

REDEFINING NORMALCY: A QUEER RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FAMILY

*AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF YOUTH WITH LESBIAN PARENTS*

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of  
DEBORAH KARIN THOMAS-JONES find it satisfactory and recommend that it be  
accepted.

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Chair

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# REDEFINING NORMALCY: A QUEER RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FAMILY

## *AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF YOUTH WITH LESBIAN PARENTS*

### Abstract

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This dissertation is an exploration of the concept of family as it is defined by six, early adolescents and their lesbian parents. It comes at a time of increased political and social tension surrounding issues of gay and lesbian marriage rights and validity for same sex parents. This study employs qualitative research methods in order to fully explore how youth negotiate between their family identity and the definitions of family imposed by society. This study, driven by queer theory and inquiry, recognizes that identity is not realized through definitive and rigid boundaries but it is within and between these locations of the self where “truth” emerges and can be appreciated. Particular attention is paid to lesbian headed households as they deal with issues of validity, conformity, and invisibility. Data were collected through individual and group interviews, observations, essay writing, and illustrations. Analyses was conducted through the use of grounded theory and revealed four overarching themes: (a) being “out” about family structure, (b) marriage and family, (c) the transition from childhood to adolescence, and (d) thoughtful and purposive parenting. This study provides an opportunity to problematize the concept of normalcy as it is identified and restructured by the families who participated in this

research. There is a need for research that not only provides recognition of diverse family structures, but also encourages movement toward social change. My goal, through this study, is to offer readers an opportunity to understand the lives of the families who participated and to emerge from this experience with useful strategies to disrupt the dominant systems of power.

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## **Dedication**

I am profoundly grateful for the wonderful, honest, and rich stories of the families who participated in this study. I am so privileged to have been able to learn from each of you and I know your stories will make a difference to others who read them. These pages are dedicated to you. Thank you for opening your homes and lives to me. It has been an honor.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When asked how their family compared to those of their daughter's peers, Sue and Amy, together for 27 years and lesbian parents of 14 year old Sarah, paused for a moment. Then, Sue replied, "I don't think Scooter [Sarah] has one friend whose family's intact or hasn't turned over in the last 10 years. I mean we're the oddity. You know if it wasn't for the fact that we were gay we'd be so damn dull. We'd be June and Ward." Amy added, "It would have to be June and June though."

While the concept of family presents itself in many forms, we, as a society, are bombarded with messages, both overt and covert, about how *ideal* families are defined (Siebert & Willetts, 2000). Much of this influence is relayed to us through media, such as radio, television, and magazines (Casper & Schultz, 1996). However, these messages often go unnoticed as they are presented in the form of normalcy: assuming the representation of an acceptable family (Nardi, 2004; Delpit, 1995). Families who do not fit this ideological definition of family remain hidden due to their lack of representation and are often the only ones who recognize this absence (Delpit, 1995; Johnson, 2001). The marginalization of individuals does not always take the form of overt discrimination or oppression and therefore remains silent. Johnson (2001) reminds us that by refusing to name or recognize oppressions, we help to perpetuate their invisibility which only strengthens the division of power within our society.

The term oppression can be defined as an imbalance of power between the dominant culture and subordinate cultures (Ore, 2003). This imbalance not only occurs

theoretically but has practical manifestations that lead to oppressive actions taken to keep the subordinate cultures in inferior positions. Oppressed populations include any group who has not historically been given equal standing within the dominant culture. In the United States, these groups include, but are not limited to, women, ethnic, racial, and religious minorities, persons with disabilities, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people as well as the intersections of these groups.

Occasionally, oppressive messages can be insinuated through the display of favor for one group over another. In his proclamation of National Family Day, President George W. Bush declared his new budgetary focus to support *the* family as an “American institution.” For some, like President Bush, there is an implied singularity in his description of the American family: “Parents and family are a bedrock of love and support, and my Administration is committed to strengthening families. My 2006 budget proposes \$240 million for initiatives that promote responsible fatherhood and encourage healthy marriages” (Bush, 2005, Family Day, ¶ 3). It can be implied through the president’s message that those deemed worthy of being considered a strong family are parental units that include a father and couples who have been legally married. Here, the President insinuates a definition of an ideal family, one he is willing to promote and support.

However, more than half of the families in the United States do not adhere to this definition (Siebert & Willets, 2000). Among other non-traditional family forms, lesbian headed households are exposed to both hidden and blatant messages that invalidate their family structure (Casper & Schultz, 1996). Messages, such as these, can have influence

over the decision to raise a child in a world where they may be ostracized because of their mother's sexual orientation (Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2000). Similarly, parental identity and rights are often questioned when same sex couples decide to raise a child together (Sullivan, 1996). However, despite the lack of representation and support, lesbian parents and their children are restructuring their own definitions of family (Siebert & Willetts, 2000).

### *Rationale for the Research Study*

While there has been considerable research on lesbian and/or gay parenting (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Dunne, 2000), very little of it has come from the perspective of the children of gay and lesbian parents. More specifically, there has been very little qualitative research (Rosenthal, Feldman & Edwards, 1998; Victor & Fish, 1995) on how youth negotiate between their family identity and the definitions of family imposed by society. The quantitative data that exists about gay and lesbian families can be informative although provides us with a different level of understanding about the specific lived experiences of individuals (Rosenthal et al., 1998; Saffron, 1998). Qualitative studies provide an opportunity for in-depth examination of the lives of participants. They are especially effective in researching underrepresented populations as they create a forum for otherwise silenced voices to be heard (Morrow, 2003).

In addition, much of the research that exists about lesbian and gay headed households utilizes a comparative approach, positioning homosexual and heterosexual families against each other (Patterson, 1992; Cameron & Cameron, 1996). A hierarchy is

insinuated when groups are compared, situating lesbian and gay families in subordination to heterosexual families (Stacey & Biblarz, 2000; Clarke, 2002). Similarly, much of the research on the children of lesbian and gay families creates a dynamic where researchers are driven to *prove* that these children are not deviant or clinical in comparison to children of heterosexual parents (Patterson, 1992; Cameron & Cameron, 1996).

This dissertation is an exploration of the concept of family as it is defined by six, early adolescents and their lesbian parents. Current literature indicates that lesbian headed families are often exposed to heterosexism and discrimination (Laird, 1996; Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Anderssen, Amlie & Ytteroy, 2002). This study pays particular attention to lesbian headed households as they deal with issues of validity, conformity, and invisibility. This study provides an opportunity to problematize the concept of normalcy as it is identified and restructured by the families who participated in this research.

I chose qualitative methods to gather these data and used a grounded theory approach for analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This method of research was chosen in order to fully immerse myself in the lives of my participants, and develop theory from the data that emerged. Questionnaires, essays, interpretive drawings, and in-depth interviews provided data for this study.

### *Research Questions*

Visibility is discussed and examined in various ways throughout this research. It is manifested through the use of media and popular culture, which in turn may have implications for the individual choices made by the participants in this study. Deciding

whether to “come out” to those around them is a large factor in how their family is viewed. Making choices about the environments in which to live, work, and socialize also drives these decisions. Consequently the questions guiding this research are:

- 1) What does “being out” look like for families with lesbian parents?
- 2) How does “being out” inform the children of lesbian headed households, about the way family is viewed?
- 3) How are lesbian families represented in local and national communities?
- 4) How do families communicate about politics and society?
- 5) How do youth and parents of lesbian headed households define family?

From these interviews emerged categories that provide context and order to the considerable amount of data gathered in this study. These categories focus on issues of being “out;” definitions of marriage and family; understanding and traversing adolescence; and building and sustaining open communication between parents and their children. Family responses to questions were treated confidentially and with respect. I attempted to represent all of these participants accurately.

#### *Theoretical Framework of the Research*

This project is developed from an interdisciplinary perspective, and while it is well supplemented by scholarly writing and research across various disciplines, my educational background comes primarily from Counseling Psychology, American Studies, and Sociology. Interdisciplinary study allows for an integration of individual disciplines to form a unique level of understanding. Klein (1990) refers to this higher level of understanding as “transdisciplinary.” She defines transdisciplinary study as a

“conceptual framework that transcends the narrow scope of disciplinary world views, metaphorically encompassing the several parts of material handled separately by specialized disciplines” (p. 66). Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), a Chicana lesbian feminist poet and fiction writer, emphasizes that the importance of physical boundaries are diminished by the presence of psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands. Likewise, an effort to understand the global and local implications of, and potential changes in, the relationships between dominant and oppressed groups cannot be neatly categorized into one single theoretical perspective.

Queer theory is well supported by an interdisciplinary perspective and is, therefore, used to inform the current study. Through this lens, this project investigates the creation of and belief in the instability of identity as well as the recognition that people can have many overlapping and intertwining identities (Walters, 1996). By limiting the rigid categories of how we define marriage and family we are able to resist heterosexist discourse by recognizing its presence in and relationship to, positions of power within society (Nagel, 2000).

#### *Importance of the Research*

This research aims to give voice and recognition to lesbian headed families. It comes at a time of increased political and social tension surrounding issues of gay and lesbian marriage rights and validity for same sex parents. Messages of validity and normalcy are perpetuated through avenues, such as media sources, to provide us with a basic understanding of the way in which society ought to function (Delpit, 1995, Nardi, 2003). These messages are a direct reflection of those who have power in mainstream

culture. Sources of media proliferate messages of heterosexism, both through homophobic language and images, but most often through lack of representation for gay and lesbian individuals and families (Nardi, 2003).

Evidence of these messages can be illustrated by a recent decision made by the Public Broadcast System to remove an episode of the animated series *Postcards from Buster*. The controversy surrounding the incident was instigated when the main character from the show, a cartoon rabbit named *Buster*, visited with the child of a same-sex couple in Vermont. Although the show never acknowledged that the child's parents were lesbians, the insinuation was enough to create an uproar. While one of the goals of the series is to "...build awareness and appreciation of the many cultures in America" (Public Broadcast System, 2006, *Postcards from Buster*, ¶2), the fear of losing funding from a national literacy grant dictated the outcome of the episode. In addition, critics, including the U.S. Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, weighed in on the controversy, writing that she had "strong and very serious concerns. . ." continuing, in a letter to PBS president Pat Mitchell, to state, "Many parents would not want their young children exposed to the life-styles portrayed in this episode" (Toppo, 2005).

As evidenced in the preceding example, those in power have the ability to dictate whose families are "acceptable" in society. There is a need for research that not only provides recognition of diverse family structures, but also encourages movement toward social change. My goal, through this study, is to offer readers an opportunity to understand the lives of the families who participated and to emerge from this experience with useful strategies to disrupt the dominant systems of power.

### *The Organization of the Dissertation*

This study is presented in five chapters. The current chapter was developed as a contextual tool to set the stage for the following pages. The information in this chapter provides an introduction to the theoretical framework and rationale for this project. The current social and political climate surrounding issues of validity for same sex parented families emphasizes the significance of the timing of this research.

Chapter two provides the conceptual framework for this research. This chapter reviews the literature that exists about lesbian and gay families and includes an overview of the research that created a foundation for the development of this study. Definitions of marriage and family are reviewed and debated as an approach to investigate the influence of systems of privilege in our society. Scholars and theorists from the fields of psychology, women's studies, sociology, philosophy, and other social sciences provide an interdisciplinary context for the chapters that follow.

Chapter three provides a description of the methodology for the research and the tools used for analysis. This study employs qualitative research methods in order to fully explore the intersections of the participants' lived experiences through interviews and interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data were collected through individual and group interviews, observations, essay writing, and illustrations. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were organized using a qualitative data analysis software program in preparation for coding. Coding involves breaking down the data, forming it into categories and subcategories, and allowing theory to emerge from the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

This study used a grounded theory approach to qualitative analysis. This approach is based on the “interplay between researchers and data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13). Analysis requires the researcher’s intimate knowledge of the data in order to provide a foundation from which to build theory. Chapter four provides a detailed explanation of the concepts, categories, and subcategories that emerged from the data. Concepts are overarching themes that provide context and order to the data and allow for it to be further extracted into categories and subcategories. It is during the process of categorization when data is explained and the development of theory occurs.

Chapter five is the culmination of the dissertation. It is here where the categorized data interacts with pre-existing and currently developed theory to produce a holistic explanation of the research. In each section of this chapter I have outlined clinical implications for counselors, therapists, scholars, and educators as they apply to each specific category. In addition, I have made suggestions for further research in order to contribute to a much needed movement toward social justice.

#### *Research Considerations*

This is a study of human experience and therefore must consider and integrate the intersections of all components of an individual’s identity, including (but not limited to) race, class, and gender. Consequently, this study also identifies some of the often hidden and unnamed components of the self, such as insecurities, self-esteem and belonging, and physical and mental ability. This study, driven by queer theory and inquiry, recognizes that identity is not realized through definitive and rigid boundaries but it is within and between these locations of the self where truth emerges and can be appreciated (Walters,

1996; Anzaldúa, 1987). However, with this consideration comes the recognition that the full complexities of identity may never be fully captured or explained.

As with most research with lesbian parents and their families, the participants in this study are primarily white, educated, and middle class (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Sullivan, 1996). Many of the participants for this study have chosen to live openly about their family structures, due in at least some cases to the fairly welcoming communities in which they live and work. However, for most of these youth, in particular, the choice of being “out” is situational and selective, primarily dependent upon the presence of trust.

In addition, the choice to be open about family structure does not insinuate visibility for lesbian parented families. The dominant ideology of family, one that consists solely of a mother and a father, has influenced our societal assumptions around how we view and interpret normalcy (Nagel, 2000; Phelan, 1997). It is because of these assumptions that openness about family structure becomes more difficult. For these youth, rather than exist within the dominant structure, being “out” requires an act of resistance (Casper & Schultz, 1996). Therefore, the voices of these families are continually silenced, even when openness is chosen.

This study begins a movement toward recognizing the varied life experiences of individuals (Lugonés, 1996). Dominant ideologies create a divide that place individuals in opposition to one another, as is exemplified through the categories of male and female and of homosexual and heterosexual (Nagel, 2000; Phelan, 1997). By forcing a dichotomized view of society, the work of separating those in power from those considered to be “other” is simplified. Through this research, I aim to challenge the

concept of normalcy and explore the roles that power and privilege play in defining and categorizing family identity.

## CHAPTER 2

### INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERATURE

Gay and lesbian marriage and families are current and poignant themes in national political and social debates. Rights for gay and lesbian unions have been highlighted, threatened, honored, and devalued within the past few years with counties taking a stand against bans for gay/lesbian marriage and allowing legalized recognition for committed relationships, only to have such validation challenged at the state and federal levels. This step, although short lived, created conversations at dinner tables across the country, regardless of which side of the platform individuals identified.

Provided here are some fundamental issues that emerge when we, as researchers, practitioners, and members of society engage in the discourse surrounding families headed by lesbian parents. If, as Foucault (1991) suggests, knowledge and power are generated through discourse, then we are responsible, to identify and open dialogue about otherwise silenced populations. I explore this discourse through the lens of queer theory. Queer theory deconstructs the oppositional ideologies that are created by society to work against each other, such as the categories of homosexual and heterosexual or male and female (Nagel, 2000; Phelan, 1997). Taking a queer perspective allows for a rejection of categories that are considered, by society, to be “normal” while challenging definitions of and constructions of identity (Phelan, 1997). Considering marriage and family as fluid, ever changing and without boundaries helps to create a framework for investigating the issues around how adolescents with lesbian parents negotiate their family identities between worlds.

### *Family Values*

In the 1940s and 1950s, Talcott Parsons, a well known sociologist of his time, touted the definition of family as exclusive for married heterosexual couples with children (Parsons, 1949). He goes on to say that it would be considered unnatural for any other combination of individuals to maintain a common household. Although Parson's description of family emerged from mid 19<sup>th</sup> century America, many in the United States continue to adhere to this definition and belief system (Seibert & Willetts, 2000; Dailey, 2005).

In his address to Congress on February 28, 2001, President George W. Bush delivered a "Blueprint for New Beginnings" outlining a budget proposal that "...offers a new vision for governing the Nation for a new generation" (Blueprint for New Beginnings, 2001, President's Message, ¶ 1). Included in this plan for governmental spending and growth was a detailed description for "strengthening families." The section of this plan began by stating "... that every child deserves to live in a safe, permanent and caring family, with a loving *father and mother* [italics added]" (Blueprint for New Beginnings, 2001, Strengthening Families, ¶ 1). The proposal goes on to assert that American family values have been compromised due to the absence of fathers in children's lives and while Bush emphasized the importance of two, committed parents to promote healthy and well adjusted children, he explicitly stated that "there is simply no substitute for the love, involvement, and commitment of a responsible father" (Blueprint for New Beginnings, 2001, Strengthening Families, ¶ 5).

However, Seibert and Willetts (2000) remind us that the definition of family cannot remain stable, as proposed by political leaders and conservative professionals. Instead, the definition is constantly redefined in response to cultural and institutional changes. Queer theory provides the framework to transform societal definitions of seemingly, fixed, rigid identities (Walters, 1996). Some researchers challenge us to consider the impact of imposing views of legitimacy for families who do not fall into traditional and concrete definitions of an institution that is in a constant state of movement (Seibert & Willetts, 2000; Lehr, 1999). Any perpetuation of the definition of family as an inflexible and specific form is a privilege put forth by those in power in order to maintain their place in the societal hierarchy (Lehr, 1999). “Privilege grants the cultural authority to make judgments about others and to have those judgments stick. It allows people to define reality...” (Johnson, 2001, p. 33).

In addition, other researchers assert that lesbian and gay parents defy traditional family values (Clarke, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Cameron & Cameron, 1996). Because the concept of the family is socially constructed, social institutions such as schools, community, and government determine whether or not a family structure is considered to be legitimate or illegitimate (Young, 1996; Butler, 2002). These institutions are locations in which the rules that govern our basic understanding of the way in which society functions are created and delivered (Delpit, 1995; Casper, Schultz, Wickens, 1992). Delpit calls these rules the “culture of power” (p. 25). This culture of power is a direct reflection of those who hold the power and privilege in mainstream culture. Therefore, any beliefs, actions, or experiences that stray from the culture of

power are considered deviant and often treated as so (Anzaldúa, 1987). For the children of lesbian and gay parents, these messages indicate that their families are illegitimate.

Parke (2004) suggests that researchers must challenge traditional assumptions that “family” can be directed to a single location in historical contexts. Similarly, Foucault (1997) asserts that societally imposed definitions are a means of categorization, and therefore limit one's identity. Categorizing identities dictates the possibilities of who we are by disallowing us to envision what we might become (Foucault, 1997). Limitations such as these impair our freedom to relate to one another in a way that extends beyond what has been defined for us (Foucault, 1997; Anzaldúa, 1987; Lugones, 1996). Seibert and Willetts (2000) provide us with an attempt at a more inclusive and flexible definition of family, thereby expanding opportunities for identity. They define family as consisting of at least two individuals who maintain a supportive relationship and who may or may not share a residence, a legal bond, or biological connection.

### *The Institution of Marriage*

In 2001 President George W. Bush announced a week long observation of National Family Week. In his initial proclamation of this annual affair Bush declared that compared to other family structures “...*a mom and dad who are committed to marriage* [italics added]...provide children a sound foundation for success” (Bush, 2001, National Family Week, ¶ 3). A proclamation that neglects to acknowledge parents who are denied marital rights suggests subordination in their ability to afford their children as solid a foundation for success (Arnup, 1999). Similarly, in his proclamation for an annual Marriage Protection Week, Bush calls for the nation to “...support the institute of

marriage and help parents build stronger families.” He continues on to say that “we must continue our work to create a compassionate, *welcoming* society, where *all people* are treated with *dignity and respect* [italics added]” (Bush, 2003, Marriage Protection Week, ¶ 5). Herein lies the contradiction, a proclamation to support the institution of marriage, one that does not welcome nor respect all people.

Marriage brings with it a multitude of legal and social privileges (NOLO, 2005). Among the most common privileges connected to marriage is that married heterosexual couples are automatically awarded the legal right to collect social security benefits after the death of a spouse (Bennett & Gates, 2004). Married couples with children have significantly better access to family health insurance through their spouses’ employer, pay lower income taxes than same sex parent families, and are unquestionably provided with medical rights to their husband/wife such as hospital visitations and power of attorney in the case of medical emergency (NOLO, 2005).

In addition to the legal benefits of heterosexual marriage, there are many societal privileges assumed with this status. For same sex parents, possibly the most significant of these privileges is the legitimacy that is given to families headed by married parents (Butler, 2002). Freedman (2005) compares the privilege of being recognized as a married, or legitimate couple to the Clinton administration’s military policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” (p. 30). Freedman asserts that Clinton’s policy reinforces the closeting of gays and lesbians in the military just as the negation of marital unions for gays and lesbians robs them of legitimacy as a couple and as a family.

