the time when their baby was still in the hospital, fighting for her life, and this person took on the daily task of phoning everyone who had called that day to ask how the baby was doing and providing them with an update. This proved to be invaluable to Sara and her partner, who needed all their energy for attending to their baby in the hospital, where they spent most of every day. Going through these kinds of experiences together is part of how friends become family.

The type and amount of time spent intersects with the dimension of depth, to create the quality of the connection. This came up in Luke's reflections on this question, too:

As I read Luke's description of himself using the onion metaphor, I react to what I see as its linearity: the notion that you could peel off layer after layer and get to the core. This seems to limiting to me, as a way of understanding self. It echoes, for me, the polarized way of thinking of a person as having an inner and an outer self. I feel that there are many more dimensions to our selves than the onion metaphor suggests!

**Luke:** Sometimes I say I'm sort of like an onion. I have all these different layers to me. And there's a lot of people, say at school, who will know me as an acquaintance, but they don't know me, really that intensely, or in depth. So that's where the difference comes in, the trust level, the safety level. And the feeling of getting a give and take. If I feel like I'm at that trust level with someone and that ... develops ... that openness develops. Then, really, it's broken through into the sense of family. Because there's that support. There's that sense that you can tell them anything, and they may not agree, they may not like it, but they'll be there for you. And that's ... the big change.

Sometimes Luke even deliberately tests people, in the early stages of their acquaintance, to see if they have the potential to become close friends, or family:

**Luke:** Uh, I have to admit, I test people a lot. Like ... opening up in such a way, and sometimes I find I'm ... I even do it to see how a person will react. Just to see what they do with the information.

Natalie, on the other hand, spoke about knowing instantly, upon meeting someone, whether or not that person is someone with whom she could develop a family of choice relationship. When I asked about how she and one such person developed a meaningful connection, she referred to her ability to get a sense of the person's spirit:

**Natalie:** It just was. There's something, a quality about

**Discourse Analysis:**

When I went through the transcripts looking for examples of how people adapted to the lack of language, I found so many uses of metaphor that I concluded that this is one of the main ways we cope with the lack of language to describe our reality. We refer to something that we have a word or words for, then we go from there. Metaphor takes us to the ballpark (another use of metaphor) of meaning we are trying to express, and, once there, we see how close we can get using qualifiers, that is, similarities and differences between what the metaphor usually represents and what we are trying to describe. Or we just hope that if our listener can get to that ballpark with us, they may be able to get what we are trying to say without us having to express it fully.

By way of metaphor, language can take us beyond the content of the metaphor toward the original region where language speaks through silence. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 49)

her spirit, that I just think is really neat and I connect with.

Ellen's description of coming to know who is family, among all her friends, was somewhat like Natalie's in that it seems to reference a way of knowing that is not rational or linear:

**Ellen:** We've felt each other out, like, in the past few years, and now ... we understand who we are.

Joining with the six people who commented on this process of friends becoming family, I, too, find it hard to find the words to speak, or write about this. My task is to describe how I have taken what they said, and tried to shape it into a rudimentary understanding of how friends become family. As in so many instances in which we lack the words, I rely on metaphor. It is almost as if the process of friends becoming family is a dance among the dynamics of time, shared experience, depth of connection, constancy, and—at least for some of us—a sense of spirituality, that dimension of our lives which we have a sense of through direct experience but which is largely unknowable with our rational minds.

## **Families of Choice:**

### **Composition, Recognition, Support**

**Non-biological kin**—This is a term I have coined in the process of doing this work. I was influenced in this direction by a reference to kinfolk in a book called *The Education of Little Tree*, by Forrest Carter, which is a story based on the recollections of the author's childhood growing up with his Cherokee grandparents.

Granpa said back before his time "kinfolk" meant any folk that you understood and had an understanding with, so it meant "loved folks." (Carter, 1976, p. 38)

Once we have begun to create a family of non-biological kin, there are specific aspects of this that we may find ourselves turning our attention toward. The people I interviewed identified three corollary processes: thinking about the composition of their families of choice, gaining recognition for their families of choice, and identifying sources of support for their families of choice.

Daniel has reflected on the **composition** of his family of choice. At this point, it is mostly made up of straight women and men. He would like to have more people in his family of choice, specifically, more gay people:

**Daniel:** I want the numbers to be bigger. I want more gay people. Most of my family of choice has been straight. Not that that's a bad thing. I've got \_\_\_\_\_, I've got \_\_\_\_\_, I've got \_\_\_\_\_. They're all straight. And they're all really great. And I love them all, and they all are a part of my family. But I want some ... I want them to mix in with ... see, I've never had ... there's always been a gay part and a straight part to my life. And I want it to amalgamate now.

When Daniel and I talked about why this seemed difficult, our discussion touched on homopho-

bia, the segregation of queer culture leading to a sense of it being underground, and the problems that creates when we try to relate to an eclectic range of friends and family members. Daniel identified some elements of his dilemma that he believes have to do with gay male culture and the emphasis on sex in interactions between gay men:

In response to his first reading of this chapter, one of my committee members (a heterosexual man) questioned whether what Daniel describes here is a gay male thing, or a male thing. If, in fact, this phenomenon of the prevalence of sex in social interaction is common to all men, does it manifest differently, more intensely, in the social lives of gay men?

**TO BE EXPLORED  
FURTHER.....**

**Daniel:** Sex always prevails, with a group of gay men, when you get them together. I mean, there's always this cruising thing going on, which I can't ... I can't explain it but you can put seven couples in a room and every one of them by the end of an hour will have looked every one of them up and down and sized them up and thought about sex ... and like ... I can't ... it freaks me out! I don't know why gay men are so goddamned focused on sex all the time but it's true ... I keep thinking, is that what is always going to happen? With the gay group of friends that I have, or am I actually at some point in my life going to find a group of gay friends that are family? I don't know.

When I asked Daniel why the focus on sex seems to prevent the development of family of choice relationships among his gay male friends, he talked about the distinction between relationships that are sexual and relationships that are familial, referencing the incest taboo:

**Daniel:** Well, it's fairly similar to my family of origin. I mean, I don't think of ever having sex with any of my family of origin. Because it's taboo, within the confines and definitions of ... I think it's a carry-over of

that sensibility into your gay community and your gay family. So you choose brothers, or sisters, or (laughing) however you want to define it. You know, you choose those people based on the characteristics that you associate with those terms, and sex is not ... you know ... part of that societal definition.

What Daniel described was a source of frustration and discouragement for him: how the ever-present possibility of sex between two gay men often functions to preclude the development of other forms of intimacy.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Ruminating on this incest taboo idea that came up ... I am trying to figure out what it is about that that I buy into ... trying to imagine a group of people that I consider family, and wondering if it would be okay to have sex with each and any of them, whenever desire and circumstance and energies converge ... hard to imagine ... intriguing ... are there any concerns about this, aside from the biological ones? ... if my family is made up of non-biological kin, are there any good reasons not to be sexual with anyone in my family? ... are there other ways in which it contributes to a person's well-being to have some areas of life in which sexual interaction does not occur? ... are there any human interactions in which sexual interaction does not occur? ... is Daniel going with his gut here, or is he acting out a social script, in a social setting in which sex and procreation are not linked, eliminating the most commonly understood basis for the taboo?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel also feels that many gay men have sepa-

If heterosexual intercourse can bring people into enduring association via the creation of kinship ties, lesbian and gay sexuality in these depictions isolates individuals from one another rather than weaving them into a social fabric.

(Weston, 1991, p. 22)

rated their gay lives from their relationships with their family of origin to such an extent, that the whole notion of being part of a family is totally removed from their gay lifestyle. This is especially true if the person is still closeted, but can still be the case if they are out to their family of origin.

Another of Daniel's thoughts about what forms barriers to talking about being family with other gay men, is the emphasis on youth in the gay male culture of which he is a part. For Daniel, part of what is important to him about creating a family of choice, is the continuity of relationships in his life over time, and the desire to have a sense of connectedness with others, as he grows old. But, he says, gay men don't talk about getting old:

There is much in gay life that has tended to perpetuate a view of us as eternally young. Often we think of ourselves in that way as though we do not really deserve the prerogatives of adulthood because we have not followed the traditional path to maturity.

(Berzon, 1988, p. 313)

**Daniel:** Growing old is not something you focus on when you're in the gay community. Staying young is what you focus on. You don't talk about what it's like to grow old. You constantly talk about what you're gonna ... what you're gonna do to stay young. Once you're over forty-five, your place in the gay community changes. It's quite youth-oriented.

Daniel is still working on integrating more gay men into his family of choice. In the period of time between when I first interviewed him, and now, he has reported to me that the term 'family of choice' has moved into more common usage in the circle of gay

***Discourse Analysis:***

We might say that by talking family, we talk ourselves into its varied meanings. Our aim is to make visible the intimate connection in the realm of the familial between talk, meaning, and concrete reality.

(Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. x)

men that he is a part of, and that he has had more conversations about being family with these friends. He attributes this to the opportunity he has had, through this project, to develop a discourse about family that fits his life. I hope this is true, and that this piece of work has many more ripple effects like this one.

For Daniel, having more gay people, and gay men, specifically, in his family of choice, is the major issue when it comes to its composition. He also mentioned the importance of finding older, nurturing women—maternal figures—to be a part of this family. That has been important for me, too. In fact, I consider myself blessed with a number of extraordinary women in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, who are members of my family of choice, and who represent, for me, the possibilities of combining an openness to difference with being a source of nurturance.

For Sara and Peter, their families of choice are composite families made up of some family of origin members and some non-biological kin. For Sara, this is rooted in her family of origin. She sees herself as being part of a nuclear family with her partner and child, and it is in her extended family that she has created a family of choice:



**Sara:** I would say my extended family is my parents, my siblings ... and then, further out, my aunts and uncles and cousins. But I also include as very dear to me, a number of people that have no relation. That I would say are part of my family.

For Peter, this composite family is grounded in connections on a more spiritual level with his family of choice:

**Peter:** You know, there still is the family in the traditional sense. I still have my dad and my sister and my nieces. On a more spiritual level, I think I have family with friends, that I have had for a long period of time.

There are different ways that we put our families of choice together. Once we have a sense of being part of a family of choice, we begin to look for recognition of and support for our family.

Sara described how she, her partner, and their baby, have been accepted as a family in their neighbourhood:

They have the option of treating gay and lesbian coparents as though only the gender of individual parents has changed, while everything else about the social conditions in which childrearing occurs remains unaffected. (Weston, 1991, p. 208-209)

**Sara:** I think, for the most part, the neighbourhood has just sort of assimilated us. They all know that there are two women living here with a baby. Um ... I'm not sure how they talk about us when we're not there. But when we're around, they're asking about the baby, they're pleasant and friendly, and ... you know, they look out for us. When we're not around. If someone's been around the house, they'll come over and say ... you know, that kind of stuff. So I think they've accepted

us as part of the community.

Peter found recognition of his family of choice at his last workplace:

This kind of support can be very reinforcing to a couple's effort to maintain a stable and secure relationship. It can only help to have a partnership treated as the valid and legitimate family unit that it is. (Berzon, 1988, p. 288)

**Peter:** I was always very open there, and I think it was quite an educational process for them. They became probably one of the most supportive elements in my life, the last few years. \_\_\_\_\_ and I, as a couple, were included in whatever. Whether it was conversations at a staff meeting regarding a staff member and a significant other, whether it was an invitation to a home, or whether we were talking, in general, about relationships. And it was not just about me, the gay perspective was always included.

Natalie and Ellen had similar positive experiences of having their relationships and their sense of family recognized at their workplaces. They both attributed it, at least partly, to the fact that their work was with marginalized people, some of whom are also gay, lesbian, or bi:

**Natalie:** I mean, at work what was good was, um ... because everybody else came from far more unconventionally defined family creations than I did, um ... yeah ... there was total acknowledgment for everything that might be considered family.

Ellen experiences a tension between wanting recognition of her family of choice, in her community on the reserve, and feeling that she would like to be

able to be more private about that aspect of her life. Part of this has to do with her sense of respect for the elders in her community, and her wish not to offend them:

**Ellen:** Because I find that people, especially the older people, they'll get offended by it. Nothing's ... not that they disapprove of it. It's just that, there's a place for that?

\* \* \* \* \*

*I share this experience of tension between needing recognition and wanting privacy, although my sense of it is not informed by relationships to elders in my community as it is for Ellen, as a Mi'qmaq woman.*

By choosing gay identity we acknowledge that sexuality dominates our identity in a heterosexist world while recognizing that in a non-oppressive society no one would care who we wanted or who our sexual partners were, and sexuality would no longer be so central to our sense of who we are. (Orlando, 1991, p. 230)

*For instance, if I didn't feel so strongly that I, and others, need more space to be cleared in which to live our lives more comfortably and less afraid, I would not have chosen this thesis topic. Given the context of this moment in history when this work is necessary, I don't mind doing it, but it is a stretch for me to be so open about my sexuality. I would rather it not be necessary. In a more just world, I would share my family experiences, my choices in intimate relationships, and the process of my healing, only with my family of choice.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Recognition of our families of choice is closely linked to *support* for our families. Often this recognition and support comes more easily from our colleagues at work, our neighbours, our community, than it does from our family of origin. I have chosen to ad-

The basic queer-hating of their [the children's] society and peers has, so far, been easier to deal with than the silence or illegitimacy placed on us by their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and their father. (Roberts, 1987, p. 150)

dress the whole issue of recognition and support from our families of origin in the next chapter, which will look at what happens when our families of choice and our families of origin meet.

There are other important sources of support for our families of choice that were identified by the six people I interviewed. What follows are their descriptions of where their support for being a non-traditional family comes from, in their own words:

**Sara:** My support for being a non-traditional family comes from the community I created because I needed that support. And then, secondly, from my family of origin that came around in the end. And I am inspired by the one young man I know who grew up with a lesbian mom. I think he's got to be one of the most sensitive, caring, thoughtful, incredible, thinking young men I've ever met. I think \_\_\_\_\_'s done a great job.

**Luke:** There's a couple of different spheres of support. The first one is internal. I took my time, and for me it was a crisis period, when I had to face a lot of things about myself. I said, okay, I got to look at who I am, and I took the time to really look at it. And now, I know this is who I am, especially when someone in the community will say, oh, in a few years, you'll be fully gay. It's like ... no. I know where I'm at with that.

The other source of support is being with people who are non-traditional, being with people where that connection develops of being open and honest. And I find, through experience, that it is usually people who have gone through a similar crisis in their lives, even if it didn't have to do with their sexuality.

**Natalie:** I was lucky enough to go on a HIV+ women's retreat where I quickly learned the value of living each day for real. That was what really kicked me in the ass

to change and go against the grain and be me.

**Ellen:** For me, it would be some of the people in my community that are either gay or lesbian. There's another woman ... she has a few daughters. And I consider her, you know, just like being a sister. And her family has ... her daughters, like, have gone through the same thing my daughter has. And her daughters, I think, helped my daughter out a lot.

Although the seven of us have found support in different places, we all agreed on the importance of having our families of choice recognized and supported by others outside that family circle.

When our families of origin are not willing or able to recognize or support our chosen families, the significance of those family of origin relationships gets called into question. For some of us, the relationships we have with these people move further and further away from what we believe, as adults, family is about. This is a process that happens, usually, with a mix of emotions—pain, anger, grief, resignation, and tenacious self-love.

Relationships that cease to be trusting and giving raise the question of whether they should any longer be referred to in familial terms. (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. 14)

### **How Family Become Not Family**

For some of us, creating a family of choice involves changes in our relationships with people in our family of origin. As we learn through experience about

what we need in the way of safety and support, a sense of connection with others, and room to be ourselves, the myth that we will find these things in our families of origin takes some serious blows.

Once again, it is very difficult to identify what actually goes on in the process of family becoming not family anymore; there are no words for these changes. In an attempt to represent some of the thinking about this that came up in the interviews, I have chosen to excerpt one of my interviews with Luke, in which he talks about the extended family that still revolves around his abusive grandfather:

**Luke:** With the family I don't consider family—the relatives ... uh ... I look at them in a totally different way. The only thing we share is biological. And even that, I've tried to minimize as much as possible.

**Andrea:** How do you do that?

**Luke:** Well, I ... I think through just emphasizing the differences.

**Andrea:** Mmhm? Sort of ... creating some distance, where there might be some assumptions of closeness?

**Luke:** Yes. I purposely do that. For the extended family, it's just like, they're not very straightforward. I constantly see game-playing going around, doing things for ulterior motives.

**Andrea:** So you just don't open yourself to that?

**Luke:** I don't even talk to them, really. In fact, with some of them, even though they're not in fact dead, I

look at them as being dead.

**Andrea:** Is that like a kind of emotional death, to you?

**Luke:** Exactly. Because what I maybe envisioned or thought, about the kind of people they were ... when I was young ... has died. So ... for me ... they are dead. But I don't dwell on that, that much, because, it's like, they're there and I'm here. I'm more concerned about the people that I really care about, that I am only beginning to consider as family.

From Luke's story, from the stories of some of the others I interviewed, from my own experience, and from the experiences others have shared with me outside of this project, I have identified a number of dynamics in the process of family becoming not family. I use the term "dynamics" instead of "stages" because I know that, like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief, the different parts of the process may not be experienced in the same chronological order for everybody. It seems likely, though, that each person that finds themselves deconstructing their sense of family with their families of origin, experiences some or all of these things: recognizing the superficiality of the relationship, minimizing the connection, creating interactional distance between self and family of origin, allowing the significance of the differences, letting the person go which can be like experiencing a kind of emotional death in one's family, and creating

geographical distance.

The impetus to move into and through these deconstructive modes varies among people and contexts. Realizing that our relationships with people in our family of origin are superficial is one impetus. Daniel has never talked about his personal or social life, or relationships, with his father:

**Daniel:** My father and I don't discuss relationships. We never have. I've never once had any conversations about women with him, in my life. It's 100% absent from our interaction.

Even if they know a person is gay, relatives and acquaintances can fabricate a very loud silence by avoiding the type of "personal" questions they routinely direct to everyone else. (Weston, 1991, p. 68)

When Natalie came out as bi to her family, her sister was convinced that she was doing it just to get attention. And many of us experience, after coming out, a silence about us in our families of origin that is more intense than being closeted was. These experiences contribute to our sense of the superficiality of these relationships.

At one point, Natalie found herself reflecting on who her family and friends were, and trying to make more conscious choices about which relationships she would focus on:

**Natalie:** I've done a lot of sitting down and contemplating why certain people are in my life. And some I cut out, because they weren't helpful. They made life more difficult. And then, I think I've added on, or



refocused on others. Because it's not a right to ... be part of my family. It's something that people, um ... get because of who they are, or what they're doing, or because of some sort of effort. And before, I just thought it was ... a right or something? Like, you're part of my family so I guess I just have to take all of this and that is just part of the deal, too. Whereas now, I just ... I have no problem writing people off, if you don't uphold a certain code of behaviour.

The code of behaviour that Natalie was referring to is not overly demanding, but simply this: in order for me to consider you family, you must not behave toward me in any abusive or harmful way. Unfortunately, for many of us, the people in our families of origin do not meet this requirement.

The disparity we sometimes feel between what we hope for in our families of origin, and what we actually experience, leads some of us to this process of refocusing mentioned by Natalie. It is as if a shift takes place and we are no longer placing the same degree of hope in the possibilities of real and meaningful relationships within our families of origin that we once did.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I am remembering a tender moment with my father when I was sixteen. I was telling him about a school ski trip I had been on. I had spent the night with a guy I went to school with; a wonderful intimate experience that did not include sexual intercourse. My dad was able to recognize and respect this experience, which was certainly precious to me. And he used the opportunity to let me*

Entering into agreements to cloak your sexual orientation and your primary relationship in secrecy is to reinforce the notion that being gay or lesbian [or bi] is something to hide. (Berzon, 1998, p. 289)

It does get a bit unreal, hearing about everyone else's life and never talking about, or being asked about, your own, as though you had no personal life. (Berzon, 1988, p. 296)

*know that if I was having sex and got pregnant, that I should know that I could always go to him, and he would be there for me. It was one of the only conversations I ever had with my dad about anything to do with relationships.*

*This may not be unusual, given the way gender role socialization plays itself out in parenting. The thing is, I've had even fewer conversations about relationships with my mother.*

*It makes me very sad that my parents have never known about any of the excitement, or joy, or hard times that I have had in any of my relationships with women. I have been involved with some marvellous women over the years, all of whom are completely unknown to my parents. I have found other people to talk to about these things, but the total absence of this part of my life in my relationships with them has had consequences: it has made a major part of who I am invisible to my parents and 64 created a distortion of me that leads me to discount my relationships with them.*

*If I am not able to be fully there, how can these relationships be important to me?*

\* \* \* \* \*

As we learn what is and isn't possible in our relationships with our families of origin, our expectations change. This change in expectations re-positions our family of origin relationships in the constellation of relationships in our lives.

Creating our families of choice is a process that involves friends becoming family, figuring out who we

While dominant cultural representations have asserted that straight is to gay as family is to no family, at a certain point in history, gay people began to contend that straight is to gay as blood [or adoptive] family is to chosen families. (Weston, 1991, p. 29)

need to be part of our family, gaining recognition and support for our family, and, sometimes, renegotiating the degree of importance our family of origin relationships have in our lives. Somewhere along the way in this process, there is a shift from our families of origin being the reference point for our understanding of what family is, to our families of choice becoming that reference point.

### **Shift to Family of Choice as Reference Point for Defining Family**

How easily some of us fall back into the suppliant child's role with our parents. How important it is to remind ourselves and them, that we now have the power to design our interactions with them according to our adult needs as well as their parental wishes. (Berzon, 1988, p. 311)

**Natalie:** When I said to my mother, listen, this is your problem. You have to deal with it, and if you can't, that's fine ... there was a real switch in my gears on who I would consider family.

With the exception of Ellen, whose groundedness in her family extending into her Mi'qmaq community seems not to have been shaken by the process of coming out and creating a family of choice, all of us have experienced a shift to experiencing our families of choice as more central in our lives than our families of origin. This shift seems to be the result of accumulated disappointment in the superficial or unreal quality of our relationships with members of our family of origin, combined with a sense of being more

at home with the people we choose to be part of our family of choice.

As we come to terms with the limitations on what we can share with our family of origin, we are propelled into other areas of our lives in a search for deep and meaningful connections with others. Daniel mentioned experiences with a woman friend of his mother's generation, who has redefined for him what a mother could be, and with another woman friend who has given him something to aspire to in his relationships with his biological sisters:

How we relate to our families [of origin] ... how they relate to us, can make the difference between a gay or lesbian identity spoiled by guilt and self-denial or one enhanced by love and understanding. (Berzon, 1988, p. 285-286)

**Daniel:** Spending that time with her on that canoe trip was the most spiritual experience I've ever had in my whole life. And that's an example of what I would like to have with family. I'm able to have it with my family of choice, but I haven't had it with my family of origin. I dream about doing the same trip with my two sisters.

We have the special needs of creating a family where we are building common history, incorporating the old, adding to the rituals, and allowing a place for their mom and her partner to be lesbians. (Roberts, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1987, p. 150)

One of the vehicles for the shift from family of origin as reference point for defining family, to family of choice as reference point, is family ritual. Sara talked about the first Thanksgiving she spent with her partner instead of going home for the big dinner:

**Sara:** The second year \_\_\_\_\_ and I were together, Mom called and invited me for Thanksgiving. And ... I said, no, \_\_\_\_\_ and I were having Thanksgiving together. And she was quite surprised and shocked and, what do you mean you're not coming home for Thanksgiving? And, well, \_\_\_\_\_ and I are spending it together.

And that was one of the first times that I shifted from my family of origin to creating my own family and doing my own family rituals.

Peter talked about how, when his mother died, it was just as important to him to be with his loved ones, as it was to be with other members of his family of origin. This was an indication to him that a shift had taken place:

**Peter:** I have very good friends who have been friends for twenty-eight years, who were with me when my mother died. Who ... it was just as important for me to be with them, as it was my sister, my nieces, and my cousins. And I didn't ask them to come and be with me at the hospital. They were there. They appeared. Do you know what I mean? And, afterwards, in reflecting, and understanding what happened during that three day period ... I have ... I have created another family. I'm part of another family.

From the starting point of dissatisfaction with our family of origin relationships, through many experiences, including powerfully meaningful connections with non-biological kin, creating family rituals with our families of choice, having our families of choice by our side in times of crisis and loss ... our families of choice come to define what family is.

**Daniel:** I guess what's happened is the friends I call family now are actually ... they're the *real* definition, for me now, of what I should have had with my family a lot earlier.

When cast in narrative form, the shift from the identification of gayness with the renunciation of kinship (no family) to a correspondence between gay identity and a particular type of family (families we choose) presents a kind of collective coming-out story: a tale of lesbians and gay men moving out of isolation and into kinship. (Weston, 1988, p. 212)

***Discourse Analysis:***

**"...the friends I call family now..."**

Family discourse is not just a mode of communication but also assigns meaning to the actions we take on behalf of social ties designated familial ... When we speak of our friends as "family," we not only publicly announce what they mean to us and each other, but also simultaneously designate their interpersonal rights and obligations. (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. 14)

Even when we are situated in more healthy relationships with our families of choice, our families of origin are still there. They may not be as central in our lives, but the relationships we have with our parents, siblings, and other relatives are always a part of our lives. What happens when our families of choice and our families of origin intersect? I will explore this in the next chapter.

## **FAMILY OF CHOICE MEETS FAMILY OF ORIGIN**

The six people I interviewed said some interesting things about what happens when their families of choice meet their families of origin. In pulling their reflections on this together, I have found that they illuminate the following areas: the potential for growth and transformation in the family of origin, the function of family ritual, illness in the family of choice, the importance of maintaining equilibrium in the face of unpredictability, and barriers to the integration of family of origin and family of choice.

### **The Potential for Growth in the Family of Origin**

**Sara:** \_\_\_\_\_ was getting excited and she wanted to tell her mother about us being pregnant, and it was right around Mother's Day. So she called her mother and just, sort of ... blurted it out. And her mother's reaction was, well, what are we going to tell the grandchildren? The other grandchildren. And how did this happen? And concerns about family. And how it would affect them, and how they would represent the baby to their friends and family, etcetera. So, that was a little bit of a letdown. \_\_\_\_\_ was disappointed and cried a little bit afterwards, but her parents have since come around a lot, too, and they do consider \_\_\_\_\_ their grandchild. And they have her picture up on the mantle with all the other children and we didn't think they would, because then it would mean explaining to people who she was. They sort of came around. Her mother even came all the way down here for a baby shower. Which was a big deal for her mother, because

When a celebration brought chosen relatives into contact with biological or adoptive kin, family occasions sometimes became a bridge to greater integration of straight and gay families. (Weston, 1991, p. 33)

Opinion among both gays and heterosexuals remains divided as to whether lesbians and gay couples stay together as long as heterosexual partners. If, however, the question is reformulated to take account of contemporary discourse on gay families, which allow a former partner to make the transition from (erotic) lover to (nonerotic) friend without alienating the kinship tie, one could make a good case that gay relationships endure longer on average than ties established through heterosexual marriage. If two people cease being lovers after six years but remain friends and family for another forty, they have indeed achieved a relationship on long standing. (Weston, 1991, p. 196)

her mother is one of those women who really don't go anywhere unless her husband takes her. So coming here, from rural New Brunswick, all by herself on the train, was quite a big thing for her. And I think \_\_\_\_\_ was really pleased that she came.

Three of the seven of us have stories like this one, that speak of the transformative potential for the family of origin, in the experience of being exposed to—or choosing to make direct contact with—their queer daughter's or son's family of choice. Sometimes grandchildren are the meeting place of a sense of connection that is shared by parents and grandparents, linking the parent's family of choice and family origin.

\* \* \* \* \*

*An ex of mine from about ten years ago, with whom I enjoy sort of an extended family relationship, dropped in unexpectedly the other day, having heard that my Dad is sick and that I am going there to visit. We are like cousins who get together every once and a while and share stories about how everybody is doing. Births, illness, and deaths in either one of our families or circle of mutual friends warrant a phone-call or even a visit. This time we both had major family events to talk about. After I told her about what was going on with Dad, she told me about the visit of her niece.*

*The little one is three years old now, the child of her gay brother and one of his lesbian friends. The mother and her partner, along with my friend's brother, co-parent. They all live in another province. Right now, the two*



Because insemination highlights physical procreation, it subsumes notions of biology under the organizing metaphors of choice and creation that have defined gay kinship in opposition to blood family. Such incorporations represent not contradictions, but rather the interplay between any two terms that define an ideological contrast through difference. (Weston, 1991, p. 188)

*lesbian moms and the little girl are here for a visit. They already know my friend, from her visits to where they live. But on this visit, mothers and child are going to the rural Nova Scotia town to meet the extended family. My friend is unable to go with them, because of her work schedule, but she tells me that her parents and numerous siblings all know about this non-traditional family, and are excited about meeting the little girl.*

*She and I talk about this with amazement and joy. I remember what a huge deal it was for her to come out as a lesbian in this family. And now they are welcoming her gay brother's child into the clan, and, in some way, the child's lesbian parents. The little one looks a lot like her dad; my friend and I both want to be flies on the wall, when her grandparents look at her, and see him—and her—looking back.*

\* \* \* \* \*

This integration of family of origin and family of choice can also occur when the children are not biologically related. Ellen's parents consider her partner's three daughters as their grandchildren:

**Ellen:** When I told my mom and my dad about our relationship, my dad welcomed her and her kids into the family. And my parents see them as their grandchildren.

For some of our family of origin members, relating to an individual or a couple who are not heterosexual really throws them off; their lack of experience with anything but the heterosexist framework in which

they live leaves them not knowing what to do or say. But most people have a way of relating to children, whether they are generally fond of them or not. Having children is familiar (read family-er) enough to provide them with a way to engage in conversation, which is often the lubricant in social interaction. There is a powerful taboo against being mean to children, although we know it is violated far too often. Still, for many people, being kind to a child can soften their resistance and open them up to the possibility of accepting the child's parents.

My experience is that straight women clearly feel that my choice to have a child *balances* my choice to be a lesbian and makes me more normal, easier to understand, less of a challenge to their lives. (Polikoff, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1987, p. 53)

Looking at this from another angle, some family of origin members see their queer family member in their role as parent and caregiver for the child—a socially acceptable role—and find their homophobia challenged. Bi, lesbian, and gay people who are good parents. How does that fit into an overall condemnation of queers?

One of the things many of us value about our experience of family is feeling a sense of connection to others that crosses and links generations. I think again of the little girl born into my ex's large extended family. There can be no mistaking it when they look at her: she is one of them. Whatever their feelings of discomfort with their son's sexuality might be, they will experience a connection with her. These contradic-

You have a crisis when your idea of what the world is doesn't fit what it actually is... You're not sure of anything. ("Denny", in Griffin et al., 1986, p. 123-24)

As we learned to understand and accept our children, we learned a lot about understanding and accepting ourselves. (a mother, in Griffin et al., 1986, p. 139)

I've learned a lot from this. Having a gay brother opened my mind to other people ... I'm more tolerant. ("Jane", in Griffin et al., 1986, p. 126)

Because positive responses to coming out reaffirmed a kinship at least momentarily threatened, they quietly imported choice into the notion of blood family. (Weston, 1991, p. 73)

tions can begin to form cracks in the heteronormative framework within which the family of origin member lives.

When there is openness, this experience of difference can bring learning and growth for members of the family of origin. Daniel talked about how his younger sister was intrigued by a woman friend who is part of his family of choice:

**Daniel:** My sister sees \_\_\_\_\_ as an alternative person. Someone who doesn't conform. Not shaving her legs, not shaving her armpits. Not covering her grey hair, at an early age. All of those things that my sister, as a woman, is very concerned about. She's very concerned about her appearance. If she had grey hair at her age, she'd be colouring it ... And I think she found it almost a relief that she could see someone who doesn't conform, as still being pretty, as still being womanly. I think she would like to learn a lot from \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_'s given her food for thought. And it's obviously being thought about.

In order for this to happen, there has to be some openness on the part of the family of origin member:

**Daniel:** \_\_\_\_\_ just has a better capacity to learn, and to experience, and to be non-judgmental. Whereas my other sister doesn't share those traits.