Despite the inequalities of marriage privileges between heterosexual and same sex couples, it should not be assumed that all couples advocate for membership within this institution. Even within gay and lesbian communities, there is a lack of consensus for the support of same sex marriages. After all, the term is associated with the failure of more than half of heterosexual legal unions (Stiers, 1999). In her study on gay and lesbian relationships, Stiers asked 70 participants, who were in a primary relationship with a same sex partner, if they thought of themselves as married. Over half of the respondents referred to their relationship in terms of marriage and conceptualized it as a long term commitment, focused on emotional bonding and a desire to work on difficult issues together. However, many of the remaining respondents found inherent flaws with the institute of marriage and had no desire to associate their relationships with the term. When asked to explain these flaws several couples associated marriage with an expectation to play certain societally prescribed roles. According to the respondents, being placed in a position to adhere to these roles would reinforce the relationship hierarchy indicative of marriage, placing one person in subordination to the other (Stiers, 1999).

If same sex couples, who have the desire, can consider themselves married without legal documentation and if same sex couples, who don't have the desire, can define and label their relationship in any way that they please, then why is there a debate around the legalization of marriage? Gomes (2003) addresses this question poignantly by reminding us that the sanctity of marriage is only relevant for those who choose it for their own relationships. Marriage is a cultural symbol that affords couples legal and

societal rights and privileges (Gomes, 2003; Stiers, 1999; Freedman, 2005; Butler, 2002). However, these rights are trivial to individuals who have no desire to participate in them, but more consequential are the denial of those rights to those who want them (Gomes, 2003).

### *The Construction of Lesbian and Gay Headed Families*

There is agreement among theorists in the fields of Counseling, Sociology, and Women's Studies on the definition of lesbian and gay headed households. The research within these fields concentrates on lesbian and gay headed households that consist of two same sex parent families, single lesbian or gay parent families, and co-parenting families that primarily exist between gay and lesbian individuals or couples (Clarke, 2002; Ariel & McPherson, 2000). In addition, these fields agree that there are no "typical" gay or lesbian families. They range in diversity, just as any other family structure, in ethnicity, culture, race, age, differently able-bodied, religion, and multiple other characteristics and experiences that make people unique (Laird, 1996).

A report from the National Gay and Lesbian Task force estimated that there are 6 to 14 million children in the United States who have at least one gay or lesbian parent (Gomes, 2003). Alternate resources for statistics on gay and lesbian headed families utilize different variables for analysis and therefore cannot provide us with the same type of data. According to the U.S. Census Report, 162,900 same sex couples, who live within the same household, are parenting children under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Although these statistics cannot be thought of as comparative they can give us additional information about data that has been gathered regarding gay and

lesbian families. With that in mind, both of these sources only provide us with an approximation, as there is no way of gathering accurate statistical data on this population because of the subjectivity in self-defining sexual orientation. In addition, there are physical and emotional risks that some may encounter if they choose to self disclose.

However, within the population of lesbian and gay headed households researchers have identified two different groups of lesbian and gay parents (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Laird, 1996; Gomes, 2003; Golombok, Perry, Burston, et. al., 2003). The first group consists of lesbians and gay men who have children from a previous heterosexual relationship. In these cases, gay men are rarely given primary custody of their children. More recently, a second group of parents has emerged and become recognized. These are lesbian and gay parents who have chosen to have children within their same sex relationships or individually as openly gay men or lesbians.

The choice to become parents is then coupled with the choice of the method in which to have a child. Many lesbian parents are choosing artificial insemination as their primary method of conception which is completed with either a known or unknown sperm donor (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Chabot & Ames, 2004). There are issues to be considered with either option. If the donor is known, lesbian parents must consider whether or not they want to provide their child with information regarding the donor's identity or whether to allow the child and the donor an opportunity to build a relationship with each other (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). If the donor is anonymous, lesbian parents run the risk of having limited information about the donor's genetic disposition and/or personality. In cases where lesbian couples choose

insemination, only one parent is legally recognized and therefore many couples decide to pursue second-parent adoption to provide legal parenting rights to the non-biological mother (Crawford, 1999).

In addition, same sex couples who do not inseminate often consider adoption as a viable option for having a child (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). This can be a difficult process for both lesbian and gay families as, according to adoption statutes, there are few states that allow same-sex couple adoption (Crawford, 1999). Unfortunately, this means that in many states couples must adopt separately, as single parents. In these cases, adoption often takes much longer and can be more costly. Currently Florida is the only state which completely prohibits adoption by any single or coupled gay or lesbian (Civil Practice and Procedure, 2005). In many cases same sex couples are forced into a backdoor approach to adoption by manipulating the language of policies in order to be recognized as a legitimate family (Crawford, 1999).

### *Lesbian Parenting and Gender Location*

Research on lesbian parenting has experienced a significant increase in visibility within the last decade (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). The research that has emerged on lesbian parenting has primarily provided a comparative approach, placing lesbian and gay families in opposition to heterosexual families (Clarke, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Many scholars across disciplines find this method of comparison to be problematic because it insinuates a normalcy for one group and not for the other, more specifically for heterosexual families (Clarke, 2002; Stacy & Biblarz, 2001). Lugones (1996) troubles

this dichotomized perspective of identity as an exercise in purity. She asserts that separation is a way for the dominant culture to maintain control.

Clarke (2002) problematizes this comparative approach to studying lesbian and heterosexual mothers. She asserts that this comparison suggests that heterosexual parenting is normative and that in order to “prove” that children who are raised in lesbian headed households are “normal” we must show that there are no differences between the two populations. Similarly, many sociologists assert that children raised by lesbian and gay parents are no different than children raised in heterosexual homes (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Clarke goes on to say that by failing to acknowledge the differences in lesbian and gay headed households compared to non-gay/lesbian headed households, researchers ignore the power and privilege of societal and institutional support that heterosexual families receive.

However, Stacey and Biblarz take an alternative perspective regarding differences (2001). They assert that by ignoring the differences between lesbian headed households and heterosexual parents researchers miss an opportunity to recognize the positive aspects that lesbian parenting can offer. By not recognizing or studying differences we miss an opportunity to change the way that we view or construct gender and family systems. Stacy and Biblarz (2001) suggest that lesbian parenting may allow for an interesting exploration of the intersections of gender, sexual orientation, and family that may have implications for understanding and learning about parenting and child development.

Lesbian parents are faced with a unique opportunity to redefine parenting in a less polarized and more egalitarian structure. The heteronormative family, one in which both a mother and a father are responsible for parenting a child, are faced with societal scripts that determine their roles in parenting (Dunne, 2000). It is left up to these parents whether or not to comply with or resist the expectations that have been assigned to them. However, lesbian mothers are not given such scripts. In fact, they do not even have an opportunity to resist a hegemonic parenting structure – a societally prescribed heteronormative model because there is no dominant system to define their experience (Dalton & Bielby, 2000).

For many lesbian mothers, embracing and acknowledging differences in parenting is a way of political resistance and activism (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). The concept of gender was developed to describe and define the differences between men and women (Acker, 2004). Gender is the location from which the dominant culture constructs a fundamental understanding of parenting; therefore it is an important aspect of same sex parenting because it upsets the heteronormative balance of the family unit (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). West and Zimmerman (1987) propose that gender is constructed through social interaction. This is based upon the premise that gender is indeed a construction of masculine and feminine characteristics, but is situated within social interactions and societal expectations. Ideologically the roles of father and mother are not interchangeable, insinuating that the societal rule within a parenting structure is that the man is always the father and the woman is always the mother (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). This normative position of parenting is one from which all other parenting structures are

compared. Therefore, when society is faced with same sex parents, the rules of parental gender roles are blurred and seen as disrupting the heteronormative balance of the gender role dichotomy (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). Acker (2004) adds that gender has been used to create separation and polarization and has historically been a concept to develop and maintain a hierarchy for the dominant systems of power, placing same sex parents in a position of subordination.

Despite their position in the power hierarchy, many lesbian and gay parents embrace their differences and consider the opportunity to disrupt the gendered system to be transformative (Clarke, 2002). Lesbian mothers tend to deny the traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity giving girls and boys growing up in these households a more fluid understanding of these characteristics (Dunne, 2000; Dalton & Bielby, 2000). Similarly, parenting roles in lesbian and gay headed households tend to be more egalitarian and eliminate the gender hierarchy that exists in some heterosexual relationships (Laird, 1996). Research on lesbian parenting has shown that both partners are equally active participants in the stresses, delights, and duties of parenting (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). This information is contrary to research on heterosexual couples, whose parenting roles are much more influenced by gender expectations and therefore are much more likely to place one partner as inferior to the other, most often the woman (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). Additional research has shown that gay parents are often more satisfied with the division of parenting labor within their relationships than many heterosexual parents (Ariel & McPherson, 2000).

### *Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents*

Opponents of homosexual parenthood have raised concerns over the possibility that lesbian and gay parents will raise lesbian and gay children (Cameron & Cameron, 1996). Studies have shown that there is very little statistical difference between the children of lesbian and gay parents and the children of heterosexual parents in identifying sexual preference (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Laird, 1996; Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Anderssen et al., 2002). The differences that have been found, such as those in Tasker and Golombok's (1997) study on lesbian headed households, were in identifying sexual attraction in the offspring of lesbian parents. The researchers discovered that the offspring of lesbian mothers (nine offspring) had experienced same sex attraction or preference in relationships more often than the offspring of heterosexual parents (four offspring). When responding to this difference, Tasker and Golombok theorize that lesbian parents who are open about their own same sex relationships may be more open about and supportive of same sex relationships in their children, therefore providing a safe and viable option for their child's choice for a partner. Whereas these parents may allow for more open exploration of sexual identity (than heterosexual families), such exploration or openness is not predictive of sexual orientation. Although these researchers provide us with an interesting theory, it is important to note that a limited sample size, such as theirs, suggests that these data are not representative or generalizable.

Another concern by opponents of homosexual parenthood is that gay and lesbian parents raise gender confused children indicating that lesbian parents deny their children

a common, more traditional understanding of femininity and masculinity (Gomes, 2003; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Cameron & Cameron, 1996). The research that has been conducted on the comparisons between lesbian or gay parented children and heterosexual parented children has shown that gender role identity has been found to be more fluid for the children of lesbian parents than for the children of heterosexual mothers (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Laird, 1996). Reasons for the lack of rigidity in dichotomizing gendered behaviors are thought to be linked to the parent's own gender identity. In her research on lesbian parenting, Saffron (1998) discovered that the lesbian participants in her study felt less of a need to display feminine characteristics or align with societal gender norms than their heterosexual counterparts. Saffron concluded that lesbian mothers may have less of an expectation for their children to attach feminine or masculine characteristics to their gender (1998).

Similarly, Green, et al. (1986) found that the daughters of lesbian parents were less likely to prefer gender stereotypical behaviors during play than the daughters of heterosexual mothers. Green and his colleagues (1986) also concluded that daughters of lesbian mothers preferred mixed sex play and had similar preferences for both masculine and feminine activities. Conversely, the daughters of heterosexual mothers were more likely to engage in more feminine activities and had more interest in engaging in same sex play. This study also showed that the children of lesbian parents were more likely to choose future career goals as doctors and lawyers, ideologically positioned as masculine career choices, than their research study counterparts.

The sons of lesbian parents were also found to prefer less gender stereotypical play behavior, such as aggressiveness, when compared to the sons of heterosexual mothers (Green et. al, 1986). This study did find that sons of lesbian mothers were more likely to conform to “traditional” gender career goals than the daughters of lesbian mothers but not as much as the sons of heterosexual mothers. These findings suggest that the children of lesbian parents may be less tied to societal definitions of gender roles. This possibility has great implications for the way that we study gender and the impact family modeling and structure has on a child’s opportunity to construct gender for themselves, rather than succumbing to an imposed ideology of gender.

Often there is a question of whether raising a child within a same sex parented home denies the child the opportunity to learn from and understand the characteristics of an other sex parent (Parke, 2004). The debate is focused on what characteristics need to be in place to provide a stable and effective environment for a child. There is a misconception that lesbian mothers deny their children an opportunity for male role models or male relationships (Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1987). Research by Kirkpatrick et al. (1987) has shown, however, that children of lesbian mothers have more adult male relationships with family friends and relatives than do children of single heterosexual mothers. Similarly, Patterson (1992) found that children in the custody of divorced lesbian mothers had more contact with their birth fathers than did children in the custody of divorced heterosexual mothers. These findings show strong support for the argument that overall, lesbian mothers make a conscious effort to include male relationships in the lives of their children (Patterson, 1992; Kirkpatrick et al., 1987; Parke, 2004).

## *“Adolescence”*

A parent’s role in his or her child’s life is an integral component to healthy child development (Erikson, 1963). Parental influences shape a child’s integration of his/her self, as an individual, into the world around him/her. Erikson proposed that the development of the self occurs through progressive life stages that he termed as the “stages of social-emotional development.” These stages begin at infancy and progress through the life span. Each stage provides the foundation for the next, and when successfully achieved, leads to healthy psychosocial development. Most pertinent to this study is the stage of identity development as it coincides with the transition out of childhood and is signified by the integration of self concept. It is at this stage where an individual is significantly influenced by peers and where identities are practiced, evaluated for success, and integrated.

Up until this point, this paper has discussed existing research on children raised within same sex parented households. While much of this research has included a wide age range of participants, it is important to acknowledge that familial experiences may differ significantly depending on the age and developmental context of the child (Erikson, 1963). Taking these developmental differences into consideration, I concentrated the current study on the experiences of individuals, ages twelve to fourteen, providing a deeper more focused understanding for this narrowed demographic.

There is agreement among most theorists that the primary task for youth at this stage is identity formation (Arnett, 1999; Burt, Resnick & Novick, 1998; Erikson, 1963; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Steinmetz, 1999; Larson, Moneta, Richards & Wilson,

2002; Schwartz, Mullis, Waterman & Dunham, 2000). The paradox embedded in the formation of identity is the youth's desire and struggle for autonomy while being forced to maintain much needed dependence upon the family in order to meet basic needs, such as shelter, food, and nurturance (Schwartz, et al., 2000; Burt, et al., 1998; Larson et al., 1996). Theorist G. Stanley Hall first coined the term "storm and stress" to describe this period of transition, arguing that youth at this stage have an inherent desire to contradict their parents, experience mood swings, and have a tendency for rebellious or destructive behavior (Arnett, 1999). While current theorists and psychologists continue to engage in conversations about the period of storm and stress, many disagree with the notion that it generalizes to all youth at this period of development and therefore would not consider it to be a defining factor (Arnett, 1999; Steinmetz, 1999).

This period of transition typically coincides with a varying age range of 10 to 19 years old, with some extending this age to 21 (Burt, et al., 1998; Larson et al., 1996). Defining this age group has created much debate among researchers however lack of consensus does not supersede the reality that a transition from childhood to adulthood exists (Burt, et al., 1998; Larson, et al., 1996; Steinmetz, 1999). While its conception may be controversial, this period is distinct due to the developmental processing that is occurring amidst this journey out of childhood. The modern day adolescent experiences many life changes during this time in their development (Arnett, 1999; Larson et. al., 1996; Steinmetz, 1999; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). While family remains an important foundation to an adolescent's existence, the role of peers and interactions with

environments outside of the family are becoming more crucial to the development of individual identity (Ross, 1998).

Identity formation, which is at the crux of this developmental period, is negotiated through the individual's understanding and interaction with the world around them, specifically in the context of peer relationships (Arnett, 1999; Erikson, 1963; Larson et al., 1996; Steinmetz, 1999; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Some investigators have discovered that it is during this developmental journey that youth begin to grow and develop in their relational experiences. This process of development is often paired with an increase in trust and self-disclosure among friends within social groups (Azmitia, Kamprath, & Linnet, 1998). Children and adolescents use friendships as forums in which to discuss problems and share secrets, allowing this process to foster the development of a positive sense of self (Azmitia et al., 1998).

It is also at this stage of development when adolescents begin identifying and constructing their own value system, separate from the values of their parents, which until this point has been assumed as their own (Burt et al., 1998; Steinmetz, 1999). As youth at this stage develop more autonomy, they increase their ability to make decisions and form opinions without the approval of others (Steinmetz, 1999). This begins the process of individuating oneself from the family unit and creating clear boundaries between life inside and outside of the household. This stage can give way to a period of disengagement, causing a decrease in family interaction and relationships, typically linked with interests external to the home (Larson, et al., 1996). Although the quantity of time spent with family members as a whole is known to decrease at this stage, adolescent

interactions with their parents continue to be valued. The stability of emotional parental dependence throughout adolescence suggests that the experience of disengagement does not negate a youth's desire for an intimate relationship with their parents (Larson, et al., 1996). As the desire for independence is heightened, interactions between adolescents and their parents are often focused on a negotiation for autonomy specifically in areas of decision making (Burt et al., 1998).

Personal choice becomes an integral component in an adolescent's growing exposure to information and experiences separate from their family (Larson, et al., 1996; Steinmetz, 1999). Indicative of identity exploration is the process of choosing various role identities (Erikson, 1963). This process of trial-and-error, allows youth to experiment with various elements of self, before inevitably consolidating these roles into their own identity. Peers are increasingly important to this process as decisions regarding what roles are chosen for integration is dependent upon the impact of these relationships (Collins, 2003).

Articulated within identity formation are self-esteem and self-worth (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998, Steinmetz, 1999). During this negotiation between worlds, the way in which the adolescent self is identified may be considered variable among different contexts (Harter et al., 1998; Steinmetz, 1999). Harter et al. (1998) calls this concept "relational self-worth," meaning that the adolescent may perceive herself/himself differently dependent upon the environment and context with which she/he engages. This is a notable concept when considering an adolescent who may feel the need to

present significant facets of his/her identity according to the contexts with which she/he feels the information may be accepted.

The term “adolescence” is not the focus of this study although recognizing the importance of age and developmentally appropriate questions and expectations is crucial in considering and analyzing the data (Steinmetz, 1999). For the purposes of this study I will be referring to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade participants as youth, recognizing that most of the participants identified themselves as adolescents while some of their parents did not consider them yet at this stage. Referring to these participants as youth creates an opportunity to distinguish their developmental stage from childhood while also valuing their unique and varying stages of social, emotional, and physical development (Fasick, 1994; Steinmetz, 1999).

#### *Issues for Lesbian and Gay Families*

Lesbian and gay families are faced with societal pressures and stereotypes that can act as barriers to raising a happy and healthy family (Anderrsen et al., 2002). Children of lesbian and gay parents often experience ridicule from their peers and classmates due to their family structure and the social stigma that is often attached to homosexuality (Laird, 1996; Ariel & McPherson, 2000). For this reason, many lesbian and gay families have chosen to keep their family structure hidden due to both the fear of losing their parental rights and the negative treatment they may potentially receive from society (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). However, there are many gay and lesbian families who do not wish to be invisible, yet a lack of representation in the media and other social

institutions does not offer much support for legitimizing and acknowledging these families (Dunne, 2000; Laird, 1996).

According to Clarke (2002) and Ariel and McPherson (2000) some scholars who oppose gay and lesbian parenting make claims that lesbians and gay men are unfit as parents. While there is no evidence that these claims can be substantiated, some evidence does exist that children of gay and lesbian parents are subjected to less physical abuse (Golombok et. al, 2003) and have more emotionally connected relationships with both parents than children from nongay/nonlesbian families (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

While there are few statistical differences between the outcomes of raising children in gay and lesbian headed households compared to non-gay/lesbian headed households, those that do exist are often times the result of societal oppression (Clarke, 2002). Stacey and Biblarz (2001) remind us that difference should not be confused with deviance, and that families who are subjected to stigmatization, whether covert or overt, are bound to have different experiences. With that said, no significant evidence of maladjustment has been found in the children of gay men or lesbians (Anderssen et al., 2002). In fact, children of lesbian and gay parents have been found to be more flexible and tolerant than other children (Laird, 1996; Anderssen et al., 2002). In their study on lesbian headed families, Litovich and Langhout (2004) found that lesbian parents were more likely to prepare their children for the possibility of discriminatory treatment and offer support in the event that these experiences occur.

The invalidation of lesbian and gay parented families results in many legal and political issues that nongay/nonlesbian families take for granted. One of these concerns

is for legal custody of a child upon dissolution of the lesbian or gay parent relationship (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Arnup, 1999). At this time there is no legal protection in place for the nonbiological parent, unless the child has been legally adopted. Similarly, nonbiological lesbian and gay parents who are not able to legally adopt their children may have difficulty accessing records or claiming their parental rights through the courts or other institutions, such as schools, who do not recognize them as legal guardians. Lesbians and gay men are forced to consider the legal consequences of child custody battles more conscientiously than heterosexual couples.

The current socio-political climate is strongly influenced by our choice of national and local leadership. While attention in the media and political forums have created opportunities for positive change to occur around gay and lesbian unions, there is also a danger of iconizing and abnormalizing these relationships. It is important to remember that behind the politically charged exterior of advocating for change and the climate in which society creates their own understanding, there are families who are being affected by the discourse that surrounds this issue. Very little scholarly writing has been done on the children of lesbian parents and the process of negotiating family between worlds.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

For indigenous cultures, the term research has been historically linked with dominance and colonization (Smith, 1999). In her text *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith points out that “researching” a culture can easily be construed as a process of *othering* those groups or individuals being targeted. While Smith directs her methodological advice toward researchers studying the experiences of indigenous individuals, her words, knowledge, and insight may be applied to all areas of research. Smith reminds researchers to be humble, to open up their hearts and minds to experiences and lives with which they may or may not be familiar. In addition, researchers must understand that creating change, both personally and societally is an integral piece of qualitative research. Finally we are reminded that the experiences of individuals are not only about the stories that they tell us but are also a recognition of the importance of each person’s place in our world.

This qualitative study utilized a grounded theory approach, following the research methods developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the descriptive research guidelines outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This method of analysis, also called the constant comparative method, carefully scrutinizes the data, breaks them down into discrete parts, and then compares them with other “units” of data to create categories and to find emergent themes. Qualitative research methods are particularly suited for reaching groups who have been historically underrepresented, as they provide an avenue for communicating stories that “are not often told” (Morrow, 2003). This method is based

upon a process of interviewing and observation that allows the researcher an opportunity to gain a rich understanding of a participant's life and a depth of knowledge from which theory can be built (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, I used a computer based program called HyperResearch, to aid in the organization and coding of this data.

### *Research Design*

#### *Participants*

I recruited six lesbian parented families for this study. I chose to limit my study to six families in an attempt to gather a more in-depth and rich understanding of the lived experiences of each of these families rather than extend the number of participants but gain only a broad scope of understanding for each family. The youth (the primary participant) participants were all in seventh or eighth grade and between the ages of twelve and fourteen. The grade of the primary participant was specifically chosen because youth of this age have not yet experienced the transition from middle school to high school, a period of increased stress in a youth's life (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999). This grade cut-off allowed the research to be more focused on the youth's family life without confounding the data with the added social and academic stressors due to the adjustment to high school.

Out of the six youth participants in this study, there were five females and one male. Although grade level and parenting structure were intentionally built into the parameters for this study, gender was not an initial consideration which accounts for the imbalance in female to male youth participants. Each youth who participated in the study was co-parented by at least two lesbian mothers, although in two of the families, the

original mothers were separated and were raising their child together but in different households. In both of these cases one of the mothers had a new partner with whom she lived and shared parental responsibilities. This study was intended as an investigation into the lives of youth being raised by lesbian parents. Therefore, co-parenting families were important to the research design. I intentionally selected parents who, even if they had been separated, considered themselves to be co-parenting their child in order to provide consistency throughout the study.

### *Recruitment Strategies*

Recruitment for this study was geographically limited to a large city in the Pacific Northwest. The primary intention for this limitation was the substantial number of interviews that were built into the design of this study. At the end of this study, 27 interviews had been completed. By limiting the geographical location of the study, I was able to complete all but one interview in person. In addition, this particular city is known for its large gay and lesbian population providing a wide demographic from which to access during the recruitment process.

I initially posted my recruitment announcement (Appendix A) on several local gay and lesbian family organization list serves. This method of recruiting yielded limited contacts so I expanded my advertising to a wider base. I contacted individuals and groups who could help me get the word out in a more comprehensive manner. I attended local functions and connected with school district personnel in an attempt to locate families who would be interested in my study. My announcement was placed on several list serves and in the end it was distributed to a very large community of lesbian parents.

Throughout the course of recruitment, I was contacted by nine families, although only six met the criteria for this study. Of the three families that were not recruited, two were raising their children as single parents and the third family was located out of state and would have required that all of the interviews be conducted over the phone.

### *Measures*

#### *Demographic Questionnaire*

I designed a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) that I administered to the parents during my first interview with their child. The questionnaire consisted of nine questions about the mothers' race or ethnicity, family income, where the family resides, occupation and education of the parents, race or ethnicity of each child, and type of school each child attends. The demographic data provided a basis for understanding similarities and differences among the families, as well as identified issues related to class, race, religion, and other information that might prove relevant during data analysis.

#### *In-depth Interview*

The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is an integral part of a successful interview. According to Hiller and DiLuzio (2004), qualitative interviewing has reached new levels in terms of the exchange of ideas between participant and researcher. Interviewing no longer need be an interplay of question-answer-repeat. A successful qualitative interview can exist on whole new levels of sharing ideas, brainstorming, and problem solving. I decided to take this approach with my 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade participants. I found that although there were structured questions to be addressed for each interview, my goal was to engage with each participant in conversation,

minimizing the feeling of interrogation and placing the power of information into the hands of my participants. I approached the interviews as a novice in relation to the topic and treated each participant as the expert.

During the final interview, each participant was asked to complete a short essay in response to the question: If you could create a perfect world for your family, what would it look like (Appendix F)? These responses were used in addition to the interview questions in order to frame our final discussion and provide participants with an alternate approach to sharing their ideas.

### *Procedures*

#### *Individual Youth Interviews*

All individual interviews took place in the participant's home. Each participant was interviewed individually three times (See Appendix C for Youth Individual Interview Guide). Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All of the interviews were conducted in an area in the home where the youth and I were given privacy. Parents were not present at the youth interviews and although I gave an overall explanation to parents indicating what the interviews would entail, none of the parents asked to review the specific interview questions.

I found that there was tremendous benefit to being able to interview my 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade participants multiple times. By meeting with the participant on three separate occasions, I was able to build a trusting relationship with him/her which allowed for a deeper interviewing experience for both of us. Each interview provided for a deeper

more engaging experience that, in turn, allowed us to gain a better understanding of each other.

### *Group Interview*

In addition to the individual interviews, I conducted a focus group session with four of the youth participants (one participant opted to meet individually as opposed to the group setting and one participant was ill on the day of the interview). I chose to conduct the group interview in the middle of the individual interviewing process. My goal was to establish a relationship with each of my participants before asking them to engage in an interview with a group of unknown youth. In addition, I found it was important to be able to follow-up with the participants after the group interview. This final interview allowed me to gather feedback about the group process as well as have an opportunity for closure with my participants.

The focus group interview gave the primary participants an opportunity to network with other middle school students with similar family structures and provided an opportunity for them to discuss their experiences in a safe and supportive environment. According to Strauss and Schatzman (1973) the process of group interviewing gives a unique advantage to the researcher as participants often disclose their feelings and experiences because of the commonalities they may share with others in the group.

The group interview took place at a local veterinary clinic during its off-hours. This location was chosen because it was centrally located for families who traveled from other cities to participate and was offered free of charge by the clinic owners. Parents dropped their child off at the meeting place for two hours. Although this study focused

on six 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders living in lesbian headed households, only four participants were able to attend the group interview. The other participants were asked questions similar to those generated as part of the focus group interview in subsequent interviews.

The group interview began with an ice breaker game, attempting to put the participants at ease and feel more comfortable discussing in a group environment. After the ice breaker was completed, the participants were given a choice of two prompts as well as art supplies and paper in order to draw their interpretation of the given prompt. The prompts were simply requests for the participants to draw the meaning of family or the meaning of marriage on their sheet of paper. According to Yuen (2004), drawing as a tool for focus group discussions allows children to comfortably communicate their experiences in a relaxed atmosphere. Because these participants were not familiar with each other prior to the group interview, beginning the group interview by drawing created an environment of creativity and allowed the discussion to proceed in a more open and relaxed way. The drawings were intended to relate to the overall theme of the focus group, therefore I provided two prompts for the participants to keep in mind during this activity. These prompts were: (a) draw what marriage means to you or, (b) draw what family looks like to you. After the drawings were complete (the participants were given approximately 15 minutes), participants were asked to present and explain their drawings to the group (See Figures 1-4). This was yet another way to initiate the process of discussion before any formal questioning started.

Once the drawings were completed and discussed we, as a group, established some rules for respectful and polite group discussion and then went directly into my pre-established list of formal questions (Appendix D).

### *Parent Interviews*

Many of the qualitative studies on lesbian parented households are conducted through a process of interviewing either the children of lesbian parents or just the parents themselves. While these studies have laid a foundation for providing a better understanding of family experiences for children raised in lesbian headed households, they fail to include the voices of *both* mother(s) and child(ren). Consequently, in addition to interviewing the youth participants, I also interviewed the mothers in my study. These interviews included the participant's primary caregiver (in most cases this included both mothers), as well as any partner who played a role in raising the child (Appendix E). Although the youth was the primary subject of the study, the mothers' perspectives added more depth to my understanding of the experiences of the family as a whole. Most of the parent interviews were conducted in the parents' home. In the case of the families with two parent homes, the interviews were conducted with all parties who were considered to be raising the youth, both in the home and in one case on the phone due to the parent living out of state. The parent interviews, while similar in format to the youth interviews, evolved into semi-structured story telling and reminiscing, often resulting in the sharing of very personal and intimate details of their lives. For many of these parents I was the only outsider to ask openly about their sexual orientation, their families, and how the two intertwine.



Figure 1. "I drew a white arch with roses under it to show people don't have to be married under that. It shows it doesn't have to be perfect" (Larkin, 2005, study participant).



Figure 2. "This is my picture. It's a heart and two people that are happy and it like doesn't matter who people are" (Dominique, 2005, study participant).



Figure 3. "It doesn't matter who a person is or what they look like. I was trying to be creative but I couldn't think of a better way" (Rachel, 2005, study participant)



Figure 4. "Parents can be a girl or a boy either way. So I drew a girl or a boy" (Alana, 2005, study participant).

### *Analysis of Data*

Data gathering and data analysis occurred simultaneously. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that researchers should consistently look at their data while in the midst of gathering interviews and observations. By employing this method of analysis I was able to revise questions and begin the categorization process from the beginning. In addition, initial data analysis allowed me an opportunity to return to my participants for follow-up while the interview/information was still fresh in my mind.

A helpful and important first step in data analysis is microanalysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By using this approach the researcher looks at the data word by word and line by line to begin understanding the participants' responses. Often times this is where themes begin to emerge and can be seen both within and between individual interviews. Microanalysis is the initial process for taking concrete data into the abstract. According to Strauss and Corbin analyzing data at this minute level is invaluable for the researcher (1998). Microanalysis reminds researchers of the vast amount of information that is packed into small amounts of data, allowing the data to speak and keeping the researcher open to whatever she/he might find.

Microanalysis is especially important at the beginning of data analysis when the researcher is just beginning to get familiar with the data. Then, once initial categories have been established, the researcher can more efficiently scan the data, looking for relevant information. At this point, the researcher can then go back to line-by-line analysis to help support existing data or to help fill in missing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) using microanalysis throughout an entire

set of data would not only be too time consuming, but would end in an excess of data that could be overwhelming for the researcher and superfluous to the research.

Microanalysis was an important tool during the initial process of coding my data. These data were rich with information, although navigating through 27 in-depth and lengthy interviews was initially very daunting. Line-by-line analysis provides a systematic process for moving a large, seemingly overwhelming data set into specific, workable categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This tool allowed me to build a foundation for pertinent and applicable data while simultaneously siphoning out extraneous information. Microanalysis was a helpful precursor for the second stage of analysis, open coding.

Without microanalysis, open coding would be much more difficult and taxing (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding stems from the analyzing foundation built by microanalysis. The initial themes that began to emerge from a preliminary analysis of the data begin to form categories. These categories are the basis for the development of theory. In-depth theory building does come later, but one of the distinctions of grounded theory is that this is not a linear process. Qualitative analysis is circular and repetitive, forcing the researcher to continually look at the data.

The next step in analyzing data is called open coding because researchers must break open the data in order to discover, label, and make conceptual connections (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, pp. 102). Eventually these concepts will be grouped together as themes emerge and the researcher becomes more familiar with their data (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). For example, my line-by-line analysis for this project provided me with several

terms that families used to describe their relationships. I heard couples and youth use words like “union”, “marriage”, “shared love”, “relationship bond”, and “ceremony” to name a few. In this circumstance, these terms were clearly describing the concept of *commitment*. By conceptualizing terms, I was able to collapse the amount of data, making it more manageable to take into a deeper level of analysis.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) call this next level of analysis categorization. Categories help move the data into the abstract. When forming categories the researcher continually asks the question; “What is going on here?” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 114). By asking this question the researcher extracts deeper meaning from the data. For this study the concept of commitment, in many cases, fits into the category of *legitimacy*. The families in this research do not have the option to be legally recognized as “married” so they have coined terms and concepts to establish their legitimacy as a couple and as a family. Developing categories provides a foundation for linking the data to explanations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This is when theoretical comparisons begin to take place and theory begins to flourish.

Pulling from existing literature at this point can be very helpful to support a theory, or portion of a theory and can even aid in some analysis by giving a name and a basis for understanding complex information. However, sometimes having too much knowledge or information from outside literature limits the researcher’s ability to look beyond what is known (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This study aims to utilize a realistic balance between being grounded in preexisting literature and remaining open to the experiences of my participants.

### *Organization of Data*

All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. None of the tapes or transcriptions ever used names or identifiers, in order to maintain confidentiality. The tapes were kept in a locked office and will be destroyed in April 2007, as agreed upon by the Washington State University Institutional Review Board.

All transcribed interviews were entered into HyperResearch, a computer-based qualitative tool for data analysis. This allowed me to examine my data in great detail, creating categories and recognizing themes that were then able to be easily organized through the aid of the software.

Finally, I kept a researcher's log in which recorded thoughts, processes, and experiences that occurred during the course of this research project (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In their study of women struggling with HIV/AIDS, Lather and Smithies (1997) found that acknowledging and problematizing their own interpersonal processes throughout their research project was integral to a deeper understanding and expression of their research experience. The research log helped me to recognize some of my own biases and allowed for a creative and uninhibited tool for processing the data.

This study was developed to better understand how youth within lesbian parented households negotiate their definition of family within the greater society. Developing a level of trust was a crucial component to building a relationship with the participants and for providing a safe environment for self disclosure. Maintaining confidentiality was not only an ethical requirement but a personal commitment to the participants in this study. Consent and assent forms were reviewed and signed prior the initial interviews. Parents

were asked to sign a consent form to give permission for the child to participate in the study (Appendix G) and a consent form for their own participation (Appendix H). In addition, after parental consent was obtained, each youth participant was asked to give their assent for participation in the study (Appendix I). Each form provided an overview of the study, an explanation of what was required of the participant, a commitment to confidentiality by the researcher, and information on participants' rights, including contact information for the Washington State University Institutional Review Board.

As with all research, this study was not without limitations. The demographics of this sample were limited in terms of racial, educational, and socioeconomic diversity. A large consideration for this deficit was in access to participants. Although resources for recruitment were varied, methods were limited to advertising in locations where openness about sexual orientation and family structure was assumed. These included list serves, organizations, and events specifically directed toward those within gay and lesbian communities.

Although each family provided me with a rich understanding of their lives and experiences, there were inconsistencies within family variables that if better controlled, may have provided more specific information about given themes. These differences include an uneven distribution of youth in terms of gender. Selecting for all males or all females may have provided an interesting connection to the implications of gender as a social construction (West & Zimmerman, 1987), specifically in terms of these youth being raised by two women. In addition there were inconsistencies in parental methods of insemination. Most of these youth were conceived through donor insemination

methods with the exception of the two participants who were conceived as a result of a heterosexual union. Given that experiences for both parents and children were quite varied in terms of these methods (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Laird, 1996; Gomes, 2003), the inability to provide a more specific focus in one of these areas is considered to be a limitation of the study.

A qualitative approach to research provides participants with a space to freely share their individual stories (Morrow, 2003). In addition, researchers have an opportunity to capture a rich understanding of study participants through an exploration of the complexities that give meaning to their human experience (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). The result of developing an affective research relationship with study participants are the data that are extracted from interviews and observations. Data from the current study were analyzed and constructed into four emergent themes representing the invaluable life experiences of the families who participated. They are introduced and described in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This chapter provides a detailed account of the themes and trends that emerged from the interviews conducted with study participants. It begins with a description of the sample and an introduction to each of the families. The participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

#### *Description of the Sample*

Six families participated in this study. Five of the youth participants are being raised by two lesbian parents who both live in the home. In addition, one of these families shares custody of the youth who lives 50 percent of the time in a two parent lesbian headed household and 50 percent of the time in a single parent lesbian headed household. The sixth youth participant lives most of the year with her single lesbian mother and only a few weeks a year with her other lesbian mother and her partner, whom she does not consider to be her parent. Information about the participating families can be found in Table 1.

This sample consisted of thirteen lesbian parents and six, seventh and eighth grade youth. The demographic data for the parents in this sample are shown in Table 2. Twelve out of thirteen parents identified as white-Caucasian and one parent identified as white-Sicilian. All of the parent participants are college-educated. Two participants have

Table 1

*Information about Participating Families*

	Family					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Youth	<i>Alana</i>	<i>Larkin</i>	<i>Sarah</i>	<i>Dominique</i>	<i>Liem</i>	<i>Rachel</i>
Age	12	13	14	13	13	14
Ethnicity	White/Pacific Islander	White	White	White/Italiano/Pacific Islander	White	White
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Female
Grade	7 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>
Type of School	Public	Public	Alternate Public	Private	Private	Public
Custodial Parents	<i>Laurel and Jennifer</i>	<i>Robin, Carla and Daniella</i>	<i>Sue and Amy</i>	<i>Lee</i>	<i>Alicia and Chris</i>	<i>Janelle and Jo</i>
Household members	No	Zach (brother)	No	No	Bridget (sister)	No
Other parents	father	No	No	<i>Mary Ann</i> (in other)	No	father
How brought into family	heterosexual union	insemination	insemination	insemination	insemination	heterosexual union

*Note.* Italics indicate participation in interviews

Table 2

*Demographic Information about Participating Parents*

<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Community Description</i>	<i>Annual Income</i>	<i>Years with Partner</i>
27	12 white/Caucasian	2 AA	Massage therapist	4 urban	1 \$35-50,000	2 have no partner
30	1 white/Sicilian	2 BA +	Loan processor	4 suburban	3 \$50-75,000	4 years
34		4 BS	Health policy analyst		4 over \$75,000	4.5 years
37		3 MA	Data manager			5 years
37		1 DC	student			8 years
43		1 PhD	Speech/language therapist			18 years
43			Social worker			27 years
44			engineer			
44			Assistant professor			
44			Critical care RN			
45			2 RN			
46			Executive sales consultant			
58						

associate degrees, eight have bachelor's degrees, and three have completed or have nearly completed post-baccalaureate degrees. Many of the parents in the study are in social service professions such as teaching and medicine. The household income range for this group of parents varied from \$25,000 to more than \$75,000 annually.

Although only six youth participated in this study, two of the participants have one younger sibling who is a part of their household. The demographic data for the youth in this sample are also shown in Table 1. Parents were asked to identify their child's racial and ethnic identification. Of the six participants, four were identified as white-Caucasian, one was identified as Caucasian-Pacific Islander, and one was identified as Caucasian-Italiano-Pacific Islander. Most of the youth attend a public or public alternative school. Two of the youth attend a local private school. The sample was evenly distributed by grade with three participants in the seventh grade and three participants in the eighth grade. Five out of the six participants identified as female and one as male.

### *An Introduction to the Families*

#### *Family One*

Laurel, Jennifer, and Alana live in a suburb outside of a large Northwest city. Laurel and Jennifer have been living together for over five years and consider themselves to be co-parenting Alana. Alana is twelve years old and in seventh grade. She loves gymnastics and watching television. Although Alana was born into a heterosexual union with Jennifer and her biological father, she considers Laurel and Jennifer to be her parents. She does not have contact with her biological father who lives out of state.

Alana is a quiet and sensitive person who prides herself on her relationships with her two closest friends. Alana has a menagerie of pets in her house and considers herself to be an animal lover and because of her strong conviction has committed to a vegetarian lifestyle. When Alana and I met, she described her favorite academic subject as science because of the hands-on activities that the class offered. She told me that seventh grade was better than sixth grade because she could understand her coursework better which allows her to enjoy more responsibility, both at school and at home.

#### *Family Two*

Larkin is a thirteen year old eighth grader who loves to read and excels in school. Larkin was born into the union of Robin and Carla, who have since separated. Carla lives with her current partner Daniella who share custody of Larkin and her younger brother, Zach. Larkin and Zach split their time equally between parents. Although Larkin found the separation between Robin and Carla very difficult, she finds great benefit to having three moms, and considers each of them to be unique and valuable parents.