Members of Sara's family of origin began with a degree of openness, which they have developed over time, and this has enabled their capacity to em-

brace her and her family of choice to grow as well. Sara recalls what happened when she asked for her sister's support when coming out to their parents, and juxtaposes this with the relationship she has with her now:

**Sara:** She had no point of reference with which to compare what I had told her. She wasn't as supportive as I had hoped, and she really did try. But I knew that she didn't approve. I mean, it was obvious, and it was ... there was nothing she could have done to change that. That was just her reaction. And that has since changed. I mean, she's one of my best friends, now.

If our families of origin are going to be transformed into families that can embrace and include our families of choice, they must come to accept the way we define family for ourselves. Peter, whose father had threatened to cut his head off with an axe when he first heard that Peter had been having sex with other boys, experienced this:

**Peter:** I had a family reunion at my home, and at one point, my father made a speech. When he referred to \_\_\_\_\_ and I, he referred to \_\_\_\_\_ as my partner, and he said, you know, this is the first time I've been in your home, and you know, \_\_\_\_\_ seems like such a wonderful man and I'm so glad that you are so happy together, and welcome to the family, and all that stuff. That was a biggy for my Dad. Especially to say that in front of all the family, you know, like my mom, my nieces.

Because the relationship of lovers, like marriage, brings together two individuals united by the symbolism of sex and love, many in the United States have drawn analogies between this bond and more customary affinal arrangements. Relatives and judges alike perceive the option of treating gay or lesbian lovers as they would a childless heterosexual couple: as an exceptional relationship in a procreative world. (Weston, 1991, p. 208-209)

Ellen and Sara have also had experiences like this, in which their family of origin clearly accepts their definition of who family is, to them. At Luke's wedding, he and his partner chose one of his close woman friends to be the "best man". His parents are fond of this friend, and had no difficulty accepting the role she was chosen to play in the wedding. For Luke, Natalie, and Daniel, many of the challenges that go along with the meeting of family of choice and family of origin are still to come. They are in their twenties and are just beginning to consciously create family of choice. Daniel envisions his mother being able to connect with his gay family, although he can't see his father as being able to do this:

**Daniel:** See, I have it in my head. I see it. I play the movie in my head, about what it will be like when she knows. I can see my mother meeting my gay friends and thinking these are really great people. I see her with the capacity to love and the capacity to understand and the capacity to grow ... that I don't see with my father. But I only see it for her when he's not in the picture. When he's not controlling the whole show.

Differences in the potential openness and ability to be accepting that we see in different members of our families of origin, adds complexity to the process of making connections between our family of origin and our family of choice. Even with the sense that his

mother could come to appreciate his family of choice members, Daniel's expectations of his family of origin as a whole are grounded in his sense of how conservative they are:

I believe that self-determination is especially important when it comes to the role we allow our families to play in our same-sex relationships. (Berzon, 1988, p. 286)

**Daniel:** If I am fortunate enough to find a lifetime partner or partners, that make up a lifetime, they [his family] would have to have the capacity to take them into the fold, and to see them as important people in my life and to appreciate them for the reasons that I appreciate and love them. That's important. There's going to have to be validity given to the type of love I feel. They're going to have to appreciate it for the love that's there. As a universal love, not as one that different because it's a gay love. And that's why I'm not so ... I'm a little skeptical on their ability to do that right now. I mean, you know, these are the type of people who, you know, Chinese food is a big integration for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

*As I write this section, I am struck by how I do not feel a part of it. I want to try to figure out why.*

*It has taken me so long to sort through my relationships with my family of origin. I have felt alienated from my parents for as long as I can remember, and yet it was only a few months ago that I spoke the truth with them about this, finally clearing away illusory hopes about my connection with them. My two brothers and I have been isolated from each other in our efforts to make sense of our experience of them, but this has begun to change, again just in the past few months. And then I have had the somewhat baffling experience of being closer to my father's siblings than to either of my parents.*

Your potential for loving experience need not be limited by what has happened between you and them [your parents]. (Berzon, 1988, p. 294)

*It occurs to me, now, that my preoccupation with this confusion—whether it has been conscious or unconscious—has prevented me from consciously creating a family of choice. I have been very aware of the lack of family in my life, and my longing for it, but it is only in the process of doing this work that I am claiming the psychic space and autonomy I need to be able to begin to address this need in myself.*

*So the question of family of choice meeting family of origin is not one I have yet encountered in my own life. Even though I have been out to my parents for years, my life with woman partners, indeed, my life, in general, has been almost completely invisible to them. That is the way they wanted it, and I accommodated them. Doing this piece of work is my way of grounding and transforming myself, so I can begin to do what I need to do to meet my own needs around family.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Family Ritual as a Vehicle for Integration**

For those who have experienced meetings between family of choice and family of origin, family ritual has often been what has brought these two parts of their lives together.

Before examining some concrete examples of how family ritual has worked for some people as a vehicle that moves their experiences of family toward integration, it is necessary to clarify that we all have

Because of the significance to family life, ritual has a role in the assessment of families. (Francis, 1996, p. 16)

different experiences of family ritual, and its function in our lives.

Only one of the seven of us whose stories are included in this study describes a lack of family ritual in his family of origin. Luke's parents were both quite preoccupied with distancing themselves from their families of origin; their rebellion against the family ritual of those families seems to have spilled over into a rejection of the whole idea of family ritual:

**Luke:** The ritual part ... I really like having rituals, and there's been times, uh, which I'll say are painful, when \_\_\_\_\_'s family has asked me, well, what did you do at Christmastime, or something like that. And the lack of stuff sort of disturbs me ... And you feel like you should have this stuff to say, but the few things that you do remember when there was ritual, it was ... not ritual for ritual's sake but for power plays, in the extended family. Which I don't talk to now. So, um ... it's a ... I look at it as a dynamic that's growing.

Natalie remembers family rituals in her family of origin at home, in much the same way as Luke does:

**Natalie:** Rituals? Well, like I said, with my mom's family, we always did Easter and Christmas, and, you know, every ... the mandatory holidays. Um, which were ... I mean, always disasters. Every single one of them, in some shape or form, ended up in some form of chaos. My mother had a really crappy relationship with her parents. So, a lot of what she did was to show off to them that, you know, she was okay. So these dinners were humongously elaborate things. To make a point. And my mom's sister would have to take nerve

The literature also explains ritual's role as a "window" into a family's life for the therapist or researcher, allowing access to the interior qualities of family life and the family identity. (Francis, 1996, p. 135)



pills to show up, because she was so uncomfortable with the grandparents, as well, And the two younger brothers would go out into the garage and get stoned because that was the only thing they could do to be there.

Natalie's experiences of family ritual with her extended family in Europe was completely different, however:

**Natalie:** With them, there was a ritual for almost everything. Everyone would troop off to my grandfather's gravesite every Sunday, and bring flowers, and make sure it was all cleaned up nicely. They did a lot of stuff together, even if it wasn't as a full group. They ritualized almost anything, kind of stuff. You know, they'd get together ... coffee and cake was the big thing. Everyone did coffee and cake every Saturday, just ... for no apparent reason. Just to do it.

The research consistently demonstrates that ritual is symbolically significant; that is, it has meaning attached to it, and this meaning reflects what the family believes about themselves as a family.  
(Francis, 1996, p. 21)

So Natalie experienced the difference between family ritual that was meaningful and spontaneous, and family ritual that was all form and no substance.

\* \* \* \* \*

*My own experience of family ritual was a mix of these two extremes. I remember enjoying the big dinners with the extended family—those were often the only times during the year that we saw our cousins. But, as I got older, the hypocrisy of these occasions made them more and more distasteful to me. There was so much brokenness in our own family, so much fear and hostility, that these family occasions began to feel pretty hollow. As an adult, I have not yet created any family rituals of my own. I think that may become more important to me when I have a child.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel, Sara, Peter, and Ellen all have positive memories of their experiences of family ritual with their families of origin:

**Peter:** In our family, there was a celebration for everything. There was a celebration for birthdays, there was, you know, Christmas was the big time of year. Um ... and the end of school was, you know, something special would be done. There'd be, you know, a special gift bought. There was a lot of recognition for accomplishments ... My mother was this stunningly beautiful woman who loved to entertain. A lot of that changed when she left my father, but I have good memories of wonderful parties, having people over, when she was still at home.

Their family's sense of self was well-established, and ritual gave them the opportunity to confirm this identity with one another time and time again. (Francis, 1996, p. 139)

**Sara:** Well, we always did the big Christmas thing with the tree ... and when we were younger, we always went to all the families to visit their tree and see what everybody got and they'd haul the presents out. So we did that. And we did birthday things. It was always supper. We had to wait all day long 'til supper and we'd have ... whoever ... whatever the special supper was ... my favorite supper was whatever, that's what it would be. And a cake and couldn't open the present until after supper was eaten and we'd cut the cake. And every Labour Day weekend, we'd have a big gathering down at the cottage, and all the extended family would go and there was a big pot-luck supper on Saturday night, and all day Saturday they had games like scavenger hunts and candy scrambles and stuff like that.

Rituals represent what the family sees about itself and wants to continue; rituals survive when they represent the enduring attitudes, philosophies, and goals of the whole family group. (Francis, 1996, p. 14)

**Ellen:** Growing up, I know that we always had these big conversations at suppertime. All the kids would be there. And, it's so funny because, everybody always used to eat so fast. And we'd be teasing each other, because, well, most times, all of us couldn't sit at the

table, but when we did, it was a lot of laughter around the supper table ... And even like, when we were kids, going out and picking blueberries. I don't know why I remember blueberries. And those were even outings in themselves, being with my mom.

**Daniel:** We had evening dinner—we called it supper—but the evening meal, we had together six nights of the week, at least, if not seven. And I thank god for it, every day of my life. Because I think it was the most, one of the most important things we ever did as a family. And I feel really bad for people who don't know what that feels like.

Family ritual can serve as symbolic of who family is, a language of gesture. For Daniel, the tension he has begun to feel between the expectation that he will go home for Christmas and Thanksgiving, and his desire to spend these special occasions with his family of choice, has highlighted for him the shift in his experience of family:

**Daniel:** I would love to develop some family rituals with my chosen family, but I haven't been able to because I've been so concerned with keeping the traditions that I've had with my own family. Christmas is a big deal. And \_\_\_\_\_ and I talked about it this year. I would really like, next year, not to go home for Christmas. But that will be such a trauma for my mom. You know? Easter. Now, I'm not going home this Easter. This could be the first ... it might be the second Easter I've not made it home. Every major religious ceremony that goes with our church is a major, major, family tradition.

Daniel foresees that as his family of choice continues to become more central in his life, he will be spending those traditional holidays with them and not with his family of origin.

The first Thanksgiving that Sara spent with her partner sent a clear message to her mother, who was very surprised that she would not be coming to their family dinner, even though the two women had been living together for two years:

Time together as a family fosters a feeling of belonging because it encourages the development of a sense of identity, a sense of "who we are as a family." (Francis, 1996, p. 109)

**Sara:** The second year that \_\_\_\_\_ and I were together, Mom called and invited me for Thanksgiving. And I said, no, \_\_\_\_\_ and I were having Thanksgiving together. And she was quite surprised and shocked and, what do you mean you're not coming home for Thanksgiving? And, well, \_\_\_\_\_ and I are spending it together. And I think that was the ... one of the first times that I shifted from my family of origin to creating my own family and doing my own family rituals.

Peter has had similar experiences in making this shift:

**Peter:** When I went back to my home town, there would be no talk of \_\_\_\_\_ unless I brought him up. Whether it be my father's birthday party, or my mother, who threw one for herself, too, when she turned seventy-five. You know, and they would make plans and, you know, other people would be mentioned. Like, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ will be here. And \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ will be here. And so and so will be here. And Peter will be here. Do you know what I mean? And so after a while I said, it's not Peter, it's Peter and \_\_\_\_\_. And if you're uncomfortable with that, then you let me know,

How our families behave toward our gay or lesbian lover can make the difference between a partnership enriched by family ties and the continuity of shared lives and one that suffers tension and strain when anything concerning family comes up. (Berzon, 1988, p. 286)

The key to adaptability seems to be the ability to incorporate change into rituals without losing their value or meaning. (Francis, 1996, p. 18)

because I'll have to tell you to go sort that out and then come back to me. And that went on for a while. And then we started receiving cards. To Peter and \_\_\_\_\_. You know? Or when it was \_\_\_\_\_'s birthday, cards came from my family, to him. And not just because it was something that the both of us were sharing. He was being acknowledged for himself.

Sara's family of origin have grown to be able to include the close friends that she includes in her family of choice, in some of their family rituals. In fact, the inclusion of those friends that are family in special occasions that she celebrates with her family of origin, is one of the things that distinguishes those friends from other close friends, and part of how they come to be defined as family:

**Sara:** My mom had a baby shower for us, and those people were invited to the shower. Along with aunts and cousins and relatives. \_\_\_\_\_ was invited, and \_\_\_\_\_ was invited. That's one of the differences between those family-type close friends, and other friends.

These gestures communicate her mother's recognition of her family of choice and are precious to Sara, but achieving this was hard, requiring courage, stamina, and perseverance on her part:

**Sara:** The first Christmas I didn't go home ... I think that was hard for my parents. The next year they called and invited the both of us. For Thanksgiving dinner. And we both went. And the same thing for Christmas.

Descriptively speaking, the categories of gay kinship might better be labeled families we struggle to create, struggle to choose, struggle to legitimate, and—in the case of blood or adoptive family—struggle to keep. (Weston, 1991, p. 212)

They invited us both and we both went. I think that was an important shift. For me. That first year that I said, no, I'm not coming home for Christmas, my mom called me half a dozen times: well, are you coming home for Christmas? No, Mom, no. I'm still not coming. And she'd call me the next day: well, on Thanksgiving, we're going to have ... uh, Mom, I'm not coming. And she called half a dozen times. I think it was hard for her. And it was hard for me. It was, uh ... part, you know, standing up and saying, this is a legitimate family for me. And, if you don't recognize it, I'm not coming. You know? It was hard to do.

Family ritual provides the person who is creating a non-traditional family with a concrete means to demonstrate to their family of origin their commitment to members of their family of choice. Conversely, it provides members of their family of origin with an opportunity to express their openness and willingness to include the family of choice into the extended family of the family of origin. For those who have had positive experiences of this, family ritual has been a vehicle for the integration of family in their lives. Unfortunately, there are many of us for whom this is not the case.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I listened to Sara, Peter, and Ellen tell these stories of the ability of their families to stretch to include their partners and other members of their family of choice. I was fascinated and—I must admit—a bit envious.*

*In my case, members of my family of origin aren't even on speaking terms with each*

*other, let alone in the habit of sharing family rituals together. So there is nothing to integrate a family of choice into ...*

*For me, family of choice meeting family of origin is happening in baby steps. Like last night, when I came out to my brother and sister-in-law, and was telling them about my plans to have a child. I talked about the person I am trying to get pregnant with, using his first name, and my sister-in-law asked what his last name was. That was pretty exciting for me. Everything is relative (no pun intended), so I choose to recognize the signs of openness and celebrate them, however small. We all have to start where we are.*

\* \* \* \* \*

A father, talking about his son:

He and all the other gay and lesbian children have a right to be here as they are. They can help us expand our lives by widening the range of differences that we can embrace and enjoy. ("Jack," in Griffin et al., 1986, p. 154)

Sometimes, partners become integrated into their partner's family of origin and extended family, and they remain a part of the family even if their relationship with the family member ends. Ellen spoke about this; that even if they break up, her partner and her partner's children will always be family to Ellen's family. My own experience bears this out: there are a number of homes and families I will always be welcome in, though my involvement with the person who came from that family is long over.

### **Illness in the Family of Choice**

Another example can be found of the family of origin recognizing and acting inclusively toward the

family of choice, in Peter's story. Peter knew his partner had AIDS when they met. Because of his uncertainty about how his family would deal with this, Peter did not tell his family about his partner's condition until a couple of years later:

**Peter:** I had wanted a relationship with this man. I wasn't going into it blindfolded. We made the commitment that we're going to be together. It was a couple of years after that that I decided to tell my family. Our friends knew immediately. But I wasn't sure how my family was going to accept it. I knew my sister would be wonderful. I thought my mother would be very accepting. Uh ... with my dad, it was difficult. So it was a couple of years ago ... as my partner became more and more sick, I felt the need for my family to know. Because I was looking for as much support as I could get, as well. Uh ... my dad was very good, very wonderful, very concerned. And I remember having a conversation with him and then just leaving it at that ... And, you know, my dad will call on a regular basis and want to know, how is the boy? You know, he refers to \_\_\_\_\_ as 'the boy'. And I'll say, well, Dad, he's not a boy, he's a man, but my dad's eighty-three years old ...

Accepting that his partner had AIDS, and responding to that in a supportive way, led to another way in which Peter's dad expressed acceptance of and support for him:

**Peter:** It was only about six months ago that my dad called and he said, so, Peter, how are you? And I said, I'm good, Dad, how are you doing? He said, I'm doing good, but how are you? And I couldn't, I didn't know

Situated historically in a period of discourse on lesbian and gay kinship, AIDS has served as an impetus to establish and expand gay families. In certain cases, blood relations joined with gay friends and relatives to assist the chronically ill or dying. (Weston, 1991, p. 183).



What these mixed responses by blood relatives indicate is that the birthing and the raising ... the coming out and the dying, have become arenas of contention in which discourse on gay kinship is formulated even as transformations of kinship ideologies are hammered out. (Weston, 1991, p. 188)

where he was coming from, and I said, good. He knew that I was going through a difficult time with Mom and \_\_\_\_\_, you know, trying to be caretaker for both. And he said, are you ill? Because the word back home is that you're dying of AIDS. And I just realized that I had never told him that, you know, I was negative. And I said, I'm so sorry, you know, I should have told you that, you know, that when I told you that \_\_\_\_\_ had AIDS, that I was ... I'm healthy. And he said, I just want you to know that it wouldn't make any difference to me at all. You're always my son. We are always here for you. There is always a home for you to come to, there is always this, that, and the other thing. I mean, that's the other side of my father. That's why, all my life, it's been so confusing.

### **Maintaining Equilibrium**

The confusion that Peter speaks of is very difficult to deal with. In my experience, it is impossible to trust any of the hopeful signs of recognition or acceptance, because such trusting leaves me very vulnerable when the next homophobic or condemning comment comes. Peter and I explored this in one of his interviews, which I excerpt here:

**Andrea:** I know what you mean about the confusion. There are these moments that are just profound ... and then there's all this bullshit.

**Peter:** Totally. Total bullshit.

**Andrea:** That makes it so difficult to deal with. It creates so much work throughout our lives as adults, to sort through. It affects the way we relate to people.

We lull ourselves into thinking it doesn't matter, or it will work itself out, or it's already worked out. Then, we are taken by surprise when suddenly it matters so much, or we are overwhelmed by a feeling of isolation from people we love, or we realize that it isn't worked out at all, that we've just begun what we thought we were almost finished with. (Berzon, 1988, p. 285)

We, too, need the stability and tranquility that enables us to compose a life of meaningful activity from a home base that is secure. (Berzon, 1988, p. 7)

**Peter:** It's so confusing. I want to give you another example. Now, this is what my dad said six months ago. My dad was here, he spent the time with \_\_\_\_\_ and I when my mom passed away. He came and stayed with us, and, um ... after the funeral, you know, we spent some ... some, I think, quality time together. A few weeks later, I decided to take a trip. I was going to New York, and so I decided to stop in at my home town on the way and do an overnight with my sister, and visit with my dad. So when I stopped at my dad's house, my dad said, so you're going to New York. And I said, yeah. And he said, so you got a girl with ya? (chuckles) And I said, you just don't get it. You know? And it would have been one thing, I mean, if he had been implying, do you have a friend that you're going along with, whether it be male or female. But he was ... he did it again! You know, do you have a girl with you, or is there going to be a girl down there for you when you get there? And it's just like, after a while, it's like, why do I even bother? And I just looked at him and said, no. And if I was going to take somebody, it would be \_\_\_\_\_ and he is at home. You know? That's all I said.

**Andrea:** I know what you're talking about. It's schizoid.

**Peter:** Yeah.

**Andrea:** It's like it ... can you ever settle into some kind of a relationship with this person that's predictable either way, you know?

**Peter:** Right, right.

**Andrea:** You know? You're consistently shitty, or consistently decent ...

**Peter:** Yes. And what has confused me over the years is because it put me in such a state of confusion. Until just recently, and this is something that I'm working on, with my therapist, now. That's his stuff. That's their

stuff. I don't need to wear that, anymore. I'm feeling very confident in who I am, and if they want to be, or appear to be confused about it—that's them. You know? I don't take that on, anymore.

**Andrea:** No.

**Peter:** That's a hard one, though, because especially with your family. You get so ... you're so involved already ... um ... and it's so easy to get caught back up into, you know, what you've been conditioned to think or feel or go along with all your life ...

Peter has developed a way of dealing with the unpredictable ups and downs in his relationship with his father, by maintaining a kind of inner equilibrium, no matter how well or poorly things are going. He articulated this when he recounted the story of his dad making the speech at the family reunion, welcoming his partner into the family:

**Peter:** Those were words, and I thought, afterwards, let's ... okay, words are okay. You know, especially when you're put on the spot, to come up with something to say ... let's see how you carry through. But those are just words.

While this posture enables Peter to be ready for the experiences of lack of recognition, acceptance, and support that he knows are still to come, I believe it also means that he cannot fully open to the joy of those moments when his dad does get it, and is as present to him as he can possibly be. I am speaking

This is a very serious thing. Protecting our hearts from being hurt by our family of origin's homophobia can, I believe, contribute to our being emotionally shut-down in other areas of our lives. And the unpredictability of recognition/acceptance and rejection means that we can't really grieve the loss we often experience in our relationships with our parents.

Grief denied can create a dangerous undertow to whatever currents of emotion are happening in your life. (Berzon, 1988, p. 294)

We need to know more about this.

**TO BE EXPLORED  
FURTHER.....**

to this from my own experience. I do not want to live in this psychic ready position, and I feel alternately sad and angry that, because I choose to continue to relate to my family of origin and attend to my own safety, I must. The best attitude toward this dilemma that I can come up with is that a holistic acceptance and celebration of queer sexualities and families of choice is evolving, and the need for this ready position is a temporary condition that may last my lifetime, but will someday be unnecessary.

In the interests of contributing to this evolutionary process, let's examine the barriers that must be dismantled if families of origin and families of choice are ever to be able to embrace and include each other.

### **Barriers to the Integration of Family of Choice and Family of Origin**

The list of barriers to the integration of family of origin and family of choice that the participants and I came up with, looks like the negative to the picture of what enables families of origin to grow and be transformed from experience with their family member's family of choice. Openness on the part of family of origin members allows for growth and transformation; narrowness is a barrier to the integration of family of

choice and family of origin. Genuine and respectful interest in learning about and from people who are different from themselves leads to growth and transformation; bigotry is a barrier.

Daniel summarized the barriers as follows:

**Daniel:** Bigotry. Lack of education. Lack of experience. Lack of the desire to be educated and experienced in the world. A lack of understanding of social issues, and how they affect all of us. My family of origin seems ... they're seemingly in a ... you know, my parents are seemingly oblivious to social issues in this world that we live in and, ignorance is bliss. And fuck, my parents are happy!

Daniel's family is an affluent, middle class family whose consciousness of social issues is limited to what they hear about in the context of their church, in a framework that is more about charity than social change. He thinks that, because nothing in their own lives requires them to think critically, they have a narrow world view and a lack of curiosity about what lies beyond the limits of their own experience.

\* \* \* \* \*

*This rings true for me, in my own experience with my family of origin. Where my experience differs is in the way that my parents do have a social conscience, it is their interpretation of their religious faith that holds them back from being able to include homophobia in their sense of what needs to be changed in the world. When I came out to them, both of them responded with care and*

A lesbian [or bi woman] can choose to bear a child in the hope of gaining acceptance from "society" and straight relatives, or she can embark on the same course with a sense of daring and radical innovation, knowing that children tend to be "protected" from lesbians and gay men [and bi people] in the United States [and Canada].  
(Weston, 1991, p. 200)

*concern, and unequivocal disapproval grounded in their belief that my lifestyle is not in God's law.*

*It will be interesting to see how they respond to the child I hope to have. Although I am committed to trying to enable my child to have relationships with my parents that are not limited by my negative experiences of them, I fear that they may inadvertently harm the little person with their attitudes. It may end up that their beliefs, and my fear of how they may affect my child, will be a barrier to the integration of family in my life.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter's reflections on the barriers to integrating family of choice and family of origin come from another angle. He has experienced difficulty with the partner of one of the members of his family of choice, who is unable to accept the intimacy in his relationship with that person:

**Peter:** I developed a very, very—well, \_\_\_\_\_ is one of my dearest friends in the world. Her husband and I were best buddies, going through school. We did everything together. He was part of the gang. We were close. When I developed a relationship with her—this was after they were married—he couldn't deal with this at all. He ... he doesn't speak to me today. He and I knew each other for as long as \_\_\_\_\_ and I have known each other. But he's not able to deal with it. After we went through twenty years of a friendship. Because I developed a very intense relationship with his wife. There was something there, there must be something up. You know? Ulterior motives, or whatever.

Peter has also experienced people assuming that he and his best friend, who is a straight man, are partners:

**Peter:** For years, people assumed that \_\_\_\_\_ and I were partners. And a lot of this came from the town we both came from, um, almost small town thinking, type of thing. And, uh, being in the community that we were, that we came from, yeah ... people just assumed. You know, if you're associated—guilt by association—if you're associated with a gay man, then you must be gay or there must be something wrong with you. And we heard these rumours all our lives.

Peter and I spoke about how impoverished our imaginations are, how few ways we have of thinking about our relationships with others, compared to our experience of having many ways that we relate to other people. I asked Peter how he thinks the narrowness of the categories of relationships we are provided with, affects us:

**Peter:** There are times when I question myself. I question myself, like, do I really like \_\_\_\_\_ that way? You know, he's a nice looking man. What are the things that you look at in someone when you're, you know, when you have that, uh, sexually intimate relationship. You know? Maybe that's why I'm so attracted to him. But I know. No, when he was eight years old, and I was twelve, and I knew that something clicked, that we would be friends. And it was nothing to do with sexual. I was so stimulated by this guy, mentally, I was intrigued. I was just intrigued by his whole story and the fact that he was able to talk to me and take me into his confidence. It had nothing to do with sexuality

... Same thing happened to \_\_\_\_\_ and I. \_\_\_\_\_ and I are wonderful, wonderful friends. We would go home to where we grew up, and we would go out to the clubs where our friends would be hanging at the time. We would regress, to the point where we would be on the dance floor, kissing, and things like that. It was just so unnatural for us. So uncomfortable.

Are we not ourselves unconsciously impressed by the part the family has played in our society for several centuries, and are we not tempted to exaggerate its scope and even to attribute to it an almost absolute sort of historical authority? (Aries, 1962, p. 364)

It is an ongoing challenge to define, for ourselves, what family means to us, and who our family is. Many of us have had experiences of finding ourselves, sometimes against our own better judgment, trying to fit our families of choice into the categories of relationship that others are able to understand and accept. Like Peter and his close female friend, who is one of his loved ones, kissing on the dance floor. As a bisexual woman, I have sometimes found myself telling my parents about a man I am interested in, and not telling them about my relationships with women.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I am writing this section of my thesis while visiting my parents on Saltspring Island. I have tried several times in the last two days, to casually mention the woman friend who is visiting Nova Scotia this summer and who I am spending time with. She is someone with whom I had a special connection eleven years ago, when I was in my first long-term relationship with a woman. Although she was attracted to me then, and I to her, I was clear about my commitment to my partner at the time, and she was respectful of that. We developed a friendship that seems to have deepened, across the miles (she has lived in B.C for the past ten years), and over the*



*years. We have discovered, during her visit this summer, that we still have a strong attraction to each other, that is now grounded in this love that has grown through our friendship. It is powerful stuff, and part of me is very much with her, even while I am here.*

*I have tried to mention her a couple of times to my mom, with no response, and always something that she finds more important to talk about at that moment.*

*Then, tonight, while she and I were baking a birthday cake for my niece, I told her about a man that I met last summer at a folk festival, who lives in Quebec, and with whom I have been corresponding for the past year. He is thinking of coming to visit me. I am interested in exploring my friendship with him, but it is definitely not the same kind of love I feel for my friend from B.C. Of course, when my mom and I join my dad who is watching a football game in the den, she says, "tell your dad about your friend from Quebec "*

*My immediate—inward—response is disgust. At myself, mostly, for letting this happen. And at the powerful homophobia that keeps the beautiful and meaningful connections with women that I experience, invisible and oppressed. So I begin to downplay the significance of my Quebecois friend, and then, I just tell them. That it is hard for me that they are only interested in hearing about the men I am interested in, and never the women. That it hurts me, and makes me feel fragmented. Telling them how it affects me doesn't make the experience any less hurtful, but something changes in me when I do not comply with the silence they impose.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke talked about this work as claiming terri-

tory for an experience of family that is meaningful to him:

**Luke:** My family is going to be my support network. It's just claiming territory ... more and more, it became ... family and friends will be very close to being synonymous. If I have a family, it's going to mean something.

There are many barriers to bringing together our families of choice and our families of origin. Working toward this integration is hard, as I experienced tonight at my parent's house, when I had to find some courage in a moment in which I was feeling hurt and vulnerable so that I could try to educate them about the effects of their attitudes on me. And, quite frankly, I have decided not to put a whole lot of energy into this, with my parents. I am visiting because my dad is ill, and I feel the need to be in touch with what is going on and to support them in some way. My bottom-line commitment to myself is that I will not sit in silence when their behaviour hurts me. Some of us, however, choose to work harder at this with our families of origin, determined to create an experience of family for ourselves that includes all of our meaningful relationships:

**Daniel:** Whether it's family of origin or family of choice, they're very important to me, both of them. And I will

**Discourse Analysis:**

**"...family of origin ... family of choice ... very important to me, both of them."**

**Discourse on gay families transfigures the exclusively procreative interpretations of kinship with which it takes issue in such a way that it remains of them but no longer completely contained within them. (Weston, 1991, p. 210)**

**try, for the remainder of my lifetime, to amalgamate them, and to work with both of them. And to, um, seek happiness through them. And that's important.**

## **RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY OF ORIGIN: AN ENDLESS PROCESS OF NEGOTIATION**

Becoming family, with the people in our lives who are most significant to us is an ongoing process, as is negotiating the ways in which these chosen families come together with our families of origin—or do not. Another dimension of this multifaceted process is the ongoing work we do to experience a sense of being okay in our family of origin relationships.

Even when we are creating a family of choice, or an unconventional network of loved ones, we still have relationships with members of the family from which we came. At various points in our lives, the six people I interviewed and I have had to make choices and decisions about how to keep our balance within the tensions in these relationships. In this chapter, I use the expression “making peace”. In doing so, I am referring to a sense of peace that, for some, is always just beyond our reach, and for those of us who do achieve it, is always transitory. The peace that we are able to find or create lasts until some shift in the expression of our sexuality, or in our family of origin, necessitates its renegotiation.

As I read and reread the transcripts of the twelve interviews I conducted, I found that the participants in

my study had a great deal to say about this. While I know that our experiences with our families of origin are incredibly powerful, there was something about the amount of talk about this that felt disproportionate to me. I puzzled over it for some time, asking myself, why do my participants have so much to say about this, even when they are stating that the relationships they have with non-biological kin are often more meaningful to them? And it eventually dawned on me that when we speak about how we relate to our families of origin, we are communicating within the dominant family discourse. We are using concepts, terms, and expressions that we have been taught since we first learned to speak. It is easier to talk about our relationships with our families of origin than it is to talk about our relationships with our families of choice, relationships we often have no language for, and few opportunities to talk about.

Experience and interactions within our families play an important role in our development, and are reflected in the persons we become, the values we hold, and the family lives we build ourselves.

(Francis, 1996, p. 1)

So I have made a political decision about how I am going to handle this part of the data I collected. Firstly, I acknowledge again, as I have in earlier chapters, how instrumental our family of origin experiences are in how each of us shapes our lives. I will honour that by presenting some of the stories of how the seven of us deal with these relationships as adults. Secondly,

I will state my hunch that the fact that there is a lot of material in the transcripts relating to this theme, does not necessarily mean that it is more important than other aspects of our experience of family covered in the interviews—it may simply mean that it is easier to talk about! When the seven of us talk about our ongoing relationships with our families of origin, we come closest to speaking our experience in the dominant discourse of family. In order to avoid reinforcing that dominance, I will attempt to keep this section brief.