Larkin finds satisfaction in doing well in school, although is very adamant about disliking PE. She has a strong sense of identity and describes herself as an activist, both politically and socially. Larkin doesn't consider herself to be a "girly girl," which she identifies as someone who likes to talk about relationships and breaking up, but she has great pride in identifying as a "girl" which was reflected by one of the first things she shared with me, that her birthday falls on the same day as International Women's Day.

#### *Family Three*

Sarah, daughter to Sue and Amy, is a fourteen year old eighth grader who attends an alternative school in a large Northwest city. Sarah is very active in her community

and is especially proud of her involvement in the Gay Straight Alliance at her school.

When Sarah isn't playing soccer, the flute, or the saxophone she enjoys hanging out with her moms, reading and playing games by the fire.

When asked about her friendships, Sarah told me that she has a lot of friends and finds it easy to make and build relationships with people. Sue and Amy have made a strong effort to build a welcoming home to all of Sarah's friends who, according to Sarah, "are always here on the weekends." Sarah loves to read and has been working on a year long project for school, volunteering at a local bookstore. She considers herself to be creative and enjoys the emphasis that her school places on art and creativity. She has recently started teaching herself photography and hopes to sell cards created from her pictures to help fund the expense of purchasing and developing film.

#### *Family Four*

Dominique lives with her mom, Lee in a large city in the Northwest. Her parents were separated when she was three years old. Her other mom, Mary Ann lives out of state with her partner. While Dominique shared that she likes Mary Ann's partner she does not consider her to be her parent. Dominique spends most of the year with Lee but travels out of state to visit Mary Ann a few times a year. Mary Ann shared with me that she and her partner have plans to move back to the Northwest to be closer to Dominique.

Dominique is currently in seventh grade at a local private girls' school. She was proud to tell me that she enjoys and is good at math and that she doesn't like classes where there is a lot of writing. Dominique also indicated that she is involved in many activities outside of school such as basketball, soccer, and rock climbing but that her favorite activity is hanging out with her friends. Dominique is very self assured and

seems to develop relationships quite easily as she made evident through her extensive list of friends and community members from school and church.

#### *Family Five*

My first encounter with Liam was at his home in a large city in the Northwest. Although Liam's family resides within city limits, they share their home and their yard with one dog, three cats, a cockatiel, and six chickens. Liam is an animal lover and attributes much of the modeling of this behavior to his parents Chris and Alicia. Although Liam describes himself as a good student, he admits that he doesn't enjoy school. His favorite subjects are PE and play production.

While Liam reports to have many friends, he prefers to leave his socializing at school and enjoys time at home alone with his family. Although Liam is involved in several after school activities, such as piano, drum, swimming, and diving, he is most proud of his black belt in tai-kwon-do. Liam told me that while he enjoys being the son of Chris and Alicia and brother to his younger sister Bridget, he regrets that he only shares his male gender with some of the pets in his house.

#### *Family Six*

Rachel lives in a suburb of a metropolitan city in the Northwest. She lives with her mom Janelle and her mom's partner Jo. Rachel is an eighth grader at a local public middle school. Despite the fact that Rachel is good at math, she told me that she doesn't really like academics although she enjoys art, dance, and choir. She does however love to socialize and told me that her mom says that she is "too good at it."

Rachel plays soccer and would like to join the Boys and Girls Club in her area. She considers her relationship with her mom to be very close and shares openly with her.

At the time of our final interview, Rachel's proudest new skill was learning how to use an Epi-Pen on her mom, in case of a severe allergic reaction to sesame seeds. Rachel reported that, although she had learned the skill, she had not needed to use it as of yet.

### *Emergent Themes*

Analysis of the interviews revealed four overarching concepts: (a) being "out" about family structure, (b) marriage and family, (c) the transition from childhood to adolescence, and (d) thoughtful and purposive parenting. According to Corbin and Strauss (1998), concepts, or themes, provide us with a means for organizing data. Data that share similar properties are labeled as themes and therefore provide the context for the study. Each theme branches into categories and subcategories that are supported with data from the interviews. Categories provide an even more specific breakdown of the data and while they are unique representations of certain phenomena, they are related to each other within each theme. A further detail of data analysis and description is the use of subcategories which one can assume by the name, are contained within categories but have unique properties that provide more depth of understanding for the data. In addition to the themes presented, I have also included unique findings that are not necessarily representative of the majority of the participants but are particularly rich, notable, and worthy of contemplation.

#### *Being "Out" about Family Structure*

The concept of being or coming "out" has historically been linked to the gay and lesbian community as a means to communicate the status of one's disclosure of sexual orientation. The term comes from the adage "coming out of the closet," insinuating that homosexuality is often treated as something to be hidden away. The concept of being

“out” focuses on the study participants’ comfort and decision about disclosing their family structure to people outside of their immediate households.

When asked about how their families compared to those of their peers, every youth participant in this study agreed that having two moms was just as normal as having a mom and a dad. Sarah explained it to me in very simple terms, “I mean, it’s a mom and a dad and it’s two moms. It doesn’t matter, it’s still the same amount of love and trust and being there for each other...” Although each participant shared similar expressions of their views on family and normalcy, they did recognize that their view of the world was not always supported outside of their families.

I’m extremely fortunate that it’s not been hard or had any negative experiences like that. I’m sure lots of kids, maybe at a less welcoming open school or in a group of friends that they just met or something. It’s just terrifying for them to say “I have two moms” because they might get beat up or insulted or getting the cold shoulder, no one to talk to them, in isolation, just sitting alone at lunch everyday. Kids are so worried about their school life because that’s where your future is made or broken. It’s so low for people to tease other people.

Fortunately, for most of these youth, their schools and community environments are such that many people are open and accepting of their family structure. Four out of the six youth shared that they were “out” with most of their friends and that family structure was essentially a non-issue in their peer relationships. Liam’s response to whether or not he discusses his family with his friends was this, “I don’t care if people do talk about it. It’s just much more amusing to talk about videogames.”

Due to the social climate of many of these family's communities, the concept of "coming out" is not an overwhelming concern. Sarah attributed an accepting and open environment to her geographical location.

Just walking down the street in downtown, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary to see two guys, holding hands, walking down the street. So I'm really lucky to be living in a community where it's this open. It's not a big deal. It's just this feeling that people feel safe that they can just walk down the street and be who they are and be who they want to be without having to worry.

Much of this climate was carefully and conscientiously constructed by their parents who understand the impact the world can have on a child.

While geographical location may have some bearing on the tolerance of the communities in which these youth exist, many of these parents made very conscious decisions about positioning their family within supportive environments. For Lee, searching for an accepting and positive community began when Dominique was ready for daycare.

When I first was looking for a daycare, I walked into this place called Capable Child. It's in the basement of the Grier building. I walked in there, and I had gone to probably five different ones. As soon as I walked in there, I had this gut feeling that this was the place. I knew immediately. And you know, the guy who's the head of the toddler group is gay, and there was this lesbian working in the baby group, and they were very gay-positive.

Similarly, Robin felt that the school they had chosen for Larkin would be the right environment for her to be nurtured and respected regardless of her family structure.

...She went to an alternative grammar school and lesbian parents were not uncommon. There's a couple lesbian teachers at the school. Her kindergarten teacher was a lesbian. She's played soccer since she was like 4 or 5 years old with the same group of people and they are mostly people that went to Lincoln Grammar School, and they are either lesbian or gay or ex-hippies or Evergreen graduates who are ex-hippies, so they are really very welcoming.

Many parents considered it to be a privilege that they could position their family within supportive and open communities. For one couple in the study making a recent move to a suburban neighborhood meant risking the opportunity to have the support their family needed to feel safe and comfortable in their environment. In the case of this family, they had to make a choice between economic hardship and social isolation. When describing their experience in their new neighborhood compared to the nearby metropolitan area, they expressed their concern about creating a community for their family.

I mean we never know, living where we do, I mean I think [the city's] a little bit more progressive but out here, worrying about why she doesn't have more friends. So it's kind of like we're still really, we don't have a lot of connections out here. I mean we have from our old neighborhood but not here in this neighborhood or any people that we know from her new school or even really in this neighborhood. We're secluded... It's hard for us to meet anyone, gay or straight, just to have friends... We get lonely, you know, the same thing for Alana. You want to have more people around for her and we're really secluded here.

This couple went on to tell me that their lack of community may be the result of keeping themselves at a distance from the people around them for fear of rejection or mistreatment. They shared a story about a recent trip to their veterinarian, whom they suspect is a lesbian. Although they never breached the conversation about their own relationship with her, they felt relieved that they could act normally in front of her.

Like yesterday we had to take our dog to the vet and you know, you just know. I mean, I'm 99% sure she was gay cause it's one of those, you can get a read off of her. I just felt so much more comfortable. I mean "we" this "we" that, and talking how we are now, you can just tell we're together and it's easier to do that when you know too that they're not thinking "ok, they're together, alright" (said in a wary voice).

*(In)visibility and lack of representation.* One of the most prominent categories that emerged from these interviews was the recognition that lack of representation of same sex families in the media, schools, discussions, and in society as a whole has a significant and meaningful impact on these youth as they develop and embrace their identities. According to most of the youth in this study, having visual representations of family structures similar to their own was a way of knowing whether or not an environment was welcoming. When asked if seeing other people with similar families would make a difference in who she told about her own family, Alana said, "Yeah, cause then I wouldn't be so afraid of what I'm going to say or something cause then I already know that they have two moms or two dads. I would be more comfortable in talking more."

Sarah, who attends a very open and accepting alternative school, and is also one of the founders of the Gay Straight Alliance in her academic community, describes the tolerant climate at her school, "...we have a lot of support in our school and its super easy. We feel we're really lucky that we have such like this incredible school that's so welcoming and open, so it makes our job really easy at our school." However, even with this sense of support and acceptance Sarah describes her hesitation when talking about her family to a new group of students.

Right, well first day of school you go around... parents' names and of course in a new group anything's a little bit nerve racking, right? And so this was just something different and it was a little bit, the first time, like the very first time I was in a group like that, I was a little bit nervous about it and I actually kind of got that not a lot of people had two moms. First thing, it was a little weird and of course the kids had questions and that was a little bit frustrating to kind of like explain to them that it wasn't really different from having a mom and a dad, but it's not really left an impression horribly or mortified me to the point of "agghhh."

Sarah's experience is not unique to the rest of the youth in this study who described the process of coming out about their family as one that takes careful consideration. In responding to the question, "How do you decide who to tell about your family structure?"

Sarah responded:

So it's not, I can't be 100% sure, you can't but it's just kind of, you go with your gut and make sure, you want to kind of get to know the person a little bit better before, just get to know that kind of thing.

Similarly, Alana emphasized the importance of trust in disclosing her family, “If I’m their friend for a long time then I can tell that they’re like really my friend and I can trust them.” Liam explained that he felt there were certain environments where he would not discuss his family structure, “Personally I only discuss it with friends. I wouldn’t have a classroom discussion about it.”

The media played an important role in our discussions about same sex family visibility, for no other reason than to reconfirm my suspicion of the lack of representation for families headed by lesbian parents. Four out of six youth participants said that magazines and books were resources where same sex families were positively portrayed. “There’s a really cool book, it’s a picture book but it’s really cool. It’s called ‘The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans’ and it’s about a bunch of kids who have homosexual parents. It’s really cool.” When asked about books that were more age specific, such as chapter books and novels, Larkin said, “Well normally they don’t have homosexual people in them but there’s not, there’s usually either two straight parents or one straight parent.”

Most of the youth in this study are not avid television watchers; when asked about television shows, they could only name “Will and Grace” as a show that consistently portrayed gay people living normal lives. Rachel did add that she watched a show that, while it did not depict families headed by same sex parents, it did illustrate a non-traditional family structure in a positive light.

...for example, there is a few shows like, ‘That’s So Raven’ is a single mom, she’s all alone with no husband to help her and can totally take care of them and herself.

Two youth said that they heard about the gay marriage debate on the news but that it was either negatively portrayed or mentioned in passing.

...in the media and television, there's always that ongoing battle between same sex marriage and it's a really big deal. It depends on where you look. It goes either way. So either it's not mentioned or it's mentioned and it's kind of a big deal and a lot of it, a lot in the media is negative. Generally on TV and stuff and the news things are negative because it makes for better headlines.

During the group interview, the four youth that were present tried to brainstorm all of the places where they had seen any representation of family structures that were similar to theirs, but aside from the mention of a few books, an occasional magazine article, one movie, and one television show, no other resources were discovered.

*An internal struggle in accepting a lesbian parent.* Rachel's experience with being raised in a lesbian headed family is different from any of the other youth in the study. Unlike four of the six study participants, Rachel was not born into a lesbian union through insemination. It is perhaps because of this difference in upbringing that Rachel is faced with other considerations regarding her understanding of her family structure. Rachel has struggled to be supportive of her mom and her mom's partner while working through her own frustration of identifying with a family that is not easily understood.

Some of Rachel's struggle has been due to the absence of her biological father who, at the time of our last interview, had not spent time with her for almost a year. When I asked her if she ever saw her father she answered, "No, the last time I saw him was last Christmas. We were really close." She continued to tell me that her relationship

with her father had ceased to be as intimate as it had been in the past, although she did not attribute this change to her parents' separation.

Rachel was old enough to remember when her mom came "out" to her and openly shared her experience with me. Here, she recalls her initial realization that her mom was a lesbian: "I don't remember exactly, she never really told me. When my dad moved out and her friend moved in our house, I was like, huh? It had never crossed my mind." When I questioned her further about what the experience felt like to her, she replied, "I was mad. Well, not mad... just kind of surprised, I guess." Since Rachel's experience had occurred several years prior to our interview, I asked her how she felt currently:

Way different. I've halfway forgiven and halfway mad. Well, way more forgiven, maybe a third or fourth mad... I think it's mostly about never having that conversation. And I know you shouldn't have to ask your kid if you can be with somebody, but usually you ask them if they like this person, and I was never asked, I just thought Jo was her friend for a long time. I was never asked if I was ok with it.

In the group interview Rachel expressed her dislike for the terms "lesbian" or "gay." "I really hate those words, gay and lesbian, I hate when people say it!" Similarly, in her individual interviews she preferred to whisper the word "lesbian" rather than say it out loud. It seemed that she was uncomfortable when I would make reference to her mom's relationship by using the term "partner." Although, when I asked her if she preferred that I call Janelle and Jo her "parents" or if I referred to them as "her mom and her partner" she responded by saying, "that second thing."

In addition to her own personal struggle with accepting a lesbian parent, Rachel recalled a painful experience that occurred when people at her school found out about her family.

The only thing I remember is this guy Ben Richter, the most popular guy in school, in front of everybody said, “Your mom’s a lesbian so that makes you half lesbian too!” And I was so mad! It was a little school and it got around, all around the fifth grade.

Despite this negative experience, Rachel emerged stronger and more determined. In the conversations that followed, Rachel described to me her process of acceptance of, not only her mom’s lesbian identity, but also in accepting her mom’s partner Jo. It became apparent to me that Rachel is very protective of her mom and although she seems to be continually discovering what her role is within her family, she has a strong sense of herself. Regardless of her initial reaction to her mom’s coming “out,” Rachel is confident about being “out” as the daughter of a lesbian parent. “I don’t care. I mean, it doesn’t really matter. If people ask me I definitely get into the subject, really proudly sometimes.”

Although Rachel reported that she is becoming more accepting of her own family identity, she admitted that her feelings about her family fluctuate from day to day.

Well, sometimes this [referring to her mom’s relationship with her partner] is just frowned upon. Sometimes it makes me down and other times I’m like, “Hmm there’s nothing wrong with it!” Like sometimes we’re looked down upon and sometimes I don’t care, sometimes I’m mad, and sometimes it makes me sad.

Rachel determined that her relationship with her mom and Jo was better than it had ever been and that it may continue to be a struggle sometimes but that she knew they loved her. She compared her family to a family parented by a mother and father, “It’s the same amount of love, two people that love you.”

*Fear of mistreatment from peers.* Even when the consequences of coming out have not yet been experienced, the anticipation or expectation of mistreatment may be enough to choose to hide one’s family structure. Although Alana admitted that she had never had an overtly negative experience due to disclosure of her family structure, she described the following scenario, “If I tell the wrong person then they could tell other people and sometimes they could make fun of me and I wouldn’t want that to happen cause I only tell the friends that I trust and that I’ve been with for a while.” I asked Alana if she had a personal example of a situation where she chose not to share her family identity. She explained a school project to me where she had to create a written description of her family:

I think it was last year that we had to write, I forgot what we had to write, like an assignment about something and I only mentioned one of my moms but my other mom was ok with that.

During the interview with Alana’s parents, Laurel made reference to this same assignment. She described the conversation that she had with Alana about the essay:

I read something that she wrote about her mom. She let me read it and she said “You know I wanted to write about you but I didn’t want to have to answer all those questions.” So pretty much she kind of writes what they want to hear, you know.

Laurel continued to explain to me that Alana had experienced significant turmoil over having to “lie” about her family to her class and teacher. She shared with me that she too has had to protect herself by not disclosing the truth about her family and that she is honest with Alana about her own inner turmoil:

But I tell her “Hey I kind of deal with the same things too.” Like I just got a job and you know they always ask, “Do you have a boyfriend, do you have any kids?” And I always say, “No, no, no.” And I’ll eventually probably end up telling them but I don’t like to tell people right up front, I like to ease people into it but I have to say, “No, I don’t have a kid,” which is not true because if I did then there’ll be other questions. So we both have to deal with that and I told her I understood but I know she feels guilty and it’s hard and I always tell her not to...feel guilty.

### *Marriage and Family*

Themes of family, legality, and legitimacy were raised during interviews with the participants. Interviews were full of conversations about issues of marriage, both legal and symbolic. Consequently this raised discussions about the effects of separation and the difficulties surrounding child custody.

*The legal and societal benefits of marriage.* Many of the conversations about marriage and family began with stories of commitment, both publicly and privately. More than half of the couples in the study have participated in some form of ceremony to celebrate and recognize their commitment to each other. Sue and Amy, who have been together for over 27 years, have a celebration of their relationship on every fifth

anniversary. They remember their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony as one that Sarah was able to actively participate:

...for our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary we had a commitment ceremony and did it however we wanted and she was very involved. I think that really helped, and it was very public, and it was a celebration.

In March, 2004 Multnomah County in Portland, Oregon began issuing marriage licenses to same sex couples. As many as 3,000 gay and lesbian couples traveled to the Multnomah courts to get married. In April, 2005 the Oregon Supreme Court nullified the marriage licenses of all same sex couples who had been married in Portland the previous year. Three couples from this study joined the 3,000 in Multnomah to participate in this historical event. Larkin described the event for her family:

But then on March 12<sup>th</sup> a couple of years ago we went down to Portland, before we lived here I think, yeah it was before we lived here. To get like a license and stuff and then like when Oregon said that none of those marriages counted, they sent us our money back. It was really sad. They said that the piece of paper was just a piece of paper and should recycle it. Really sad.

Laurel and Jennifer talked about the significance of including Alana in the process of getting married through the Multnomah courts:

I mean we talked to her about it when we were going down there (to get married) and how big of a deal it was and of course, she was with us. We just took off one morning. I mean she (Jennifer) called in sick to work and we drove down there. They were trying to get to where they would stop issuing them and we were like "It's so close, if we don't do it now we're never going

to do, it's something to do." So we went down there and we had to stand, she got to see a big line and all the people down there and how big of a deal it was.

I asked each of these youth if they knew of any benefits of being married. Larkin shared this idea, "I don't think being married or not really matters. There's political benefits, I guess, and you say Mrs. instead of Ms. but you still love each other a lot." During the group interview, a discussion of the legal benefits of marriage arose. Larkin shared that she thought tax cuts were given to legally married couples. When the other participants questioned her about it, she imparted her knowledge, "Yeah, it's like an extra thousand dollars or something." The topic of taxes turned to other monetary benefits such as the right to a spouse's money. Again Larkin shared this information with the group, "...like in a divorce or death you would legally get the money."

Despite their recognition of the legal advantages of marriage, these youth were satisfied in knowing that their own parents had made a genuine commitment to each other and to their family, regardless of any documentation offered by the courts. Larkin responded to my question about whether it would make a difference to her family if her parents were legally married. "I don't think it really changes anything. I don't remember what it's like when my mom is not with someone. They live together and have been together ever since they met. There's no difference." All of the youth had similar responses to this question. Most agreed that marriage was just a word and only held meaning as a conceptual tool used to define a relationship. Sarah shared her opinion on the use of the word:

Personally I think marriage is an idea. The idea of marriage, people might think they're furthering, deepening their relationship and if that's what they need to do that then that's ok... It's just a word. "We're married" is a word. There's no real substance to that unless you can actually back it up with "we're deeply in love and we couldn't imagine a world without this other person."

While it was evident to Sarah that marriage could conceptually hold significant meaning for people's relationships, the term "marriage" itself, carried societal weight and reemphasized the divide between the rights of heterosexual and same sex couples.

Like when people talk about marriage there's not even a word for, I think a lot of same sex families they don't quite grab onto, it doesn't come naturally to use a certain word about the relationship and it's because "commitment," "partner," "spouse," it doesn't seem the same, it doesn't hold the same meaning as "wife" or "husband;" and that people are so set on having "husband" and "wife" be the only way two words interact.

Although these participants articulated that marriage was not an essential variable for validation of their own families, they all expressed strong conviction about the discriminatory nature in which marriage laws were created. Liam attributed the imbalance in the legal system to the current political administration. "Gay people can't get married. Personally, I think it's because of the Bush administration and I don't think it's right. It's a lot about persecution and prejudice." Similarly, most of the youth agreed that equal opportunity should be given to anyone who wanted to express their relationship through marriage. This sentiment was extended to couples who may not find

value in marriage as an institution, but whose committed relationship ought to be recognized by being afforded the same legal benefits. Here, Larkin responds to the involvement of government in marriage decisions:

There's kind of a few perks to marriage in the legal sense and again it doesn't make sense why two men couldn't enjoy those perks from their marriage, or unification, or whatever, that it could be, they could enjoy the same things that a man and a woman, in a legal sense anyway, for their marriage. They shouldn't miss out. Government and politics is supposed to be totally neutral and not influenced by religion but that's not exactly gone to plan.

*Legitimacy as a couple and as a family.* The conversations about marriage quickly shifted to rights and recognition as a couple and as a family. Alicia and Chris, who have been committed to each other for over 18 years, described a situation at Alicia's job where she was denied bereavement benefits when Chris's father died because they could not provide legal validation of their relationship.

...and I called my head nurse, when he died, and I said "Chris's dad has just died... I don't know what to do here. I need to take that uh... bereavement leave." And she goes, "Well you get three paid days of bereavement." I said, "Because if you're not going to give it to me, I can't go..." We were poor, poor, just making it by at that time. And she said my three days were effective right away. Then we got him cremated... then we come back, and we're waiting, and on the answering machine is a message from her saying "Alicia, I'm calling you back about the possibility of you taking a bereavement leave. Well, you can't because you're not married."

For these families, a desire to be treated as a “normal” family was sometimes misconstrued as a request for exceptional courtesies:

I’ve had coworkers say, “Well, why do you have to let me know you’re a lesbian all the time?” And I’m like “How did I?” “Well you’ve got pictures up.” And I’m like “So do you and you come out to me everyday when you say your ‘husband,’ why can’t I say the same thing? I’m not talking about what we’re doing in bed. I don’t want to know what you’re doing in bed.”

Sometimes, participants explained this disregard for equal treatment as a form of ignorance. “It affects our lives. It’s the going to a hotel and having the person in front of our kids say, ‘Who’s the parent?’ ... and um, you know what I mean it’s not going to change, people don’t just change.” Regardless of the reason, the effects can be harmful and can still send the message that their families are not legitimate.

Perception can be an important factor in feeling validated. When Liam talked about his parents’ rights to get married, he acknowledged that, for his family, it didn’t seem necessary that his moms’ relationship be documented by the courts. He did recognize however, that the opportunity to get married may mean that the world around him would perceive his family differently.

Then kids [with same sex parents] would officially have two parents. Right now I officially have one and one... not two; and the family would feel more together I think. We might feel more official, but we’d be the same family. I mean, they’ve been together my entire life.

The perception of family and being treated fairly because of this perception was an issue for Chris and Alicia’s family. As two mothers of a young son, they have unique

challenges with gender that many heterosexual parented families may not encounter.

Alicia shared her frustration with a woman at their local community center who complained about their male son changing in the women's locker room after the family had been swimming.

...that woman got our son kicked out of the locker room at a very young age because we were not comfortable with him being in the men's locker room, at that little, to get changed because that's creepy when you're really little; and we couldn't go in there and she made a big stink about Liam being in the women's locker room... I think that's really hard when you're standing outside the changing room when you have a very young kid. She made it impossible for me and my kids to get in, so we had to wrap them up in towels and change them at home. And that's not fair when we can't put our kids in dry clothes in the winter to drive home in!

Negative responses to these parents raising children were not unique to strangers and people of the outside world. Many families in this study received unsupportive and discriminatory reactions when they decided to come "out" about having children. Carla recalled her mother's initial response when she announced that she and her then-partner were going to have a child.

She had massive arguments with me over the phone for years especially when she was informed that Larkin was going to be born. She thought it was an abomination. She used the word "appalled" describing my aunt and uncle and grandparents' reaction to idea of Robin and I having a child.

Carla assured me that her mother eventually embraced her decision to have children and is currently a very involved grandmother. However, this sentiment was not uncommon for many of the mothers that I interviewed. Sue and Amy shared a similar experience when they decided to have Sarah.

So when we started telling people we wanted to have a kid together it kind of brought a lot of things, I had a sister who didn't think it was okay, and Amy's parents struggled with it for a while.

While Laurel's mother seemed to accept that she had found a partner with whom she was committed, she also insisted that her mother invalidated her show of support by making occasional comments about their relationship's demise.

It's been four years and she has my name and we actually went down and got married and I'm raising, we're raising a child together... It's like she's still waiting for it to end or something but she's like happy that we've been together this long but it still surprises her, she's still expecting that something will happen.

*Effects of separation.* The effects of parental divorce or separation are significant for any child. Three of the six youth in the study shared their personal experiences with living through a parental separation. Each of these youth were affected in different ways and shared their experiences openly, in spite of what was a painful experience in their lives. Although Larkin's primary parents had been separated for several years prior to our interviews, she had been recently affected by a custody battle that involved one of her parents in conflict with her other parent and her partner moving to another city.

Apparently, the two parties yelled and swore at each other over the phone during the whole court fiasco about who would have to be mine and Zach's secondary parent, which would mean we wouldn't be at their house as much. Larkin talked about the differences in her experience of separation compared to how she perceived a divorce or separation for a child with heterosexual parents. More specifically, she described the lack of support she felt was available for children of same sex parents.

If there were more people with families like mine (referring to having three moms) who had parents that were fighting and stuff, their parents were fighting and there was a huge court thing, that would be really weird and most people would be depressed for a while and then we could get through it together. That would be nice... it would be nice to have someone that I could talk to, who I could have talked to. I'm fine now because the whole thing is over.

Larkin's experience with parental separation is also unique because, although her mom and mom's partner relocated to a different city, her parents have a 50/50 custody agreement in place for Larkin and Zach. While this agreement places strain on the parent who travels back and forth from city to city, it allows Larkin and Zach to spend equal time with their parents.

For Dominique, the custody arrangements have not been as equalized. Dominique primarily lives with her mom in the Northwest but travels a few times a year to visit her other mom who is currently living in a southern region of the United States. During our interviews together, Dominique shared with me about how she feels, not only

physically distant from her mom who lives in the south, but also emotionally. She was not as forthcoming about why their relationship seemed strained but mentioned that she felt that her mom did not know her very well. “She’s smart and she has a PhD and all that stuff but she doesn’t get that I’m growing up and all that stuff.” When I asked her if she thought her mom might not be noticing that she is becoming more independent and mature was due to the lack of time they spent together, she responded with a simple “Yeah.”

It was Dominique’s mom, Mary Ann who really influenced this conversation about separation and the impact it has on children. “You didn’t ask what the effects or reactions of a child are when lesbian parents separate. When families separate there are issues that come up.” She acknowledged the strain that parental disputes can have on a child in the midst of a separation. “It’s hard when kids get in the middle of parents who don’t get along and make mean or insinuating comments about each other. She’s a product of separation coming into adolescence.”

Mary Ann pointed out the specific struggles that lesbian parents can encounter when custody issues are at stake and parental rights are threatened.

Custody issues are different if you’re legally married. You are more likely to go through some formal legal process to determine legal custody... It was a tumultuous separation during that period especially knowing that the court system could interfere with my rights because Lee was the biological mother and then choosing to move away. It’s more of a veiled threat that I could lose something because I’m a lesbian and then complicated by the fact that Lee is

the primary parent. It's a combination of being in a space where I had legal rights but I didn't feel that I had equal rights and that they were under threat.

Conversely, Larkin's mom Robin found the court system in the Northwest state where she and her ex-partner separated, to be fair in granting equitable custody rights to both she and her ex-partner.

The first second parent adoptions were in Thurston County, 18 years ago, they decided that same sex parents could adopt children. So one of them would be the biological mother and the other mother would adopt the child... and if we hadn't gone through the adoption process, then probably when we split up, I would have had Larkin, and Carla would have had Zach, which would have been horrible because they grew up as brother and sister, and they are very close with each other.

Larkin's original parents both mentioned, during their interviews that their separation was tumultuous, especially when the custody concerns were heightened by a long distance move. Robin recalled the strain it placed on the children, "It took nine months for the whole process to be done, and it was very stressful on everyone." She continued to voice her concerns about the issues emerging again with the prospect of their family situation changing in the future. "I know that my ex-partner, that her new partner is going to be finishing school in three years and we may be going through the whole process again in three years, which I'm not looking forward to." For Robin, Carla, and Daniella, the pressure of providing a consistent and supportive custody environment for their children is ever present.

Despite the turmoil that resulted from Larkin's parents' separation and custody battle, Carla was able to positively reframe the situation by focusing on the benefits of offering three loving and supportive parents to Larkin.

I think one of the positive things about having three mothers is three really different relationships with women that gives her so many opportunities to talk about things that she's not comfortable with and gives her so many different perspectives on things.

Rachel's experience with the separation of her mother and father has given her a different perspective on the meaning of parenting in her life. Although Rachel's mom has been with her partner for more than four years, in our interviews, Rachel preferred not to categorize her relationship with Jo as parental. "...I don't want to call Jo my parent, I just say partner because I do have another parent."

Rachel shared that her relationship with her father had been waning over the past year and that she was disappointed about the separation of her parents. However, she quickly acknowledged the differences between her mom's relationship with her father and her mom's relationship with Jo. "I mean they argue but not fight like my mom and dad's relationship and I think they're less likely to get divorced. Women are more sympathetic than men in the situation." She continued to say that she recognized the value in her mom's choice of partner and that the emotional climate in her home was much more desirable now than it had been with her dad. "Yes, it's better. Not that it's bad having a mom and dad. But its better, there's more sensitivity, they're not as aggressive, you're more appreciated."

Jo discussed the challenges that she faced when she entered her relationship with Janelle, specifically concerning the difficulties in figuring out how to build a connection with someone else's ten year old child. "It was very hard. It was like here's your life; their family, their house, their dynamic...All of a sudden I come in there and I'm like, school? Activities? I don't know."

Families who have experienced separation have challenges and difficulties for both children and parents. There are differences for parents who, after a separation, must learn to raise a child as a single parent while others adjust to new partners who enter relationships and acquire new roles of parenting and connecting with children who they did not raise from birth. As evident from the stories of the three families in this study who have had the opportunity to restructure their family lives due to a separation, the effects are vast and the needs are diverse.

#### *The Transition from Childhood to Adolescence*

As their children approach adolescence, these parents are noticing changes in their behaviors, attitudes, and responsibilities. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to this emergent phase of life and most of these parents were surprised at how much they were enjoying the process. Daniella and Carla comment on traversing this developmental process with Larkin.

Well, I guess I used to be afraid of the teen years but the older they get the more I'm liking it. I like it better than the little kid years. To me they're more people. They're more individuals, more independent, more willing to go and do their own thing, and yet want to still be with us. Do you know what I mean?

Parents noticed that the balance between freedom and dependence was not only a symptom of their child's movement into adolescence but was also a struggle for them, as parents. For Sue and Amy, the challenge then becomes how to provide the appropriate laboratory in which their child can experiment and grow.

With all adolescents, it's kind of this, you know, the balance between giving them more freedom and still, um, you know, feeling like, you know they're making safe choices and, um, you know, I think Sarah really understands the consequences of choices for sure, but I think I'm not always sure she's got those skills. Not necessarily from like an intellectual or cognitive point of view but just the practicality of doing certain things that she's just hasn't done on her own before.

For both these youth and parents the most significant discussions about the movement from childhood to adolescence were about building and maintaining peer and parental relationships.

*Relationships with peers.* The significance of peer relationships was among the most prevalent category that emerged from these data. For most of these youth, peer relationships were built around school activities, clubs, and sport teams. However, being involved in out-of-school activities was not a measure of the amount of friendships that these youth developed, nor was it a measure of the time they spent socializing outside of the family.

Although Sarah's activities included sports, music, church, and school, among others, it was her involvement in her school's Gay Straight Alliance that she spoke of the

most. This is a place where she, not only expresses her dedication to social justice issues, but is also a location from which her friendships are built and nurtured.

I'm in GSA, the Gay Straight Alliance at my school... I'm a really active member in that community and I have a lot of fun and I really got a lot out of that experience of being in that community. There's all my friends are in this, it's once a week, every Wednesday at lunch and we, we're just basically trying to make the school a safer place for GLBTQ youth or just in general, who don't feel safe coming out in their school or to their friends cause they're afraid they'll lose their friendship.

For Sarah, peer involvement extended far beyond the school day and organized activities. Both Sarah and her parents mentioned that their home was considered a haven for many of Sarah's friends and that it was not unusual for people to spend time in their house several nights of the week and most weekends.

Well, every Wednesday, Jamie and her little sister Rita come over and then Tuesdays we're trying to arrange so that Luther can come over and Fridays is always something... But on weekends, they're always there. On weekends our house is kind of whoever gets here first... We just have the space and my parents are good cooks too. And we always have a vegetarian option but we definitely say that this is hot spot for the kids.

Sarah's extensive relationship with her peers was not representative of the rest of the youth in the study. Although Larkin could identify several peers that she would consider friends, she had a distinct categorical system that distinguished the level of involvement she had with her friends.

...there's like 20 or 30 of us total including my friends from elementary school and I'm pretty good friends with most of them but not like, "Oh I love you have some random expensive birthday present." Instead I say, "Hi, you're nice, come over to my house for pizza on Fridays..." but I never see any of them because I'm not good at talking on the phone at all and I keep forgetting what I'm supposed to be saying on the phone.

Liam easily placed a boundary between his interaction with peers and his desire to spend time alone and with his family. "Well, the only thing is, at my new school I consider my social life to be done when the day's over and I don't really get together with my people once outside of school." When I asked him about how he related to his friends during the school day, he was happy to describe a typical conversation that might happen during lunch.

My friends and I love to socialize involving videogames; and we all like the ones with weapons but not too much gore or anything, just kind of talking about strategy or how good the graphics are. Occasionally I talk to friends about Disney World. Basic stuff.

Making friends and being social was a concern for many of these youth as well as their parents. Alana disclosed that although she would like to have more friendships outside of school, she was hesitant to ask anyone, but her friend Claire to come over to her house. "Only one of my friends comes over, her name is Claire, and I've known her for about three years now. And she's like the only person that comes over." When I asked her why she had a hard time asking peers to come over to her house, she didn't have an answer. In the interview with her parents, I mentioned Alana's concern about

building friendships outside of school and they shared their insight with me. Their primary observation was that their daughter seemed to lag developmentally in terms of the onset of puberty, which influenced her relationships with peers.

She doesn't like kids that are too advanced, way more advanced than she is.

A lot of them are like that and I think that makes it hard for her to make friends because she knows we don't like that and we wouldn't tolerate that.

So in turn, she doesn't like that and doesn't want to tolerate that herself. So I think that limits her friendships at school and because she doesn't think that's cool and she doesn't do a lot of things some of the other ones, I think it makes it hard for people to be friends with her.

In many of the interviews that I conducted with these youth, they shared concerns about feeling socially isolated from their peers. Many of them likened this lack of connection to their differences in interests from their peers.

It just makes me so frustrated because I don't like sports to watch, it's something I cannot bear! I like playing, but I'm there like "What are you guys talking about?" I just can't figure it out and I hate it! It just drives me nuts, and I'm like "Please change the subject..." and most of my friends follow sports, and I don't care. They're boring for me. Does that mean I'm not cool?

Larkin's experiences with socializing at school were often related to conversations about relationships. She mentioned that the divide between being informed and being out of the loop was linked to lack of interest. She assured me that lack of interest did not translate into a desire for exclusion.

I always feel like I'm getting left out of things... I don't really know how to be social very much. I prefer to just sit there and read during lunch, while I'm eating my lunch, instead of talking about stuff that I have no idea about because no one told me about. I would like it if people would actually tell me stuff.

Alicia and Chris shared concerns that they had about a recent harassment experience with Liam at school. In one of our interviews, Liam had described the incident to me. "I said the word irrelevant to him once and he started calling me a 'dictionary head!' And he would be rude to me, and tease me." While Alicia recalled the event that Liam had disclosed, her concerns for him were more universal and were underscored by realizing what role she would play in helping him through the experience.

My biggest concern is that he's kind of a nerd, and then teasing that goes along with that... and him finding his way, where he is in school. And I think being open and honest will help him with that. Kids are so mean. Last year he got teased at school and we just listen to his struggles, we all have our own struggles, it's just different... and so he's in the middle of that right now and he's coming home with stuff like, "Oh yeah, I'm the loser with the high voice still." It's really hard. We love him so much...

Every parent in this study discussed how their roles were changing in their child's life, as they were moving into adolescence. Although peer relationships are becoming more important to each of these youth, their relationships with their parents continued to be valued.

*Relationships with parents.* Every youth participant in this study spoke openly about the relationship that they shared with their parents. Relationships were defined by a level of open communication, an overall positive feeling toward their parent(s), and an emphasis on humor. Sarah commented on the ease and comfort of time spent with her parents.

We can just be together and not have to talk or entertain ourselves in anyway but just sit and read together and still feel like we're together but we can also feel comfortable talking to each other about stuff and any problems can be resolved quickly cause I know I can trust them and I know they'll help me figure it all out. That's really a good thing about our family.

Parents placed equal emphasis on the importance of communication and the level of disclosure that they had with their children. I asked them to think about their own relationships with their children compared to the parents and families around them. Many parents as well as youth valued openness as a crucial component to communication. Laurel discussed the conscious effort she makes in providing a welcoming environment for Alana.

I think we talk more, if we don't talk more, that we're more open to communication. Not making anything that she says, not making her feel weird, making her feel like she can come, cause that's important me... I always approach it kind of, even if I was uncomfortable by what she was asking or didn't like it, I'd never outwardly show that 'cause I never want her to feel like she can't say anything.

Carla pointed out that, for her, closeness was not only measured by the depth of the conversations she had with her children but also by the amount of time they spent together. In her experience the value placed on time was notably different for their family compared to their peers.

I think that just in general, for their entire lives, I've spent more time with them than the average parent does. I've focused on them, doing stuff with them. I just enjoy them a great deal. I enjoy time with them.

Conversations about disclosure and openness were not complete without the discussion of sex and sexuality. When I asked these parents how they communicate with their children about intimacy, relationships, and sex they were generous about sharing their experiences.

When we talk to Rachel about it, we include more than just terms. We talk about feelings around it. I never did that with my mom. We never talked about when you feel like you're in love or if it's just infatuation, and how the relationship changes so you should wait and those kinds of things. We talk about those things that go along with it, the relationship part of sex. It's not just sex. There's a relationship that happens whether you want it to or not.

Many parents pointed out that most of their conversations about sex are initiated by questions brought to them by their. They placed emphasis on responding honestly and appropriately.

My philosophy has always been if you're simply open and age appropriate and not embarrassed or feeling like you need to protect them, that they will get what is appropriate and what they need constantly along the way. So

they'll never be a need for the day that they learn about life because they've been picking up and understanding things all along. So Larkin has already cut open a sanitary pad to see what it's like inside, how much liquid it holds.

Most of these youth shared that being open with their parents involved a considerable level of trust. For Alana trust was not just about maintaining confidentiality but involved knowing that her issues would be taken seriously. "Well they always say that I can come talk to them about stuff and I know that I can trust them very much... because they never laugh at me or anything like that because they're good parents."

I asked Sarah if she had ever experienced romantic feelings for someone and if she felt comfortable sharing those feelings with her moms.

The first thing I did was I told my moms, they know everything. For sure I would. And I know a lot of kids would find that "whoa" weird but it's not weird for me 'cause it doesn't bother me and it doesn't bother them either. They were kids once too as hard as it is to believe.

Sarah's sentiment was shared by many of her friends who have discovered that Sue and Amy are willing to be open and honest with them.

Because I feel like we're pretty tight with a lot of her friends, we're privy to a lot of those conversations. I think we actually do get to be more a part of that because we are just the girls. You know I think that's really the way they think of us, not as Sarah's moms, but we are a little bit more in that mix... but if girls [Sarah's friends] ask me questions, I answer them to the best of my ability. I think the good thing about this group of kids is they are very bright

and very verbal, so if they see something they don't understand, or is questionable, we can have that discussion and it's not that weird.