I have chosen, from each set of interviews, one way in which that person has worked with their family of origin relationships, and I will add to that some reflections on my own experiences in this area. This will provide us with seven different perspectives on the question of how we, as lesbian, gay and bisexual adults who are creating families of our own, experience the non-negotiable fact of the presence of our families of origin in our lives, and the negotiable form of these relationships.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Daniel:** You know, one of the most important things in my life is to feel accepted, by my family, my family of origin. And particularly, of all of them, my mother ... You know, she is ... she's the reason I am the way I am, and I want her to know and understand that. And I feel that I'm a good person, and the doubts she has about some of the things that I do ... I want to lay those to rest. And say, I've learned from you, and say

that I am the person you molded, and I'm happy about that.

Daniel wants to be able to acknowledge his mother's contribution to the qualities he appreciates in himself. His desire is to be able to feel accepted by her as a gay man, and to know that she can see how the values she passed on to him, about being true to himself and living with integrity, are expressed in how he lives his life as a gay man. He has yet to come out to her, so achieving this in his relationship with her is still down the road, but it is clearly his goal.

**Daniel:** I can talk about family, traditional family, in a negative way, a lot. And in fact, I do that a lot. But I sometimes have to step back and look at what it's given me, as well, and it's given me some really positive things. You know, my mom always was, as a Catholic woman, talking about the need to be truthful, to others and to yourself. And she often talked about not caring what other people think, and doing what's right and what you know is right ... I often say to her, you know, what you taught me to do—and I'm so happy you taught me to be true to myself—and to listen to my own instincts and to not pay attention to what other people have to say but to go with what is true in me, and explore that.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Sara:** I was substituting at the school where my father is the principal, and I took the ovulation kit with me to work, because I thought, this might be the day ... anyway ... it changed colour ... I wasn't out of school 'til 3:30, the clinic closed at 4:00. I screeched out of the parking lot that night—I had to get all the way across town to the clinic, in rush hour traffic ...

When Sara read over her transcript, she added this layer of reflection to this story:

**Sara:** I told my father this story one time, much later, when we were speaking at a PFLAG meeting [Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays]. I was surprised that he was upset with me, saying if he'd known, he would have let me leave early.

Sooner or later, however, parents have to go beyond the cultural messages of rejection and hatred if they are to feel any peace ... The decision to go against hurtful societal views often does more than just help them survive. The act of confronting homosexuality openly and courageously can become a course of freedom and fulfillment in the family. (Griffin et al., 1986, p. 9)

Sara's parents have come a long way—particularly her father—from the difficulty they had when she came out to them as a lesbian. Being able to go and speak about being the parent of a lesbian who has had a child through alternative insemination indicates that Sara's dad has not only been able to come to accept her and her family, but feels able to be a resource for other parents in similar situations.

Sara's surprise at her dad's reaction to the story of how she had to rush from school to the clinic that day, suggests that she had adjusted to the isolation that was part of her experience of trying to get pregnant. When she told me this story, she actually found it somewhat humorous—she didn't expect support from her coworkers at the school where she was substitute teaching. Her surprise also suggests to me that she had no reason to think that her dad would have been supportive, as her dad, and in his role as principal at the school. She didn't expect his support in that



situation, and was surprised when he said that he would have let her go early. This makes me wonder if he was truly able to be as supportive at that time, as he now wishes he could have been, or whether his openness and supportiveness has grown in the two or three years that have passed since then.

This story is inspiring for those of us who hope for an integrated experience of family in our lives. Sara and her dad are doing quite well in their own relationship as father and daughter, and he has joined her in the work of combating homophobia by building support for other lesbians and gay men and their family and friends.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter told me a story about how his father threw a huge birthday party for himself on his eightieth birthday, had it professionally video-taped by someone from the local community cablevision channel, and gave everyone copies of the video for the following Christmas. He says that every time he sees his dad, he is asked if he has watched the video lately. In Peter's words, "Makes you want to vomit." And so I asked Peter how he became the person he is, without the egotistical attributes of his father. His immediate response was to give his parents credit:

**Peter:** I have to credit my parents for a lot of that, too. I have to credit my parents for, you know ... there's been a certain amount of accomplishment in my life. And, uh, you know, my parents ... it was really, really important for them. You know, an education.

Differences of class, age, race, ethnicity, and a host of other identities that crosscut gender are sufficient to put to rest the notion of a single woman's or man's standpoint. The assumption that gender identity will be the primary *subjective* identity for every lesbian or gay man, universally and without respect to context, remains just that: an assumption. (Weston, 1991, p. 143)

For Peter, making peace with his family of origin, has meant learning to embrace the contradictions in them, so that he can appreciate what they gave him that he still values today, while still seeing clearly what he rejects about their way of life. Some of what he regrets about his growing up with them, specifically not being encouraged to go to university, he now sees as indicative of the atmosphere of racism which permeated their lives:

**Peter:** I wish they had pushed education more. You know? After I graduated from school, and not taken me I don't know how many years before I decided that, yes, I am university material. But again, I think that had a lot to do with the time that I graduated. Uh ... what was (sigh) ... the expectations of a Black man, in those days.

Over time, Peter has come to feel compassion for his parents, and for himself, as he sorts through his mixed feelings about his family of origin:

**Peter:** At times, I feel that I'm almost contradicting some of the things that I'm saying, but I think the reason for that is because there are so many mixed emotions involved. Life in my family has been rich in so many ways, and at the same time, it's been absolutely

devastating. In other ways. It seems like it's been like that all my life. Only now, is it getting more clear.

Time, and the opportunity to avail himself of some therapy that he feels has been very beneficial for him, have helped Peter make peace with the family he came from:

**Peter:** I understand better now that ... people are different. I know I could say, I wish that my sister was more like ... somebody else. I wish that my dad and the whole dynamics that go on within my family were different, and like ... the Brady Bunch or whatever. After a while, you learn to accept, or I have learned to accept people for what they are. And ... and then you decide where you're going with them from there. It's not a hurtful process anymore. You know? There was a time when it would have been painful. It's not anymore. I don't wish things any differently. You know? If there's something that happens that I disagree with, then I make a decision about what I'm going to do about that. There's ... I don't see it as a ... there's no perfect setting. There's no perfect world. So I'm pleased with what I have. As family. And the other. Whatever name we're going to attach to that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Luke, when I asked him how he has integrated his sense of his sexuality with his ideas about family, said:

**Luke:** I was starting anew. My attitude was then, and it still is now, that even though I may have a slip of the tongue and call them my grandparents, as far as I'm concerned, they're dead. And outside my aunt and my parents, I have no family. As far as I'm concerned.

Luke's story is an important one to hear, I think. because sometimes healing means rejection. It is not always possible to achieve a reconciliation between being oneself, and being connected to one's family of origin, nor is it always possible to make peace with maintaining relationships when there is no reconciliation of these things. In Luke's case, the fact that the patriarch of the family (his grandfather) sexually abused him as well as several others in the family, has never been confronted, and is protected by his wife, has a great deal to do with his decision. I tend to get caught up in the inspiring stories of growth and healing. Luke's story grounds me by making me see that no growth on the part of family of origin members, no healing within these relationships, and—sometimes—no relationships with some family of origin members is the reality for some of us.

The experience of coming out to relatives convinced many that the elements of choice shape even the ostensibly fixed substance of biological ties. Selectivity manifested itself in the discretionary power to judge the closeness of relationships. (Weston, 1991, p. 188)

**Luke:** I feel like I've done my integrating, thank you very much. I feel that it's very, um, based on a lot of the stuff with my parents, the positive stuff with my parents, that anybody who's family is somebody of my choosing. It has to be substantial. It has to be something that's real ... It's going to mean something because, the family that I came from—biological family—I have nothing in common with these people. They've done more harm to me than any stranger I ever knew.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Natalie:** I just wrote my parents a big letter about, sort of explaining where I've been and why. And it was a

Reality, the truth, and disclosure about who we really are supports individual growth and validates the bond of gay and lesbian relationships. (Berzon, 1988, p. 297)

really good letter in a sense because it was ... I was able to say, you know, because of all these things, I'm not really interested in being in a relationship with a man, and I know that's shitty for you, but ... you know, that's what I've got to do. And finally, I'm, you know ... trying to make sense of my life is such a way that I'm not hiding stuff.

When Natalie read over her transcript, she listed what she thought the main themes in it were, and one of them was family secrets and silence about important events in the family that generated strong feelings for family members. So for her to write a letter to her parents in which she discloses her inner life and the reasons for her decisions about relationships, is breaking a tradition of silence and secrets—attempting to change a family pattern. Not hiding stuff is a radical departure from what she grew up with, when her mother would disappear from her life for months and then reappear, with no explanation given to the children. For some of us, changing negative family patterns in the way we put our own lives together, is the way we make peace with the families we came from.

In some families, it is the custom to avoid dealing with anything of an intimate nature, especially if it is sexual. To introduce information about yourself that tells family members more than they want to know about your personal life is going against family "culture." (Weston, 1991, p. 302)

When Natalie reread the passage in her transcript that I excerpted above, she added one comment:

**Natalie:** And I'm happy!

\* \* \* \* \*

For Ellen, coming to terms with her family of origin has been made easier by her parents' ability to acknowledge and take responsibility for the alcohol abuse and violence that coloured her childhood.

**Ellen:** Even today, like my dad ... I know my dad sometimes, he'll get this look like, um ... he can't give us enough love, sometimes? You know? Like, because, he knows, I guess, or he remembers those times when he was an asshole, or ... you know, the times when he hurt us ...

Ellen and her parents are able to talk about those times, and even when they don't remember the details of how they behaved with their children, they believe Ellen. They know the drinking was a problem, and that it had an effect on the rest of the family.

**Ellen:** I mean, we talk about the times when, you know, he was being violent and stuff like that, and, um ... there's one part in my mom's life when she doesn't even remember. Especially when she was drinking. She doesn't remember like, one whole year of her life.

When Ellen related this part of her story to me, it was with a sense of acceptance, and thankfulness that the family had come through this and is still intact.

My own experience has been quite different, and leads me to believe that whether or not one's par-

ents are willing and able to take responsibility for ways in which they have hurt their children in the past, makes a big difference in the extent to which one is able to make peace with one's family of origin. When Ellen told me about how she and her parents talk about the negative aspects of their family life in the past, I disclosed to her what it's like in my family:

**Andrea:** It's quite wonderful for me to hear a story of your parents, kind of ... working on their own healing and then trying to help the family heal. And try to, you know, come back with ... some real love.

**Ellen:** Yeah?

**Andrea:** And care. And try and acknowledge, at least, if not make up for those times. I talked to my parents in October, on a trip to B.C., after getting back together with my younger brother last summer, who had been estranged from our family for ten years ... and ... and they asked about him and so I talked very openly about ... you know ... my experience and his experience of physical and emotional abuse from them. And they ... they shut me down, basically. Turned around and accused me of making it up, and ...

**Ellen:** Oh, yeah, yeah ...

**Andrea:** ... you know ... they responded with a combination of denial and lying. And, you know, it's really great, when especially that generation, can say, yeah ... I screwed up there. And ... and realize there's some healing to be done, and ... it doesn't always happen. It's not going to happen in our family. So it's neat to know that sometimes that does happen.

\* \* \* \* \*

According to the seven different stories represented here, making peace with our families of origin can involve sorting through what was positive and negative about our early experience of family, finding ways to acknowledge what we value about that experience, identifying family patterns that we want to change in our adult lives, healing from past hurts caused by family of origin members, or dealing with the realization that this healing may not happen in the family context. And there are as many more dimensions to this process as there are people's stories to be told.

Certainly, the process is often difficult, requiring courage and perseverance over time. Devoting a significant amount of energy to this process, and contenting ourselves with small increments of progress, demonstrates a deep commitment to our families of origin, for those of us who choose to, or who are able to do it.

I close this chapter with a personal reflection on my recent visit to my parents' home, a visit I made because my dad has been diagnosed with an incurable and irreversible progressive lung disease.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Writing this on the plane ... the pilot has just announced that we are now flying over Lethbridge, Alberta ... I am on my way home*



*after eight days visiting family.*

*The visit went well. What does that mean? It means that I was able to be there in a way that was supportive of Mom and Dad as they bravely face the decline of Dad's health, and still stay centred and be myself.*

*None of us made any reference to the last visit. And yet, for me, it was not as if it never happened. Their demeanor was much the same as it had been before, but mine wasn't. I felt a wonderful sense of detachment, which freed me to be good to them, while still seeing clearly how their limitations pose a threat to my sense of self. They cannot—or will not—participate in my healing from the wounds they inflicted in the past, and I feel a peaceful acceptance of that. For the first time in my life, Mom's controlling and critical ways did not trigger old pain. It seems that, finally, she cannot hurt me anymore.*

*Which brings me to a new place in my relationship with them. The compassion I feel for them is no longer tinged with a sense of injustice, and the twisted outline of martyrdom that I now realize was there before. Also different is my capacity to speak more honestly about my life. Without anger, without it being intended as a challenge, I talked about my thesis work, and, though it was not easy for them, they engaged in conversation with me about it, to the best of their ability. This is the key: I did not feel the need to conceal my true self. And therefore, I did not end up feeling diminished and alienated from myself, by being there.*

One moves forward in establishing a self-accepting gay/lesbian [b] identity through a willingness to search for new information, new meanings, new ways of being. (Berzon, 1988, p. 60)

*This growth in me is so profound that it is really inexpressible. What I know with what feels like unshakeable certainty, is that the little one who was so hurt back then, is finally*

*safe. And that my well-being as a whole person, is in my own capable hands.*

*I do not know how my relationships with them will unfold in the future. There are more rocky times to come, because they want to read this thesis, and they will be angry about what I have said about them—even though I believe I am being respectful and clear about the fact that all of us have changed.*

*But I am no longer afraid. I can offer them love and support, without compromising myself, and accept them as they are.*

\* \* \* \* \*

So far, in my exploration of how bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults experience family, I have looked at where our ideas and expectations about family come from, how we become family with those most important to us, what happens when our families of choice and our families of origin meet, and how we make peace with our families of origin.

These chapters all address the process of creating family, with all the complex dynamics that involves. In the following chapter, I will examine how my six participants and I actually experience family, day to day.

## **EXPERIENCING FAMILY**

Gay and lesbian people are not so psychologically different from our heterosexual counterparts. We, too, have the need to affiliate, to have the continuity of companionship that brings true understanding and intimacy ... the need to be caretakers and to know that there is someone to take care of us. (Weston, 1991, p. 7)

During the interviews, the six participants spoke about many things that can best be presented as different aspects of their experience of family in their day-to-day lives. They spoke of growth and learning healthy ways of being themselves in the world that stem directly from their efforts to meet their need for family. They spoke about what their households were like, what kind of household they would like to live in, and the role of extended family and community in their experience of family. They spoke about encountering homophobia and what it is like living in the centre of controversy. They also spoke of the link between their experience of family and the quality of their lives.

I will address each of these different areas of their experience, in turn.

### **Growth and Learning**

For bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults, the process of taking action to meet our need for family usually involves a great deal of personal growth. Some of this growth comes in the form of strengthening the qualities in ourselves that enable us to resist the pres-

sure to conform. We may find ourselves developing a strong sense of individuality and a commitment to being true to ourselves even in the face of disapproval, and the self-awareness that living this way requires. For Luke, being a bisexual man and creating a family of choice means embracing this ongoing process:

**Luke:** Some people like to just be satisfied and be tranquil, and sort of reach a space of contentment. For me, life isn't that—and especially family—isn't that. I guess the word I would pick would be, for me, dynamic. Ongoing. Alive. Especially dynamic. Life ... and family ... is something that's always happening, it's always changing, and, uh, I feel like it's going in very positive, open ways.

... So it's ... it's always looking at how I can grow, how I can improve dynamics with other people. And a constant questioning ... it's all so new.

This sense of the newness of different possibilities was also mentioned by Natalie, for whom openness to growth in the process means being willing to try previously untried things:

**Natalie:** The guy I was engaged to, we'd been friends for years. So he had known all sorts of stuff about me all the way along. And then, I guess ... I have to think about how in the world we set this up. We ... when we started dating, I just said, this has to be under the condition that, you know, I won't have sex with other men, that's fine, but, you know, there may be a time when I have relationships with women outside of this. Is that okay with you? And he said, yeah, that's fine. You know? And we talked.

Because some of the traditional definitions of family don't fit gay and lesbian families, they often enjoy a greater amount of freedom when it comes to experimenting with new lifestyles and inventing unique family traditions. (Pollack, 1995, p. 72)

In periods when fields are without secure foundations, practice becomes the engine of innovation. (Marcus and Fischer, quoted in Lather, 1991, p. 116)

For some of us, the growth that comes with creating families of our own involves unlearning unhealthy things that were part of our experience in our families of origin. Ellen has had a heartfelt talk with one of her brothers, pointing out to him the ways he was repeating the story of alcohol abuse and violence that they grew up with as children. This has helped him to change his behaviour, and keep the cycle of violence from continuing in the next generation.

And so to become more thoughtfully or attentively aware of aspects of human life which hitherto were merely glazed over or taken-for-granted will more likely bring us to the edge of speaking up, speaking out, or decisively acting in social situations that call for such action. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 155)

**Ellen:** My oldest brother, he gets violent when he drinks. And I remember talking to him and telling him, I said, \_\_\_\_\_, don't you remember that time when we were kids and how afraid we were, like, when mom and dad would be drinking? And he would say, yeah. And I said, well, that's what you're doing to your own children. And he went, like, yeah. And he doesn't drink anymore ... We don't want our kids to be brought up in the same circumstance.

Supporting her partner in healing from her childhood experiences of abuse and recovering from her substance abuse problem has also been a priority for Ellen in the establishment of their blended family.

For some of us, attending to our own growth in this process has been grounded in some of the other responsibilities we have in our lives. Ellen talked about a need she was aware of, at an earlier point in her life, to balance exploring her evolving sexuality with her

responsibility for maintaining a stable home for her daughter:

**Ellen:** I knew it was the women, not the men, that I wanted the relationship with. I knew that that's who my life is going to be with. My family ... is going to be another woman. And all those other things just, will either fit in or they don't. You know? And I have to think about my daughter. Because she is still at my home. And she has ... she has no intention of going anywhere. And it was always my thing that, with her, regardless of who I was seeing, I didn't want her to feel any pressure.

Part of what Ellen has learned is that her needs, regarding family in her life, are changing as she gets older. While she has been content with the arrangement she has had with her partner of eleven years, that they maintain separate households, she now feels that she would really like them to share a home:

**Ellen:** I think maybe I'm just getting older. And realizing that I need someone. That I've been putting this off for so long, and it was always just my daughter and I. And there was no room for anybody else. And now, I just feel that because things are changed, she's older ... now I'm beginning to feel that I do need someone, and I do need them there most times. And I think it just comes with age.

For Peter, what has come with age is acceptance of his feelings about his family of origin members, and knowing who the people are in his life who

are most important. Along with those realizations has come a sense of contentment and accomplishment:

**Peter:** I'm much more clear than I would have been ten years ago. I've always known where I stand with the people in my life that are very dear to me, outside of my family members. And I think that will just continue ... I'm pretty content now, where ten years ago, I can honestly say, I wasn't content ... It's not so much questions anymore. A short while ago, it would have been questions. I would have been questioning myself. Now, it's ... it's acknowledging. Now it's just an acceptance. Do you know what I mean? I don't beat myself up anymore because I don't have those feelings about family that we're told we should have. Because we're related. I did a lot of that work.

Ellen's experience adds another dimension to the notion of understanding and accepting the limitations of family relationships. For her, this applies to her family of choice as well as to her family of origin:

**Ellen:** I've sounded off to the people who I consider to be family. You know, like, individually. Because they are so understanding, and I think, you know, that's who you look for and that's who you want in your life are those people that are going to help you. But there's sometimes when, um ... it's ... sometimes you don't want to burden them with some of the shit that you're feeling, right? But when that happens, usually that's when I get into prayer.

Being open to self-scrutiny and growth, breaking the cycle of violence and abuse some of us experienced in our families of origin, balancing our atten-

The modern family's growing discomfort suggests the need for expansion and diversity in what we expect from it and its adaptation to new social conditions with diverse timing schedules and a multiplicity of roles for its members rather than for seeking refuge in a non-existent past. (Rossi et al., 1978, p. ix)

In our culture, many live with families of choice—one or more adults who become in time and with effort (no different from any other relationship) the social construct that nurtures growth, that shares our life's milestones and cares for us and supports us. (Wakeling, in Wakeling and Bradstock, 1995, p. 6)

tiveness to our changing needs with other responsibilities, and coming to understand the limitations of our families, are all aspects of our learning as we create family. This learning requires hard work, but it has its rewards:

**Luke:** You know, you've got to work through it. If there's that commitment, you know, it's like ... and for me, that's the real space. I'm challenged to be more assertive about asking for what I want. In my relationship, and in the family. Like, I'm learning a lot. I'm learning a lot of healthy things.

### **Thoughts about Household**

Among the six people I interviewed and me, there were several different perspectives on the importance of living in a household with our families of choice, or network of loved ones. For some of us, living with members of our family signifies the permanence of those relationships, and provides us with a buffer against feeling alone in the world. For others, our household is the space we share with our intimate partner, and we connect with other members of our family of choice outside of that space. And for some of us, the need to create household with our family of choice is something that changes over time.

Once again, in this aspect of how we as bi-



sexual, lesbian, and gay adults experience family, our feelings and choices are very diverse.

Daniel expressed a desire to live with one of his family of choice members indefinitely, and explained how they envisioned this possibility:

**Daniel:** We've talked about the idea of she and I buying a home, and having a home together. And amalgamating a partner of mine, or of her's, into that, should it ... should the chance arise. And that maybe if I had a partner and she had a partner and the house was too small for four, one would buy the other one out, and the other couple would leave and start their own home in another place. But we've talked about the importance of communal living, and this idea that we could raise two families, and that if she were to get pregnant, I would support her through that, as family.

Families of affinity, or families created through bonds of love and support, is the term that best describes gay and lesbian families. They are unique in their structure, their daily routines, and in their development of rules and order. (Pollack, 1995, p. 73)

Note: I find Pollack's emphasis on rules and order unnecessary and insidious. I don't think the assumption that there is, or needs to be, some sort of alternative family structure is justified. Does this reflect a need to be protected from uncertainty, by continuously constructing mental frameworks that comfort one?

For Daniel, as for most of us, there is a connection between family and home. In his case, because he is finding it challenging to create family with other gay men, he imagines creating a household with a straight woman friend and integrating his gay relationships into that household. It is quite clear to him that sharing a household is part of being family:

**Daniel:** I want to live with a family. I guess that means I want my own family around. And one of the things that I'm fearful about, being a gay man, is that someday I'm going to be alone. Without any family. So, it is imperative that I have a connection with a group of people that I know will always be a part of my life.

Sara, who is living with her partner and their child, spoke about how making major purchases together—first, their car, and then, their house—was a significant step in becoming family:

**Sara:** I think when we began, when \_\_\_\_\_ and I began to do things that suggested permanence, I began to think, okay, this is my family ... When we bought a car together. I mean, it was the biggest expense I had ever had, the biggest purchase. And we both put our money together and bought the car. And, uh, I think that was the first thing. And then there was the house.

In the process of claiming insurance benefits for same-sex partners, living together and owning property together are used as proof of the spousal relationship:

The question of how to establish valid eligibility criteria for domestic partnerships is an intriguing one. Simply declaring that a committed relationship exists is hardly enough to set the bureaucratic machinery in motion. Something more concrete is necessary. Something verifiable is essential. The two conditions that are most easily verifiable are cohabitation and economic integration. (Berzon, 1988, p. 266)

Again, the theme of permanence comes up. We live in a culture in which material things are symbolic of status and form another type of family discourse—the language of worldly possessions. I was amazed at how many of the participants used the metaphor of “the little house with the white picket fence” to describe what their expectations were of their adult lives, when they were children. So it is not surprising that buying a home with one's family members is an important expression of being family. As well as the practical aspect of sharing the expense and the responsibility for a major investment with another person, there is the statement that such an investment makes: our intention is to be together in the long-term.

Peter's experience supports this, and adds another dimension. He and his partner lived together

in their own home, until his partner's recent death. At the time of the interview, this was how Peter described his sense of their household:

**Peter:** \_\_\_\_\_ and I had a family reunion, where first we had all his family come, and then, the following year, we had the same for my family. And we hosted it at our home. Both times. When I had mine, I stated very clearly, that \_\_\_\_\_ is my partner, this is our home. This is not just my home. So when you come to our home, both people are treated with the same amount of respect. And acceptance.

What Peter articulates here is the self-determination that can come with sharing a household, and being the creators of the environment in which we live with our families. When Peter explained to his invited family members that this was the home he shared with his partner, he was making it clear that they were family, and that the invited guests were visiting them as family, not just coming to see Peter. Again, the physical space of the home becomes part of the statement that Peter and his partner wanted to make about their relationship, in the context of their extended families.

Peter's experience was interesting in another way, also. Although he feels deep and meaningful connections with several loved ones (he chooses not to use the term 'family of choice') who occupy a place in his life much like traditional family members, his

household was clearly the home of his intimate relationship. Some of his loved ones had never, or only briefly met, his partner. There was separateness in his life, between his partner and other loved ones, that Peter constructed quite purposefully, for reasons he was aware of but chose not to discuss.

The recent death of his partner has left Peter living alone in their home. It would be interesting to know if, in the future, he continues to maintain this distance between home/household/intimate relationship and his loved ones, or if his living situation will change to include another form of family. Certainly, life-changing events, like the death of a spouse, open up the possibilities of change in how one's household is constituted and what it means.

Ellen was the other participant who spoke about how household figures in her experience of family. She made a decision to create a home for her and her daughter, and to keep her personal relationships outside of their home. Although lovers could and would spend nights there, she never chose to invite any to stay. This decision reflected her commitment to maintaining a stable environment for her child, that was not subject to change with the changes Ellen experienced in her personal life:

**Ellen:** That's how I always thought it would be. Regardless of what relationships I was in, while \_\_\_\_\_ was living at home, I wasn't going to bring anybody home. And have them live in my house. You know, because that was my house and \_\_\_\_\_'s house. That was ... there was no room for ... you know, although I was seeing different people, I never asked them to move in.

Over time, this combined with Ellen's long-term partner's choice to keep a separate household for her and her daughters, a decision influenced by the needs of her daughters in the early stages of her relationship with Ellen. In the last couple of years, it has become clear that Ellen's daughter does, indeed, consider their home to be her home, and she does not plan to move out, although she is working and in a committed relationship with her boyfriend. Ellen's daughter's boyfriend now lives there, too. Partly because she knows that her daughter's sense of home is secure, and partly because her own needs have changed, Ellen now wants to live with her partner and create a shared household. It is the constancy that such a living situation provides that she desires:

Chosen families introduce something rather novel into kinship relations ... by grouping friends together with lovers and children within a single cultural domain.  
(Weston, 1991, p. 136)

**Ellen:** As our children get older, we're looking forward to having some time alone. To go and do some stuff. And live together, for a change! Because, I think, right now, that's what I'm feeling. I'm really feeling that. And I'm really feeling the loneliness of it, like, of us being apart. I'm feeling that I want to be with someone everyday.

**Discourse analysis:**

If we attribute family diversity to the organizational embeddedness of family usage, the household is no longer the express geographical location of domestic order. As we reveal family in its assignment practices, family's geography is transformed. The meaning of familial experience is attached not to the private household as a site for "family," but rather to the diverse domains of family usage. This does not discount the household's importance, but it does invalidate the assumption that it is the ultimate experiential location of domestic order. (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. 130)

From the stories gathered in this project, it seems that living in households with our family of choice members appeals to some of us for different reasons. Permanence, constancy, self-determination, and flexibility are a few of the values that we associate with the households in which we live, or want to live.

**Extended Family and Community**

Because our families of choice, or the network of loved ones who are closest to us, are unconventional, so are our definitions of extended family.

For some of us, extended family means the people we are related to through our families of origin, augmented by some of our closest friends. For others, extended family does not intersect with our families of origin at all, but is made up only of those members of our family of choice with whom we do not live in the same household. One participant may refer to the network of loved ones that he or she relates to as family outside of life in their home as extended family, while another would use the term 'family of choice' for a parallel group of people. This can be referenced to how the individual feels about their household and if their sense of family extends beyond the walls of

their home. For those who consider that their family extends beyond those they live with, extended family tends to mean another, slightly larger circle extending beyond and encompassing more people than their family of choice.

Extended family factors more significantly in the day-to-day lives of some of us than it does for others. The same can be said for the role of community. For some, there is almost no distinction between extended family and community.

Luke, whose experience of extended family with his family of origin was overwhelmingly negative, is now part of a traditional extended family through his partner:

**Luke:** They have a lot of rituals that I'm just learning about. Things like food, doing stuff together. Like, this summer, I helped out with the garden in the back of the house. There's a lot of ... it's hard because it's all so new for me to have extended family in that sense. I'm a lot more used to ... it's enjoyable. I mean, there's stressful times and there's good times.

Coming out is an act that is repeated over and over again every time the information is shared with a new friend, another coworker [or extended family member]. Sometimes the decision is spontaneous. Whatever the situation, it is an affirmation of identity. (Pollack, 1995, p. 71)

One of the stressful times for Luke was when he found himself coming out as bi to his partner's younger sister, when this little girl asked him about the freedom rings he wore on a chain around his neck. It was a tense moment in which the question of the future of their relationship was very much up in the

air, that resolved into her acceptance and a deepening of the bond between them. Still, there are times when Luke doesn't know how he fits in. He is finding his way in this extended family as time goes on.

Ellen also spoke about the advantages and disadvantages of having an extended family, although it seems clear that, for her, the good outweighs the bad.

**Ellen:** Sometimes extended families are a good thing, and sometimes they're a bad thing. They're a good thing, um, when you need that other family to help you with ... bringing up children, or whatever. But it's a hindrance when, especially if you're having problems in your relationship, you get the other family members interfering and putting in their comments. So ... if a couple is having problems, it's harder for them to try to work it out because there's other people interfering. That's the only thing. But ... my family ... I'm very close to all my aunts. And I just thank goodness that my aunts were there when I went through that rebellious stage with my mother. If they weren't there to support me, I think I probably would be dead on the streets. Because I was getting into those circumstances.

I also believe it's important for kids to have a variety of adults around during their upbringing. The old extended family had qualities the current nuclear family often lacks; aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents with whom kids have an ongoing close relationship. As with parenthood, I believe it's the role these people play in kid's lives, not their biological similarities, that is important. (Dunne, in Wakeling and Bradstock, 1995, p. 93)

Ellen's experience of extended family was unique among the participants' stories, because she lives on the Mi'qmaq reserve where she grew up. Both her mom and dad come from large families, so Ellen is biologically related to many people who live in her community. Ellen's sense of extended family also includes non-biological kin, specifically, people in her



community that are gay or lesbian, and also some straight friends.

**Ellen:** Because we've gone through all that stuff. And I've learned a lot from them. And I still go to seek them out for advice, when I'm having some difficulty.

Peter considers his home to be space for him and his partner, while his network of loved ones occupies the inner circle around his home. His extended family are the relatives with whom he enjoys close relationships. He spoke most about his nieces, and how much he enjoys being included in their lives.

Sara is an example of someone whose boundaries between extended family in the traditional sense, and in the sense of family of choice, are fuzzy:

**Sara:** I would say, if you're asking about my extended family, I would say it's my parents, my siblings ... and then further out, my aunts and uncles and cousins. But I also include as very dear to me, a number of other people that have no relation. That ... I would say are part of my family. Like \_\_\_\_\_, who is somebody that I love dearly, and she's like a sister to me in a lot of ways, and I've known her since school.

In Sara's experience, the role her biological sister plays in her life and the role an extended family of choice member plays are indistinguishable from each other. One buys clothes for the baby and looks after her when Sara and her partner need a break, and one

drops off a couple of boxes of diapers because she knows they can use them. In the reality of Sara's day-to-day family life, whether or not a family member is a blood relation is not a determining factor in the supportiveness and meaningfulness of the relationship.

Neither Daniel nor Natalie spoke about extended family as a significant part of their experience of family at this time in their lives.