Feelings of trust and comfort are an important foundation for these youth to be open with their parents about issues and concerns. In addition these participants emphasized that they genuinely enjoyed the time they spent with their parents and family.

They're funny... We do a lot of fun things... So they're in my opinion, my family's absolutely crazy. And they like to take us places. They try to find things that are fun for us. They really try to make life really fun for me and my sister.

A crucial component to parental likeability was their penchant for humor and willingness to play.

Me and my family members are a lot closer. They [peers] talk about it as if their mom is a jail warden or something. But I think of them as somebody who takes care of me and does some pretty funny stuff. Blowing up footballs and getting herself nearly killed about five times.

I asked Rachel to describe what she liked most about spending time with her mom and her partner and she answered with a laugh. "They're really funny. Even though they talk with big words, like grown ups, and I don't know what they mean. They're still funny. Even if they're strict, they're still funny."

### *Thoughtful and Purposive Parenting*

Being a conscientious parent was more of a climate that permeated throughout the interviews rather than a theme. Throughout all of the interviews with parents and most of the interviews with youth was the presence of a consistent and deliberate approach to

parenting. For some of these parents this approach began far before any children were conceived.

*The process of contemplating parenthood.* Four out of the six families in this study used alternative insemination methods to conceive their children. These parents had to be thoughtfully decisive in considering their roles of parenting simply and initially by nature of their method of fertilization. Some parents shared the process by which they agreed upon a decision to have a child. In our interview together, Alicia and Chris recalled the many considerations they had to problematize before making the decision to have a child, because of their unique parenting structure.

Well, we talked about this before we had kids. We were concerned bringing a child into the world in our situation. We were afraid they'd be ostracized at school to such an extent that they'd turn around and look at us and say "How come you did this to me and my life is miserable because I have queers for parents!" We had that conversation repeatedly about whether we should bring children into this world, whether that was fair.

Once the decision to become parents had been made, many of these participants shared their very conscious considerations about what parenting would look like for their own relationships and the reality that their lives as a couple would change.

When we had Sarah, we knew we had twelve very precious, very special years if we were lucky, of raising a child... and then we knew that once teenage years hit she'd be pulling away. So you know our relationship has ebbed and flowed and when Sarah needed us more and more, the two of us had less time together, but we knew that was just a short period of time, and you think

twelve years is a long time, well twelve years isn't a long time, you know...

So we knew we'd give a little bit up of who the two of us, of our relationship, not a lot, but you know a little, but we knew we had those twelve precious years, and I feel like we've sucked the marrow out of those years and gotten the best out of it.

For most of these parents, the role of mothering was paramount to any of their individual needs or considerations. Laurel made it clear that her priority for Alana is to always offer her an open line of communication, even when it interferes with her own agenda.

There's times when she just gets chatty patty and I'm really tired or something or I'm in the middle of reading something and I'll try my hardest to listen to her. I think that's what being a parent is and when you get like that, you want to still encourage that, even though I might not be in the mood to really listen to all of it, letting her to just unload, trying to grasp as much as I could, allowing her to know that we're here whenever she wants to talk... 'cause I would rather her talk and keep that open than for her to feel that we don't care or that we're going to react badly to something that she says.

Carla makes a two hour commute every two weeks to share custody of her children with her ex-partner Robin. For Carla, this means that for two weeks out of each month she lives apart from her partner who attends school in a city nearly two hours away. In addition, Carla then travels home to her partner, Daniella, to spend the two weeks of time that she doesn't have custody of her children. Rather than complain about

this arrangement, she offered the situation up as a unique opportunity for her to have individual quality time with each person in her family.

We have the children half time and that is tenuous because of our situation. I'm with Daniella a lot without the children and then when I'm up there with them I'm without Daniella. So it's very different than if the four of us were together for the week that we have. That would be different. So I'm missing, I'm without somebody all the time. I'm always missing somebody. So that creates a dynamic that most people don't ever experience in their lives. But it's also an opportunity.

Many parents in this study value the opportunities that they can offer their children. For most of them, this means, providing their children with experiences that help in understanding the world around them. Many of these parents are actively involved in their communities, which gives them an opportunity to share their experiences with their children.

*Guiding moral and social development.* As a whole these youth were politically and socially aware. During interviews with both youth and parents it became clear that this awareness was largely due to the value these parents placed on sharing their opinions and experiences with their children.

Actually just talking about it, anytime a learning opportunity comes up with political things that are going on. The kids are very aware of it, they listen, they want to know, they're not real thrilled with Bush, they're not real thrilled with the electoral process, because we just talk about. Anytime something comes up, we'll just start talking about and it's not that we're espousing any

particular slant so much as awareness, that you can't just take things at face value.

Many of these parents take advantage of current political issues to use as learning tools to initiate discussions around social justice and systemic imbalances with their children.

I think Amy and I are vocal about our opinions about, I think of it not so much as a political conversation, but I think of it as what is justice. And how does our government bring that about. Amy and I have always worked with individuals with disabilities, so I think we definitely have opinions about that, and if anything I think if anything been political in our household, or harped on, or preached about, it's that, its disability rights... So Sarah has always been around lots of disabled people through our work and hears our opinion on those subjects.

In addition to voicing their own opinions, these parents encourage individual thought and personal conviction, in these youth.

We're definitely having more discussions with Rachel... and telling her that you can have discussions, and you might not necessarily agree ever, and you can still have your own opinion about it. And even if things aren't going your way politically, you can't let it slip under your rug, you have to be active in what you believe, even if you think it's not going anywhere. Continue to be active.

Activism is common within these families, and although it is expressed in many diverse ways, many of these youth have gotten involved with some form of political or social cause. Carla commented on getting her kids involved in voting.

Larkin's always been upset that she can't vote, she can't quite understand that. I have taken the kids with me to vote every year since they were old enough to walk. You have to punch the thing and they always let them do a fake ballot there and they give them an "I voted" sticker. The whole bit. So they've been involved with what we're doing and we keep them aware.

For Lee, formerly in the Peace Corps, providing Dominique with an understanding of social justice issues included a more global perspective and experience:

I consider myself to be political but not active. I do a lot of work overseas on my spare time, so I do a lot for women's issues and such... it's a non-profit I started 5 years ago... we set up this whole system and I raise money, and build water supply and sanitation and community education kind of work. She's [Dominique] actually traveled to Nepal with me to the project areas. Of course she acted like she was bored most of the time.

Each of these parents put forth strong efforts to teach their children about having respect for people and opinions different from their own. Carla and Daniella described a conversation they had with Larkin about religion and same sex marriage.

...We're also not saying that "this is good and that's bad," we're saying "You've got to balance everything," you can't say that this is the only thing; cause we'll talk about religion and Larkin will say, "Well that makes no sense to me" and I'm like, "Well it may not to you but it does to other people. What

you have to understand is where they're coming from." I guess I come from the perspective, I don't want to completely judge people for being a right wing radical Christian because I don't know where they're coming from... and so we try to keep it open minded, think about both sides... you can't assume just because you've heard one side of the story, you know the whole story.

While some of these youth had strong opinions about many social and political issues, overall they were sensitive about issues related to mistreatment and discrimination. A question about discrimination was included in our interviews. The majority of these participants had a solid understanding of what discrimination meant and how it affected people's lives.

Discrimination is like a feeling or like a notion of bias or prejudice thoughts or feelings that causes you to hate or dislike either a group of people or someone else because of something that's different about them; and it could be race, gender, skin color, or like anything. Anyone can be discriminated against about anything about themselves because no person is exactly the same as anyone else.

Most poignant was Sarah's response to a situation where she was being treated differently due to her family structure.

Kids have some questions about that, "Do you know your dad?" "No, I can only meet him when I'm 18" and blah blah blah; and you just have to be patient and they don't know and you can't blame them for that. For being curious about it, well that's great, that's a good thing cause if they're curious then you can teach them then they'll be less likely to be prejudiced or scared

about not knowing, cause you're always scared about what you don't know about and it's true. But once you know about it and some light is shed on the subject it's like "Oh, this isn't so different."

Overall, these parents are raising conscientious youth. Although most parents felt confident that their children were evolving into exceptional adults, they shared their concerns about the changes that were occurring as they moved from childhood into adolescence.

*Parental concerns.* While these parents and youth all recognized that open communication was a present and valued component of their relationships, it was also the most common concern for parents as they anticipated the upcoming changes in their children's lives. Alicia and Chris shared this with me during our interview:

I think that my biggest concern is about kids getting sullen and withdrawn from their parents. He's [Liam] started to emulate some of those behaviors. I'm afraid he's going to stop talking to us. I just want him to be normal. I know maybe that is a normal part of growing up, like stop talking to your parents and start talking to yourself. But I'm just going to miss him if he does that; and stops sharing his deepest concerns... I'm not concerned with drugs or alcohol. Just that we stay the kind of parents that can be approached and talked to.

For Janelle and Jo, the concern for losing communication was directly related Rachel having a strong sense of self and being willing to voice her opinions. Janelle provided this response when I asked her about what changes they were noticing in Rachel as she was getting older, "I think trying to get through with a good sense of self, if you

have an opinion you need to say it! We're always trying to tell her that... expression of emotion, not shutting down."

Similarly, Carla pointed out the importance of maintaining an open line of communication with Larkin, as well as recognizing her role in the relationship.

Being comfortable with herself, because I see the number one cause of death in adolescents is after automobile accidents, is suicide. So I think it's incredibly important to be constantly aware, and open, and listening, and seeing if they're comfortable... So, I guess that is knowing that she feels good with herself. That she's comfortable.

Daniella pointed out a behavior that Larkin struggled with currently and addressed how she hoped they would be able to help her emerge as a stronger person.

Yeah, for me that she's not taking on too much responsibility for Zach, you know the younger sibling... and voicing her opinion, being a strong woman. Because in some ways she can be strong and independent and in other ways not... Just trying to make sure that she keeps that strength in there and doesn't let herself disappear.

### *Summary of Findings*

As a whole these youth enjoy a close relationship with their parents. Spending time together as a family was a priority for both youth and parents and seemed to be a consistent practice in their lives. All of these youth were transitioning into an adolescent stage of life and were challenged yet excited about the prospect of more independence while acknowledging the importance of parental support.

Most of these youth are “out” in their communities regarding their family structure. For many of them, being “out” meant sharing information about their families when asked, using family examples in school assignments, and sharing family information with their friends. While all of these youth were proud of being raised in a lesbian headed household they were also aware of the social stigma that is sometimes attached to same sex families. This knowledge allowed them to be discrete and informed about their choice of friends.

Conversations about family brought up themes around marriage, commitment and legitimacy. Three of the six youth had parents who have been legally married during the period in which the courts allowed legalized documentation for same sex couples. Many of the youth have participated in ceremonies, either legal or symbolic, to acknowledge the commitment of their parents. Of the six families, two have been through separations. These families are familiar with the issues and difficulties of separate households, additional parents and partners, and sharing custody.

As a whole, these families had similar experiences with preparing for and entering into adolescence. All of these parents acknowledged concerns about raising their children to be respectful and self assured. Youth value the close relationships that they have built with friends whom they deem trustworthy but also raised issues about feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers. The time these youth spend with their friends outside of school hours ranges from, almost daily to, only on special occasions. Most of the youth in this study consider their families to be their most significant source of support.

Most parents in this study are active in their communities. In addition, many of these youth are involved in extracurricular activities such as lessons for musical instruments, playing on sports teams, and after school clubs. Many of these parents are politically and socially aware and often share discussions with their children about current issues and policies. Most of the youth in this study had a strong grasp on issues around diversity and discrimination as well as an understanding of local and global causes for social justice.

These six families have unique and individual lives that have been shared openly through these interviews. The information shared through this research has provided a foundation for a better understanding of seventh and eighth graders being raised by lesbian parents. The following chapter will utilize this rich data as a springboard to discuss the implications of this research.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Traditional social constructions of identity are rooted in historical ideologies that maintain power hierarchies for the perpetuation of the dominant culture (Nagel, 2000). This study investigated the lives of six youth and their lesbian parents and how they negotiate definitions of family identity within the confines of a dominant system of power. Family experiences are discussed in the context of existing research and theory. Most prominent are considerations of legitimacy, visibility, and normalcy within lesbian parented families. From these data emerged four main themes, (a) being “out” about family structure, (b) marriage and family, (c) the transition from childhood to adolescence, and (d) thoughtful and purposive parenting.

The following chapter reviews each theme in detail. For each of the following themes there will be a summary of the findings, a discussion of the literature as it interacts with the data, clinical implications for counselors, educators, and members of society, and suggestions for future research. This study attempted to create a space in which lesbian headed households could explore their definitions of family and in turn provide a forum for discussion and an avenue for creating positive change.

#### *Being “Out” about Family Structure*

All of the families in this study are “out,” in varying degrees, in their communities. For many of these youth, being out meant disclosing about their lesbian parents to a few, trustworthy friends. While other participants have chosen to be out in their wider communities, including school and church. Although there were differences

in whom these youth told about their family structure, establishing a foundation of trust was a common precedent for disclosure.

While most of these youth had never experienced overt harassment due to their family structure, many of them acknowledged the stigma that society often attaches to same sex families. For some participants just the anticipation of possible mistreatment guided their decisions for disclosure. Most common, to the discussions about being out, was the lack of visibility for same sex families in the media, in schools, and in the community at large. For many of these youth it was this invisibility that informed their decision to keep their family structure hidden.

#### *Data and the Literature*

In keeping with previous research, the families in this study reported few instances of *overt* discrimination, harassment, or mistreatment due to their family structure (Litovich & Langhout, 2004; Laird, 1996; Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). The experiences of negative treatment that were addressed presented primarily in the form of asking inappropriate questions, such as “why don’t you have a dad?” However, a few youth participants in the current study acknowledged that often times these questions were routed in genuine curiosity and did not seem malicious in nature. Only one of the participants shared an experience of overt harassment in which she was “accused” of being a lesbian because of her mom’s sexual identity. Although this youth recognized that being called a “lesbian” was not offensive, in and of itself, she did express her humiliation as a result of the name calling predominantly due to the hateful nature from

which it was intended. Fortunately this was an isolated event and experiences such as this were not common for any of the other youth in the study.

Despite their limited experiences of harassment or discrimination, these youth are very careful about disclosing their family structure. The development of trust was the necessary element of a relationship before disclosure could be considered. Although most of these youth reported that they were “out” with many of their friends, they also expressed feelings of anxiety when faced with novel situations where they may be asked to share about their family. This finding agrees with previous research on the children of lesbian and gay parents, who often fear negative treatment or being placed in the “spotlight” when their family structure is exposed (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). There seems to be a disconnect between actual negative experiences and the anticipation of discrimination. For the families in this study, oppression does not present in an obvious form, but rather permeates all facets of their lives by remaining hidden.

There is a lack of representation of same sex families in media sources and in society in general (Dunne, 2000; Laird, 1996). When the participants in this study were asked to share examples of sources where they had noticed gay or lesbian headed families, very few were mentioned. According to these youth, other than an occasional television show or magazine article, representations of same sex family structures do not exist. Limiting exposure of family forms that do not fit the heteronormative model allows those in power to define reality for society (Delpit, 1995). The reality for these youth is that their families are not normal and therefore illegitimate. By limiting visibility, society is silencing the discourse that provides validity to these families.

For most of youth in this study, living within a society that defines legitimate families for them but does not include them, challenges their ability to resist a heterosexist structure (Casper & Schultz, 1996). The work of resistance becomes even more challenging when definitions of family shift and family identity is disrupted. For one participant in this study, her family was initially defined by a heterosexually headed household until the dissolution of her parent's relationship. It wasn't until she reached elementary school that her understanding of her parent's separation also included a new identity for her mother, as a lesbian. Not only did this youth give up a "legitimate" family identity but she was asked to replace it with one that society refused to validate (Ariel & McPherson, 2000).

Although invisibility of lesbian families is a systemic disorder, and therefore present in all branches of society, geographical location can play a role in providing or limiting opportunities for a legitimate family identity. Legitimacy can be complicated by geography when access to sources of support, is unavailable. It has been established that representation of same sex families in the media is limited, however, some families, such as many of the participants in the current study, have opportunities for support within their communities. Most of the families in this study live in a predominantly liberal, metropolitan city in the Northwest. Many of them are involved in gay and lesbian community organizations or have developed a social network of open minded individuals. For many of the youth in this study, geography has provided them with options for support, even when representation is lacking elsewhere (Casper & Schultz, 1996).

Most of the families in this study consider themselves fortunate to be able to live in an area that is comparatively more open and accepting of lesbian families. For one family, however, the opportunity to choose their geography was limited by access to employment and affordable housing. Inevitably their location limited their capability for connection in a supportive community. This family was forced to choose between social isolation and economic stability. In this case, the opportunity to *choose* geographical location is considered a privilege.

### *Clinical Implications*

At first glance, suggestions for clinical implications can be overwhelming. Invisibility and illegitimacy are the result of a systemic imbalance of power. Lack of representation for same sex families reiterates societal definitions of normalcy and therefore encourages a cycle of invalidation (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000; Ryan & Martin, 2000). In order to restructure these systems of privilege, there needs to be a concentration on increasing visibility and discourse for families who do not fit into societal norms.

Suggestions for creating positive change are two-fold: building support systems, and increasing awareness. The most obvious place to begin building support for families is in the schools. It can be assumed that many school staff and administrators are unaware of the number of lesbian and gay parented families in their schools as many families may not feel comfortable or safe about disclosure and therefore remain hidden (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Schools can provide an opportunity and a message to parents that coming “out” can be a safe and supportive experience for them. A climate of

acceptance can be created through gay/lesbian/straight alliance groups that are sponsored and advertised through the school. Separate alliance groups should be offered for both parents and students and should provide support and education for all those involved. In school districts where groups such as these are not tolerated, community organizations such as PFLAG (Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and Rainbow Families can provide support through networking and education.

Although lack of visibility and proliferation of heterosexist standards of family are societal problems, genuine awareness and understanding must happen at a personal level (Victor & Fish, 1995). It is important that individuals understand their own biases and address their potential for homophobic values and beliefs before change can affectively occur. This work can be done through personal therapy, community education, reflection, and even expanding personal relationships to more diverse populations (Casper & Schultz, 1996). In addition, diversity education should include normalizing representations of lesbian and gay families in the media and in other public forums.

#### *Future Research*

Although studies have been conducted, including the current research, on issues of invisibility and illegitimacy of lesbian headed families, there is recognition that most of these studies are done so with nonrandom samples, and with urban, predominantly white, educated, and middle class families (Casper & Schultz, 1996; Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Dunne, 2000). This research limitation is problematic as families who experience multiple forms of oppression due to their racial, ethnic, gender, and/or

class identities continue to remain invalidated and invisible (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Clarke, 2002; Anzaldúa, 1987). Not only are gender, ethnicity, and class flexible, borderless identities within themselves, but often an individual identifies with all of these aspects at once. Gloria Anzaldúa calls these multiplicities “borderlands” (Anzaldúa, 1987). Those living within the borders are often difficult to access, and therefore little is known about these demographics. Research on ethnic/cultural minority lesbian families, who are not out in their worlds, could have major implications for understanding, building services, and providing support for these families.

### *Summary*

Overt discrimination and harassment are not immediate concerns for the lesbian headed families in this study. Rather, these families are invalidated through hidden oppressions. Lack of representation in the media is one example of how those in power dictate our societal understanding of normalcy. Media is a dominant source of cultural influence (Mantsios, 2003). By limiting visibility in the media for lesbian headed households, society is implying that these families are of less value and in turn unequal to the dominant culture. Additionally, invisibility can be relative to geographical location and can limit access to support and community for same sex parented families.

Support and awareness are key components to creating positive change in our society. Building support services within the schools has the potential to reach many families although recognition has been given to the possibility of intolerant institutions, therefore community organizations such as PFLAG and Rainbow Families should be considered.

Although many lesbian parented families are continually invalidated by society, research in this area has been limited primarily to women who are educated, white, and middle class. Further research needs to be conducted with ethnic minority, lesbian mothers who are not able to be “out” in their communities and their families and therefore have limited access to support. Women who live within and between the borderlands also live within multiple identities and are in turn, often oppressed within multiple identities (Anzaldúa, 1987).

### *Marriage and Family*

Discussions of marriage rights for same sex couples were consistent throughout all of the interviews with the families in this study. Half of these youth participants have parents who were married during the limited time when same sex marriages were legalized in a Northwest county court. All of these youth agreed that the laws against marriage for same sex couples are unjust and could list several legal benefits that are afforded to married heterosexual couples. In addition, some participants recognized and discussed the societal advantages that are assumed with legal documentation. Included in this list is societal recognition and validation of same sex families. Although these youth acknowledged the importance of these advantages none of them considered legalized marriage a necessity for their own families.

Parental dissolution can be difficult for any child but unique challenges must be considered for the children of same sex parents. Out of the six youth in this study, three have experienced parental separation. All of these families struggled with custody issues and the legal ramifications of being denied automatic parenting rights because of family

structure. For one youth, in particular, the experience of parental separation was especially strenuous.

These data are discussed in the context of previous research and theory and in light of the current socio-political climate. Suggestions for educators and clinicians include developing support programs and offering individual and family therapy for families of lesbian parents. Considerations for ways to expand opportunities for research have implications for working toward social justice.

### *Data and the Literature*

According to the Defense of Marriage Act (1996), marriage can be defined as “a legal union of one man and one woman as husband and wife.” As an expansion of this definition, President G.W. Bush stated in his proclamation of Marriage Protection Week that protecting the sanctity of marriage is “essential to the continued strength of our society” (Bush, 2003, Marriage Protection Week, ¶ 1). This language is such, that power is given to those who conform to these messages. Foucault’s (1991) assertion that knowledge and power are reiterated through discourse is made apparent through the reminder that the “strength of our society” rests in the institution of heterosexual marriage.

Although two couples from the current study were involved in the short lived legalization of same sex marriages in the Multnomah courts, they both acknowledged that their commitments to one another were defined long before they entered into this institution. The remaining parent participants had similar response to the importance of legalized marriage in the context of their relationships. Both parents and youth agreed

that the ability to get married would not create any significant changes for their relationship as a family. Some parents recognized that consideration of marriage is not necessarily an institution with which they would want to align since so many marriages end in divorce. Research has found that many same sex couples are resistant to endorse a heteronormative construction of marriage because of its inevitable end (Stiers, 1999).

While all of the participants in the current study acknowledged that marriage, in and of itself, did not matter to their personal family relationships, several addressed the societal and legal benefits of marriage. During the focus group discussion, the youth in attendance mentioned several monetary rights that are awarded to heterosexual married couples, such as tax and inheritance benefits. Marriage laws do provide many benefits for legally documented heterosexual couples. Included in those are rights to finances and property in the event of the death of a spouse. In addition filing a legalized marriage license allows couples access to spousal health insurance, lower income taxes, and legal power of attorney in the case of a medical emergency (NOLO, 2005).

Among the most common concern for families who are denied the legal benefits of marriage is for legal custody of a child upon dissolution of the same sex parent relationship (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Arnup, 1999). Unless the nonbiological parent has legally adopted their child, they have no protection of parental rights under the law. When heterosexual parents go through the process of a legal divorce, both parents are automatically awarded parental rights. Similarly, rights are reserved for heterosexual parents who have not been married but share a biological bond with their child (Arnup, 1999). Three youth in the current study have been through a parental separation. Two of

these families shared their very different yet equally difficult, custody experiences with me.

For Larkin's family, custody issues were complicated by considering the rights and provisions for two children. Robin and Daniella each gave birth to one child, Robin is the biological mother of Larkin and Daniella is the biological mother of Zach. Both Larkin and Zach were legally adopted by their nonbiological parent which afforded both these parents rights they would not have had otherwise. In the end, it was decided that because the Larkin and Zach were the legal and biological children of both parents, they would remain together and parental custody would be equally divided. Had these parents not been awarded legal adoptions, these siblings would probably have been forced to live in separate homes.

Dominique's case is very different than that of Larkin's family. Although her nonbiological mother legally adopted her, neither of her parents wanted any court intervention when they decided to separate. According to MaryAnn, Dominique's nonbiological parent, asking for intervention from the legal system meant the possibility of losing her parental rights because of her lesbian identity and complicated by the fact that she would not be considered Dominique's primary parent. For MaryAnn the fear of a heterosexist political establishment disallowed her any rights as a parent. Fortunately, these parents were able to agree upon the custody of their child without the need for legal intervention.

Although it would not be considered a theme of this study, the emotional devastation of parental separation warrants some mention. Only one youth in the current

study shared her personal experience regarding the separation of her lesbian parents. While separation and divorce are difficult for any family, the dissolution of a same sex relationship has unique implications for the lives of the children affected (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). The legalization and therefore validation of married couples allows a process for a legal and valid separation, otherwise known as divorce. For the children of same sex parents, there is no process with which to define or identify a separation. How can the termination of a relationship be recognized when the relationship itself never existed? For these families, invisibility becomes multiplied. The implications for the youth in this study were troubling. Although she assured me that her difficulties with the separation were no longer a problem, she explained to me that while she was in the midst of the custody battle, she was not able to locate any sources of support due to her family structure. She indicated that all systems of support were structured around children with heterosexual parents and she never thought anyone would understand her experience. For this participant, being considered an illegitimate family invalidated her need for support.

Legitimacy and validity are privileges awarded to families headed by married parents (Butler, 2002). This position of privilege within the hierarchy of power is defined and recognized not only through legislation, such as legalization of marriage, but also through political discourse. In an address to the nation recognizing and honoring American families, President Bush indicated that children who are raised by married parents are grounded in a more solid “foundation for success” than those from other

family structures (Bush, 2001, National Family Week, ¶ 3). Here the message of legitimacy is obvious.

However, often hierarchical structures of privilege are hidden and therefore not easily identified. Some of the youth participants in the current study addressed the significance of the word “marriage.” Although many of them agreed that marriage, as a construct, can hold importance and meaning, they also emphasized that at its core, marriage is only a word. These participants bring to light an interesting paradox, marriage in its rawest form is just a word, however, as Foucault (1991) implies, language is at the core of the creation and perpetuation of power.

By limiting membership to this institution called “marriage” we, as a society, are reaffirming the dichotomy of sexualities. Reemphasizing this divide makes it easier to believe that we have no commonalities, and therefore maintain power by treating all others as deviant. Let us consider, however, ways to reject the power hierarchy by transforming these simplified and imposed definitions of marriage and family (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998). Ceremonies of commitment for same sex couples can be considered acts of resistance because they are pushing traditional and rigid constructions of gender and family (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). Similarly, if power is produced through discourse then communication can be a tool of resistance. Although, historically it has been considered an instrument of oppression, the term “queer” has been reclaimed to disrupt positions of power (Halperin, 2003). One couple from the current study asserts their movement toward resistance by utilizing the term “wife” when publicly referring to one another. Additionally, visibility can be an avenue for communicating acts of

resistance. One parent in this study described a situation in which she displayed a photo of her family on her desk at work. One of her coworkers commented that this public display of her partner and children was an overbearing attempt to remind people that she is a lesbian. She responded by telling her coworkers that they remind her of their heterosexuality everyday by displaying pictures and referring to their “husbands,” and yet these gestures are not considered inappropriate. Here, we are reminded of the power of privilege but can also realize the strength of resistance.

### *Clinical Implications*

Children of same sex families who experience parental dissolution are faced with unique issues of legitimacy and gaining access to support (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). Recognition of need and the development of support programs must be considered in order to provide appropriate services within a much underserved demographic. For schools that are challenged by lack of support and tolerance for lesbian and gay families, school counselors must be vigilant about providing avenues of safe and confidential resources for students. It is likely that youth will be hesitant to initiate contact with counseling services due to the stigma attached to, both therapy alone, and even more so in the context of support for issues within a diverse family structure (Clarke, 2002; Ariel & McPherson, 2000). Therefore, effective advertising is crucial for projecting messages of openness and understanding for support of all family structures. Additionally, developing school organizations such as Gay-Straight-Alliance’s and providing in-class awareness education for all students, communicates a climate of acceptance for all families.

In addition to school based support programs for the youth of lesbian parents, providing individual and family counseling for lesbian parented families, is an important step to creating social change. An accepting and effective counseling environment is crucial for same sex parents who are working toward resisting dominant systems of power. It is important for the therapist to provide an environment from which client empowerment can emerge and that includes analyzing the construction of privilege hierarchies that exist within society (Enns, 2000). The therapist can use the therapeutic relationship as a laboratory for maintaining an equal sense of power which can aid the client in becoming aware of the ways in which she has been socialized to feel powerless (Enns, 2000). The process of empowerment can provide lesbian parents with the recognition and tools they need to resist systems of power that are constructed to invalidate diverse family structures. In recognizing that some acts of resistance will be unsuccessful and may be ill-received, providing opportunities for support is essential.

#### *Future Research*

Little research exists on the effects of parental separation for lesbian headed families (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). Studies addressing mechanism of coping and resilience through the process of dissolution would help to develop a better understanding of unique issues these families face (Litovich & Langhout, 2004).

Developing more effective ways to gather accurate demographical data on same sex families would provide researcher, educators, and policy makers with a better understanding of these families in general. Gomes (2003) asserts that due to stigmatization and subjectivity in defining sexual orientation the data that exists about

gay and lesbian parented families is drastically underestimated. If, what we suspect is true about the number of gay and lesbian families who are in existence but are not accounted for, then knowing and providing this information has the potential to threaten systems of power and create locations for resistance (Dalton & Bielby, 2000).

### *Summary*

For these parents and youth, discussions of marriage indicated little concern for legal rights and monetary benefits. More prevalent was the acknowledgement of societal benefits that are connected to marriage, such as legitimacy as a family unit and validity of partner relationships. Marriage and family are socially constructed systems of power and while power is created and maintained through discourse it is also at this location where resistance is formed. The language of resistance can increase visibility for otherwise hidden populations and has the capacity to disrupt the oppressive language and behavior that dichotomizes society.

### *The Transition from Childhood to Adolescence*

The youth in this study are all approaching a developmental transition into adolescence. For most of them, this means that relationships with their peers are evolving and that their responsibilities are changing, both in the home and at school. These parents acknowledge the need to allow their children more independence and want to support them in any way that they can to prepare them for the world. The relationships that these parents share with their children are centered in open communication. Both youth and parents agree that, compared to the family relationships of their peers, they spend more time together participating in activities and communicating with each other.

Although two out of the six youth participants spend a considerable amount of time socializing with their peers outside of school, this is not the case for the majority of the youth in the study. Some of these youth expressed a sense of social isolation from their peers. For most of these youth, time outside of school was concentrated on family relationships and very little peer socializing occurred except for organized sports activities and special occasions. There is an interesting relationship between the findings with these youth and the literature that exists on adolescents. Following are some of connections and disconnections that emerged from these data relative to previous research.

#### *Data and the Literature*

Many researchers agree that as an individual begins to transition out of childhood and into adolescence there is a growing emphasis on the importance of identity formation (Erickson, 1963; Arnett, 1999; Steinmetz, 1999). Critical to this time period is the development of social relationships and interactions with their peers (Arnett, 1999; Erikson, 1963; Larson et. al., 1996; Steinmetz, 1999; Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Peer relationships were a recurring theme throughout all of the interviews with these youth, more specifically in the context of identifying their own sense of belonging. The extent of their relationships varied for each of these youth, although in most cases socializing did not consume much of their time outside of the school day.

While some of the past research on adolescent development indicates that youth at this stage are placing more value on peer relationships than in childhood (Burt, et al., 1998; Larson, et al., 1996), the majority of these participants recognized that they were less

involved in social relationships than their peers and this was of great concern. Four out of the six youth in this study reported that, while they shared some interests with their friends, it was the topics about socializing that they had no desire to participate. Larkin recalled her dislike for talking on the phone which she admitted was a crucial instrument in peer bonding outside of school. Although the content of the discussions were all unique, many of these youth had similar experiences with peer socializing. For these four youth, the experience of not always fitting has left them with a feeling of social isolation.

According to some researchers, youth at this stage of identity formation are caught between a balance of desire for autonomy and maintaining dependence on the family (Schwartz, et al., 2000; Burt, et al., 1998; Larson et al., 1996). In his study of 220 youth ages ten through fourteen, Larson, et al. (1996) found that this act of disengagement from the family differed depending upon the youth's stage of development. This research concluded that for the younger participants, disengagement could be defined as withdrawal from the family unit and included more time spent alone, usually in the bedroom. For older participants in the study, disengagement was related to an increase in outside activities generally coinciding with socializing with friends. In the current study, when comparing themselves to the families of their peers, the majority of these youth reported that they spend more time with their parents, both in communication and in activities than do their peers. Parents also reported that their children continued to put forth an effort to spend time with them and had not experienced a noticeable change in a desire to pull away from the family. This continued connection to their parents may be a factor in their lack of peer

relationships perhaps because there is less energy put forth by these youth, outside of socializing at school, toward building and maintaining peer relationships.

The conversations that did emerge, regarding the autonomy and dependence balance for youth (Larson et al., 1996), were initiated by the parents in this study. Most of these youth did not express a need for more independence nor did they report that any conflicts existed around this issue. Interestingly, it was the parents in the study who acknowledged that their children would, in some form, eventually disengage from their relationships at home. As a whole, these parents were primarily concerned that they would adequately prepare their children for this experience.

It is difficult to assume that these youth, in general, differ significantly from most youth at this stage in development. It is also possible that a stage of disengagement is still to come and that these youth may eventually experience an individuation from the home with an increasing desire for peer socialization. Nevertheless, currently these youth have found a connection with their parents, which reportedly includes more time spent together and more open communication, than those of their peers. An interesting consideration for this difference may be embedded in a societal assumption of heterosexism (Clarke, 2002; Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). For most of these youth, being open about their family structure is a deliberate and selective process. While many of these youth said that they did not “keep” their family structures a secret, each of these participants explained that a developed level of trust was an important antecedent to being out about their family. This is not to say that all of these youth intentionally hide their family structure from their peers and community but they do acknowledge that society assumes heterosexual parents, so in essence their own

family is hidden by assumption (Dunne, 2000; Laird, 1996). This may make it more difficult to disclose family structure because instead of agreeing with the norm, they are fighting against it. Johnson (2001) reminds us that any form of resistance is difficult, but it is especially true for those who do not hold the power in society.

When their lesbian parented family is not assumed, these youth must make the decision to either, continually disclose their family to those around them or allow the assumption of a heteronormative family. Many of these youth have chosen the latter, and while they do not deny being proud of their families, they are overwhelmed by a powerful societal pressure to conform. Perhaps their solution is to savor the most honest and open relationship that they have: the one with their parents. Their home environment and relationship with their families may be the one and only location where everything can be out in the open.

### *Clinical Implications*

Children spend 7 to 10 hours every weekday at school (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). The amount of time spent at school and the messages that students receive about societal norms and behaviors make schools very important to the development of children and their families. If perhaps, the youth in this study are developing closer ties to their parents at the detriment of their relationships with peers, clinicians and educators need to consider what systemic changes can be made within the school environment.

Students who provide limited disclosure of their family structure to their school or friends may experience anxiety because their lives at school and their lives at home are incongruent (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). Creating an accepting and supportive school climate

may make an impact on the depth on relationships that a student builds with their peers. For Sarah, a youth participant in this study, being actively involved in her school's Gay-Straight-Alliance seemed to make a significant impact on her ability to connect to her peers while maintaining close ties with her parents. Compared to the other schools attended by the youth in this study, Sarah's school seemed particularly centered around their GSA and other community issues. Moreover, out of the six youth from this study, Sarah was the only one who reported this kind of balance between family and friends. Although this story is anecdotal, it is worth consideration as it exemplifies the possibilities that can occur for students when school ideology embraces same sex family structures. Sarah's experience, not only being involved in the GSA but also being provided with a school culture that is very open and supportive, allows her the opportunity to build close and open relationships with her peers while maintaining close ties to her parents.

#### *Future Research*

Sarah's story provides an interesting model for researchers from which to further investigate school climate and the children of lesbian parents. I suggest taking a closer look at schools with active GSA's in order to better understand how students from lesbian families build and maintain peer relationships when their school climate is visibly and systemically supportive of varying family forms.

Additionally, a longitudinal study of the development of these youth would provide us with an interesting perspective on parental relationships as they evolve throughout adolescence. A more developed and in-depth study on the proposed theory of secret keeping would inform us of whether this theory can be applied to the lives of these

participants. If this theory presents as a significant developmental consideration, a longitudinal study could also provide us with a better understanding of the long term effects of secret keeping in the context of peer and family relationships.

### *Summary*

While some of the previous research on the transition from childhood to adolescence indicates that this period in a child's life is one where disengagement from the family occurs (Schwartz, et al., 2000; Burt, et al., 1998; Larson et al., 1996), there is little evidence of this currently taking place in this population. At this stage in their development focusing more energy on time spent with their parents than with their peers. In addition, these youth value the open communication that they share with their parents. Due to their lesbian parented households, they may prefer a closer relationship with their parents than their peers because of the pressure of disclosure and societal assumptions of family structure.

As clinicians and educators we are responsible for creating a more supportive and open climate for youth with lesbian parents. Developing a Gay-Straight-Alliance within the schools, may help provide students with a visible example of a welcoming environment and may have implications for the relationships they share with their peers. Further research on this area needs to be conducted. In addition, a longitudinal study of these current participants may provide researchers with a better understanding of the relationships between lesbian parents and their children.

### *Thoughtful and Purposive Parenting*

For the parents in the current study, the decision to have a child was thoughtful and deliberate. These participants embrace parenthood in a variety of ways: four youth in the study and two younger siblings were conceived through donor insemination; two youth were born from previous heterosexual unions; four parents have adopted their children; and two are co-parenting without adoption. All of these parents acknowledge the societal implications of raising a child within a lesbian headed household. For many of them, the realities of a heterosexist world complicated their decision to raise a child. Nevertheless these parents are committed to the lives of these six youth and value honest and accurate dialogue, with their children, regarding the choices and processes involved in becoming parents.

Open communication and trust were consistent themes throughout these interviews. Both youth and parents acknowledged the somewhat unusual bond that they shared with each other, specifically when compared to the families of their peers. Issues of social justice and politics are common themes for discussions in these families. Parents in this study are not only knowledgeable about these issues, but many of them are active in working toward change in their communities both locally and globally. Additionally, these parents embrace every opportunity to provide their children with a better understanding of the world around them. Consequently, many of these youth are knowledgeable about social and political issues and are comfortable asking questions and engaging in debates with their parents.

Following is a review of the previous research on lesbian parenting discussed in the context of the current data. By examining the relationship between the families in this study and the findings from past participant research, we are expanding our knowledge base to include and learn from these families experiences.

#### *Data and the Literature*

Donor insemination was the most common form of conception for the families in the current study. This method of parenthood is increasingly more common among lesbian couples (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). According to previous research, there are many considerations when deciding to conceive through donor insemination, such as the choice of a known or unknown donor (Chabot & Ames, 2004). In the current study, two of the four youth who were conceived through donor insemination, know and share a relationship with their sperm donor. While the current interviews did not address the decision making process for choosing a donor, they did address parental concerns and considerations preceding the decision to have a child. Lesbian parents have unique issues that accompany the decision to bring a child into the world (Chabot & Ames, 2004). For some of the parents in this study, the decision to have a child meant recognizing that a heterosexist society may not always be supportive of their family structure.

All of the parents in this study described instances where they have experienced some form of oppression due to their lesbian identity. For many of them the experience of coming out to their family of origin was their initiation to oppressive treatment. For these parents, having had first hand experiences of societal inequity or discrimination provided them with a better understanding of the systems of oppression from which they

could share with their children. These parents value open communication, addressing issues that may arise around the acceptance of same sex families. Included in this discourse is an emphasis on terminology and accuracy regarding sexual orientation, both in terms of insemination methods and in defining parental relationships. Most parents in this study find that by providing the appropriate vocabulary to explain their family structure, they are empowering their children to educate others truthfully and confidently. In their research on resilience in lesbian headed families, Litovich and Langhout (2004) found that children who are raised having honest discussions about their lesbian headed family structure are more likely to approach public situations, such as attending school, with a sense of family pride.

Although discussions about discriminatory treatment in the context of family structure was the most prevalent location from which to initiate conversations about tolerance, the parents in the current study placed equal value on conversations about acceptance and diversity for all people. This finding agrees with previous research on children of lesbian parents who were recognized as having an ability to empathize with people who had belief systems that were different and sometimes opposing to those of the participants (Litovich & Langhout, 2004). These researchers found that lesbian parents emphasized the importance of valuing the beliefs of others, even when they seemed discriminatory. Similarly, the current study found that many of these parents utilized their exposure to negative messages through media or experiences of negative treatment through personal interactions, as an opportunity to educate their children. Rather than negatively respond to discriminatory comments or behaviors, they encourage their

children to approach situations from an alternative perspective, recognizing that oppressive treatment is often rooted in ignorance. As a whole, the youth in the current study reiterated these lessons from their parents, often describing situations in their own lives where they responded to offensive questioning about their family structure as an opportunity to educate those who were misinformed. In addition, these researchers discovered that having a foundation of open and honest communication with their parents made children of lesbian parents more likely to disclose their own experiences of discriminatory behavior or harassment when it occurred.