Community and extended family of choice mean close to the same thing in the stories of some of the six people I interviewed. However, it is instructive to take a closer look at how we each relate to the term and concept of community.

Daniel's use of the term "community" is restricted to what he perceives and experiences as the gay community. For him, this refers to those who are out to themselves and who participate in some collective forms of cultural expression: going out to the bars, going to see queer films or other cultural events, socializing and/or doing political work with other queers. He considers himself part of this community. Community figured in his reflections on family in that he hopes to have more people from the gay community become

We have no specifically lesbian traditions, no lesbian customs to guide us in our daily lives. We have no time-honored way of formalizing our unions, our separations, our births, our deaths, our comings and goings, no social services geared to our needs. (Pollack and Vaughan, 1987, p. 27)

members of his family of choice.

Sara spoke about looking for examples of the kind of family life she wanted, when she first came out in the lesbian community. She did not find what she was looking for there, at that time. Now she speaks of community as something she had to create for herself:

**Sara:** My support for being a non-traditional family comes from the community I created because I needed that support. And then, in the second place, from my family of origin that came around in the end. But ... in the first instance, it was the ... that's where it was. My own community, that I had to make.

Peter's references to community were minimal. He talked about the Black community he grew up in, and he used the term to refer to the geographical area where he now lives. It did not seem, from his interview, that being part of a community is a major part of his identity at this point in his life.

Luke had recently moved to this area so his experiences of community still referred to the city in which he used to live. He found community among feminists, and it was among those whom he considered to be part of his community, that potential family of choice members could be found.

Natalie did not use the term community very

much at all. She had an experience of queer community at her workplace, which she clearly valued and relied upon during some difficult times in her life. Her life seemed to be in flux in several ways—in her orientation to relationships, to her family of origin, and in her education and career plans. She has since moved to another province to take a job. My sense is that community is something she may cultivate and experience in more meaningful ways in the future.

\* \* \* \* \*

*What does community mean to me? This is a hard one.*

*I do not feel that I am a part of any community at this point in my life. I have experienced a sense of community among lesbian feminists in the past, but felt constricted by the feeling that my membership in that community entitled other women to make a number of assumptions about me. I recall being horrified at the nasty response many women I knew had upon hearing that a friend of ours, whom we knew as a lesbian, was involved with a man. From that point on, I did not feel comfortable in the lesbian community.*

Because of the extreme biphobia in the lesbian community, and because the lesbian and gay community is one I have always admired, related to, and identified with, it has been much more difficult to be out as bisexual in the lesbian community than to be out as lesbian in the straight world. (Dajenya, 1991, p. 249)

*Not long after that, I came out as bi, myself. Like so many other women, who realize that a lesbian identity does not allow them to fully express who they are, I have experienced intense biphobia in the lesbian community. My response to this has been to retreat, and create an eclectic network of friends and loved ones on whom I can rely.*

*I guess I have become suspicious of*

*communities that are based on a shared ideology. It has been my experience that, over time, ideological frameworks often atrophy into dogma, and those who source their identity from them often become rigid and resistant to change and growth.*

*And so ... I choose to situate myself on the periphery of several communities: my housing co-op ... the neighbourhood we live in ... the community I am a part of by participating in the local Unitarian church I go to ... the therapeutic community ... the arts community ... These are all very important sources of meaning and identity for me, without requiring me to renounce any aspect of myself, as a condition of membership.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Encountering Homophobia and Biphobia**

In the daily life of bisexual, lesbian and gay adults in non-traditional families, encounters with homophobia and biphobia are inevitable. The forms are variable, and often unexpected. It is quite impossible to fully describe this aspect of the lives of those I interviewed and myself, so, once again, I have chosen to provide the reader with a vignette from each person's experience. Hopefully, this will indicate the range of ways homophobia and biphobia are experienced in our family lives, and also, the different ways we respond and cope.

In San Francisco, gay community organizations set up special telephone hotlines during the holidays to serve as resources for lesbians and gay men battling feelings of loneliness or depression. (Weston, 1991, p. 30)

\* \* \* \* \*

**Daniel:** Well, Christmas dinner's not going to be happening after I've come out—well, that's a general ... I won't say never, but I mean ... the dynamics of those holidays, and, you know, special occasions will change once they find out I'm a homosexual man. I mean, that's just going to take place. My partner and I are not going to be going to my parents' house for Christmas dinner ... I have no idea what's going to take place with my family of origin. My family of choice is predictable. My family of origin isn't.

Daniel's experience of homophobia is centred on his family of origin, from whom he expects a degree of rejection and resistance to his gay lifestyle, once he comes out to them. Accordingly, his hopes for the future are grounded in the process of becoming family with people he chooses to occupy that inner circle in his life. He has already started to create this family of choice, and continues to work at it in a conscious way.

What is most striking to me about this particular experience of homophobia and its relationship to Daniel's need for family, is the notion of predictability. Daniel understands that the homophobia in his family of origin effectively denies him a sense of security in those family relationships. While the predictability of any relationship over time can certainly be debated, Daniel feels more confidence in his family of choice relationships. His way of dealing with this experience

of homophobia is to focus on creating his family of choice:

**Daniel:** And ... your family of choice ... I guess I'm looking for it to be more stable than my family of origin, and to not change. So now I'm looking for members of that family that will be there in forty years. And that's part of their potential. Is knowing that they're not the type of people that are going to forget me ... in forty years. Or that they value me for reasons that will still be there in forty years.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Sara:** It is hard when ... you're out in public. And, like, you're walking down a mall. Or something. And somebody stops and says—and these are strangers, but everybody approaches babies—and a stranger says, oh what a cute baby, who's the mom? And that's happened more than once, several times. It's awkward, and we don't quite know how to respond to it, and it's a stranger, and you're never going to see them again. Do you get into a point of educating this person that you don't know that you'll ever see again? I mean, how much responsibility do I take for this work? You know? So, there've been times when one or the other of us has said, me, and the other just hasn't said anything. And there was one time when we said, well, she has two moms, and the person just sort of looked at us and said, oh what a cute baby, and left.

...from a non-biological  
comother's journal:

I was hurt in the Berkeley Bowl when a woman came up and asked, "Well, whose baby is it?" and Kathleen said, "Mine." I understood why she said that, but it hurt anyway. (Gray, 1987, p. 135)

Sara's encounters with homophobia these days are related to how she and her partner and their child interact as a family, in their neighbourhood, workplaces, their families of origin, and in public. To a great extent, the two of them have addressed these experiences very effectively as they have emerged in

As I am at home with Ben, I am often confronted with making a decision about who I explain our situation to. It involves coming out as a lesbian to people I normally would not consider being intimate with. The assumption is that I am the biological mother and there is a husband/father. I find having to correct people in their assumptions difficult and stressful, especially when I don't have any idea of their prejudices. (Ogle and Holstock, 1995, p. 27)

their families of origin, at home, and at work. Sara speaks of having developed a clear sense of how to respond in these contexts, and having found openness and attitudes that are able to change. It is in responding to the public experiences of homophobia that Sara feels less sure of herself.

It takes an enormous amount of energy to tell the truth about one's family, in the face of ignorance and the likelihood of having that truth met with fear and loathing. And to feel the need to do this with strangers, when there is no investment in an ongoing relationship, adds a kind of perplexity to the challenge. The question of whether or not this is really necessary surfaces for the individual, or couple, in those situations. And yet, especially as their child gets older and is able to understand what is going on, there are negative repercussions from deciding not to correct the assumptions of those the family meets. Sara and her partner are very aware of how accommodating homophobia can affect not only their wellbeing, but their child's sense of herself in the world. For instance, one of the ways Sara and her partner have had to change their behaviour is to challenge themselves to be more openly affectionate with each other in Sara's parents' home, so that their daughter will not grow up thinking that affection between women is something



that needs to be hidden.

For Sara and her partner, there is a lot of work involved in dealing with homophobia. Her response to these encounters is a firm commitment to deal with them as directly as possible, recognizing her limitations and her need to make choices about where she spends her energy. It is important to note, however, that this has not come without feelings of anger:

**Sara:** I wish we didn't have to deal with the funny looks and the rude remarks and the fear, every time you think about whether you should tell this new person. And, uh, the beating heart, and the ... the ... you know, I wish I didn't have to go to the hospital and worry about what somebody's gonna think and whether they're going to be just that little bit less gentle when they poke the needle in my baby's butt, you know? I shouldn't have to expend energy thinking about that kind of stuff. And it pisses me off that I do. More than anything, it just pisses me off.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, I believe, we need a concept of permanent partnerships for our relationships, a concept that sends the same message that heterosexual marriage does: these two people are bound in love and in life, functioning as a family unit, mutually committed and invested in another's future. (Berzon, 1988, p. 8)

**Peter:** One of the places where I've dealt with this is at \_\_\_\_\_, where I used to work, and I think it was quite a ... educational process for them. They became, probably, one of the most supportive elements in my life, in the last few years. Usually, my partner and I would be included in any events, or referred to in conversations about relationships, and when it wasn't ... and I had to bring it up, because I would—whether it was in a staff meeting or whatever—and I felt I was being excluded for that reason, they were, uh ... sincerely apologetic, and it wouldn't happen more than that once, with that particular ... it would depend, you know, on what the issue was.

Besides the ongoing struggle Peter has had with his father to recognize his same-sex relationship, Peter encountered homophobia at his workplace. He spoke very clearly, however, about the openness of his coworkers to change their attitudes to be less discriminatory and more inclusive. Seeing growth in this area over the years he worked at one particular place, was a rewarding experience for him. Like Sara, Peter had to work at this, but his coworkers responded to his efforts to get recognition for who family was for him, by taking responsibility and changing their ways. Peter's coworkers had already had their consciousness raised about the injustice of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation; their expressions of homophobia were unintentional. Once it was pointed out to them by Peter that they were excluding him, they were quick to change.

Because the experiences of encountering and challenging homophobia that Peter mentioned were, comparatively speaking, quite minimal, he and I were able to identify another layer of inequity, that is, the gratitude we feel for the respect that we should be able to expect:

**Peter:** You know, they really took on the whole issue of, you know, what can we do as a group? And what isn't working in this organization to allow you the sup-

port you need at this particular time? They took on some wonderful projects.

**Andrea:** Great.

**Peter:** Yeah. And didn't shy away from what that could mean. You know, I think they were very brave in some ... it should be expected of all, but for a group that's ...

**Andrea:** We're so grateful for what we should be able to expect.

**Peter:** Exactly. Yeah.

**Andrea:** But in the context we're in, we're still grateful.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Luke:** I took my time, and when I did reach—and for me it was a crisis period—when I had to face a lot of things about myself. Uh ... I said, okay, I got to look for who I am, and I took the time to really look at it. And ... I guess the label was, bi. And that's a very strong support for me, because I know I took the time, I know this is who I am. Especially when somebody in the community will say, oh, in a few years, you'll be fully gay. You know? It's like ... no. I know where I'm at.

Luke has, like many bisexual people, experienced biphobia in the gay community. Many of us—myself included—have heard comments about ourselves or other bisexual people that are derogatory, leading us to the conclusion that we cannot expect support from gay men and lesbians. This can have the effect of cutting us off from the one group we tend to think we have some hope of receiving support

from—leaving us doubly marginalized.

How this plays itself out in our lives with our families of choice is subtle, but very real. We simply don't have many opportunities to share our questions or struggles as we create families that honour our bisexuality. Luke's response to his encounters with biphobia has been to take the initiative to create the support he needs:

**Luke:** It doesn't wear me down but, sometimes, that part of me will get lonely. That's the part of me that I've used to start support groups and things like that.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Natalie:** Try as I might, I'd love to say that I would, you know, at some point in time, take a partner and go to Toronto [where her parents live] and visit. And there's possibility in that, but ... highly unlikely in the next little while, anyway.

Natalie comes up against homophobia, more than biphobia, in her family of origin when she thinks about taking a same-sex partner home with her, when she goes to visit. She cannot envision this in the foreseeable future. This affects her life in a couple of significant ways. Firstly, if an instance arose when it would feel natural for her to take her partner home to meet her family and see the places where she grew up, Natalie will choose to go against this natural desire,

Unfortunately, it is often true that parents' wishes for their daughter or son not to be actively gay get manifested in an effort to sabotage their offspring's relationship. Usually, this happens in subtle ways. (Berzon, 1988, p. 292)

knowing that it would probably be an unpleasant and unfulfilling experience. That type of decision distorts the relationships we are in, by keeping them invisible to our families, and accorded less respect and importance than a heterosexual relationship would receive. This reinforces the heterosexism that keeps us invisible and in the situation of lacking support. We get the message—however subtly—that there is something wrong with us and the way we live. Needless to say, this is damaging to our self-concept, making it a real challenge to maintain a healthy sense of ourselves.

Secondly, the decision to not take a same-sex partner on a trip to visit one's family of origin, denies that person the opportunity to get a sense of where we have come from, our roots. As all of us who have experienced this kind of trip with a partner know, it is a meaningful step in developing an intimate relationship. Not being able to share this with a partner can get in the way of establishing a sense of continuity between where we came from and who we have become, leaving our intimate relationships impoverished in this way.

Natalie currently deals with this by insisting that when her parents visit her, they must see, interact with, and respect the reality of her life as a bisexual woman who is sometimes in a relationship with another woman:

**Natalie:** I mean, when they come to visit here, you know, I certainly wouldn't, um ... at this time ... I mean, there was a time when I wouldn't include anybody, but at this time, you know ... if you're coming to visit me, you know what the cards are on the table already, so , that's what you're going to see when you get here.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Ellen:** I'll tell you a story. (chuckles) \_\_\_\_\_ and I were going into the store one day. And there were these little girls. They were only nine years old, ten years old, like that. Or maybe even younger. And these two younger girls, they know us. They're from my community. They know who we are. And they know that we're lesbians, although, like I said, they don't have a lot of ... on the concept. But anyway, they had a friend visiting from another community, and when \_\_\_\_\_ and I were going into the store, you see, they got in this little huddle, right? And \_\_\_\_\_ and I looked at them and we smiled at them and went into the store. And about two minutes later, those little girls came into the store. And the little girl that was with them, she was looking at us, and she said, they're only women. Like she didn't understand what lesbian was, and she says, like, they're only women.

Ellen appreciated the humour in this particular story, and went on to explain that she chooses never to get defensive, especially with children, since that often fuels the negative reaction. Knowing that they are young and they have not had a chance to see the love that is there in her relationship with her partner, helps her to deflect experiences like this one without feeling hurt.

Lack of acceptance and understanding from

The basic queer-hating of their society and peers has, so far, been easier to deal with than the silence or illegitimacy placed on us by their grandparents, aunts, uncles, and their father. (Roberts, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1987, p. 150)

adults is a bit different. Ellen's partner's sisters have not yet accepted their relationship, and have expressed their disapproval to her partner's daughters. While Ellen and her partner are concerned that this does not make life any easier for their kids, Ellen does not take their disapproval personally, and stays clear about whose problem it is:

**Ellen:** To me, you know, that ... that's just something that they're going to have to deal with. It's their own issues, right?

\* \* \* \* \*

*On the day that I am writing this section, I am thinking about a call I have to make to my parents tonight. My dad's health is deteriorating, and there is a sense of uncertainty in this situation. Urgency is toying with us, it seems.*

*I am going to B.C. to visit the woman I am involved with, at the end of October. I have told my parents this, explaining the reason for this trip, and expressing my desire to come and spend a couple of days with them while I am out there.*

*Their difficulty with my relationship with her is so great, that I am not sure at this point whether or not they want me to come. I know they want me to pretend, for their sakes, that I am not involved with a woman. I have obliged them in this way in the past. They know that I am no longer willing to do this, because I have realized that this is a distortion of myself that hurts me.*

*So here is the homophobia I am up against:*

*Their's: That they may not want me to spend time with them on this trip, or, if I do, they may expect that I make no mention of the woman I am involved with. That, even though my dad's time is limited, they could still choose to reject me. That their homophobia could effectively block my ability to support them in this time, and keep me from spending time with my dad.*

*Mine, internalized: That I am questioning myself about whether or not it is fair for me to expect them to accept me as I am, at this time in their lives, when they are going through so much. That I can still go there—to that place where I take responsibility for their homophobia, and consider a temporary return to the closet, to make things easier for them. Even though I thought I had made a clear decision not to do that anymore.*

*How I deal with this: I remind myself that I am kind and caring, and motivated by my desire to offer them my love and support. I remind myself that I am an adult with the need, as well the right, to be myself. And I tell myself that, since my time with my dad is so limited at this point, I definitely want it to be real.*

*And I talk it through with my girlfriend in B.C. and members of my family of choice, who have offered me their support as I grapple with this dilemma.*

\* \* \* \* \*

From these seven examples, we can see that we encounter homophobia and biphobia from numerous sources: from our parents, from extended family,



Then there are those subtle acts of discrimination and homophobia that are more difficult to evaluate—neighbours who prefer to keep their distance, PTA parents who discuss you behind your back, school systems that inhibit your child's ability to share her home life in the classroom. (Pollack, 1995, p. 27)

The schools have asked few questions when both parents have volunteered time in the classroom and come to school events. They have accepted our time and energy with gratitude, conducted parent/teacher conferences with both of us, and tacitly supported our nontraditional family. (Tortorilla, 1987, p. 173)

from coworkers, from children in our communities, from strangers. In those instances, it seems that there is little distinction made between homophobia and biphobia. Queer is queer, to those who have not examined their heterosexist beliefs and attitudes. For those of us who are bisexual, our encounters with what we can specifically name as biphobia, have been mostly with people who identify as exclusively gay or lesbian.

The impact of all of this is multi-faceted and different for each of us. We experience unpredictability in our family of origin relationships, and a lack of continuity in our lives when we cannot bring our same-sex partners to the place where we grew up. We experience a wearisome need to constantly choose when to correct assumptions and provide education, and we have to deal with our anger about this. And we find ourselves feeling grateful for something most people can take for granted—respect for our right to choose a lifestyle that is suited to us.

We are resourceful in our responses, in ways that are varied in direct proportion to the numerous ways we experience homophobia and biphobia. Some of us nurture a commitment to social change that keeps us going through the endless process of making space for ourselves and our families, and support each other

in that commitment. Some of us use our loneliness and anger as fuel for community activism. And those of us whose stories are presented here, try to remain clear about who needs to take ownership and responsibility for the problems associated with homophobia and biphobia—namely, those who have difficulty with who we are.

### **The Constancy of Controversy**

There can be no doubt that bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults creating family with our loved ones expend a great deal of energy challenging heterosexism and homophobia. Our very existence challenges the dominant heteronormative model of the family. Most of us know, when we set out to meet our need for family, that we are going against what is considered an acceptable family lifestyle, and stretching the definition of family to include us and our loved ones.

A question that arose for me as I listened to the stories of the people I interviewed was: how does living with constant controversy affect our lives?

I have already quoted Sara talking about what it is like to have to make myriad decisions on a daily basis about who to educate, and being angry about that. She also spoke about fearing that her daughter

The very notion of gay families asserts that people who claim nonprocreative sexual identities and pursue nonprocreative relationships can lay claim to family ties of their own without necessary recourse to marriage, child-bearing, or child-rearing. (Weston, 1991, p. 35)

will not be treated with equal respect and care by homophobic health care professionals. What is it like to live with the demands and feelings that Sara describes?

Exhausting, for one thing. Natalie sums this up well:

**Natalie:** It's certainly much harder being part of a non-traditional family than it is to do the traditional thing. Because there always seems to be something happening, I mean, someone has an issue. There's always some controversy. I always kind of feel like something's going to happen. I hope it settles down soon. It's not amusing. It's draining.

Natalie describes living with constant controversy as being on edge, waiting for the next axe to fall. I am reminded of the way Peter talked about the inconsistency of his father's recognition and acceptance of his lifestyle, and how this necessitates the adoption of a stance that I call a psychic ready position.

My own experience of this is that I am quite acclimatized to living this way. The energy required is a constant low-level drain on my resources. I imagine that, were I to wake up tomorrow morning and heterosexism and homophobia had been magically eliminated, I would have all kinds of energy that I wouldn't know what to do with!

Gay men and lesbians encounter added dimensions that complicate the practice of constructing kin ties: parenting children in a heterosexist society, maintaining erotic relationships without viewing them through the one-dimensional lens of a gendered sameness, risking kin ties in coming out to straight relatives, interweaving peer relationships in multiples of three or four or seven, consistently asserting the importance of relationships that lack social status or even a vocabulary to describe them. (Weston, 1991, p. 212)

I'm not sure if this is a universal experience as a lesbian parent, but it's strange how you have this driving urge to perform twice as well in order to be accepted on the same grounds as heterosexual parents. It's as though you are constantly being assessed. There's a constant overcompensation. (Kuijpers, in Wakeling and Bradstock, 1995, p. 52)

The fact that same-sex couples have to balance stress in so many systems at once—their own families of origin, their relationship, the gay/lesbian community, their ethnic or religious communities, and mainstream society—makes their efforts at forming a family an impressive juggling act. And the complexity of a relationship between people with the same gender socialization can create further confusion and conflict, yet the problem may not be evident to the straight therapist. (Markowitz, quoted in Wakeling and Bradstock, 1995, p. 70)

I am concerned about how adeptly we cope with the constant threats and demands that come with being queer, and trying to create family for ourselves. Obviously, being good at this is a matter of survival, and necessity has been the mother of our inventive responses. But whenever I notice that large amounts of energy are being spent on coping with the status quo, I find myself asking if I and others are being colonized by these dynamics. Are there any other ways to get by, and what else could we be doing with this energy?

Some queer parents have made a point of creating social networks among similar kinds of families; socializing with others with whom there is shared experience creates a buffer between the individual family and controversy. Controversy cannot be completely eliminated, but we can exercise some control over how often we are exposed to it, creating spaces and times during which we are holding it at bay.

Others choose to be actively involved in efforts to eliminate discrimination through legislative reform, education, or cultural expression. Any efforts aimed at changing attitudes will help eliminate controversy as a given condition of our lives.

And for those of us who identify as bisexual, life in a heterosexual scenario sometimes surfaces in

**TO BE EXPLORED  
FURTHER.....**

Because family is not some static institution, but a cultural category that can represent assimilation *or* challenge (again, in context), there can be no definitive answer to the debate on assimilationism. Rather than representing a crystallized variation of some mythically mainstream form of kinship, gay families simply present one element in a broader discourse on family whose meanings are continuously elaborated in everyday situations of conflict and risk, from holidays and custody disputes to disclosures of lesbian or gay identity. (Weston, 1991, p. 199)

our thoughts and hopes, as tempting and beckoning. Natalie and I talked about this in one of her interviews: knowing that one of the options we have is so much easier than the others. And yet both of us reject the idea of choosing a particular kind of relationship because it is the path of least resistance; we want our connections with our intimate partners to be about more than that. How do we make choices that live up to our standards for ourselves, when we know that one of the directions we could go in is relatively hassle-free? To what extent does this influence our choices? And if we are in a relationship with someone of another sex, how are we affected by the distorting dynamics of heterosexual privilege? Perhaps openly acknowledging our attractions to others, and finding ways to express ourselves as sexually vibrant people, are basic elements of any healthy relationship? Is it possible to live this way without cultivating controversy?

How we deal with controversy as a constant in our lives is definitely an area that needs to be explored further.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I am thinking about the debate among queers and other critical thinkers about whether*

*relating our lives to the concept of family is useful at all. Are we going for assimilation? How do we reconcile our needs for recognition and acceptance with our commitment to dislodging the power of the heteronormative status quo?*

*I remind myself that in the stories of those of us whose lives make up the fabric of this project, family is meaningful. So I ground myself in that, and work at excavating some possible meanings of family in the lives we are currently living.*

*However, in taking up this whole business of controversy and its impact on our lives, there is an opening through which other ways of thinking about relationships can come ...*

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Family and Quality of Life**

In spite of the controversy we live with, creating family with the people who mean the most to us, brings contentment:

**Peter:** I'm much more clear than I would have been ten years ago. Knowing where I stand with the people in my life that are very dear to me, outside of my family [of origin] members ... And I think that ... it will just continue. I'm pretty content right now.

For Natalie, embracing the idea of creating a family of choice has given her a greater sense of control over the quality of her life:

**Natalie:** It's certainly less abusive than a conventional family could be. Cause I just won't let it be, not let it go past a certain point. Because it's not a right ... to be part of my family. It's something people get because of who they are or because of some sort of effort. Before I just thought it was ... a right. You're part of my family, so I guess I just have to take all of this and that is just part of the deal, too. Whereas now, I just ... I have no problem writing people off, if you don't uphold a certain code of behaviour.

Claiming self-determination in who we consider family, with a conscious intent to eliminate or reduce the significance of the relationships in our lives that are damaging to us, is a major step in moving toward greater quality of life. The choice factor in our family lives makes this a possibility. If we have weathered the emotional risks of coming out to our families of origin, often suffering painful rejection, we can sometimes bring to the process of creating family, the ability to make clear choices about healthy relationships. I say sometimes, because this certainly does not happen in every case; bisexual, lesbian and gay adults definitely have our share of unhealthy relationships, intimate and otherwise, with the people with whom we are close. My intention is to simply point out the *possibility* of greater agency in the act of choosing family, and to show that some of us experience the potential of this to increase the quality of our lives.

Defined in opposition to biological family, the concept of families we choose proved attractive in part because it reintroduced agency and a subjective sense of making culture into lesbian and gay social organization. (Weston, 1991, p. 135)

Peter credits his relationships with his loved

ones as influencing his quality of life by their contribution to his well-being:

**Peter:** My relationships with these people are a reflection of the quality of my life. Um ... I think I am who I am, because of the influences in my life, over a number of years. Because I like myself, and because I feel good about myself. I think that's very important, and these people have played a significant role in that.

Pain and suffering are inflicted on same sex couples and their children for daring to live as though they are a family unit. This pain is something that should not be underestimated: belonging is something we all have a right to. We need somewhere we can have our identity affirmed, somewhere we can practice being human. (Wakeling, in Wakeling and Bradstock, 1995, p. 15)

More useful than rhetorical attacks on a monolith called "the family" are ethnographically and historically grounded accounts that ask what families mean to people who say they have or want them. (Weston, 1991, p. 199)

For many of us, being able to be fully ourselves, feeling known, and being appreciated for the fullness of who we are, is something we have only experienced with our loved ones/members of our families of choice. The importance of these experiences to the overall quality of our lives cannot be overstated. It is profound, and for many of us, these experiences constitute coming home to emotional honesty and peace in our experience of connectedness with others.

For Sara, experiencing family—a powerful mix of joys and struggles—makes her feel complete:

**Sara:** I think I'm complete. I think I'm better for it. I think I'm happier and healthier for having had good experiences, and having worked for what I want in my life.

• • • • •

*I wondered, as I wrote this section, how my experience related to my participants' accounts of the connections between*



*experiencing family, and quality of life. After all, I don't really feel like I have created a family of choice, in the way some of them have. And then I realize that I have fallen into linear thinking, as if there is an endpoint in creating and becoming family, and I am not there yet, so I have nothing to contribute.*

*All of my participants would, I believe, say that they are still in the process of creating family for themselves. As am I. So it is in reflecting on the process as I am experiencing it, that I can contribute to this question about quality of life ...*

*I often have moments of complete awe about the number of extraordinary people who are a part of my life. On a daily basis, I feel loved, nurtured, inspired, amused, and challenged by the diverse women, men, and children I count among my loved ones. These are the family relationships whose impact on the quality of my life is most obvious. I feel richly blessed, and grateful for this.*

*In trying to describe how family and quality of life intersect for me, I must now also include my family of origin relationships. This marks a significant change from where things stood when I began this project. A remarkable combination of events has brought about profound shifts in the way my parents and my brothers and I relate to each other. Outdated perceptions of each other have been dislodged by the challenges we have faced and are facing with my younger brother's re-emergence and my Dad's impending death. Old resentments seem to be dissolving, and new ways of being with each other seem possible. This is a surprise to me. I had let go of my desire for this kind of healing ... which may have something to do with it now being able to happen.*

*So it no longer seems that the depth of connection I desire with other people will have to be found in a family I choose and create for myself, to the exclusion of my family of origin. There seems to be a way to embrace the contradictions in my parents, without betraying the child within me who was so hurt by their violence, which makes possible a genuine connection between us as adults. This is very new to me; there is an element of tentativeness in my understanding of all this ...*

What is taken to be family is never something settled once and for all, but derives its meaning in relation to the conditions and understandings of everyday life. (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. x)

Because our relationships to each other are not defined in traditional ways, I am always reminded that I can't take anything for granted, that I must think about my life anew every day. On my bad days that feels very tiring, on my good days, it's invigorating. (Washburne, 1987, p. 145)

*How is it that all of these changes in my family of origin are happening in the period of a couple of years in which I have taken up this work of looking at the meaning of family in my life, and in the lives of other adults who, like me, define our sexuality outside of the heterosexual norm?*

*Quality of life, for me, is moving into dimensions of richness and depth I never anticipated. Treasured connections with members of my family of choice are deepening, and new friends are entering that inner circle. Increasingly real and meaningful connections are starting to grow in my family of origin, like plants that have been dormant for years and all of sudden start to flourish.*

*This is pretty overwhelming, definitely one of the most emotionally demanding times in my life. I am responding by trying to attune myself to all this change with a balance of groundedness and fluidity ... earth and water ... conscious reflection and passionate participation ... air and fire ...*

\* \* \* \* \*

The six people I interviewed and I had different

things to say about how our experience of family affects the quality of our lives, depending on where we are in the process of creating and becoming family. Whether we experience it through contentment, self-determination, self-love, a sense of completion, or hope, there seems to be a clear and positive correlation between experiencing family in our lives, and quality of life.

Some of us choose to have children, and some of us have children from earlier relationships, that become part of our experience of family as bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults. How having children informs our experience of family is the subject of the following chapter.

## HAVING CHILDREN

### Checking My Baggage

This chapter is a particularly challenging one for me to write—for two reasons. Firstly, I am in the process of trying to become pregnant, myself. Today is Saturday; I inseminated myself on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday of this week. As I write this, I am wondering if I am pregnant, and hoping that I am. I am acutely aware of how being so immersed in this is making it hard for me to write: this is not a topic to be discussed in a thesis! This is a profoundly absorbing life experience that I am having at this very moment!

I am not sure how to take my experience, the experience of the two other participants whose stories will be a part of this section, and reflect on it all as part of a larger picture. When I think about having children these days, my focus goes immediately to my belly! My thoughts are about what may be going on there, and all my senses are searching for the information I want: am I pregnant?

The second reason that I am finding this piece hard to write is that I have come up against my own biases about the value of parenting. Through my reading, I have been challenged to see the ways in which

Are lesbians immune to a culture of compulsory motherhood? Of course not. We were girls before we were aware lesbians, and we were raised by families that expected us to become mothers ... If we fail to ask ourselves the kinds of questions I have raised here, and many more, we essentially embrace not only the personal experience of mothering but the institution of motherhood as well. (Polikoff, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1987, p. 49,54)

cultural assumptions about the institution of motherhood, especially, and parenting in general, have shaped my thinking. I see now that these biases were operative in the interview process I undertook with my six participants. With the two participants who have children, I spent time asking detailed questions about how having children affected their experience of family. I did not, however, spend any time asking the other four how their choices to be child-free affected their experience of family. The term 'child-free' was not even in my lexicon until I read it in the literature.

It is an interesting word—child-free—because it takes the notion of not having children, and changes it from a state that is defined in a negative sense as the absence of something, to a state that is defined in a positive sense by referencing the positive quality of freedom. By not asking the other four participants about their experiences of family as child-free individuals, I have reinforced the cultural assumptions about parenting in a subtle way. I have not accorded equal space to the positive choice to pass on parenting, that many people make. I am perpetuating the value system that says that being child-free is to be lacking something.

I can see, now, how this results in something being missing in the picture I wanted to give people

I have read a great deal about woman as mother, but virtually nothing about woman as nonmother, as if her choice should be taken for granted and her life were not an issue. (Klepfisz, 1987, p. 55)

**TO BE EXPLORED FURTHER.....**

about the experiences of family in the lives of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults. Unfortunately, I cannot go back and remedy this, now. I can only point to the empty space where these stories should be—which is my intention here—and proceed to share the stories I do have, from the two women I interviewed who have children, and from my own life.

### **Becoming Parents: Getting Pregnant**

Among the seven people whose stories are included in this project, three of us have three very different experiences of the process of becoming parents. And there is even greater diversity in the ways that bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults become parents than will be represented here.