While both parents and youth in this study agree that their relationships are grounded in open and honest communication, almost every parent expressed concern over the possibility of losing this bond with their child. There is an assumption in our society, that the transition from childhood into adolescents involves a period of heightened conflict and turmoil that is especially disruptive to the parent-child relationship (Arnett, 1999; Larson, et al., 1996). G. Stanley Hall developed the concept of storm and stress in 1904, relating this period to the emotional and behavioral changes that he considered to be, unique and inevitable to adolescence (Arnett, 1999). Many scholars have debated over the validity of Hall's theory, specifically in the context of it generalizing to *all* youth at this stage in development (Arnett, 1999; Larson, et al., 1996). Somehow, this theory has permeated into our societal concept of adolescence and therefore influenced our views on this period of transition. Given this societal expectation of storm and stress it was not surprising that all of the parents in this study shared concerns over the anticipation of this phase occurring. Their fear is such that, in the process of development, their child will

withdraw from communication and internalize their stress rather than seek the support of their family. Nevertheless, these parents are committed to offering their children a consistent environment based on trust and open communication.

As the parents in this study make conscious decisions about raising thoughtful and conscientious youth, they also recognize that societal pressures can have a strong impact on the development of their relationships with peers and other people outside of the family unit. These parents are not only worried about the future state of their own relationships with their child but are concerned about their child's inner strength when developing relationships outside of the home. Research on adolescent self-esteem has indicated that youth at this stage perceive themselves differently according to their relational context (Harter et al., 1998). More specifically, individuals internalize their self-worth dependant upon their interactions with others. Similarly, parents in the current study, although they recognize confidence and inner strength in their children at home, fear that in other contexts, these youth may loose their sense of self. Here, Daniella (study participant, 2005) summarizes what many other parents in the study had described as their concern, "[we want to] make sure that she keeps that strength in there and doesn't let herself disappear." These parents are concerned that peer influences may have a negative impact on their child's self-worth. Harter et al. (1998) suggests that support may help develop self-esteem across contexts, specifically when it is increased in areas where youth identify lower self-worth. The youth in the current study are all receiving a tremendous amount of support from their parents and seem to identify a strong sense of self-worth in the context of their family. This study did not include investigation into

support sources for these youth outside of the family unit. However, this seems to be a pertinent consideration for the development of positive self-worth across the contexts of peer and family relationships.

### *Clinical Implications*

As educators, we have a responsibility to all youth to teach beyond classroom curriculum by integrating healthy ways of relating and understanding perspectives other than our own. Much of the development of school culture is embedded in the context of discourse: in the classroom, amongst educators, and with parents (Casper et. al, 1992; Casper & Schultz, 1996; Victor & Fish, 1995; Ryan & Martin, 2000). Dialogue in the classroom must be structured around utilizing appropriate and inclusive terminology. In addition, open and non-oppressive language should not be limited to conversations between teachers and students (Casper et. al, 1992; Casper & Schultz, 1996; Victor & Fish, 1995; Ryan & Martin, 2000). Educators need to use this terminology in their discussions with each other and in meetings and training sessions.

The parents from the current study have provided a helpful model of communication within the classroom environment. Students appreciate and respond well to honesty. Providing a classroom culture where truth is valued and discussed, allows students more freedom to express themselves and explore those things that they do not understand (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Sarah, a youth participant in the current study articulated this concept beautifully, "...if they're curious, then you can teach them. Then they'll be less likely to be prejudiced or scared about not knowing, 'cause you're always scared about what you don't know."

In addition to creating an open and inclusive classroom environment, school programs that emphasize support strategies for youth, could be an effective approach in developing and maintaining adolescent self-esteem (Harter et al., 1998). Researchers have found that although parental support is crucial to a healthy sense of self, identifying support in other contexts such as in relationships with peers can have a positive impact on relational self-worth (Harter et al., 1998). Implementing a counseling curriculum in the classroom and/or out-of-class programs that addresses the importance of support for youth at this stage, can be an effective tool in teaching life skills to adolescents. An important component to this curriculum would be educating students on how to give support to others, but also on how to ask for support when needed. While it is difficult to navigate peer interaction, because so much of it happens outside of the school environment (Burt et al., 1998), developing programs that assist students in building support strategies can help them generalize those skills to life experiences.

#### *Future Research*

There is a natural progression from the current study into future research in the context of relational self-worth in adolescence, specifically within peer relationships. Many of the youth in this study identified their peer relationships as a source of concern in their lives. While we did not address self-esteem directly, many of these youth expressed feelings of “not fitting in” and “not [being] cool” when discussing their peer relationships. A follow-up study on support seeking strategies in the context of peer relationships for these youth may have implications for future research with a larger

sample of adolescents on how they identify and utilize sources of support across relational contexts.

While this study did not directly address the application of empathy in youth raised by lesbian parents, there was considerable mention of opportunities when these participants employed this practice. Litovich and Langhout (2004) discovered that, in their study of children with lesbian parents, their participants showed a greater understanding of empathy than the children of heterosexual parents from the same classrooms. Research on this issue should be explored further and with a larger sample of youth with lesbian parents. There are considerable implications for research such as this, including development of classroom curriculum based on empathic practices.

#### *Summary*

Parents and youth in this study agree that their relationships are grounded in a climate of open and honest communication. Beginning at an early age, these parents have placed value on engaging in accurate and truthful dialogue with their children, regarding their family structure. These youth learn from their parental experiences of discrimination and in turn, have learned the value of respecting beliefs and perspectives other than their own. Further research needs to be conducted on the ability to empathize in youth who are being raised by lesbian parents.

Although these parents are satisfied with the relationships that they have built with their children, they are concerned that these youth will begin to withdraw and isolate themselves from their family. In addition, these parents worry about feelings of self-worth, specifically in terms of the relationships that these youth have with their

peers. Building school programs to teach youth about the importance of asking for and giving support, may have positive implications for adolescent self-esteem across relational contexts.

### *Reflections and Conclusions*

Visibility and legitimacy were common threads throughout this study and how it interacts with previous research and theory. Lesbian parented families are continually invalidated by society through lack of representation, oppressive discourse, and fear of mistreatment (Litovich & Langhout, 2004; Laird, 1996; Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). Although systems of power indeed exist in all facets of society, most of these families are privileged to live in geographically tolerant and accepting locations. Recognizing and discussing privileges such as these are avenues for communication between parents and their children. Having personal experiences with discrimination and oppression has created a climate of empathy with these parents that they have, in turn, passed down to their children. Open and trusting communication is central to these family relationships and is essential to providing context for understanding this research.

In agreement with most studies that are conducted with lesbian parented families these participants are urban, predominantly white, college educated, and middle class (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Clarke, 2002). Demographics such as these can be problematic as they limit representation of race, class, gender, and the intersections of these. However, the unique advantages of utilizing qualitative methodologies are that they “provide a space for previously silenced people to give voice to their experiences” (Morrow, 2003). Much attention was paid to representing these families honorably and

accurately and therefore revealing the rich and varied multiplicities of their individual identities. While these data do not give us the ability to generalize to all families of lesbian parents, writings, such as this, that acknowledge and validate same sex family structures, provide locations of resistance from which to challenge systemic imbalances of power. "...it's not about who's there, it's about your parents loving you because you're their children and people don't seem to see that there's not really a difference" (Sarah, study participant, 2005).

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## APPENDICES

## **APPENDIX A**

### **RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENT**

My name is Debi Thomas-Jones and I am a doctoral candidate from Washington State University. My graduate program is interdisciplinary and explores the intersections of American Studies, Sociology, and Counseling Psychology, specifically in the context of Women's Studies. I am currently looking for volunteers, in the greater Seattle area, to participate in a research project for my dissertation entitled "Middle Schoolers with Lesbian Parents: A Qualitative Exploration of Adjustment within the Current Socio-Political Climate."

This study looks at the definitions of family through the experiences and voices of adolescents living in a lesbian headed household. I am specifically interested in how adolescents develop their family identity within the current socio-political system. The study will concentrate on family life, including parent and sibling relationships, friendships, school experiences, and extracurricular involvement. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Washington State University Institutional Review Board for human subject participation.

I am currently looking for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders who are being raised by lesbian parents. I am interested in the period of adolescence that occurs before the exciting yet difficult transition into high school. The criteria for the study requires that both adults in the home assume parental responsibilities and would consider themselves to be co-parenting their child(ren) however there is not a requirement for both adults to have raised their children from birth.

I will be asking the adolescent participants to participate in three individual interviews as well as one group discussion with all of the adolescent participants in the study. In addition I will be asking the lesbian parent(s) of the adolescent to participate in one interview. The interviews will be conducted in confidential and safe environments, including your home, if desired. The discussion group will be conducted in a neutral and confidential environment. By conducting this research I hope to provide an avenue for youth to explore and share their voices. I hope this will, in-turn, begin to influence our current political and social systems by recognizing and redefining the concept of “family”.

Please feel free to contact me at any time: (206) 854-8977 or by email: dtjwsu@yahoo.com. I would love to hear if you and your adolescent may be interested or would like more information.



Child 1:                      Age:                      Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Child 2:                      Age:                      Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Child 3:                      Age:                      Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

Child 4:                      Age:                      Gender:

Race/Ethnicity:

9) For your children who are in kindergarten through twelfth grade, check the description that best matches their school:

Public school     Private school     Charter school                       Parochial school

Home school     Other (please describe):

## APPENDIX C

### YOUTH INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### Interview 1

*Theme: Study introductions and issues within the home*

1. How old are you?
2. What grade are you in school?
3. What gender do you consider yourself?
4. Tell me about who lives in your house (If you share your time between two households, list people in both).
5. What jobs/responsibilities do you have at home?
6. Tell me what your definition of “family” is.
7. Do you participate in any support groups, family groups, meetings that specifically address your family structure?
8. What are some of the things you like most about your moms?
9. What are some of the hardest things about having two moms?
10. How did your mom(s) tell you she/they were lesbians?
11. Who in your life knows that you have lesbian parents?
12. How do you decide who to tell about your family structure?
13. What would you like to change about your family life?
14. What does the term “diversity” mean to you?
15. How do you view diversity in your own life?

16. How do you view diversity around you (for example, in your school, church, social circle)?

## **Interview 2**

*Theme: Peers and school experiences*

1. What are your favorite academic subjects in school?
2. How do you think you're doing in school in terms of grades and/or interest?
3. What kinds of things are you involved with outside of school?
4. What kinds of extracurricular activities do you do connected to your school?
5. How many close friends would you say you have?
6. What kinds of things do you like to do with your friends, both at school and outside of school?
7. How do you see your life as different from your peers?
8. How do you see your life as the same as your peers?
9. Have you ever had romantic feelings about someone you know? Is this something that you have discussed with your moms? Why or why not?
10. How do you think your communication with your moms, regarding issues at schools, your friends, your romantic interests differ from the conversations your peers are having with their parents?
11. What kinds of experiences have you had at school relating to you having lesbian moms?
12. How would you define the term discrimination?

13. Do you think you have ever experienced discrimination? Describe that situation and how you handled it.
14. Have you ever discriminated against someone? Describe the situation.
15. What would you like to change about your school life?
16. What would you like to change about your friendships?

### **Interview 3**

*Theme: Focus group debriefing, societal messages, advice*

1. What kinds of things have you heard on television, radio, movies about same-sex families?
2. Can you name some of the resources where you hear these messages (i.e. musicians, movies, television shows, political leaders, newspapers, magazines)?
3. How about locally in your own life? What kinds of things do you hear about your family in your school, church, community center, places where you hang out?
4. How do these messages make you feel?
5. How do those messages fit the way that you view your own family?
6. What are the differences between the messages that you are hearing and the way you feel about your own family?
7. What happens when these are opposing messages? What do you do to make sense of your world when what you are hearing doesn't fit with the way you feel?

8. What are ways that you deal with these messages? Who do you talk to?  
What activities do you do?
9. What advice would you give to your peers/other kids about kids with lesbian parents?
10. Is there anything else you think I should ask you about what it is like to have  
(a) lesbian parent(s) right now?

## APPENDIX D

### YOUTH FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### Focus group

*Theme: Family, media, marriage debate, being out*

1. Define family for me.
2. Do you participate in any support groups, family groups, meetings that specifically address your family structure?
3. What are some of the resources where you get information about who you are supposed to be according to the rest of society? For example, how you are supposed to dress, what books to read, movies to watch, relationships to have?
4. Are there any places/resources in your lives that give you messages about what kind of family you are supposed to be a part of? What do those messages say?
5. What do you know about the ban against gay and lesbian marriage being debated in the political system?
6. What do you think should be done about that debate? How would you problem solve this issue?
7. Who in your life knows that you have lesbian parents?
8. How do you decide who to tell?
9. What advice would you give to your peers/other kids about kids with lesbian parents?

## APPENDIX E

### INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PARENTS

#### *Raising an Adolescent*

1. What is it like having an adolescent in the home?
2. What are your biggest struggles/concerns?
3. How does your parenting differ from the way you were parented growing up?

#### *Being Out/Community Interaction*

4. What was the coming out process like and how did you come out to your child, if applicable?
5. What does your community look like, who is considered part of your community and why?
6. How does your family interact with your community?
7. What have been your experiences as a result of your family structure, either as a family or individually, with other parents?
8. What have been your experiences with the school system?... Other community groups?
9. What are some of the unique challenges your family faces because of its structure?

#### *Communication*

10. What questions, if any, has your child brought to you for discussion regarding marriage and family?
11. Do you consider yourselves to be politically active? How?
12. How do politics influence your life and your families life?
13. How do you think your parenting/ communication styles differ from other parents around you?

*Sex/Sexuality*

14. How do you communicate with your child about sex and sexuality?
15. How was sex education addressed in your family?

*Parenting/Family*

16. What kind of advice would you give to other parents with adolescent children?
17. Would your advice be different if the parents were lesbian?
18. Please define family.



## **APPENDIX G**

### **WRITTEN PARENT CONSENT FORM FOR YOUTH PARTICIPANT**

I, Debi Thomas-Jones, am inviting your child to participate in a research project for my dissertation entitled “Middle Schoolers with Lesbian Parents: A Qualitative Exploration of Adjustment within the Current Socio-Political Climate.” This study looks at the development of adolescents living in a lesbian headed household in the context of our current socio-political system. The study will concentrate on family life, including parent and sibling relationships, friendships, school experiences, and extracurricular involvement. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Washington State University Institutional Review Board for human subject participation.

The information in this consent form is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to allow your child to participate in this study. It is important that you understand that your child’s participation is completely voluntary. This means that even if you agree to allow your child to participate you are free to withdraw her/him from the study at any time, or decline his/her participation in any portion of the research, without penalty.

As a participant in this study, your child will be asked to participate in three interviews lasting approximately 1 hour each as well as a two hour focus group with other adolescents with similar family structures. The interviews will be recorded on audiotape so that I have an accurate record of your child’s responses. I and my major professor, Dr. Dawn Shinew, will be the only people with access to the tapes. As the tapes are transcribed, all identifying information will be omitted. The tapes will be

placed in a locked file cabinet in my office until April 25, 2008, when they will be destroyed. In addition, I would like to have an opportunity to observe you and your child in your life environments (school activities, home). The observations will be previously arranged and will only occur with agreement from both you and your child.

By participating in this study your child may experience some emotional discomfort by sharing feelings and experiences related to being raised by lesbian moms. In addition, your child may experience some embarrassment or emotional discomfort when asked questions about his/her life experiences, peer and family relationships, or development. You and/or your child may decline to answer any question asked of you or may decide to terminate an interview or the study at anytime, with no consequence.

No names or identifying information will be associated with the findings. Upon completion of your participation in this study you will be provided with a brief explanation of the question this study addresses. If you have any questions not addressed by this consent form, please do not hesitate to ask. You will receive a copy of this form, which you should keep for your records. Your child will also receive an assent form outlining the guidelines of the study and will have an opportunity to decide whether or not she/he is interested in participating.

Thank you for your time.

Debi Thomas-Jones Ed.M.

Doctoral Candidate

dtjwsu@yahoo.com

206.854.8977

Dawn M. Shinew Ph.D.

Associate Professor

dshinew@wsu.edu

509.335.6837

CONSENT STATEMENT:

I have read the following comments and agree to participate in this research. I give my permission to be audio-taped, under the terms outlines above. I understand that if I have any questions or concerns regarding this project I can contact the investigator at the above location or if I have questions regarding my child's rights as a participant I can contact the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661 or irb@wsu.edu.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature (date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature (date)

## **APPENDIX H**

### **WRITTEN PARENT CONSENT FORM**

I, Debi Thomas-Jones, am inviting you to participate in a research project for my dissertation entitled “Middle Schoolers with Lesbian Parents: A Qualitative Exploration of Adjustment within the Current Socio-Political Climate.” This study looks at the development of adolescents living in a lesbian headed household in the context of our current socio-political system. The study will concentrate on family life, including parent and sibling relationships, friendships, school experiences, and extracurricular involvement. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Washington State University Institutional Review Board for human subject participation.

The information in this consent form is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in this study. It is important that you understand that your participation is completely voluntary. This means that even if you agree to participate you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, or decline to participate in any portion of the research, without penalty.

As participants in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting 1-1 ½ hours. The interview will be recorded on audiotape so that I have an accurate record of your responses. I and my major professor, Dr. Dawn Shinew, will be the only people with access to the tapes. As the tapes are transcribed, all identifying information will be omitted. The tapes will be placed in a locked file cabinet in my office until April 25, 2008, when they will be destroyed. In addition, I would like to have an opportunity to observe you and your child in your life environments (school activities,

home). The observations will be previously arranged and will only occur with agreement from both you and your child.

By participating in this study you may experience some emotional discomfort by sharing feelings and experiences relating to raising an adolescent child. In addition, your child may experience some embarrassment or emotional discomfort when asked questions about his/her life experiences, peer and family relationships, or development. You and/or your child may decline to answer any question asked of you or may decide to terminate an interview or the study at anytime, with no consequence.

No names or identifying information will be associated with the findings. Upon completion of your participation in this study you will be provided with a brief explanation of the question this study addresses. If you have any questions not addressed by this consent form, please do not hesitate to ask. You will receive a copy of this form, which you should keep for your records. Your child will also receive an assent form outlining the guidelines of the study and will have an opportunity to decide whether or not she/he is interested in participating.

Thank you for your time.

Debi Thomas-Jones Ed.M.

Doctoral Candidate

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Dawn M. Shinew Ph.D.

Associate Professor

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509.335.6837

CONSENT STATEMENT:

I have read the following comments and agree to participate in this research. I give my permission to be audio-taped, under the terms outlines above. I understand that if I have any questions or concerns regarding this project I can contact the investigator at the above location or if I have questions regarding my rights as a participant I can contact the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661 or irb@wsu.edu.

\_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

(date)

\_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

(date)

## **APPENDIX I**

### **WRITTEN YOUTH ASSENT FORM**

I, Debi Thomas-Jones, am inviting you to participate in a research project for my dissertation entitled “Middle Schoolers with Lesbian Parents: A Qualitative Exploration of Adjustment within the Current Socio-Political Climate.” The information given in this assent form is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in this study. This means that you are allowed to say that you do not want to participate in this study, without being penalized, and that you may choose to withdraw from the research at anytime. This study has been reviewed and approved by the Washington State University Institutional Review Board for human subject participation.

This study looks at the experiences of adolescents living in a lesbian headed household. The study will concentrate on family life, school experiences, and how you are influenced by the world around you.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Participate in 3 individual interviews, each lasting approximately 1 hour.
2. Participate in a group discussion with other adolescents with similar family structures, lasting approximately 2 hours.

The interviews will be recorded on audiotape so that I have an accurate record of your responses. I and my major professor, Dr. Dawn Shinew, will be the only people with access to the tapes. As the tapes are transcribed, all identifying information will be omitted. The tapes will be placed in a locked file cabinet in my office until April 25, 2008, when they will be destroyed.

In addition, I would like to have an opportunity to observe you in your life environments (school activities, home). These observations will be previously arranged and will only occur with agreement from both you and your parent(s).

Although this research poses little known risks to you, there is the possibility that some questions may cause you to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. You will always have the opportunity to decline to answer a question or withdraw from the study at any time. Your parents have given their permission for you to participate and now you get to decide whether or not you want to be in the study. All data collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential and handled with utmost integrity. Your responses will also be kept confidential from your parents. No one will be able to identify you or your family because of your participation in this study. If you have any questions that are not answered by this form, please do not hesitate to ask. You will receive a copy of this form, which you should keep for your records.

Thank you,

Debi Thomas-Jones, Ed.M.

Doctoral Candidate

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206.854.8977

Dawn M. Shinew, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

dshinew@wsu.edu

509.335.6837

ASSENT STATEMENT:

I have read the above explanation and agree to participate in this research. I give my permission to be audio taped, under the terms outlines above. I understand that if I have any questions I can contact the investigators above or if I have questions regarding my rights as a participant I can contact the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661 or irb@wsu.edu.

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Participant's signature

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date