I will explore how the three of us experienced (or are experiencing, in my case) becoming parents, by looking at each person's process, in turn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once Sara and her partner decided that they wanted to have a child, and that Sara would be the one to get pregnant, they sought information about alternative insemination.

**Sara:** We talked to other people. We didn't know anybody who had kids, other than from a marriage or a

In this context, biological ties no longer appeared as a given but as something consciously created, with choice representing a necessary and structural condition of parenting for anyone otherwise exclusively engaged in nonprocreative sex. By situating relationships between parent and child within the metaphor of choice that defines gay families, this argument underlined the implicit contrast between gay and straight parenting. (Weston, 1991, p. 190)

Our daughter was conceived through a process we define as *alternative fertilization*, language which to us reflects a sense of woman-controlled conception rather than the traditional term *artificial insemination*, which calls up images of medically induced plastic babies. (Zook and Hallenback, 1987, p. 89-90)

previous relationship. So we talked to other people about what they thought about it. Had they considered it? Did they know what to do, how to do it, if there was, you know, people around? Did they know any gay men that were donors? At this point, we didn't know there was a clinic here. We didn't have money to travel to be inseminated. So we talked around a bit.

And there's kind of a funny story around my brother and his wife who were here, and we were just telling them what we had been thinking about and talking about and hoping to do. And ... at the time we did come across another couple that were thinking about inseminating as well, so we were just kind of running it by, sort of feeling \_\_\_\_\_ out to see what his reaction would be to donating sperm. Just trying it on. Not asking him anything in particular. And he had misunderstood and thought that we were asking him, to donate sperm to us, and he looked at his wife and she looked at him, and he looked at us and said, well, yeah, we'll do that for you. And we said, whoa! We're not asking that. Can you imagine?! I mean, he's adopted. But ... can you imagine, with my luck, the baby would be a boy, it would be the spitting image of you, and we'd be on Geraldo! No, no, no! That's not what I meant. I thought it was really wonderful that he was willing to do that. But no ... I just couldn't imagine all the complications out of that, right?

Anyway, we had a good laugh over that, but we did a lot of that. Just talking to people and trying it out and seeing what kind of reaction we got and how people responded and then, we discovered that there was clinic. And sperm was available. So we went to see our family doctor, found out we needed a referral, and he was happy to do that, and we were all gung ho, we wanted to go tomorrow. And there was a six month waiting list. So that was kind of a ... deflating our bubble, but ... anyway, we waited the six months and went in for the assessment.

Notable elements of Sara's and her partner's process up to this point include: looking for informa-

Profound and significant differences make this a unique decision for lesbians. Most people are unaware of the many issues we need to deal with in the course of deciding whether or not to parent. Many women today are finding the parenthood question an increasingly perplexing one. For lesbians making this decision, however, there are several added dimensions which make this choice even more difficult and complicated. It is not a simple, straightforward choice, and the complexity of the concerns can be both challenging and overwhelming. (Pies, 1985, p. xvi)

tion about their options, checking to see if there was support for this decision among family and friends, enlisting the support of their family doctor, and accessing mainstream services designed to assist heterosexual couples who are having difficulty conceiving a child. Fortunately for them, their experiences of talking about it with friends and family were positive, overall, and their family doctor is well-known for his openness and support for alternative lifestyles. They had an ally from the start; any resistance from the clinic would have been met by challenges from him.

**Sara:** The woman who did the assessment was Doctor \_\_\_\_\_, who Doctor \_\_\_\_\_ [their family doctor] said was absolutely fine with this. The problem is the policy because of the Salvation Army [the clinic is in a Salvation Army-run hospital], but she was perfectly happy and willing to help, and ... I'm not sure what she did in terms of their policy which is to only inseminate couples—heterosexual couples—but when I went in, she asked me where my partner was. Because I went alone, thinking that that would be a problem. She said, how come your partner's not here? And I said, we didn't know if that was going to be okay or not, because we had been told about the policy. So she said, oh well ... and went on to something else. She was great.

This is an example of how living in the psychic ready position that keeps up prepared for homophobic reactions can actually rob us of opportunities to experience validation of who we are. This is another way we encounter homophobia: it doesn't always have



to originate from an external source. We have internalized the lessons so well that some of our actions to protect ourselves also function to keep us in line. I find myself asking, how was it that nobody told Sara that it would be okay for her partner to accompany her to the assessment? Is this an example of the numerous situations we encounter when the service-provider we have an appointment with is queer-positive, but the support staff have not been educated to ensure that their role in the provision of the service is consistent with the attitudes of the health care professional involved? It was not enough for this doctor to be open herself; she should have made sure that her patient would receive the best possible service from all the players involved. The work of eliminating homophobia and heterosexism requires this kind of attention to detail.

**Sara:** They do a physical exam, and tests for STD's and HIV, and all sorts of blood work. And then there's the physical characteristic stuff. They give you a photocopied sheet, and it lists all these different characteristics, and the idea is—and I think it even says this at the top—to match these characteristics as close as possible to your husband. So that's the ... that's the idea, that you just ... and so I matched it to \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner]. And that was our choice. We wanted to do that. And we had talked about it before. We knew that we could pick physical characteristics, and, so ... we picked height, and ... and you can ... height and weight and hair colour and eye colour and skin colour, and ...

With a view to possible legal complications or a desire to legitimate a nonbiological mother's claim to parental status, some lesbian mothers prefer not to know a donor's identity. A few went so far as to use sperm from several donors to make it difficult to trace the child's genitor. There was always a danger that a donor would have a change of heart, redefining his contribution from gift of sperm to possession of the shared biological substance that would give him grounds for a custody case. (Weston, 1991, p. 170)

We talked about it a lot, whether the child might want a father. It was more important that we not have to deal with a third party intruding in our lives. (Hill, 1987, p. 112)

skin tone, I think. And they match those right up. They find a donor that matches as closely as they can, and they said that they're pretty good at getting all the characteristics you ask for, and ... but they don't give you ... you don't get any information at all, about who the donor is.

Women who get pregnant through alternative insemination have differing views on the relative merits of having a known or an unknown donor. The major issue, for lesbians, is the fact that the law provides no protection for a lesbian mother, should she ever have to contest a custody suit. Although some judges have awarded custody to a child's lesbian mother in situations in which the father was suing for custody, there is still little legal precedence for this. Human rights legislation that prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation has not been passed in every province; even where it is in place, it would be very easy for a judge to make a homophobic decision and reference it to other criteria.

Another reason many lesbians prefer keeping the identity of the donor unknown is that they do not want to have the donor involved in the child's life. Some women choose other male adults to serve as role models for their child; some do not believe it is important to do this.

Sara and her partner were initially completely

comfortable with their preference for an unknown donor; as time went on, Sara wished she knew more about the man who is her daughter's biological father.

The fact that Sara mentions that not knowing more about her daughter's biological father doesn't really bother her *no less than four times* in this passage from her interview speaks to me more of ambivalence than acceptance.

**Sara:** It didn't bother me in the beginning. And it didn't really ... I knew that, when I went in. And then I saw a show afterwards, on television, about some of the ... some clinics in other parts of the country and they actually do give a profile. And I thought, I'd like to have one of those. But, um ... it doesn't really bother me. Like, it would be nice to know things like ... what his education was, or what his work, what his job was, what his hobbies were, what he liked to do, what his dislikes were. Those sorts of things would be interesting to have, but, I mean, it doesn't really bother me. It's a curiosity, really. And other than that, it's not important. But I went back to the clinic and asked for his medical history. And all they would tell me was his medical history is immaculate. And I said, well, what does that mean? Well, all we can tell you is his medical history is immaculate. And they just kept repeating that, which got kind of annoying. All that means is he has no genetic medical history. And they do a very—I asked—they do a very in depth genetic profile of the donor. So that's fine. It doesn't bother me. And I'll be very up front with \_\_\_\_\_, when she asks about it. You know? I'll tell her that there was a very nice man that was willing to help out people who couldn't get pregnant the way most people do, and um, that he just volunteered to help, and we're very grateful to him for that, but he didn't want to have children, and we're very glad that he didn't. And ... you know, we'll answer whatever questions she has, but ... I think—and I don't know, I'm just sort of speculating—but I think, in a lot of ways, kids take their lead from whoever the caregiver is, and you know, if it's not a big deal, it's not a big deal.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I don't agree with Sara on this one. As an adopted person, I know how important it has*

*become for me to know the identity of my birthparents, and the birth family of origin that continues, through me ...*

*My two brothers are also adopted. My younger brother always expressed an interest in finding out who his birthparents are. I was always very open about being adopted, and my line was that I was completely comfortable with it. I considered the people who cared for us in our day-to-day lives to be our real parents and I had no need to know who my birthparents are. My older brother never said a word about being adopted until, at his wedding, in front of hundreds of people (many of whom were complete strangers to him) he disclosed that he was adopted and said that he was proud to be a Currie and to carry on the name. Hardly an indication of a need to know about his biological and cultural origins!*

From a non-biological mother's letter to her child on his first birthday:

As we discussed the possibility of Kathleen getting pregnant, it became clear that she did not want her baby's father to be anonymous. Some lesbians we know are having children by artificial insemination, but it was important to Kathleen that you know about your father, even if he did not play much of a role in your life. She says she has known too many adopted children whose adult lives are spent searching for their biological families. (Washburne, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1985, p. 142)

*And yet, here we are, these three very different personalities, and I am the last one of the three of us to begin the search for my birthparents. As adults, now in our thirties, we experience not knowing as lacking something meaningful in our lives. We want to know, and we feel we have a right to know where we came from.*

*This figured very significantly for me, in deciding how I would approach getting pregnant. I have never considered an unknown donor, because I would not want to knowingly create a situation in which my child would have to live with these unanswered questions. To be clear, it is not as if this is a source of great anguish for me, it is simply a void in my life that I would not wish for anyone else, if it could be prevented. And it can.*

Lesbians who had been adopted as children and lesbian birth mothers who had once given children up for adoption took the lead in formulating a critique that portrayed anonymous insemination as detrimental to a child's well-being in a society that privileges biological inheritance. (Weston, 1991, p. 170)

**TO BE EXPLORED FURTHER.....**

*In the realm of broader social analysis, I find it interesting that there is so little debate about the ethics of using unknown donors in clinics that provide services to people trying to conceive, at a time when family services agencies across the continent are setting up adoption reunion departments. There is growing recognition that protecting the identity of parents who give up a child for adoption, is not an approach that honours the needs and rights of both parties, parents and child. The outcome of these shifts in thinking is still unknown. I think that the growing recognition of the depth at which even an infant experiences being separated from their birthmother, is the start of a much-needed transformation of how adoptions are done.*

*I also predict that, at some point, these evolutionary shifts in consciousness will affect the way the donation of sperm is handled.*

*And really ... if the reason the identity of birthmothers has been kept secret is to protect them from social stigma, and to enable them to move on in their lives, wouldn't it be wiser to work toward eliminating the attitudinal barriers to this, rather than perpetuate an atmosphere of secrecy around adoption? Other cultures manage to do this quite well. And if a lesbian mother's fear is that she may lose her child, or not be respected as the primary caregiver if the donor's identity were known, wouldn't it be better to find other ways to ensure respect and security for the mother-child relationship?*

There were limits to the openness of the clinic Sara went to: when it came to the actually doing the insemination, that is where the services of the clinic

came to an end.

**Sara:** They told us that we just contact them whenever I was ovulating, and we could go in and pick the sperm up, but they wouldn't inseminate on site.

***Discourse Analysis:***

This is an example of how language is used to obscure power relations and discrimination. In fact, the clinician was informing Sara that they would not do the actual insemination. If she had simply said that, however, without adding the qualifier "on site," the fact that Sara was not being offered the full services offered to a heterosexual woman would have been obvious.

The use of language here is interesting: in fact, they wouldn't inseminate off-site either! They would not do the insemination, although this is a service that is provided to heterosexual couples.

**Sara:** But that was fine with us. We were just as happy to pick it up and bring it home. And that's what we did, when I was ovulating. I called them up, and said, this is Sara \_\_\_\_\_, I'm ovulating, I'm coming to pick up sperm, I'll be there in half an hour. They got the little plunger ready, and they loaded the sperm into it, and ... I just went in, paid them my money, they wrote me a receipt, and I drove home like crazy.

The clinic charges \$135.00 each time; this is not technically the price of sperm, but an amount that offsets the cost of screening, freezing, and storing it.

Sara conceived after three tries, or three months. The data that has been compiled on straight couples trying to conceive suggests that twenty-five percent will conceive during the first three months of trying, fifty percent by six months, seventy-five percent after nine months, and somewhere around ninety-nine percent after a year of attempts. Those who do not conceive after twelve months are usually referred

to a fertility specialist if they wish to continue trying to become pregnant.

**Sara:** The afternoon that I knew the test results would be back, I called my doctor's office. I was at the SMU library, and \_\_\_\_\_ [the nurse/receptionist whom Sara knew on a first-name basis] said it's ... she paused for a moment ... and she said ... it's positive! And I near fell over. And I was there all by myself. At the Saint Mary's library, on a pay-phone. And I was so excited I didn't know what to do with myself. And I was scared at the same time, and my adrenaline was pumping and I just ... had nobody to share it with. And I was wishing I had waited til I got home to call, but ... I just couldn't wait. I had to phone. So I phoned \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner]. But first I asked \_\_\_\_\_ [the receptionist], are you sure? You're sure? You're absolutely sure? Yes. Positive. So I phoned \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] at home. And told her. And she was really excited, more so that I thought she would be. Really excited. And scared and nervous and ... thinking ... oh my god, this is for real. It's ... I can't back out. I've done ... I did it. This is it. And it was a scary day, too. You know? I mean, your life is just about to change, in the biggest way you can ever imagine. And you can't even begin to think about all the ramifications that has ... what that means. And ... it's really exciting, and terrifying.

The whole of life changed its context when we learned the results of the pregnancy test. Pregnancy does have a way of doing that! My lover and I puzzled over how and when to tell our families. We were overjoyed by the news, yet we would be asking them to accept yet another extension of an already unconventional lifestyle. (Tortorilla, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1985, p. 168)

For Sara and her partner, the process of getting pregnant was something they considered carefully, and a decision they made over time, as two adults in their thirties, in a committed, long-term relationship. This is only one possible context for the decision to get pregnant. Ellen's experience, and mine, exemplify another couple of ways of going about it.

Ellen was seventeen when she had her daughter.

**Ellen:** It was hard, growing up as a teenager. And in the back of my mind, I was thinking that ... I'm going to get back at my mother by getting pregnant. To me that's ... what it was. And that's what I did. And after that, it's not that I regret anything, it's just that, I went about it the wrong way? And I ... I had all this anger at my mother for ... I don't know why. I don't know where it was coming from, or if it was just my own issues.

Like many women—straight and queer—Ellen became pregnant at a time in her life when she was not really focused on what it meant to become a parent. To this day, she is glad she had her daughter when she did, and grateful for the assistance provided by her extended family and community. Although it wasn't easy, sometimes she wishes she had given birth to another child at that time.

**Ellen:** I love children, actually. (laughs) Yeah ... I wish I had, at the time when I was younger, I wish I had a couple more children, at the time. But ... I wasn't really ready but ... now, when I look back at it, you know, I would have liked to have had a couple more children.

Ellen is not the first woman I have heard express this nostalgic kind of regret that they did not have a child, or more children, when they were



younger. What strikes me about these reflections, whenever I hear them, is the ironic combination of the understanding of what a huge undertaking having a child is, and the romantic hankering back to a time when they were less aware of this, and more willing to just dive in and do it. Ellen recalls that time in her life as a time when she did not stop to consider all the variables she knows about now; it is much harder to think about having a child now, even though she is, in many ways, more prepared. This sentiment in parents is not exclusive to those of us whose sexuality falls outside of the norm.

\* \* \* \* \*

*This is the third time in my life that I have tried to get pregnant. The first two times when I was trying, it was with the same partner, a close male friend, who is straight.. I am very glad I did not conceive a child with him. As the years have passed, his lifestyle and mine have gone in significantly different directions. He was never sure how involved he would want to be in parenting, but I know now that I would have done whatever I needed to do to ensure that our child would not have spent time in the environment is which he lives. Having wanted to get pregnant so badly, it is strange to feel so grateful that it didn't work out, but I do.*

*Although I have talked about my plans to have a child with different partners that I have been with over the years, and with the exception of one male lover, my partners have been supportive ... most of the time that I have actively pursued it, I have been on my*

own.

Our relationship with our daughter's father has become a source of joy for all of us. Although we initially felt fear and uncertainty, we have been able to discuss our concerns and actively support each other in our varied roles ... He describes himself as a father, but not a parent. (Zook and Hallenback, 1985, p. 91)

*I have learned more about how to figure out when I ovulate, as I have gone along. I have learned that the approach that works best for me, is to be inseminated, or to inseminate myself. Having sex on certain days for this specific purpose just isn't how my desire works ... having procreation as an agenda changes the experience ... passion and ovulation do not necessarily meet on schedule! So, for me, sexual intimacy and getting pregnant stay separate. Although I must add that I have grown into a relationship of emotional intimacy with the man I am trying to conceive with, characterized by tenderness and humour, that is very precious to me.*

*I have learned a lot, in this process, about how sex, and intimacy, and passion, and procreation, work in my life ... and I have given myself permission and space to explore and validate my own ways ...*

*I have also had the experience of being referred to a fertility specialist, because we had been trying—with a few missed months—for a little over a year, and my family doctor thought it was time to check everything out.*

*What an emotional thing that was! I felt the weight of the stigma that goes along with being infertile ... What would they find out? What would I do if I found out I could not get pregnant? It was challenging for me to work through. I ended up feeling ready to find out whatever there was to find out, knowing that there are lots of ways that I could have children in my life ... and knowing that I would be okay with whatever the situation turned out to be. It was quite a ride getting to that*

*point, however. I was amazed at the power of the word—fertility . I felt like I was walking through an emotional minefield, with my goal being to emerge with my psyche unharmed.*

*Everything checked out as a-okay.*

*Most notable in my experience so far has been the support of my family doctor, who is bi ... my partner in this project, who is a gay man ... and the fertility specialist I saw , who is a lesbian. Not all of them are openly queer, but because they are all physicians, they know each other and they are all out to each other. In fact, they seem to be getting a kick out of being involved in this hoped-for pregnancy ... and I feel completely safe with them and really well cared for ...*

\* \* \* \* \*

Three of the seven of us have stories about the process of getting pregnant. But only one of us can go on to talk about what it was like giving birth and accessing post-natal care, as a lesbian or bisexual person. Ellen was not out as a lesbian when she gave birth to her daughter, making her birthing experience similar to those of many heterosexual young women who have children as single moms. I have not yet had the experience of childbirth, so my contribution ends at this point. Ellen's story will emerge again later in this chapter to be woven into a section in which parenting concerns are explored.

Now we turn to Sara's experience of giving birth and accessing health care as a lesbian family.

### **Birth and Post-Natal Care: One Story**

Sara's story is the story of how one lesbian family asserted itself in the face of crisis. As she and her partner were confronted with the likelihood that they would lose their baby, their vision of how the birth would take place and the extent to which they would have to deal with the health care professionals involved, changed drastically:

**Sara:** Initially, we figured we'd slip in and slip out, right? We'd be there overnight, and that would be it. \_\_\_\_\_ [a close friend, a lesbian, and a doctor] was going to be there to deliver the baby, and we weren't at all concerned about it ... When things went wrong, we obviously ended up being there a whole lot longer than we intended, and ... we knew that we could possibly have a bad situation.

As they faced the challenge of how to access the support they needed in the midst of this emotionally tumultuous time, a curious thing happened: the fact that they were two women in a lesbian relationship took a back seat to the dynamics of meeting their needs as parents, and the needs of their infant, who was born alive but had a very slim chance of surviving.

When Sara was just twenty-three weeks into the pregnancy, she had a discharge that seemed to

be mostly mucous. She phoned her family doctor, who did not think it was anything urgent and made an appointment for a few days later to check it out. When Sara was examined at that appointment, they found she had a bulging membrane—when part of the amniotic sac actually comes out through the cervical opening. This is a very urgent condition because of the risk of infection, and Sara was hospitalized immediately. Because she was so early in her pregnancy, it was not physically apparent that she was pregnant, so the trauma for her began with waiting in the maternity hospital's admissions area and being asked if she was pregnant. When she was admitted, she was told she was going to be there until she delivered. Sara tells the story:

**Sara:** I was 23 weeks, and I was thinking, you mean like ... 18 more weeks? And they said, no, you're not going to make it that long. They did tell me that there was a very small chance that the membranes would recede and that we would know that in the next 48 hours. And they didn't. And they said that the most likely scenario was, because the membranes were exposed to the vaginal canal, that they would rupture. And when that happened, there was a greater chance of infection. Which ... ultimately, is what happened. I was in bed for two weeks and they ruptured, and I was leaking fluid ... And the fluid got infected and ... they had to get her out. The infected fluid, she couldn't stay in there. So ... they induced, and she was born. But they said ... they told me that ... she wouldn't live. They said she would be born ... she was ... if she wasn't born dead, she ... she wouldn't be strong enough to

survive.

It was awful. Laying in bed like that for two weeks, with nothing to do but think. About what was happening to ... it was really awful. And every day at that point in gestation makes all the difference. You know? I forget what the percentage was, but they said that every day the baby's chances improve by such-and-such per cent.

Anyway ... uh ... I started to have some pains, and I was really hoping it might be gas. And I called the nurse. And she says, no, dear, I don't think so ... and ... they took my temperature and it was on the way up. So they took me down to the labour and delivery room, and ... I was there by myself when that happened, and I was crying, and \_\_\_\_\_'s [her partner's] friend, \_\_\_\_\_, popped in for a visit, right at that time, and she burst into tears, so she came down with me, and ... we spent—that was around noon—and we spent all day in the labour and delivery room just waiting. And feeling not sure. And then she left and \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] came. And her sister came, too. And I called Mom and Dad and they waited at home for awhile, and \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] called them with updates, and then they couldn't wait anymore, so they came in. And \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ [family of choice members] came by and they stayed. So we had a roomful. They were all in the labour and delivery room. All of these people. Which was good.

And they were waiting to see what my temperature would do. And they gave me another shot of steroids—I had been given steroids a couple of times since I was there, because that hurries up the lung development, which is the biggest concern with premature babies. And they put me on antibiotics, because, until she was born she would get some of the antibiotics through the placenta which would help her fight the infection. And they had me hooked up to the fetal monitor, and her heartbeat was fine, and ... but they said ... oh, I don't know, it must have been about 8:00 at night, I guess, they shut the monitor off. They said ... there's no point watching this, that ... she's gonna make it or she's not, and it's hard to watch the monitor. So they shut it off.

And the specialist sort of intimated at that point ... and they gave that to \_\_\_\_\_ [their lesbian doctor friend] to do ... or I suspect she volunteered to do that. She came in and told us that they had been discussing it, and they felt the baby's chances were zero, or close to zero, for survival. And ... um ... asked if we had any questions, and talked a little bit about what they do when a baby's born dead. And that was a really hard ... a really hard moment. \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] never gave up hope. She said, she's going to be fine. And I'm laying on the bed crying, with this baby in my belly, thinking, I'm going to have to push a dead baby out. And saying to \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner], listen to what they're telling us! This is not going to be okay! And she said, no, the baby's going to be fine, the baby's going to be fine.

Not all experiences are like this one:

Lesbian mothers with special needs children have talked about the frustrations they experienced in working with agencies such as hospitals, schools, and other institutions, in which the staff were more concerned and curious about their lesbianism than about the child's needs. (Pies, 1985, p. 92)

This experience of childbirth—teetering on the edge of life and death—illustrates how human beings can put aside differences when the demands of the situation force a focus on a common concern. Everyone involved in this situation: the lesbian couple, their family of biological and non-biological kin, and the health care professionals, were united in their hope that the baby would make it, and committed to do whatever they could, in their various roles, to support every effort in that direction. Clearly, the fact that this child was being born to lesbian parents was not foremost in the minds of the professional caregivers; they had been informed by the family doctor that this was a lesbian family, and instructed to accord the non-biological parent the same status and respect due any partner of a woman giving birth. Just as clearly, any

misgivings Sara's parents may still have had about the nature of their daughter's relationship were put aside in their commitment to be there so their daughter and her partner could utilize the strength that comes with the support of family. The fact that Sara, her partner, and the baby comprise a lesbian family was not an issue at all, during this time.

**Sara:** When she was born ... I mean, they look for certain things, like reflexes and skin colour ... they're pink or grey or ... um ... whether she cries, or kicking, and that sort of stuff. And she came out kicking and crying and pink, and ... all her reflexes were good, and they do an Apgar score, and when they do an Apgar score, they say 10 is the best and most healthy newborn babies get a 9, and, uh ... they do them twice. They do one right away, as soon as they're born, and then they do it five minutes later. And, generally, the score goes up. And most healthy newborns get a 6 or 7 at first and then it goes up. Well, \_\_\_\_\_ [their baby] got a 6. And it went up ... And, uh ... they came over, and she was just ... the skinniest, ugliest little thing ... she looked like a spider monkey. And I thought, oh my god, that's my baby. And \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] thought she was beautiful. And I can't imagine ... (chuckles) ... I thought she was the ugliest little thing! But ... and terrified! I mean, her skin is translucent. You can see through it. You can see the veins, and the ... and, you know, she's very skeletal. No ... no fat under the skin at all. And, uh, all of about 12 inches long, head to toe. And ... anyway, they brought her over to me, and they said, she's a fighter, and she looks good, and we're going to do everything we can for her. And they had said that she wasn't going to live. You know? They pretty much said, expect the worst. So they put her in the incubator and whisked her off. You know, this neonatology team had come bursting through the door about 10 minutes before she was born. These doors



From a grandfather's letters to his granddaughter, born at twenty-four weeks:

Three months before you were supposed to be born, here you are, an easily recognizable person. You are Zoe, and only Zoe. You pull the same faces all the time. You wrinkle your forehead when we speak to you as some people would raise their eyebrows. You make no sound. We don't know if you can see, but when we touch you and speak to you, you wrinkle your forehead. It's your greeting to us. You have already engaged the love of so many people ... And I think of my first contact with you. I think of it often, and each time I choke up about it. That first day with a 5 to 10 percent chance of survival, when I placed the tip of my little finger in your hand, you gripped it until your knuckles turned white. (De Pree, 1994, p. 41)

opened up, in the labour and delivery room, that had been closed before. These bright lights came on. There's these machines and monitors blinking, they've got an incubator set up, and a warmer, and all this stuff. And these people came in, and it was like something out of a science fiction movie. I mean, like whoosh! Everything ... lights go on, and they're blinking, and people are busy and they're moving around and everybody has a job to do and they're doing this and they're doing that ... and they pass the baby over to me, these people, and they're all huddled over her, and they hooked her up to this and that, and they got her in this great big machine, and she's this tiny, wee, little thing, and they put her in this great big, humongous incubator. And they wheeled her over to the bed so I could look at her ... and I did ... and the nurse said, do you want to touch her? And I was kind of afraid to—she was so tiny. But I did put my hand in, and touched her a little bit, and then they wheeled her away. And there I was laying on the bed, not knowing what to expect, all bloody and sore, and \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] took off. She followed them down the hall. Chased them down the hall with the incubator and ... they went down to intensive care, and they got her set up and ... and she was breathing on her own, too, which they didn't expect, they fully ... they had a ventilator there, to hook her up, and she didn't need it. And that's quite an amazing thing, for somebody that little. And then \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] comes charging into the intensive care unit, and ... the nurse there said ... are you the mother? And \_\_\_\_\_ said, yes, I am! And ... (chuckles) ... he looked at her, like, you're kidding! As if he wanted to say, well, you look pretty damn good! But he didn't say anything. He just gave her kind of a funny look. And she marched right over and the neonatologist talked to her as if she was the mother and explained to her what they were doing, as they were doing it, what they were hooking her up to, and how ... and the nurse that asked that question, later became one of our biggest advocates.

To say that the health care professionals involved did not focus on the lesbian relationship is not to say that there weren't moments when they were momentarily confused. Certainly, the presence of one of the baby's mothers in the intensive care unit, while the biological mother was still recovering in the delivery room, stretched the conceptual framework of family that the health caregivers were accustomed to, forcing an immediate expansion to include this new reality. It was precisely in moments like these, in circumstances which provided no room for hesitation or diversion of attention toward anything but the necessary tasks, that the potential for human beings to accommodate difference was evident.

When I asked Sara if that particular nurse would have been informed about the fact that this was a lesbian family, she explained what she knew about how their doctor had attended to this:

Our female general practitioner paved the way for Rachel to have all the rights and responsibilities accorded a father. (Zook and Hallenback, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1985, p. 91)

**Sara:** Well, \_\_\_\_\_ [their doctor] was very good about making sure that information was on our chart. When we went to the fifth floor, when we were waiting, she put it right on our chart. \_\_\_\_\_ was to be given the same privileges, visiting privileges and what not, as a spouse. And that was on our chart. So that we didn't have to deal with every new shift. And that was a blessing. You wouldn't think that, I mean, a little thing like that ... but it makes a big difference when you have to explain, every new shift, that this is your partner, yes, she can be here, yes, she needs the same information, no, you can't chase her out of the hospital. You

know?

Their doctor did as much as she could to mediate the experience of this lesbian family in the hospital setting; she clearly saw this as part of her responsibility as their physician to look after their health care needs in the birth and post-natal setting. By putting the information on Sara's chart, she made it clear that recognizing this couple and their baby as a family was part of the responsibility of every health caregiver involved, just as familiarizing themselves with other information on the chart is part of their job.

While Sara referred to this aspect of her doctor's care as "a little thing," it seems to me that there is no such thing as a little thing when it comes to addressing institutional heterosexism. Every facet of its manifestation needs to be traced to its roots as it is discovered; in this case, the stress of having to come out, over and over again, to hospital staff who make heterosexist assumptions was eradicated by using a form of internal communication to convey the information. As an extra measure, their doctor stated that if any of the health caregivers working with the family had any problems with this, they were to talk to her, effectively placing herself as a buffer between potentially homophobic staff and the family needing care:

**Sara:** That made a big difference. And she said she wrote that, right at the top of the chart. Signed her name on it. And if you have any problems, call Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ [their doctor]. And she said the same thing to us. If you have any trouble, with anybody, tell me, and I'll deal with them. You don't need that stress. I'll do it. And that was ... that was really welcome.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Journal Entry: 21 October 1997**

*Dad is dying. I am amazed at the scope of the changes this brings. I can feel major shifts happening in the family I grew up in, in the way that people relate to each other. My thoughts are a cacophony of soundless memories, images of the past. I ache for it all to be okay among us, feeling certain it won't be.*

*When I got the news, I first thought about all the good memories I have of times with my Dad. With him, it was rare and significant moments. The idealization and perpetuation of the father figure. Lucky for me, my Dad had so much to offer.*

*It is a summer night in Winnipeg, mid-seventies ... ..*

*Thinking of you, Dad. Looking forward to seeing you, in a week and a half. Wanting to be part of your leaving, and do it as well as we can.*

### **5 January 1998**

*1998 ... this little journal now has dates that span three calendar years ...*

*Well ... I ended up taking a full two months off*

*from working on this. In December, I put the finishing touches on the chapter "Experiencing Family," adding the alternate text that appears in the left margin. Now, I need to finish writing the next chapter 'Having Children', and then I will just have the discourse chapter to write, and the intro and methodology to revise. Oh, and a conclusion of some sort!*

*Dad's health has stabilized, although he is still very sick, and sleeps for a big part of every day. We are all in a holding pattern, waiting for the next round of bad news.*

*The time I spent with him and Mom at the end of October and into the first couple of weeks of November was pretty amazing. I was so impressed by how Dad—and Mom—are going through this process. Their acceptance, and courage, and pragmatism, and humour ... and the sweet, tender ways in which they are going about letting go of each other ... They have been together for 43 years! I had a good visit, was able to be supportive of them, and was actually surprised at how Dad's impending death is causing shifts in all of our relationships. Most notably, my brother Rob, his partner Peg, and their kids went to see them, after close to ten years of no contact. Wow. That is definitely the biggest shift of all.*

*There is so much I could write about what has happened—so much has happened!*

*But what I need to do is take up this work again. Get going ... get these last few pieces done. I want to have the whole text drafted by the end of this month.*

*Angels, be with me. And help me to walk in*

*beauty one more day.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, back to this Sara's birthing story ...

Besides their doctor, other health care professionals chose to become active allies of Sara and her family, during their baby's hospital stay:

**Sara:** The nurse that had asked \_\_\_\_\_ that question, as I said, became our biggest advocate. The forms actually say, mother's name, father's name, and he scratched that all out and he put, mother's name, mother's name. And you know, he was very good about making sure that people knew that and didn't give us any grief. And one of the specialists was there one day and she was telling us about something and someone else was there and she had to introduce us, and she said, this is Sara and \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_'s two moms. And she just said it as matter-of-fact, and went on to continue what she was saying, and then after he left she asked, was that okay? How should I introduce you? Did I say that right? Is there something else I should say? And ... and she was wonderful.

With almost one hundred per cent of the hospital staff, homophobia was either not present or was overcome by their shared commitment to this child's life. There was one nurse that Sara and her partner actually requested be removed from caring for their daughter:

**Sara:** We had one nurse, out of all those nurses that

we dealt with—and there were a lot of them—one nurse that we didn't like, that we felt ... and there's nothing specific that we can say ... just a coldness, a ... sort of a down-your-nose kind of attitude that we felt, that we couldn't really say why. We felt that she didn't, she wasn't as gentle or careful with the baby. Um ... which may have been perception on our part. Because we felt this attitude.

**Andrea:** You were probably watching her very closely if you felt this attitude?

**Sara:** Yeah, yeah. And we mentioned it, and ... we never dealt with her again. And they were really good about that. We mentioned it to the head nurse, who had always been, you know, if you have any problems, questions, make sure you ask me, and we'll sort it out. And very soft-spoken, mild-mannered, but very, um ... very thorough.

With the exception of this one nurse, Sara felt that the fact that she and her partner were in a lesbian relationship really took a back seat in their interactions with hospital staff:

**Sara:** It was so much *not* the focus of what was happening in our lives. I needed to be there every day. \_\_\_\_\_ found it hard to be there that much. But that's okay. And she was really good about making sure that I was okay. And there were times when we'd get bad news and I'd just fall apart and start to cry. And she would say, well, what does that mean? And we need this information. And, well, we don't understand that. You need to say it differently. And she was really good about getting that stuff and saying, do you understand what he's saying? Did you get that? And really sort of took charge. That ... the ... for everybody involved—\_\_\_\_\_ and I and the unit—the lesbian-ness really took a back seat. They treated us both as parents. They

dealt ... as much with \_\_\_\_\_ as a parent. And that may have been because of her take-charge-ness ...

When the baby was strong enough to go home, the family's relationships with the neo-natal unit staff were, for the most part, over. Some of them called Sara from time-to-time to find out how the baby was doing, and one nurse actually lives a few houses down on Sara's street and she'll still invite Sara, her partner, and the baby down for coffee.

The ongoing health care needs of their daughter were now attended to through the Izaak Walton Killam Hospital for Children, not the Grace Maternity Hospital. [This was prior to their amalgamation.] This meant that Sara and her partner had to deal with an entirely new staff and, again, assert their right to be treated as a family. Sara found the atmosphere at the IWK distinctly different from the Grace:

Contesting definitions of family can become all too evident in conflicts over a course of medical treatment or hospital visitation rights. (Weston, 1991, p. 186)

**Sara:** We came back to the IWK and were admitted for other things. You come out, in the waiting area, in the reception, in the emergency room, and ... I mean, there are all kinds of things around that. In how \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] is going to be treated, and what not. And whether or not that's going to affect the care your child gets. Or do you ... swallow your sense of self and dignity and ... erode away at your own self a little more, and not say anything? So that's definitely a concern, but again, you know, we were talking about how kids sort of take their lead from adults. I think people, like



While no one ever asked directly, people were able to respond to the sense of family we were projecting. Other teachers often asked Rachel how Nancy was doing, and some even sent clothing outgrown by their children. We were delighted when a surprise baby shower was held ... We have learned that our easy acceptance and confident projection of family goes a long way in enabling other people to react with the same acceptance. (Zook and Hallenback, 1985, p. 91-92)

I'm not sure if this is a universal experience as a lesbian parent, but it's strange how you have this driving urge to perform twice as well in order to be accepted on the same grounds as heterosexual parents. It's as though you are constantly being assessed. There's a constant overcompensation. (Kuijpers, 1995, p. 52)

the people in the neonatal unit, took their lead from us. And I think people watched us to see how they were supposed to respond. And I think people do that in general, if they don't know what to do. They look for clues and cues and ... try to figure out how to respond, and ... we were up front with it. In the very beginning, and very clear. \_\_\_\_\_ [their daughter] had two moms. And said that.

A number of things about this extraordinary story stand out for me. With a lesbian couple experiencing childbirth, health care professionals have to do extra work in order to be supportive. Little things make a big difference to the family, and allies among the staff are crucial. The difference between a healthy birth and a birth with complications is even more profound for lesbian couples, since it necessitates coming out in many unanticipated contexts. And, in this case, the advocacy skills that these parents developed in the process of getting their family's health care needs met were recognized and appreciated by the hospital staff; Sara was appointed to the Grace Amalgamation Committee as a parent representative and was instrumental in bringing about improvements in neonatal care.

\* \* \* \* \*

*When I listen to Sara tell this story on the tape, parts of it echo a conversation I had with a friend of mine in Wolfville, not long ago. We were talking about the flood in Winnipeg and the response of communities across the country. We know that people can*

*come together, differences no longer significant, in times like these. Why can't we live like that all the time?*

*Crisis teaches us that we are capable of it.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Parenting Concerns**

How can you knowingly saddle a child with the stigma of gay or lesbian parents, ask heterosexual critics, invoking cultural notions of childhood innocence. This is an argument that would deny children to the poor, the racially oppressed, and members of all other groups not assigned to the mythical mainstream of society, respond the defenders of gay families. (Weston, 1991, p. 195)

Bisexual, lesbian and gay adults with children have parenting concerns that overlap with those many heterosexual parents have: how two parents can accommodate each other's different parenting styles, finding complementarity, how to avoid repeating the mistakes of one's parents. And then there are parenting concerns that overlap with the parenting concerns of any group that experiences discrimination: fear for the child's safety, protecting the child from discrimination and teaching them to protect themselves, fostering critical thinking, helping them develop skills for mediating difference, legal rights, living with the foreknowledge of difficult times, and the importance of support.

In the two stories in this study which are parents' stories, two concerns emerged which seemed distinctly related to homophobia. Homophobic rejection by a partner's child is an experience Ellen faced. And the other concern relates to the way people's

Many gay men, despite their knowledge and acceptance of homosexual feelings, may adopt marriage and parenthood as a valuable and viable way of life because they truly desire children and value the role children play in their lives. (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989, p. 169)

I have never reconciled being a lesbian with being a mother, not to this day nearly ten years after the divorce ... I have been praised and admired by lesbians and others across the country for my personal courage, but I cannot bring myself to come out to my son. I have assumed, rightly or wrongly, that he will reject me, and I have chosen to be rejected for having deserted him rather than for my love for women. (Wolfe, 1985, p.75-76)

sexual orientation is not immediately evident and heterosexist assumptions abound. The long-term effort and energy required by parents who have to come out as lesbian, bi, or gay, in countless contexts throughout their lives is inestimable. To accept these repeated experiences of discomfort and struggle as a given in one's future, and to consider having a child to be worth it, requires real commitment. Some lesbian, gay and bisexual parents knowingly make this commitment. For some, being a parent came before their queer self-expression, so their commitment to their child was forced to stretch to encompass new realities. For others, being queer and being a parent could not be integrated, meaning some parents are closeted, and some men and women have given up their children in order to be who they are.

Sara, Ellen and I seem to share a sense that our lives will include struggle because there are many things in our communities that need to be changed; choosing not to have a child does not lessen the need to take action for change.

• \* \* \* \* • \* • \* \*

*I am finding this section so hard to write.*

*After a year-and-a-half of trying, my friend with whom I have been trying to conceive and I have decided to put it on hold. We both know that it is highly unlikely we will try again, it's just that neither of us are fully ready to let*

*it go. It has been a sweet dream we have dreamt together ... an amazing adventure ... a soul-stretching query into our own and each other's hearts. I really, really love this man, and relish the intimacy of our friendship. It is not just the sense of loss that comes with thinking I may not ever get pregnant, it is the loss of the chance to know the child he and I would have, and the loss of the mutual adventure of parenting a child with him, that stiffens me with sadness.*

\* \* \* \* \*

On the day that I am writing the first draft of this section, I really do not feel able to engage in analysis of Sara's and Ellen's parenting concerns. I am keeping at bay a huge sadness about the fact that I have not been able to get pregnant this past year. Positioning myself vis a vis this material in a way that allows me to get an overview, does not seem possible. So I have decided to present Sara's and Ellen's experiences and thoughts in the form of a dialogue among the three of us, as if I were interviewing the two of them on the topic of their concerns as parents.

**Andrea:** One of the things I have heard you both mention is that, as queer parents, you know that there will be rocky times ahead for your children and your family.

**Sara:** And I'm hoping that I can give my daughter what she needs to be able to ... to deal with ... the sort of homophobia she's going to come into contact with, in a way that is ... sure of who she is so that it doesn't threaten her sense of self or her values of her family,

At what point does one move from being someone's lover to being the comother of her children? How is this decided? What formalizes it? How is it talked about? How are the day-to-day arrangements, the division of labour arrived at? Is comother number one still a mother after the breakup when comother two or three moves in? How do we decide these issues? What guides and motivates the choices? ... We need to be discussing these issues on a larger scale. (Vaughan, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1985, p. 27)

or who her parents are.

**Ellen:** Right now, my partner's youngest daughter—she's only thirteen. And she's going through all this stuff. Like ... her friends ... I think her friends are giving her a hard time. About her mother's relationship with me. But she's lucky in that she has her older sisters to help her through.

**Andrea:** So other members of the blended family, or extended family, can help your child deal with homophobia. But both of you have told me about encounters with homophobia within your families, too.

**Ellen:** My partner's middle daughter ... the middle daughter is something else! Although she doesn't say anything bad about the relationship, I just feel that ... I think a lot of the times I get from her that I shouldn't be saying anything to her, like I'm not her mother.

**Andrea:** So you think there is a homophobic element in that challenge to your authority? Interesting. Sara, you talked about how you and your partner are so much more aware now of how your responses to different situations may affect your child. You've found yourselves looking at the ways you might be perpetuating homophobia by reinforcing heterosexist assumptions.

**Sara:** Neither of us is willing to lie. We've said that. It's important to us. We don't want \_\_\_\_\_ [their child] to hear us lying. We don't want her to experience that. And it's hard because we don't want her to pick up that we're uncomfortable or awkward about saying who our family is, either, if people ask. And that's a problem when we're in the mall. In situations where we might have allowed people their assumptions, just because it's easier and you don't always have the energy ... we now have to think about how letting those assumptions go unchallenged affects \_\_\_\_\_ [their child].

**Andrea:** So it sounds like making space for yourselves

We expect to tackle discussions for which there are no precedents or models and hope that we can stay clear of the traditional "parents know best" stance and together be able to discuss possibilities and dilemmas in a spirit of mutual respect. Our daughter will grow up being familiar with a wider range of human experience than either of us knew. This cannot help but enhance the possibilities for her own relationships. (Zook and Hallenback, 1985, p. 93)

We still have a long way to go in eliminating the things that oppress people in this society, and we know that one of the ways to do this is to teach the children. The thing that is exciting about our child's life is that she is not alone in her learnings.

People get ready! If you are racist, sexist, classist, or homophobic, my child is going to think you are strange. (Parker, 1985, p. 99)

as a family means that you have reconsider your own style of dealing with heterosexism and homophobia, in light of how everything you do affects your daughter's experience and view of the world, her parents, herself, your family. Wow! That's a big task.

**Sara:** And even though we have thought a lot about it, in the situation, it's still awkward and it's still uncomfortable. Especially, I mean, with people that you don't know, that you're dealing with on a one-time basis, you know, the very fact that you have to tell them 'she has two moms', reveals intimate details about your life that you don't normally reveal to strangers. And it's a really awkward situation.

**Andrea:** And you go through it because that's part of how you protect your child from homophobia. How do you prepare her to protect herself?

**Sara:** I think my instincts are good. I think I have a lot of really wonderful things to give a kid. Besides all the love and the warmth and that sort of stuff. You know? I think I have a sense of social ... justice that I want to pass on to somebody else. And I think that's really important to me. To be able to ... not that I want to tell \_\_\_\_\_ what to think, but I want to be able to talk with her about issues and have her think critically about what people say to her or tell her or show her. And be able to make intelligent decisions about her own life, and how her life intersects with other lives,

and to be able to do that responsibly.

**Andrea:** So critical thinking has something to do with protection against homophobia?

**Sara:** Yeah. That she can say, I have two moms and I don't care what you say. I have two moms that love me, and some people don't. And I'm really happy to have two moms. And I hope I can give her what she needs to be able to do that.

**Ellen:** I can just remember my daughter being angry. As to why \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] was staying at my house.

Lesbian and gay parents think very carefully about when and how to come out to their children. Although waiting has the potential to cause difficulties, some people choose to wait until their children are older and may better understand. Deciding how and when to disclose one's homosexuality is always a complex process. (Pollack, 1995, p. 64)

My daughter has been very open about having two moms. She knows her lifestyle is different, but she feels very much loved and accepted for who she is. This seems to give her the courage to be and to express herself with her peers, even though she has told me this year with questioning concern in her voice: "They just don't understand, Mom." (Tortorilla, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1985, p. 173)

A lesbian mom, about her son:

It will be interesting to me when he's eleven and twelve and the kids start to harass him—how he defends himself. I hope that he's comfortable enough with it to stand up to it. Because I certainly know it will happen. (Pollack, 1995, p. 68)

Why she was there. And, um, I never really told my daughter that I was a lesbian. What happened was that, \_\_\_\_\_ [her daughter] was having some problems of her own, growing up. Her mother was a lesbian and I guess she must have been getting ragged on, or whatever. And she started to drink. And what happened was that my mother, and my sister ... they sat down with her, and they explained it to her that, okay, your mom's a lesbian. Live with it. Adjust to it. And after she was told that, by my mom and my sister, she was able to adjust better. She stopped the drinking and doing that foolish stuff.

**Andrea:** So kids have to see that not everyone agrees with the conventional prejudices, so that they know that it's okay to disagree and have another view. I can see that since homophobia is so pervasive, critical thinking is a crucial tool for minimizing its effects and helping children to feel comfortable with difference.

**Sara:** I think ... having room for and recognizing and understanding that there are many different kinds of family. And that ... that's okay, and lots of people have two dads and lots of people have two moms. Their moms have remarried, they have step-moms, step-dads, and that's okay. That's a different kind of family, and that's ... that's perfectly fine. And you have two moms, and so, I think, creating a sense of ... that it's absolutely okay to be who she is and where she is. Whoever that is. And giving her the strength, helping her to develop the strength and sense of self to deal with the difficulties she's going to deal with.

**Andrea:** And that's the reality, isn't it? She is going to feel the sting of homophobia, no matter what you do.

**Sara:** Oh yeah. There may be a time when she doesn't want our relationship to be common knowledge, there may be only some people that she wants to know, and that's okay, too. And ... if there is a time when she feels uncomfortable having two moms, I hope that the work I have done before then will be ... I want to say good enough, but that's not what I mean. But I will

From a fifteen-year-old who lives with her two lesbian moms:

It's hard to say how much of my upbringing has to do with Annie being a lesbian, and how much of it has to do with who she is and who I am regardless of who any of us sleeps with. Annie's always taught me to be who I am, to do what I need to do, to express my emotions, to think clearly, and so much else I can't even begin to put it down. She's taught me all of this just by doing it, and encouraging me to do it if I wanted to. (Rhodes, 1985, p. 275)

It is not easy for the nonbiological parent in a lesbian or gay relationship to validate her or his role in a child's life. There is no readily definable slot. The parameters of society's vision are stretched by our very existence. (Tortorilla, 1985, p. 174)

have done what I need to so that when she gets through that, she still hasn't lost any sense of her ... dignity, I guess, and value ... I hope that I can help her be sure enough in herself, that she can deal with those things and that they won't have a lasting effect on her.

**Andrea:** So it strikes me that it's got to be really important for you, your partner, and your daughter to have support to sustain you through all this. Ellen, you've talked about how that support works in your family.

**Ellen:** My partner's daughters and my daughters have been pretty supportive of each other. The youngest one, she's only thirteen. But she's lucky in that she has her older sisters to help her through. Especially right now, where, besides just starting puberty, she has her friends giving her a hard time about her mother's relationship with me. And my daughter is the oldest of them all, so she's almost been like their older sister.

**Sara:** Our family's support comes from the community that we created because we needed that support. And then, in the second place, from my family of origin that came around in the end.

**Andrea:** I'm really struck by the incredible number of instances in any given day when you find yourself in a situation where whether or not you are supported as a family really matters. From issues as pragmatic as whether or not you can access the services of the young women in your neighbourhood who babysit, to issues as profound as whether or not your partner is recognized as a parent.

**Sara:** When \_\_\_\_\_ [their daughter] was younger, she had so many medical problems. We never considered a babysitter. We always took her over to Mom's, or somebody else. But now, she's older. We don't have those concerns anymore. And \_\_\_\_\_ [a local teenager] is a very ... she looks after a lot of the kids in the neighbourhood. And we've talked about maybe going out somewhere, just for a few hours, and asking her to



come over. I think that'll happen, in time.

**Andrea:** Have you and your partner attempted to create some form of legal recognition or protection for your family?

For lesbians and gay men, the issues surrounding parenting are complex and sometimes disturbing. In addition to the emotional, financial, and legal considerations facing any parent, lesbians and gay men must also face societal homophobia and the absence of equal rights in the eye of the law. (Pollack, 1995, p. 19)

For lesbians parenting together, it is imperative that you draw up specific legal agreements to identify and protect the position of the nonbiological mother. The relationship of the nonbiological mother is not legally recognized; therefore we must take conscious steps to establish whatever legal bonds we can. The nonbiological mother risks losing her child if the biological mother dies without a will designating a guardian for her child or if the relationship between the partners ends, and there is no clear plan delineating the continued parenting of the child. (Pies, 1985, p. 111)

**Sara:** Well, we talked about legal things. And we had sort of looked into adoption and discovered that we couldn't do anything here in Nova Scotia, in terms of \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] adopting, unless I gave up my rights as a parent. Which we were kind of disappointed about. I mean, it doesn't really make any difference to us in how we parent, other than just sort of legitimizing their relationship, and we wanted to do that more for \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] than for anything else. We do have a legal document drawn up that says that if anything should happen to me, \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] will be her caregiver. We went to a lawyer and told her what we wanted. It was somebody that Mom had gone to that Mom knew. First we had guardian-in-health-care documents done up for each other, in the event that we were incapacitated and unable to make medical decisions. And a local woman lawyer did those for us, someone we knew of through the women's community. And we really liked her, but she had since left. We didn't know anybody else to go to. Mom suggested this other woman, so we went to her and were very up front about what we wanted, and she had a really good price, and we showed her the documents from the first lawyer, and, she said, oh well, we can just adjust these a little bit, and that'll cost you less money and ... so we redid our wills to include each other. So that \_\_\_\_\_ [Sara's partner] would be her guardian in the event that something happened to me. In the event that something happened to both of us, my sister is the guardian, but, the other thing we did was have a ... sort of a guardian-in-health-care document drawn up for \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] and \_\_\_\_\_ [their daughter], so that if something happened to \_\_\_\_\_ [their daughter], and \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] had to take her to the hospital, they wouldn't waste time trying to track me down with consent, so \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] has a document—a legal document that she carries around in

We introduce ourselves as gay parents and we inform them of [her adoption] and how she relates to us. A big concern to us is what everybody does around Mother's Day because she doesn't have anybody. We make sure that they focus on her grandmother. On Father's Day, she needs to be allowed to make two things, not one, which is usually no problem for anybody. But we're real up front about it. We're active in the Parents Association, we're active fundraisers, so we're known. (Pollack, 1995, p. 75)

According to an article by Patterson in the journal *Child Development*, "Although studies have assessed over 300 offspring of gay or lesbian parents in 12 different samples, no evidence has been found for significant disturbances of any kind in the development or sexual identity. The same held true for moral development, intelligence, and peer relationships." (Pollack, 1995, p. 29)

her wallet—it's actually not the whole document, it's just a little piece of paper that the lawyer did up specially so she could keep it in her wallet. That refers to the document saying that \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] has the right to consent to medical treatment for our daughter.

**Andrea:** All of this must be very time-consuming, not to mention costly. And how do you foresee handling the ongoing demands to advocate for your daughter and your family, as she heads off to school and her world gets bigger?

**Sara:** I think dealing with people right up front makes all the difference, and I think people take their lead from that. When she goes to school, I have every intention of going with her. I think you can go now before that first day, and explaining that \_\_\_\_\_ [her daughter] has two moms. That's who her family is and when it comes to Mother's Day, she'll be needing to make two Mother's Day cards and, when it comes to Father's Day, maybe she can make a Grandfather's Day card or she can make some more Mother's Day cards, but that's who she is, that's who her family is, and I expect people to deal with that respectfully. And I expect the teachers to make sure that that happens. So I'm going to have that conversation. As difficult as that may be, and as much as I don't know the nature that will take, I think it's an important conversation that needs to happen. And I suspect it's going to have to happen every year. [There was a tangible tone of weariness in Sara's voice when she spoke about this.] But that's okay. And so, you know, maybe until she's into junior high and then she can decide if she wants people to know. She can tell them herself. And if she doesn't, that's okay, too. She may choose just to tell some people. If that's how she's more comfortable, that's fine.

**Ellen:** I think my daughter has a really good sense of who she is. And she's comfortable in who she is. And I think that's probably one of my biggest things, you know, that because her mother's a lesbian, when she was younger she wondered if she was a lesbian, too. And I know that's not an issue for her anymore. And

From a fifteen-year-old who lives with her two lesbian moms:

Values aren't absolute. There's lots of choices, lots of options, more options than most young people think. I learned that there are lots of versions of what's okay, and the conventional way isn't automatically the best way. I think I have the better deal because I get to see more options. (Rhodes, in Pollack and Vaughan, 1985, p. 273)

Some lesbian mothers encourage their children to understand the difference between the two (or more) mothers. Others do not. And, some children must try to explain who this 'other' mom is, often in terms that are not translatable to the nuclear family model. (Pies, 1985, p. 101)

regarding when she has her children—my grandchildren—you know, if they're gay or lesbian, that's going to be fine. I think she'll be adjusted to know that her children are who they are. And we have to be accepting of who they are.

**Sara:** People that have an untraditional family—and I'm meaning same sex family, as opposed to single mom's or step-families or blended families—I think the children tend to grow up being more thinking, sensitive children, through the experience. And I think they do that out of necessity, to some degree. They have to be socially aware. And I think that's good. I think that's a really good thing that comes out of some of the difficulties of that family situation. The only kid I know that's grown up with a lesbian or gay parent has got to be one of the most sensitive, caring, thoughtful young men I've ever met. I have a lot of respect for his mom. I think she's done a wonderful job.

Sara and Ellen provide us with a glimpse of some of the concerns of lesbian parents. Sara spoke repeatedly about her belief that if she and her partner take the lead, with confidence, and with the expectation that others will be respectful, this will both disarm potential homophobic responses to their family, and model appropriate responses. Their little girl, as she grows up in this atmosphere, is also taking the lead, by creating the language she needs to refer to her family members.

**Sara:** When she calls out, like from her crib, she'll say, Mommy, Mommy. And if you don't respond, or if the one she's looking for doesn't show up, she says, Mommy Sara? Or Mommy \_\_\_\_\_ [Sara's partner]? And now, because we've all heard her do this, if \_\_\_\_\_

[her partner] calls for \_\_\_\_\_ [their daughter] at my mom's house, and Mom answers the phone, she'll say, \_\_\_\_\_ [their daughter], come talk to Mommy \_\_\_\_\_ [Sara's partner].

Perhaps as non-traditional families become more common, more visible, and more accepted, it will be the children who grow up knowing that they are okay, and that difference is okay, who will lead us into new ways of being family with each other.

## **HOW BISEXUAL, LESBIAN AND GAY ADULTS TALK ABOUT FAMILY: AN EMERGING DISCOURSE**

**Words have the power to deny destruction and our writing must prove this. We need languages that regenerate us, warm us, give birth to us, that lead us to act and not to flee. (Chawaf, 1981, p. 177)**

My interest in integrating some discourse analysis—albeit rudimentary—in this project stems from the many research projects I have worked on in which the stories of marginalized people have been collected and analysed. Prior to interviewing the six participants in this study, I had conducted interviews with women working in shelters for battered women, women and men whose children have been apprehended by child welfare agencies, women working in rural women's centres, young women organizing to learn how to keep themselves safe from male violence, lesbians and bisexual women accessing health care, and women who are struggling with a drug addiction. I have had direct experience with the challenges people face when their reality is not easily described in the language that is available. I have waited patiently, being as supportive as possible, as the person I am interviewing scans their own vocabulary, trying to find a way to tell me something they think is relevant to the question I have asked.

Language fails those of us whose life experience is not considered part of the mainstream of society, attempting to impose silence on us because our being different is considered a threat to the myth of normalcy. This keeps us isolated, and this isolation makes it very difficult for us to connect with each other, build solidarity and strength, deepen our insight, and develop a collective vision to guide us as we work for change. In fact, the effect of the limitations of language on our imagina-

tions is one of my main concerns.

My intention in this chapter is to reflect on a number of questions. How does the lack of language to describe our experience affect us? How do we convey what family means to us? How do we use the available language? What innovations in language usage have we come up with in order to be able to talk about our experiences of family? What are the barriers to developing a discourse about family in our lives? What are we silent about, and how is our silence a part of our language?

I am not a linguist, and my knowledge in this area is scant. A full exploration of these questions would require knowledge in the area of sociolinguistics, the study of the relationship of language to society. The method would involve microlinguistics, which is defined as the highly detailed study of language data, including analysing "pauses, interruptions, false starts, hesitations, and other such features" (Crystal, 1995, p. 288). A thorough study would also pay attention to extralinguistic cues, such as facial expression and gesture, and analyse how these aid in the expression of meaning. The focus of the research would be on pragmatics, which is the study of the factors influencing a person's choice of language (p. 457), or more simply, how people make language work for them.

Such an analysis is clearly beyond the scope of this chapter. What I can do is point out some of the linguistic practices I have noticed in the course of working with these transcripts. My reflections will most closely approximate work in the area of pragmatics, i.e. how words come to be defined by their function in discourse, and how this serves to actually create new meanings and new ways of speaking:

According to contemporary thinking in pragmatics, conversation succeeds because we adopt a 'cooperative principle'—a set of rules governing linguistic interaction that everyone recognizes (Crystal, 1995).

While I am not schooled in linguistics, I have read some of the work of sociolinguist Deborah Tannen, who is best known for her work on gender and discourse. Indeed, many feminist scholars, in linguistics and other fields, are incorporating an analysis of language into their work. bell hooks, who has been described as an "insurgent black intellectual" also discusses language in her recent book, *Teaching to Transgress*. A brief overview of what I have learned from these sources will inform the reader about the critical thinking that has shaped my questions, observations, and thoughts.

Tannen's (1990) study of different conversational styles has evolved into a focus on gender differences in communication. She shows how, because women and men have been socialized differently, we have actually grown up in different "worlds of words", and women's conversation tends to have connection as a goal, while men tend to use conversation enhance their status. In relation to my topic—the family experiences of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults—Tannen's assertion that there are different subcultures within society in which language is used differently, seems helpful. Bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults have grown up in an almost wordless world, and the words we *have* heard that refer to our lives have been loaded with negative connotations and often intended to hurt us. Tannen's claim that a different vantage point in society leads to a different way of using language can be applied to us, even if the words we have to work with are so few and so inadequate.

Tannen also writes about metamessages and how they frame our conversations. Metamessages consist of information that is coded into what is said, without actually being said, directly:

Another way to think about metamessages is that they frame a conversation, much as a picture frame provides a context for the images in the picture. Metamessages let you know how to interpret what someone is saying by identifying the activity that is going on: Is this an argument or a chat? Is it helping, advising, or scolding? At the same time, they let you know what position the speaker is assuming in the activity, and what position you are being assigned. (Tannen, 1990, p. 33)

This is a useful concept in attempting to understand how context is used in conversations that bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults have about family, providing clues to the meaning of what is being said.

Dale Spender is one of the feminist scholars researching and writing about language as this relates to the historical oppression of women, and by extension, to women's liberation. She states that women are reclaiming words that have been made derogatory, and recycling words that can be used differently:

There is also a great deal of recycling going on (Mary Daly being one of the best proponents of this practice) with the result that there are growing resources which allow women to define ourselves positively and help us more accurately to say what we mean. (Spender, 1984, p. 2)

The idea of recycling words that have meant one thing in common usage, and using them to convey new meanings, seems to fit the practice of several participants in this study who use words originally meant to refer to traditional family roles, to describe non-traditional family members.

Joann Bean suggests that using words in unusual ways can indicate the need for new interpretations:



The unusual use of a word as a clue to difference is an avenue which would seem to provide interesting results. (Bean, 1984, p. 27)

This echoes an experience I had repeatedly while working with the stories of my participants: the use of words in unorthodox ways served as a signpost providing direction for my inquiry. Similarly, Vivian Darroch has written about how she engages language "for the purpose of discovering what will make visible 'unknown' images and ideas" (Darroch, 1984, p. 29).

In general, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the fact that a language that has evolved within a patriarchal system serves the purposes of that system and its beneficiaries. As part of the process of dismantling male power and privilege, women must become conscious of all we have not expressed and find new ways to bring our experience into the shared reality that language helps create.

In order to achieve self-determination, women must name their own experiences, encode their own reality, speak the unspeakable. (Ackroyd, 1984, p. 60)

Clearly, this applies to bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults, as well as we claim self-determination in our experience of family.

bell hooks sees language as a site of resistance, struggle, and change. She grounds her analysis in the historical experiences of African slaves who had to learn to use the language of their oppressors to communicate with each other, since they were not fluent in each other's mother tongues.

Possessing a shared language, black folks could find again a way to make community, and a means to create

the political solidarity necessary to resist. (hooks, 1994, p. 170)

hooks also refers to the unusual or incorrect usage of words as a creative act, incorporating into her analysis the importance of the spirit and energy of rebellion that these linguistic acts expressed:

For in the incorrect usage of words, in the incorrect placement of words, was a spirit of rebellion that claimed language as a site of resistance. Using English in a way that ruptured standard usage and meaning, so that white folks could often not understand black speech, made English into more than the oppressor's language. (hooks, 1994, p. 170)

hooks identifies modern black vernacular as a contemporary manifestation of this resistance and links this idea of "renegade speech" to the evolution of new epistemological practices:

The power of this speech is not simply that it enables resistance to white supremacy, but that it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies—different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview. (hooks, 1994, p. 171)

The elements of hooks' analysis that will be especially useful in my reflections on discourse in this study, is that using language differently and creating new language changes how we know what we know, that moments of not understanding can be encountered as spaces in which to learn, and that we can know in fragments as we explore new ways of using language (hooks, 1994, p. 172, 174).

With these ideas in my analytical toolbox, I will now attempt to shed some light on how the six participants in my study talked about their experiences of family.

### **Effects of the Lack of Language**

Based on the interviews I conducted for this study, it seems that the lack of language to speak about family affects bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults, in many ways.

Firstly, there is the experience of feeling that one is indescribable. For some of us, our difficulty with language begins with having no way of describing ourselves. One of my participants spoke about this in response to my question about how she describes her sexuality:

**Ellen:** I still haven't come ... it all depends. I don't like that word bisexual. Because it seems like it just...I have this connection that ... you don't really know what you want. That you're sleeping with these people because you don't really know who you are. And when I say that I'm a lesbian, that restricts me to just saying that I just sleep exclusively with women. And that's not so. So until ... and I don't want to use two-spirited because, there is a ... that religious part to this two-spirited part, that I don't want to use that either. So what else is ... so you'll hear me saying ... either or. But ... but I don't really know yet, even how to describe that.

Ellen chooses to use the terms "lesbian" and "bisexual," depending on the situation. I, too, feel that none of the available terms fit my sense of myself, so I often just say that my sexuality is non-exclusive, or that I'm not straight. But what does it mean to define myself in the negative sense, as not something? It's like living in the negative of a photograph, as if the space we live in is does not really exist.

According to one participant, having no way of describing ourselves and our relationships with loved ones can lead to questioning ourselves. In his experience, he has gone back to accepted definitions and roles as a reference point, and felt vulnerable to the pressure to conform:

**Peter:** There are times when the need to feel like we fit somewhere ... we regress. This happened to \_\_\_\_\_ and I. We are wonderful, wonderful friends. We would go home to the town we grew up in, and go out to one of the clubs where our friends would be hanging out at the time. We would regress, to the point where we would be on the dance floor, kissing, and things like that. It was just so unnatural for us. So uncomfortable. So uncomfortable. It was almost, like dirty.

Lacking the language—and therefore the ability—to speak about ourselves and the people in our lives who are family to us, is wounding. More than one participant commented on how healing it was to be able to talk about family, in the interviews:

**Daniel:** I enjoy [talking about family] because ... I went through all of this by myself. So this is something that I always find healing. Because when you don't talk about it, and you mull it over in your head and you don't articulate things to other people, you sometimes defeat hope. And you focus on the things that aren't occurring ... and when you don't express that out loud, sometimes those things take over. It gives you a sense of hope, when you talk about family.

**Peter:** I find this very, very therapeutic, and it couldn't have come at a better time for me.

The lack of language with which to talk about ourselves and our families is detrimental to our overall well-being. There are also several specific ways in which we are limited by this lack of language.

One participant noted how he was unable to mark the deepening of his relationship with one family of choice member, because he couldn't find a way to ex-

press it to her:

**Daniel:** I love her in a way that, um ... goes beyond ... it's just ... we've made a spiritual connection in the last two years that's, um ... that's really been ... important to me, but really difficult to express to her in a way that I...I really wish I could.

Daniel also talked about how the lack of language makes it hard to discuss the effects of gender-role socialization with partners, and clarify roles in a relationship:

**Daniel:** When you put two men together in a relationship, and they've both been brought up in traditional families, god ... what do you do? And what role...? And what I'm trying to tell myself is that you define that role after you've discussed it with you partner. And the open communication is the way to find out what's acceptable and what you're going to go with. But, you know, we don't talk about the gay family.

One of the ways I found the lack of language limiting was when I was trying to formulate the questions I wanted to ask my participants about their experience of family. Here is an example of one instance when I was trying to ask Natalie a question about being bisexual:

**Andrea:** I'm finding it a little hard to formulate questions which is, I think, because we're in an area that's so undefined. Um ... I guess part of what I want to ask you is ... what's it like not to have any idea? What's it like ... I mean, is it different ... is there something about the experience of not really having any idea about how this is all going to play itself out, that has to do with being bi? That's unique to being bi?

One participant reflected on how not having any language prevented her from being able to talk about her first intimate experience with another woman:

**Sara:** The next day was awkward. We didn't really know ... we didn't have any guidelines for dealing with this. Or any way to talk about it.

It begins to be quite obvious how the lack of language reinforces isolation, making it difficult to have healthy intimate relationships and preventing the development of supportive allies. The lack of language to talk about family among queer adults also contributes to the lack of information about options like alternative insemination:

**Sara:** I didn't hear about any long-term couples that had children, which was what I wanted. I wondered, I guess, if that could happen. And I had no idea how. I had not heard about alternative sorts of ways to get pregnant. The people that I knew in the community didn't talk about those things. My ideas about the possibility of having a family were very vague.

Besides affecting us in the realm of our relationship with lovers and other family members, not having the language we need impedes the acceptance of our families by others and contributes to the misunderstanding that often surrounds our family relationships:

**Sara:** Some of the hospital staff asked us ... how do you want to be called? Are you both moms? You know, those kind of questions, that people just ... they needed to sort out. They needed to know the words to use to be able to talk to us. But not everybody made that effort.

**Peter:** My relationship with my closest friend whom I include in that inner circle of loved ones ... is often misunderstood. He is a straight man, but for years everyone assumed we were partners. Being in the community that we came from, people just assumed, you know, guilt by association. Like the only kind of close relationship I could have with a man would have to be as lovers. We've heard these rumours all our lives.

One of the most profound ways that the lack of language to talk about our family relationships affects us as bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults is quite subtle. Because we don't talk about being family with each other very often, the times

when we do tend to be very poignant and powerful. This is not a negative thing, in itself, except that it reinforces the marginalization of our family experiences. Those aspects of our lives that are accorded acceptance and respect, and are expressed in the lexicon of our daily lives, do not usually generate intense emotion. Talking about being family with our family of choice members is still an extraordinary experience for many of us:

**Sara:** We have talked about being family. We've talked about how much we mean to each other and how we're more like sisters, I guess, maybe imaginary sisters ... or what we imagine a really great sister might be ... and those are very poignant moments.

These moments can be so emotionally powerful that some of us refrain from having these conversations, for fear of making those whom we consider family feel uncomfortable:

**Daniel:** I'm a bit guarded about talking about being family when I'm with someone who is special to me. You don't want to freak them out....

Against the backdrop of silence about queers creating and being family, talking about it becomes a very big deal. This results in what I believe is a distorted view of how we are family with our loved ones; it remains in the realm of the extraordinary.

Another way in which the backdrop of silence contributes to this distortion is that sometimes it is a crisis, or a particularly difficult time in a relationship, that precipitates us talking among ourselves and to others about what we mean to each other.

**Natalie:** So it's not unless I'm balling my eyes out, and my father says, you know, what's wrong? What did \_\_\_\_\_ do this time? Something along those lines. That I

would actually talk about her. And that's problematic for me. It doesn't give the relationship the credit it needs, and it's out of this fear place, and it doesn't feel comfortable to me.

The lack of language to talk about our experiences of family effects us in many ways: we find it hard to describe ourselves, we often do so by talking about what we are *not*, and sometimes, living in this half-light causes us to question our own identity. We have difficulty marking growth in our relationships, clarifying roles, asking questions, and building allies. Information is hard to access; acceptance from others is hard to gain. Using crises as opportunities to talk about our families leads to a distorted sense of those relationships, and the conversations we do have are imbued with an emotional intensity that would not be there if our family relationships were acknowledged and accepted as being part of our everyday lives.

In this atmosphere of restricted reflection and communication, how does the meaning of our family relationships become known to us?

### **About Meaning**

In the absence of language to talk about the full range of our experiences of family, and in the silence that results from this absence of language, by what process do we come to know who our family is? How does the meaning of a nontraditional family relationship make itself known? I found some clues to the answer to this question in the stories of two of my participants.

Daniel described his growing unhappiness with the usual ritual of going home



to his family of origin for Christmas. As his relationships with family of choice members became more and more important to him, the assumption that he would spend the holiday season with the people he is closest to began to point him in a different direction.

**Daniel:** These people are my family. It's not biological, it's not legal, but it's real. And I've actually tried to explain that to my mother. You know? This Christmas, I came back to Nova Scotia on Christmas Day, and I had to say to her, there are people now in my life that are important to me that I want to spend holiday time with. And quality time with. I would love to develop more rituals with those family members, but I haven't been able to because I've been so concerned with keeping the traditions that I've had with my own family. Christmas is a big deal. \_\_\_\_\_ [family of choice member] and I talked about it this year. I would really like, next year, not to go home for Christmas.

The meaning of his family of choice relationships began to enter into Daniel's consciousness through the discomfort he began to feel going home to his family of origin for Christmas. There was dissonance between the assumption—which Daniel had previously ascribed to—that the family of origin would gather at Christmas time, and the fact that the people who actually functioned as family in Daniel's daily life were his non-biological kin. It seems to me that it was in the space created by this dissonance, and in the process he went through to figure out what the dissonance was about, that the meaning of his family of choice relationships began to emerge.

**Daniel:** I think the first time I talked about being family with \_\_\_\_\_ [family of choice member] was when I had just visited my family of origin. I had been home and come back to her. After that ... when it was at the forefront of my mind that ... there was a comparison. You know? There's this, and there's that. And this is what I want.

Without language to express what was changing, Daniel used the language of fam-

ily ritual to let his mother know about the existence of his family of choice.

Family ritual has long been used as a way of defining family. Who gets invited to family dinners on special occasions makes a statement about how those who do the inviting view their family; when the person a family member is dating is asked to a family gathering, it is often an expression of acceptance into the family's inner circle. Daniel was making a similar kind of statement when he told his mother that there are people in his life now with whom he wants to spend holiday time. Out of the gap between assumption and actuality emerges the meaningfulness of new family relationships.

The other example of how the meaning of our non-biological family relationships can enter into our consciousness indicates the importance of discourse in meaning-making.

In one of her interviews, Ellen was identifying the members of her family of choice. She began to talk about two young women friends of her's that are in a relationship with each other, and how other members of her family of choice understood the significance of her friendship with them, although her family of origin did not.

**Ellen:** These two young girls that I'm talking about in particular that are friends of mine, they're ... one of them is not really out, yet. One of them is, and the other one is not from her community. So a lot of the times, I just call them "the girls". Like, if ... if I say I'm going to see the girls, people know who I'm talking about. The friends I have, they would know that. At home in my community, if I said, well, I'm going to see the girls, they'd go, who? And I never thought about that until just now ... that I was excluding them from who is family to me ... I don't know why I wasn't thinking that way...

Wanting to find out as much as I could about how a person comes to regard specific

relationships as family relationships, I asked:

**Andrea:** When did you know that? When was the first time you realized ... the girls are my family?

To which Ellen replied:

**Ellen:** Just ... five minutes ago.

It was in the act of speaking about family, in the interview, that the meaning of Ellen's relationships with these two young women asserted itself as family. Surely this is a powerful indication of the importance of language and discourse in our lives! If Ellen had not had that conversation with me, when would the fact that these friends had become family have entered into her conscious awareness? As Gubrium and Holstein claim, family discourse "is a language that persuades as well as informs" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1990, p. ix).

### **Barriers to Developing a Discourse**

The barriers that bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults face when trying to develop the language to speak about family in our lives are many and varied. From the communication patterns some of us have inherited from families of origin in which little of a personal nature is ever discussed, to the risks we take speaking about queer families in communities in which homophobia is still considered a virtue, finding ways to talk about family is difficult.

Some of us grew up in families in which there is a tradition of keeping family

secrets. Some families of origin have taught us to believe that any subject that touches on intimacy is not to be spoken about, openly.

**Natalie:** There was just lots of unspoken stuff in my family. When my grandfather died, and my father took off to Germany ... right around that time, it was my birthday, and nobody was talking about the fact the my grandfather had just died. We all went off to the circus, for my birthday party. It was just bizarre ... And in my own social circle as a teenager, a group of us used to hang out together. And I knew \_\_\_\_\_ was gay, all along. But, I mean, it would have been the violation of all times to have even suggested it. And when I came out to him, he said that he knew I wasn't straight. And nobody said anything.

It is also the case in some of our families of origin, that verbal acknowledgment or the withholding of verbal acknowledgment of some aspect of our lives, is used as a way of expressing approval or disapproval. Both what gets said, and what gets left unsaid, become a part of the family discourse we learn from our families of origin. Sara remembers having to break through this silence about her relationship on, once again, the occasion of a family gathering:

**Sara:** The second year that \_\_\_\_\_ and I were together, Mom called and invited me for Thanksgiving. And I said, no, \_\_\_\_\_ and I were having Thanksgiving together. And she was quite surprised and shocked, and what do you mean you're not coming home for Thanksgiving?

By not including Sara's partner in the invitation, even though they had been together for two years, Sara's mom was withholding recognition and, by extension, acceptance of their relationship. It took courage for Sara to break through that silence and make her relationship visible:

**Sara:** It was hard for me. Standing up and saying, this is a legitimate family for me. And if you don't recognize it, I'm not coming.

Again, the amount of energy required to create this kind of space for ourselves and our families, repeatedly, over time, is enormous.

For those of us whose sexuality falls outside the norm, sharing almost any information about our families includes disclosing our sexuality.

**Sara:** You're revealing intimate details of your life to strangers, in an emergency waiting room, when you're dependent on them for care in a very stressful situation. You wouldn't even be talking to them if your child wasn't sick and in need of care.

The fact that most people still assume that everyone is heterosexual unless otherwise informed, places a great weight on the shoulders of those of us who find ourselves having to refute that assumption in order to have our family relationships recognized. What we really need in those situations is to be recognized as a family; we do not need the infringement of our privacy or the stress which comes with having to disclose the nature of our intimate relationship with our partner.

One physician I know has found a way to circumvent this when he takes a patient's history: he asks each patient whether they sleep with women, or men, or both, or neither. This approach makes clear that he is aware of and nonjudgmental about all the possibilities, and creates an atmosphere in which his patients can feel affirmed and supported in whatever their sexual choices might be. He does not assume heterosexuality; he assumes diversity. This creates space for his patients to speak about their lives without being made to feel deviant and vulnerable. Hospital emergency room staff would do well to find a similar way to obtain the necessary information from their patients.

One of the other barriers to developing the language we need to talk about

family, is related to our resourcefulness and resiliency in coping with the silence that is imposed on us. We often acclimatize ourselves so well to our circumstances, finding ways to live within this silence, that speaking about our families of choice does not come naturally to us. We avoid the awkwardness of trying to express what we mean to each other, and learn to rely on tacit recognition of each other as family.

**Ellen:** Those relationships do not get spoken of as family. We don't really express it to each other. It's just understood.

**Sara:** For the most part, my relationships with those close friends I consider family ... it's largely unspoken. I think sometimes I put people in uncomfortable positions, telling them how I feel about them.

Sara thinks it is important to speak about being family with these people, because talking about it is the only way that we will challenge the norm and work through the awkwardness.

**Sara:** I don't regret it. I mean, I do it over and over. And people get kind of used to it.

But even Sara has internalized homophobia that prevents her from using the word 'lesbian', in certain situations:

**Sara:** Sometimes I think, with people that you don't know ... lesbian is a word that turns people off. So sometimes I'm careful about ... when and around who I use that word. But that would be the word I would choose for myself.

How much of this is strategic thinking, and how much of it is accommodating the silence that makes it so hard for us to claim space for who we are? Being aware that certain ways (most ways) of talking about queer relationships make people uncomfortable, and not wanting to make people uncomfortable, is another barrier

to developing a discourse.

Daniel identified resistance to talking about family among gay men that he believes is specific to gay male culture. In his experience, the notion of being family to each other is rarely found in interactions among gay men. He noted how the prevalence of sex or the possibility of sex in most interactions among gay men, seems to have something to do with gay men's reluctance to talk about being family, and we identified the incest taboo as part of this dynamic. (I discussed this in more detail in the chapter on Becoming Family.) Daniel also feels that another barrier to developing this discourse among gay men is the total absence of any discussion about getting old.

**Daniel:** Growing old is not something you focus on when you're in the gay community. Staying young is what you focus on. You don't talk about what it's like to grow old. You constantly talk about what you're going to do to stay young.

Wanting to create a family of choice has, for Daniel, a great deal to do with how he sees himself growing old:

**Daniel:** Who's going to be around when I'm sixty-five, and shrivelled ... you know? I want to be in the same retirement home as some members of my family of choice.

For Daniel, this means creating those family of choice relationships, now, and part of that is being able to talk about being family.

Another barrier to developing the language we need to talk about our families is simply the lack of words we have to work with:

**Natalie:** Words that I use, when I'm talking to people who are family ... hmm ... it might take me a little longer to get an answer out! I would say what's different when

I talk about this with people who are in my family of choice, than, say, how I would talk about it with my mother ... we talk about a connection on a different level. We talk about the sort of quality of connection, or spirit, and stuff like that.

"A connection on a different level," "quality of connection," "spirit," "stuff like that" are the phrases and words Natalie used to try to describe how she talks about being family with her non-biological kin. What comes across is that there are elements of difference, quality, and spirit in her family of choice relationships. Still, we are left feeling we may have a vague sense of some elements of these relationships, but not a full picture. And yet, Natalie was probably doing well to identify these descriptors. They were her chosen terms to describe her experience, as opposed to terms that she had heard used and that are widely accepted as applicable to family of choice relationships.

Yet another barrier to developing the language we need is the presence of social scripts that we are all expected to play out, in our lives. Luke has encountered this, as a bisexual man in a marriage:

**Luke:** I've thought of having kids, but I've also thought about just helping out people who I really feel close to, who have kids. But it always seems to be people's second question, when they hear that you're married. It's like this pressure to be a breeder. Aaagh! And it's just like, if I have kids, I'll have kids because I want to.

Luke has heard, and been drawn into, the script—or series of questions and possible answers—that most married, heterosexual couples encounter regarding whether or not they are planning to have children. This is just one of several social scripts that is based on heterosexist assumptions about family. It is not as if the world of words we live in is neutral, and our experiences of family are simply missing from it; our verbal environment is full of scripts like this one, and the expectation is that



these scripts will be adequate vehicles through which we can talk about family. Creating the language we need means, then, creating alternative scripts.

Lastly, one of the most prohibitive barriers we face in developing the discourse we need to talk about our families, is the intense and powerful homophobia we face when we make ourselves and our lives visible. There is always the risk of rejection and/or injury; the injury is always emotional and psychological, and can be physical as well. From having a child's non-biological mother refused access to her child in the hospital, to worrying that a homophobic nurse will physically hurt that child, we face danger when we speak ourselves into existence as a family in the eyes of others:

**Sara:** It's an awkward situation, and you feel vulnerable, because you are. You are relying on people whose attitudes you know nothing about, to care competently and compassionately for your child, and to respect you as a family. I wish I didn't have to worry about these things, but I do.

There are indeed many barriers to developing a discourse to speak about our families. Yet even in the face of these barriers, we find ways to make ourselves, and our family realities, heard. Our resourceful adaptations and innovations are explored in the next section.

### **Adaptations and Innovations**

With all the barriers to speaking about family that exist for bisexual, lesbian and gay adults, how is it that we continue to struggle to create linguistic space for ourselves? In Sara's situation, her family of origin has, over time, come to recognize the family she has created with her partner and their child, but these positive

changes have remained unspoken. Sara wishes this were not the case:

**Sara:** At first, my dad said that he thought that was wrong, he said that I shouldn't have kids. He's changed his tune. But we don't talk about it. And it's hard if it's never spoken. You have an understanding but it's never said. Never spoken.

It means a great deal to Sara that her dad has come around to appreciating her as a parent, and she minds that this is not expressed out loud.

In another experience, Sara encountered how reductionist the available language is: when their daughter is admitted to the hospital, Sara's name goes on the form as the mother, and her partner's name goes on the form as the guardian-in-health-care. They have difficulty fitting this lengthy term into the space provided on the paper. It may be a big word, but it is a minimalistic representation of who Sara's partner is in relationship to their child.

Certainly, there are practical reasons for finding language to talk about our families. However, I believe that it is the importance of hearing our reality said out loud—which we come to know because we have to live without this—that fuels our efforts to overcome the barriers and develop a discourse about our experiences of family.

My review of the transcripts from the twelve interviews I conducted for this study indicates that the ways we go about meeting our need for language fall into two main categories: working with the available language and adapting it, and creating new language.

In working with the language that's there, one of the first tasks is to sort through inadequate terms, assessing their usefulness. A passage from one of Luke's interviews exemplifies this process:

**Luke:** Like, I've never liked the word "lover," yet people are inclined in a lot of ... and I like to use the words "gay" and "queer," because I feel like I'm reclaiming them ... in a lot of gay or queer communities, people use the word "lover" to describe their relationships. But when you get down to it, everybody has flings. But what almost everybody is looking for is love. Not only the sexual thing, but, to me, the word "lover" is so one-sided? I think it's generally understood to mean the person you have sex with. I like the word "companion" better. The lack of terms bugs me.

One of the ways Luke deals with this is to use the traditional terms, but to make them problematic:

**Luke:** I will emphasize words like "in-laws," being "married," because ... I find terms like that very problematic, so I make them more problematic. I like to say them as if there are quotation marks around them, because people know, then, that I'm questioning them.

Sorting through the available terms, identifying those that are problematic, and marking them in some way so that their inadequacy becomes obvious even as we use them, is one approach to working with what's there.

Another approach that was very common among the participants in this study, was to use traditional family terms as a metaphor.

By way of metaphor, language can take us beyond the content of the metaphor toward the original region where language speaks through silence. This path of metaphor is the speaking of thinking, or poetizing (van Manen, 1990, p. 49).

**Daniel:** When I went to Amsterdam, I came away having told \_\_\_\_\_ that he was the brother I'd always wanted, that he was a very important part of my life. He was really excited, and genuinely honoured that I would consider him as part of my family.

**Ellen:** And there's another woman in my community, and I consider her, you know,

just like being a sister.

What struck me about this use of terms usually used to describe traditional family relationships, was that those who used them to describe family of choice relationships often commented on how their family of choice members seemed to them to be *more like* sisters, brothers, or mothers to them than their actual biological kin.

**Sara:** We've talked about how much we mean to each other and how we're more like sisters to each other than our own sisters are.

**Daniel:** \_\_\_\_\_ [family of choice member] was the first person that I told that I was gay. And she took over. She took over in the role of motherhood for me for a couple of years. Being the emotional support that I needed.

Initially, using the traditional family terms to describe non-traditional family members expands the definition of those terms. Eventually, for some of us, our relationships with family of choice members begin to redefine what those traditional family terms actually mean. And these new definitions become the standard against which we measure the quality of our family of origin relationships.

**Daniel:** \_\_\_\_\_ has redefined motherhood for me, on some levels. She's shown me that it can be more than what it has been with my biological mother, and that, you know, again, I have a goal. A new place to work toward, with my biological mother.

**Sara:** We're like imaginary sisters—or what we imagine a really great sister might be.

**Daniel:** I wish I could share some of the kinds of things I share with \_\_\_\_\_ [family of choice member] with my biological sisters. And I think that's coming. I think we're working towards it actively, and I think it will occur. I just think it's a few years down the road.

Some of us use traditional family terms to refer to members of our families of choice. This enables us to distinguish between close friends whom we consider family, and our other close friends. It also lends some legitimacy to those relationships. And, sometimes, it expands upon and deepens our sense of what those terms could mean, and inspires us to work toward making our family of origin relationships more worthy of them.

Not everyone chooses to use traditional family terminology in this way, however.

**Peter:** At one point, he [family of choice member] and I were talking about, uh, our closeness, and he said, you're just like a brother to me, and I said, well, I certainly hope not. And we talked a little bit about that. Because he's distant with those people. He doesn't have the intimacy with them that he and I have. And I didn't necessarily feel that was a compliment, when he said that I was like a brother. I know what he meant ... what he would like a brother to be. But we have our own special ... you know? He's somebody that I love. And I'm not going to put a label on ... it's totally different ... As for me, I feel closer, I feel much closer, in some ways, to the people who I've developed deep, meaningful relationships with, over the years. Than I do ... to my family, my blood family. When I include these people that I have deep feelings for ... if I start including them under the word, or along that text, as family, it's almost like a disservice to them.

Peter rejects the use of traditional family terms to describe his loved ones. In his view, the existing language is completely inadequate, and he prefers not to try to adapt it. He has come up with the term 'loved ones', to describe what other participants were comfortable with calling their family of choice. As Peter says, he can then choose whether or not to apply the term 'loved ones', to his family of origin members, depending on the quality of the relationship:

**Peter:** The type of relationship I have with the other people that I told you about that I'm very close to and I love dearly, is something that's very different. You know? So

I don't necessarily want to combine the two and call these people family. I'd like to have another word, loved ones or whatever. You know? And then, if I want to use ... that to describe my feelings or whatever, for certain family members, then that's okay, too.

According to Peter, he and his loved ones talk about being each other's loved ones, in a couple of different ways. These are the people to whom he says "I love you." There is a discourse but it surfaces unpredictably, at no particular time and in no particular setting. [Note: Again, I use the negative of something to describe the space in which we speak about family.]

As Peter has coined the term, "loved ones," several participants have combined words in unusual ways or invented phrases to talk about the people with whom they are family. When Natalie read the transcripts of her interviews, she commented on her way of talking about who her family is:

**Natalie:** Family figures for me are as fluid as the rest of my life. I talk a lot about stability but the irony is that no one is stable in my life for too long because I'm always changing direction in life. Serial family.

Other word combinations and phrases used by Natalie to refer to family were: "gut connection," "spiritual connection," "some kind of soul linking thing," "a quality about the person's spirit," "soul connection," "sense of a nonjudgmental place to be."

Ellen coined the term "primary family" when referring to her partner and their children:

**Ellen:** When I do go home, it is to see my family. But ... the family that I do go home to see, is \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] and my daughter. And...that family. But, although, when I'm home, there's still obligations to see the other family, right? But, uh ... that's who my primary family is—\_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] and her girls.

Peter used some rather awkward phrases to describe his loved ones, before he came up with that term, and redefined it by adding emphasis and significance. When we consider the phrases, "the people who I care about other than family members," and "relationships that I choose to cultivate," using "loved ones" is an attractive alternative.

In the course of working on this project, I have begun to use the term "non-biological kin." It works for me, for now, and I wonder if part of the reason for that is that my family of origin is an adoptive family, also non-biological kin. I was struck by a passage I read in a book called *The Education of Little Tree*, by Forrest Carter:

Granpa and Granma had an understanding, and so they had a love. Granma said the understanding run deeper as the years went by, and she reckined it would get beyond anything mortal folks could think upon or explain. And so they called it "kin."

Granpa said back before his time "kinfolks" meant any folks that you understood and had an understanding with, so it meant "loved folks." But people got selfish, and brought it down to mean just blood relatives; but that actually it was never meant to mean that (Carter, 1976, p. 38)

I think the term "non-biological kin" is a transitional term for me as I prepare to replace the term "family" with "kin," in the sense described above.

\* \* \* \* \*

*As I listen to Peter and Natalie, and as I observe myself moving away from using the word "family," I begin to question the whole notion of family. Is expanding the definition of family to include those of us whose bonds with our companions have not been recognized ... is that what we really want?*

*Speaking for myself, I prefer the notion of kin. I want more space around my personal relationships. I don't want to be trapped in a private world.*

*What makes sense to me about the notion of kin is that it bespeaks a connection that is consistent with my vision of human community. Kinship is not a private matter at all, to me. It is the practice of being who I am, one part of an interconnected, interdependent web of life.*

*The word "family" is now rooted too deeply in ideas about relationship that I reject: ownership, property, cost vs. benefit, reciprocation, reward.*

*Perhaps, for some of us, talking about family leads us out of that frame entirely? I will, however, continue to use the word "family" when convenience wins out, having noted its inadequacy.*

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **Journal Entry—2 February 1998**

*Wow. In the less-than-twenty-four hour timespan since I left off writing yesterday, we won the ECMA for African-Canadian Artist of the Year, I found out that my dad is not doing well at all, and the father of one of my closest friends passed away. I am sitting down to write five hours later than I had planned. I had to just sit for awhile this morning and absorb....*

\* \* \* \* \*

Using the available language in unusual ways and pulling different words into phrases to try to convey what seems wordless are linguistic practices that combine adaptation and innovation. I will now explore other forms of innovation in



developing a discourse to talk about family among bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults.

An adult educator I know once did an exercise with a group of us that she called a "force field analysis". We identified forces working against the cause we were working on together, identified our own strengths and advantages, and then looked for the openings or the access points where we could make progress. While I reject both the linearity and the adversarial orientation of this frame, it is certainly true that understanding our own abilities and strengths, as well as the forces working against us, and knowing how to make use of opportunities is crucial to our well-being. Daniel talked about looking for chances to talk about being family with those closest to him:

**Daniel:** I'm hoping, at some point, to be able to say to them, you know, you two mean a lot to me, and I think of you as family ... at some point. And I'm sure I will. But it's a matter of waiting to see that that inroad is ... It's a conscious process for me, and I'm watching for opportunities, and I'll know when the opportunity's there.

Daniel also noted that, among gay men, talking about sex can be the starting point for talking about other kinds of intimacy. He describes one instance when he invited a number of friends to visit him for a weekend, where he was housesitting in the country, during which there were multidirectional sexual dynamics:

**Daniel:** That inspired a conversation between \_\_\_\_\_ and I whereby I said to him, I trust you implicitly, and I want you to know that I'm supporting you. And he acknowledged that and said "I appreciate it"—that's the closest we've come to any kind of an intimate conversation in a real close ... and it's me saying it.

Another innovation is to take the social script, which is supposedly tacitly agreed upon, and break through its boundaries. Luke did this with his mother-in-

law:

**Luke:** I talk very directly with my mother-in-law about being family, usually by going out and having lunch with her. It's been doing things like lunches, when the kids [his mother-in-law's younger children] aren't around and you can have more of an in-depth talk. And I think I kind of got through to her one time when we were talking at lunch and she said, well, I don't know what you want from me, and I said, well, I could just go with that whole mother-in-law bit, but that isn't enough for me. And I think that clicked.

Yet another innovation is what I call "making the ordinary extraordinary."

Daniel gave an example of this when he spoke of spontaneously calling a family of choice member to thank her for her good advice regarding a dinner party he was having. He actually wanted to take that opportunity to tell her what she means to him:

**Daniel:** Like the other night, when I had all my gay friends out here. At one point, I was just having a really, really great time. And I went over and picked up the phone and dialed and she wasn't home and so I left a message and I just said, I want you to know that I took your advice. I didn't do the real formal, uptight, you know, anal retentive me. I did the laid-back, barbecue, let's just have a good time. And it's working beautifully and you know something? I wish you were here. And I wish you could be a part of it because, you know, I love you very much and I just want you to know that I'm thinking of you. And I mean, she got home. I don't know where she was. But she came home and listened to the message and I mean, \_\_\_\_\_'s reaction is always like ... she does this, like, little [*gestures*]*—*She always does that. Whenever I say anything like that to her, that's always her reaction. And I know, if she does that, that it really affected her. And I've done that ... we've done that for each other a lot, in two years.

A call to say thank-you for something is transformed into a celebration of how great it is to be family.

In this last excerpt from Daniel is another kind of innovation: gesture. According to Daniel, this family of choice member has a particular gesture that in-

cludes a specific facial expression that he sees whenever he expresses how much their connection means to him. It is how she expresses her sense of the depth of their connection—part of her non-verbal vocabulary.

Ellen made small, and then bigger and bigger concentric circles in the air with her hands, when she was describing her family. The movement, and the way she used space as part of the gesture, conveyed the sense of dynamism and change, openness and growth. The circular motion suggested wholeness and completion.

And then there are the metamessages, in which the speaker combines gesture in a larger sense, and family ritual, unconsciously enlisting the dominant discourse to convey a coded message. Sara recalls getting a message like this when her partner's mother made a rare trip on the train all the way from rural New Brunswick to attend a baby shower for family members:

**Sara:** We were pleasantly surprised with the way they sort of came around. Her mother even came all the way down here for a baby shower. Which was a big deal for her mother, because her mother's one of those women that really didn't go anywhere unless her husband took her. So coming here all by herself on the train was quite a big thing for her. And I think \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] was really pleased that she came.

Other uses of gesture that I encountered in how the participants spoke about family included a couple of Peter's stories, one in which he flew to another city because he had to talk to his loved one, and one in which he was involved in naming the infants of one of his loved ones.

Gesture, and symbols, and family ritual all work hand-in-hand in the development of what is starting to seem like an underground discourse. Family ritual, in particular big family dinners for special occasions, are often the site of much wordless communication. For instance, when Sara's mother had a baby shower for her,

she invited Sara's partner.

As previously mentioned, when Sara and her partner bought a vehicle together, it seemed to her that the two of them were saying something about their place in each other's lives.

**Sara:** When we bought a car together. When we both put it ... I mean, it was the biggest expense I had ever had, the biggest purchase. And we both put our money together and bought the car. And I think that was the first thing. And then there were other things...

Some of us create family ritual with our families of choice or loved ones.

**Peter:** Besides the traditional things, you know, whether it be birthdays or anniversaries, or Christmas, or that type of thing. And then, with some of us, there are special days. There is, oh yeah ... there is, uh ... and it's funny because, it's interesting how other people sometimes interpret what that is. \_\_\_\_\_ [his closest male friend and loved one] and \_\_\_\_\_, who was his first wife, they were married for approximately twenty-one years—five years after they were married, they decided to buy each other new rings. They decided to get each other a diamond ring, or whatever. Their first rings were this [shows me]. And it's a ring with each of their initials carved in it, it was made in Africa, and it's a wish ring, or wishbone ring. Anyhow, they decided to give those rings to their best friends. And so, he gave that to me, and she gave her's to her best friend. That started a ... a gift-giving, or an exchange of gifts, that are intimate gifts.

Sara says that family ritual is a big part of being family, for her:

**Sara:** What family means to me now? It means creating our own rituals and traditions around holidays, and doing things that we like, which is kind of an interesting ... so we do Christmas, but we do it our own way.

The quality of attention required to discern some of these messages is very demanding, motivating some of us to trust our intuition more. If we honour our intuitive way of knowing, we actually create more space in which to communicate

about being family. In her reflections on what she had said in one of the interviews on the subject of how she talks about family, Natalie wrote:

**Natalie:** With \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_, we talk a lot about feelings—being more vulnerable around one another. So even if 'you're family to me' is never explicitly said, it's felt and expressed in trust and openness.

Another way that we get the message across that someone or some people are part of our family, is by the use of context and repetition. The significance of a person in our lives can be partially conveyed through the frequency with which we refer to them. Ellen has found that referring to a couple of people repeatedly, over time, brings them into the inner circle of her family of choice; familiarity speaks of family:

**Ellen:** So a lot of the times, I just call them the girls. Like, if I say I'm going to go see the girls, people know who I'm talking about. And the friends I have, they would know that. And if I said that about ... in my home community, if I said, well, I'm going to see the girls, they'd go, who?

Several of these innovations—in gesture, ritual, intuited intent—suggest the existence of a secret language of sorts. We can be quite resourceful in finding ways to encode meaning in words and actions that our kin can understand, even if most people would find these references obscure.

As bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults find and create language to talk about our experiences of family, the children in our families play a special role. From hearing about Sara's experience, it seems to me that listening to the children in our families, and taking their lead at times, is another form of innovation in the development of a family discourse.

**Sara:** We have always referred to \_\_\_\_\_ [Sara's partner] as Mommy, with her. My mom even refers to \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] as Mommy, when talking with \_\_\_\_\_ [their daughter]. She'll say, if \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] calls on the phone, come talk to Mommy. And it's the baby who's come up with the best way. She calls ... she'll say, Mommy? Mommy? And if you don't respond, or if the one that she's looking for doesn't show up, she says, Mommy Sara? Mommy \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner]? But it's Mommy first. We recognize that she wants something and one of us responds to that. So it's not like an identity thing. Cause sometimes she'll say, Mommy, and I'll say what? And she'll say, Mommy \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner]. Like this morning, she was in her chair, and I was getting breakfast, and over there getting her something. And \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] was still up in bed. And she said, Mommy? And I said, what? And she was looking up the stairs to where \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] was, and she said, Mommy \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner], Mommy \_\_\_\_\_. So it's not specifically my identity, as Mommy.

In this instance, the little one needed to devise a way to distinguish between her two moms. She added the first name of each of her moms after Mommy, as a qualifier. This came about with no discussion or debate; it was simply the invention of a toddler as part of her process of learning new words and putting them together in ways that get her message across. I found this a powerful little story—the natural way the needed language can emerge in a setting that is accepting and supportive.

Sara read over the transcripts of her interviews and made some comments several months after the interviews had actually taken place. She reported further developments in how their daughter refers to her and her partner:

**Sara:** It has since developed more clearly. \_\_\_\_\_ [Sara's partner] is Mama, and I am Sara, and occasionally, Mommy.

I wonder if one of the keys to the evolution of new language in this way is Sara's and her partner's ability to relax, trust the process as it unfolds, and give their daughter the space to figure out ways to identify everyone in her family, that work for her. Sara's level of comfort with this was obvious, and seemed to me to be based on confidence in the quality of their family life. The family dynamics are

healthy and loving; words to describe it all will come.

The last aspect of how we talk about family that I will explore has to do with silence. Partly through my experience of silence being part of the music I sing with *Four The Moment*, and partly through my experience working with groups, I have come to understand that silence is not merely the absence of speech. I am very curious about what goes on within the silences that are woven into our everyday interactions, and especially curious about the silences that are part of the experience of those of us whose lives do not fit into the available discourse. It has been my sense for some time, now, that some silences can be very vibrant, fertile, creative spaces in which new meanings are gestating, forming. And that, against the backdrop of the abundance of inadequate words, our silences can be like a place to retreat, and a psychic workspace.

Marguerite Duras, in an essay in which she discusses silence as it relates to women's writing, states it eloquently:

The writing of women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language ... I know that when I write there is something inside me that stops functioning, something that becomes silent. It's as if I were returning to a wild country. Nothing is concerted ... The silence in women is such that anything that falls into it has an enormous reverberation (Duras, 1981, p. 175).

Yet there is a danger in romanticizing silence. If we, as bisexual, lesbian and gay adults have been able to inhabit some of the silences that have been imposed on us, not only surviving but managing to be creative and to grow, that is not to say that it is good that we have been forced to evolve under these circumstances.

Silence has been painful for many of us. It has been the territory we have been banished to when our families of origin have refused to acknowledge our intimate relationships, thereby withholding recognition of our wholeness as people. Silence has been the seductive, reductionist safety we have weighed on the one hand, when we make the decision about whether or not to come out as queer, over and over again throughout our lives. Sometimes silence feels tangibly solid, a strange substance that encases us and which we have to burst through in order to become heard and seen.

**Peter:** When we were talking about family get-togethers, like whether it be my father's birthday party that he threw for himself. They could make plans and, you know, other people would be mentioned. Like, oh yes, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ [Peter's sister and her partner], and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ [another couple] will be here. And so-and-so and so-and-so will be here. Peter will be here. Do you know what I mean? So after awhile, I said, no, it's not Peter, it's Peter and \_\_\_\_\_ [his partner]. And, you know, if you're uncomfortable with that, then you let me know, because I'll have to tell you to go sort that out and then come back to me.

It can get pretty tiresome living within the strictures of silence. We are expected to be fluent in the language of omission, as well as in the spoken word. And we are definitely expected to respect the boundaries around what gets talked about and what does not. For some of us, fear that has grown up in us as a result of other scary experiences contributes to our silence about our sexuality and our families of choice. Ellen sees this in her partner, a survivor of severe sexual abuse as a child and adolescent:

**Ellen:** \_\_\_\_\_ [Ellen's partner] won't say anything. Unless she has to. She's just that type of personality. You ask her a question, and she'll tell the answer but ... she's not going to divulge this information. And it all comes, I think, like I said, as part of how she was brought up. You know, that fear. But she's very timid, anyway.



To the extent that we decide to venture out of this silence, we need listeners. A feminist theologian, Carter Heyward, coined the phrase, "hearing each other into speech." I think that being heard is part of speaking; there is a sense of incompleteness about speaking without being heard. Sara has a story that illustrates the importance of having a listener. The setting is high school, when Sara decided to come out as a lesbian to her gym teacher whom she had carefully assessed as someone that it would be safe to tell:

**Sara:** Anyway, I went and told her. And...I sat down and poured out all this pain and hurt about what happened with the young woman I met in the summer. And ... she didn't respond at all. She didn't respond at all. She said, are you coming to volleyball practice today? That was the only response. And so I took from that that she didn't want to talk about what I had brought up, and I never brought it up again.

**Daniel:** The other thing, too, is \_\_\_\_\_'s [family of choice member] ability to listen. She's a practiced listener. She doesn't try and convince me that I need to change my thoughts. She hears me. That's one barrier that \_\_\_\_\_ [his sister] has that's been very difficult throughout our lifetime together is that I've never felt that she's ever really listened to me.

So having a listener is necessary if we are to break out of the silence that pervades our lives. In the meantime, we find ways to connect within the silence. There is specific content within the vastness of what remains unspoken, and sometimes we are able to convey it to each other:

**Ellen:** I think it's just like a kinship ... something you don't have to mention. Because we know that we share this stuff, that ... being gay and lesbian. All those ... stories and all those feelings, and all those other things. We have all that in common, so there's no need to discuss it. Now that we understand who we are, there's really no need for those words.

This tacit recognition, conveyed through meaningful silence, also extends—for some of us—to our families of origin as they come to accept our families of choice:

**Ellen:** After that initial time when my dad said what he said about welcoming \_\_\_\_\_ [her partner] and her kids into the family ... it doesn't get said. But there's all these things that ... they know we're a family, and there's nothing ever said, or embarrassing about it. You know, they...they even know, like, when we're having our fights. Because they see us so much.

We have found ways—ways that could be more accurately described through doing a more in-depth study—to know, even through silence, that we are family with each other.

**Ellen:** There is that family, that I do have. But it's not at home, it's here. That's different from when I go home to the family I came from, and it's different from my other friendships. But it doesn't get spoken of as family. It's just understood.

In this preliminary, and very rudimentary, discourse analysis of the transcripts of the participants in my study, I have tried to identify some of the ways bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults talk about family. This is a thumbnail sketch of the psychic landscape in which we live and create relationships that are meaningful to us. Somewhere, in between all these pressures and in between all those labelled boxes ... somewhere, in the cracks in there, exists this nameless terrain that we call home.

## CONCLUSION

\* \* \* \* \*

*The whole idea of writing a conclusion to this thesis has been very daunting for me. There is so much more that I could do with the data. Finishing this is such an artificial halt to an ongoing process of learning. I have so many more questions.*

\* \* \* \* \*

My intention was to explore, with a small sample of six participants, the ways in which bisexual, lesbian and gay adults experience family, weaving my own story into the text as a way in increasing sample size and foregrounding the perspective from which I have undertaken this project. In general I feel satisfied that I have achieved this.

I knew when I started that, if I wanted to do justice to the scope of my questions, I would have to seek diversity in my sample. It seems clear that there is a richness and a great range of different experiences of family among bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults. Truly, if there can be this much diversity of experience in such a small sample, then we must assume that the diversity in the larger population must be quite vast and there is much we do not know. As in all instances of attempting to shed light on the experiences of marginalized people which previously have been kept in shadow, being grounded in a precise awareness of the limitations of our knowledge is crucial to real learning.

It is my belief that there is nothing more important than this, in any knowledge creation project. So the major learning for me—although this is not what I was asking—is confirmation of an approach to my ongoing education and practice as a therapist that I have been evolving for some time. My stance as a practitioner is one

in which respect is prevalent, a tender but compassionate curiosity shapes my questions, and I rest in my faith that each person is infinitely resourceful and capable of taking very good care of themselves. In this study, this stance played a part in creating an environment in which the participants could speak about very emotionally challenging topics and share their experiences.

When I began this project, I recall saying that I hoped I would help deepen the pool of questions from which counsellors and therapists draw in our work. Now what I would say is that I have pointed out that the pool is very deep.

Two relatively unexplored areas within the topic of bisexual, lesbian and gay adults and family—which is under-researched in itself—are bisexuality and cultural difference.

It is one of the limitations of my work that I have not been able to read as widely as I would like about the experiences of bisexual people. It is quite hard to find what little literature there is. This area certainly needs to be researched further.

Interviewing a First Nations woman and an African-Canadian man, I was able to see some of the ways that different cultures experience family differently. Again, it seems that it was beyond the scope of this thesis to go into any detail or depth in the area of cultural differences.

I am uncomfortable with this because it is no coincidence that it is these two areas that I have not ventured into with the attention they merit; bisexual people and people of colour are discriminated against, and this has affected the degree of interest, the amount of research, and the quality of thinking about these areas. The fact that it is hard to find the writings of others on these topics makes researching them more time-consuming, and this combines with the institutional timelines for graduate theses to reinforce a cycle of neglect. Bisexuality and cultural difference

in the family experiences of queer adults are definitely two areas that require further research.

I note that the existence of similarities and differences that were not culturally defined indicates a need to be careful about how we think about difference. Cultural difference adds to the diversity of experiences in this area, but there are differences and similarities that can be referenced to dimensions of human experience other than culture.

Several recommendations for further research emerged in the text, as I brushed areas of questions that I would have loved to ask but which I had to leave unasked in the interest of keeping my project manageable in size and scope. I flagged these in the text with the memo "to be explored further." Racism in the family experiences of bisexual, lesbian, and gay adults needs to be more deeply probed. The need for bisexual, lesbian, and gay children and youth to create more space in which to be themselves, their need to be known, and how these often unmet needs contribute to problems with permeable boundaries and vulnerability of exploitation needs to be much better understood. The emotional costs of living in what I have called a psychic ready position—ready to protect oneself from homophobia and biphobia—also need to be investigated. Related to this, but with other dimensions as well, is the whole question of how living with controversy as a constant in our lives affects us. Another area requiring more attention is the experiences of adults who have decided to live child-free. Indeed, the term "child-free", although having more positive connotations than the term "childless," raises questions about the isolation of parenting and the wisdom of the African proverb that states that it takes a whole village to raise a child. And lastly, more work is needed in the area of evolving consciousness of a child's right to know their origin and how this will affect the practice of alternative insemination.

From our earliest thoughts about what kind of family we would be part of when we grew up, through a series of complicated and unending processes of clarification and balancing needs, to the ways we create and experience family in the present—the seven of us whose stories are found in this thesis engage in our own unique experience of family. Like most people, our family lives are a dance with the dynamics of nurturing, socialization, identity formation, rebellion, ritual, intimacy, autonomy and interdependence.

Perhaps in the space that is available when we let go of our need to define family, we can identify elements of the process of becoming and being family. It is my hope that I have made a contribution in this regard. I am so grateful to the six people who shared deeply enough to make this project possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Dad died on February 20th, two weeks ago today. I was able to get there in time to spend an afternoon and evening with him. We called my older brother Ray and told him to come, and I picked him up at the ferry late that night. Dad was at home, and how inexpressibly glad I was about that, and Mom, Ray, and I were with him when he died. My younger brother arrived shortly thereafter, and together with the extended family, we went through all the rituals of letting go. It was a holy time, and a lot of healing took place.*

*We hung out together for several days and shared the best of ourselves with each other. I am still absorbing it and attempting to integrate it into my life.*

*I thought I was prepared for this, and what I know now is that I have only just discovered, in his death, how deeply he is a part of me. There is an open wound in the middle of my chest where he has been wrenched from me. There is a soft, constant ache.*

*I have a few things of Dad's, and I gave one shirt to a friend, a man I have been spending time with. He will*

*never meet my Dad, who would have liked him, I know.  
So I like the idea of him wearing Dad's shirt.*

*Dad would have greeted my friend with such good-  
heartedness and openness it would be hard to believe  
that this same man could be so coldly uninterested in  
the women I have been involved with over the years.*

*And I think now of one dear friend, with whom I was  
lovers over ten years ago, knowing that my observance  
of my Dad's death will not be over until I talk to her and  
tell her the stories. She is family, and that's what families  
do.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackroyd, L. (1984). [Review of the book Man Made Language]. Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la Recherche Feministe, 13(3), 60.
- Adam, B. D. (1985). Age, structure, and sexuality: Reflections on the anthropological evidence on homosexual relations. In E. Blackwood (Ed.), Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior (pp. 19). New York: The Haworth Press.
- Aries, Phillippe. (1962). Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life. New York: Random House.
- Bean, J. (1984). Give and take: Considering authority and power in language. Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la Recherche Feministe, 13(3) 26.
- Beechey, V., & Donald, J. (1985). Subjectivity and Social Relations. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Berger B., & Berger, P. (1983). The War Over The Family. New York: Doubleday.
- Berzon, B. (1988). Permanent Partners Building Gay and Lesbian Relationships That Last. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Berzon, B. (1979). Telling the family you're gay. In B. Berzon & R. Leighton (Eds.), Positively Gay. Los Angeles: Mediamix Associates.
- Bigner, J. J., & Jacobsen, R. B. (1989). The value of children to gay and heterosexual fathers. Journal of Homosexuality, 18(1-2), 163.
- Bridenthal, R. (1982). The family: The view from a room of her own. In B. Thorne & L. Yalom (Eds.), Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions (pp. 225-239). New York: Longman, Inc.
- Callender, C. & Kochems L. (1985). Men and not-men: Male gender-mising statuses and homosexuality. In E. Blackwood (Ed.), Anthropology and Homosexual



- Behavior (pp. 165). New York: The Haworth Press.
- Carter, F. (1976). The Education of Little Tree. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Cejka, M.A. (1982). A demon with no name: Prejudice against single women. In M. O'Brien & C. Christie (Eds.), Single Women: Affirming Our Spiritual Journeys (pp. 3). Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Chawaf, C. (1981). Linguistic flesh. In E. Marks & I. de Courtivron (Eds.), New French Feminisms (pp. 177). New York: Schocken.
- Cheal, D. (1991). Family and the State of Theory. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cocks, J. (1989). The Oppositional Imagination. London: Rutledge.
- Collier, J., Michelle Rosaldo and Sylvia Yanagisako. (1982). Is there a family? New anthropological views. In B. Thorne & L. Yalom (Eds.), Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions (pp. 25-39). New York: Longman, Inc.
- Conrad, Rick. (1996, June 24). Province celebrates Gay Pride Week. The Mail Star, pp. A5.
- Crystal, D. (1995). The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Currie, A. (1987). Companionship in Space: A therapeutic title. Unpublished paper.
- Dajenya. (1991). Sisterhood crosses gender preference lines. In L. Hutchins and L. Kaahumanu (Eds.), Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out. Boston: Alyson Publications.
- Darroch, V. (1984). Two paragraphs about work in progress. Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la Recherche Feministe, 13(3) 29.
- De Pree, M. (1994). Dear Zoe. San Francisco: Harper Collins.
- Descartes, R. (1927). Descartes: Selections. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

- Dolan, Yvonne. (1997). Talk given in Halifax at the Maritime Family Therapy Conference, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. June.
- Douglas, J. (1973). Introduction to Sociology. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co.
- Dunn, J. (1988). The Beginnings of Social Understanding. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Duras, M. (1981). From an interview. In E. Marks and I. de Courtivron (Eds.), New French Feminisms (pp. 174). New York: Schocken.
- Family Next Door: For lesbian and gay parents and their friends. [Complete issues]. Oakland, CA: Next Door Publishing.
- Foucault, M. (1977). Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Francis, (1996). Family Ritual and Adolescents' Feelings of Belonging: Exploring the Relationship. Unpublished masters thesis, Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia.
- Gay, J. (1985). 'Mummies and babies' and friends and lovers in Lesotho. In E. Blackwood (Ed.), Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior (pp. 107). New York: The Haworth Press.
- Girard, C. (1991). A few brave and gifted people. In L. Hutchins and L. Kaahumanu (Eds.), Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out. Boston: Alyson Publications.
- Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional Intelligence. New York: Bantam Books.
- Gray, P. (1987). The other mother: A lesbian co-mother's journal. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 133-139). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Greenberg, D. (1985). Why was the Berdache ridiculed? In E. Blackwood (Ed.), Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior (pp. 185). New York: The Haworth

Press.

Griffin, C. W., Wirth, M. J., & Wirth, A. G. (1986). Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk About Their Experiences. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Gubrium, J. F. & Holstein, J. A. (1990). What is Family? Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Hill, K. (1987). Mothers by insemination: Interviews. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 111-119). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.

Hoagland, Sarah. (1988). Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Values. Palo Alto, CA: Institute of Lesbian Studies.

hooks, B. (1994). Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. New York: Routledge.

Huggins, Sharon. (1989). A comparative study of self-esteem of adolescent children of divorced lesbian mothers and divorced heterosexual mothers In Homosexuality and the Family [Special issue]. Journal of Homosexuality (pp. 123). Haworth Press.

Husserl, E. (1975). The Paris Lectures. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Husserl, E. (1960). Cartesian Meditations. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Hutchins, L. & Kaahumanu, L. (Eds.). (1991). Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out. Boston: Alyson Publications.

Kantrowitz, Barbara. (1996, November 4). Gay families come out. Newsweek, 51.

Klepfisz, I. (1987). Women without children/women without families/women alone. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 55-65). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.

Kurdek, Lawrence. (1995). Developmental changes in relationship quality in gay

- and lesbian cohabiting couples. Developmental Psychology, 31(1), p. 86-94.
- Kurukulasuriya, Lasanda. (1995, Spring). Conceivable options: Why women are choosing artificial insemination. Horizons, 9(1), 16-20.
- Lather, P. (1991). Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern. New York: Routledge.
- Lesbian Oral History Group of the Hall Carpenter Archives. (1989). Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories. London, Routledge.
- Lofland, J. (1995). Analytic ethnography: Features, failing, futures. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 24(1) April, 30-67.
- Marks, E. & de Courtivron, I. (Eds.). (1981). New French Feminisms. New York: Schocken.
- McGoldrick M. & Gerson, R. (1985). Genograms on Family Assessment. New York: Norton and Co.
- McKenna, K. (1991). "Com(e) (A)part Mentalizations Forming Academic Subjectivities. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.
- Nicholson L. (Ed.). (1990). Feminism/Postmodernism. New York: Routledge.
- O'Brien M. & Christie, C. (Eds.). (1993). Single Women: Affirming Our Spiritual Journeys. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Ogle, S. & Annie Holstock. (1995). More than a gift. In L. Wakeling & M. Bradstock (Eds.), Beyond Blood: Writings on the Lesbian and Gay Family (pp. 22-29). Sydney, Australia: Blackwattle Press.
- Orlando, L. (1991). Loving whom we choose. In L. Hutchins and L. Kaahumanu (Eds.), Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out. Boston: Alyson Publications.

- Parker, P. (1987). Legacy. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 208-212). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Penn, Donna. (1995). Queer: Theorizing Politics and History. Radical History Review, 62(Spring), 24-42.
- Pies, Cheri. (1985). Considering Parenthood: A Workbook for Lesbians. San Francisco, CA: Spinsters Ink.
- Polikoff, N.D. (1987). Lesbians choosing children: The personal is political. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 48-54). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Pollack, J. (1995). Lesbian and Gay Families. New York: Franklyn Watts.
- Pollack, S. & Vaughan, J. (Eds.). (1987). Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Public Legal Education Society of Nova Scotia. (1994). Powers of Attorney [Brochure]. Public Legal Education Society of Nova Scotia.
- Rafkin, L. (Ed.). (1990). Different Mothers: Sons and Daughters of Lesbians Talk About Their Lives. Pittsburgh: Cleis Press.
- Rhodes, A. & S. Conway-Rhodes. (1987) Family matters. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 268-276). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Roberts, R.K. (1987). A process of naming. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 149-151). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Rossi, A., Kagan, J. & Hareven, T.K. (1978). The Family. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Saffron, Lisa. (1986). Getting Pregnant Our Own Way: A guide to alternative insemination. London: Women's Health Information Centre.

- Spencer, J. W. (1994). Mutual relevance of ethnography and discourse. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 23(3) 267-279.
- Spender, D. (1984). Exploration and challenge in the English language. Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la Recherche Feministe, 13(3) 2.
- Stacey, E. (1994). Imagining feminist ethnography: A response to Elizabeth E. Wheatley. Women's Studies International Forum, 17(4), 417-419.
- Stack, C. (1974). All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community. New York: Harper and Row.
- Tannen, D. (1990). You Just Don't Understand. New York: Random House.
- Thorne, B. & Yalom, M. (Eds.) (1982). Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions. New York: Longman, Inc.
- Tortorilla, T. (1987). On a creative edge. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 168-174). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Toufexis, Anastasia. (1992, August 17). Bisexuality: What is it? Time, 37-39.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy. London, ON: The Althouse Press.
- Vance, Kim. (1995, June). Makin' babies the lesbian way. Wayves, 1(5), p. 2-3.
- Wakeling, L. & Bradstock, M. (Eds.). (1995). Beyond Blood: Writings on the Lesbian and Gay Family. Sydney, Australia: Blackwattle Press.
- Walker, A. (1983). In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Washburne, C.K. (1987). Happy birthday from your other mother. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 142-145). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Weinberg, M.S. & Williams, C.J. (1974). Male Homosexuals. Their Problems and

Adaptations. New York: Oxford University Press.

Weston, K. (1991). Families We Choose: Lesbians Gays Kinship. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wheatley, E. E. (1994). How can we engender ethnography with a feminist imagination? A rejoinder to Judith Stacey. Women's Studies International Forum, 17(4), 403-416.

Williams, W. (1985). Persistence and change in the Berdache tradition among contemporary Lakota Indians. In E. Blackwood (Ed.), Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior (pp. 199). New York: The Haworth Press.

Wolfe, S.J. (1987). Self-contradictions. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 71-78). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.

Zook, N. & R. Hallenback. (1987). Lesbian coparenting: Creating connections. In S. Pollack and J. Vaughan (Eds.), Politics of the Heart: A Lesbian Parenting Anthology (pp. 89-93). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview #1—Guide**

the genogram—3 parts:   Mapping the family structure  
                                  recording family information  
                                  delineating family relationships

How would you describe the family you grew up in?

What are some of the most vivid memories of life in your family?

If we think of family rituals as including holiday celebrations, special family occasions, and daily routines, what were some of your family's rituals?

Do you recall having a sense, when you were a child, of what kind of family you would be a part of when you grew up and left home? (If yes) Describe what kind of family you saw yourself being a part of?

Did sex role socializations play a part in how you pictured yourself being a part of family in your adult life?

How do you describe your sexuality? What term or terms do you use?

When did you begin to identify as (bisexual/lesbian/gay/transsexual)?

How did you integrate your sense of your sexuality with your ideas about family?

Have you come out to your family of origin? (if so) Has coming out to them affected your family relationships? (if so) In what ways?

What is your relationship like now with your family of origin?



When did you leave home? What were your thoughts and feelings about family then?

When you think about your earliest ideas and plans about family for yourself, what has changed? What has stayed the same?

### **Interview #2—Guide**

#### **family now ...**

Describe your experience of family in the present.

What does family mean to you now? Who is a part of your family?

Are children a part of your life? Describe your relationship with children, or lack thereof, and the role that children do or do not play in your life.

#### **for parents ...**

How did you come to be a parent? Was it a conscious choice? Was it something you always wanted to do/be? What were the main considerations for you in becoming a parent?

How do you and your children relate to your family of origin? Do you feel recognized as a family and supported in the same way other family members are?

Who is your extended family?

What are the major issues you and your child(ren) must deal with because your family is non-traditional?

Has having a child affected your relationship with your partner? If so, how?

Have there been any surprises for you in your experience of being a parent?

What do you find most difficult about it?

**for those who identify as being part of a family ...**

What is it about your relationships with members of your family that makes those relationships different from your close friendships or your relationships with other relatives?

Do you observe any family rituals with your family? (if so) What are they?

Do you talk with the members of your family about being family and what that means to you? (if so) How do you talk about it, i.e., when does it come up, what words are used, etc.? (if not) Do you have any ideas about why not?

How do members of your family of origin relate to your family?

How do other people in your neighbourhood, workplace, school ... relate to your family? Have you experienced any problems?

Where does your support for being a non-traditional family come from?

Is there anything that you wish could be different for you and your family?

What do you feel most proud of about your family.

Are there differences between your experience of family and what you know about conventional families?

**for those who do not identify as being part of a family ...**

Has not being part of a family, other than your family of origin, been a conscious choice for you? (if so) What contributed to you making this choice?

Do you see yourself as being part of an extended family of any kind?

Do you feel supported in your lifestyle by your friends, your extended family, your colleagues?

What does it mean to you to have either chosen or ended up with a lifestyle in which family does not play a major role?

**big picture ... overview questions ...**

Has your desire for family, or of no family, in your life been met? (if so) How has that desire been satisfied? (if not) What stands in the way of that desire being satisfied? And how would you describe living with that desire? What is that like?

How does your desire for family, or of no family, affect your well-being as a person? Your quality of life? Your vision of the future?

What are the questions you ask yourself about family now?

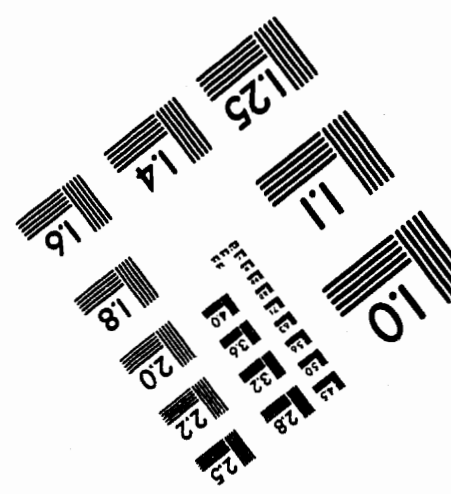
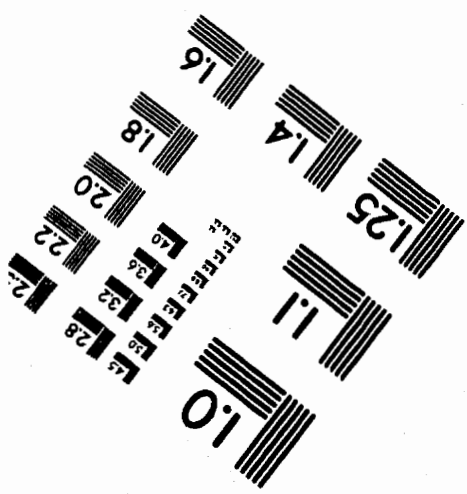
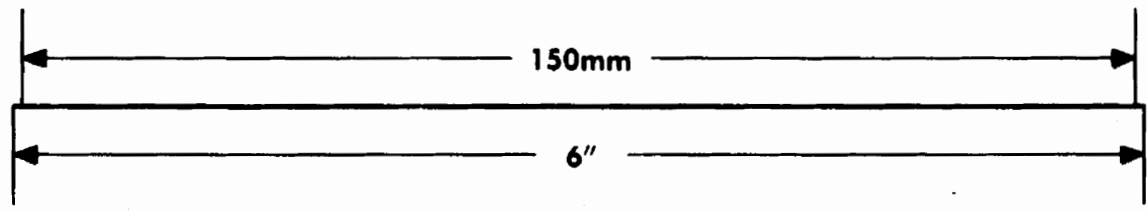
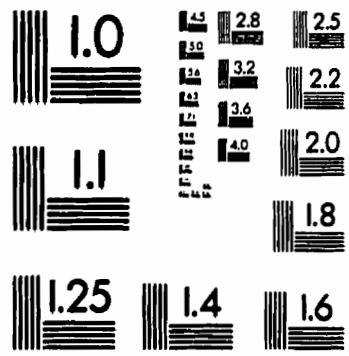
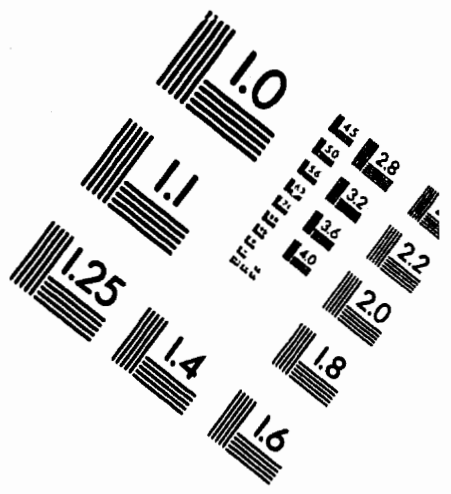
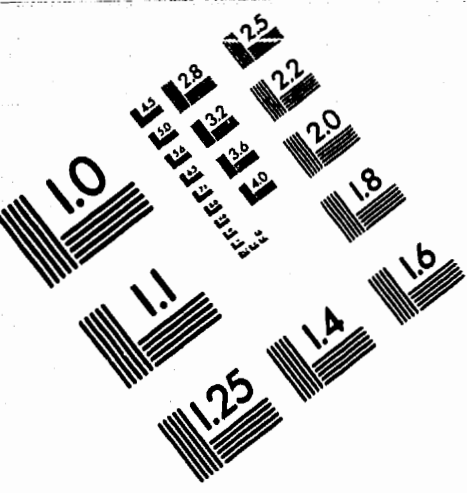
Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you would like to tell me?

Are there any other questions that you think I should be asking?

How would you like to see the information that is gathered in this study used?

Would you be willing to be contacted when this interview has been transcribed to read over what you said and provide me with additional comments?

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



**APPLIED IMAGE, Inc**  
 1653 East Main Street  
 Rochester, NY 14609 USA  
 Phone: 716/482-0300  
 Fax: 716/288-5989

© 1993, Applied Image, Inc., All Rights Reserved