

## Response to Special Issue

# Empty spaces, new possibilities

Stephen Hicks

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*This article responds to contributions to the special issue of Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review, volume 7(1), on lesbian, gay, polyamorous and queer parenting and families. The author draws upon Foucault's work to suggest that new relational possibilities might be imagined via the practices of lesbian and gay parenting. After briefly reviewing his own involvement in research on gay and lesbian foster care and adoption, the author goes on to discuss questions about gender role models, methodological debates on the nature of research knowledge, and the emergence of narrative/discourse analysis within lesbian and gay parenting studies. The author discusses and responds to a number of problems raised by the contributors, and emphasises an approach to gay and lesbian parenting studies based upon a discursive concern with power/knowledge.*

**Keywords:** discourse, gender role, lesbian and gay parenting, relationships, research methodologies.

The question of gay culture – I mean culture in the large sense, a culture that invents ways of relating, types of existence, types of values, types of exchanges between individuals which are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural forms. If that's possible, then gay culture will be not only a choice of homosexuals for homosexuals – it would create relations that are, at certain points, transferable to heterosexuals. We have to reverse things a bit. Rather than saying what we said at one time, 'Let's try to re-introduce homosexuality into the general norm of social relations', let's say the reverse – 'No! Let's escape as much as possible from the type of relations that society proposes for us and try to create in the empty space where we are new relational possibilities.' (Foucault, 2000a, pp.159–160).

**F**OUCAULT IMAGINED THAT HOMOSEXUALITY might be used creatively to forge new forms of human relationships. He saw in homosexuality the possibility to invent new versions of intimacy, 'as yet unforeseen kinds of relationships that many people cannot tolerate' (Foucault, 2000b, p.153). He even spoke of using adoption to recognise relations between adults and to challenge the limitations imposed upon the 'human relationship'. In part, Foucault was talking about a kind of creativity about kinship or intimacy that he observed amongst gay men and lesbians. He argued that it was the idea that such non-conforming ways of life might be satisfying – rather than the idea of gay or lesbian sex *per se* – that heterosexual society found most

disturbing. Yet Foucault was also suggesting that gay and lesbian ways of life could be transferred to all, in order to achieve wider transformations.

These transformations are happening all around us, and one example of new relational possibilities is the gradual emergence of narratives and practices of lesbian and gay parenting. Foucault's notion of 'empty spaces' might be a useful heuristic device here because many lesbians and gay men have talked about the process of inventing meaning about their own lives, what Didier Eribon refers to as 'redefining one's own subjectivity, reinventing one's personal identity' (Eribon, 2004, p.24). Publications about lesbian and gay families or parenting, for example, are full of the language of 'inven-

tion', 'reinvention', 'choice', 'challenge' and 'creation' (Benkov, 1994; Drucker, 1998; Mallon, 2004; Martin, 1993; Stacey, 1996; Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991). This is because, when thinking about how to form our relationships, we become aware that dominant and approved versions of kinship, intimacy and parenting do not allow for lesbian or gay inclusion. Instead, they deny the legitimacy of lesbian and gay lives or attempt to displace those lives from inclusion within the realms of proper kinship or family (Butler, 2004; Calhoun, 2000). Therefore, as lesbians or gay men, we have 'no rulebook' (McDermott, 2004, p.8), rather we have a series of 'empty spaces' that we must go about filling in our own ways. We must create new relational possibilities.

This process of creation has involved the development of narratives about gay and lesbian parenting, or what has elsewhere been termed stories of opportunity and choice (Weeks *et al.*, 2001). These stories – emerging through publications, magazines, television, word-of-mouth, the internet – have helped to create a discourse about lesbian and gay parenting and the concomitant 'identity' of the lesbian or gay parent, something that seemed an impossibility to many not so long ago (Benson, Silverstein & Auerbach, 2005; Dunne, 2000; Hicks, 2005a, 2005b; Hicks & McDermott, 1999; Plummer, 2003). In addition, these new relational possibilities contain practices or ideas that question standard models of kinship and the family (Hicks, 2005c). For example, lesbian or gay foster carers have forged relationships in which neither adult nor adult-child relations are based upon biogenetic links.

Nevertheless, all of this creativity takes place within, and is regulated by, a heteronormative field that asserts, through both extreme as well as mundane versions, that lesbian and gay lives are dangerous, perverse and a threat to both children and the family. As Donovan and Wilson note, in their editorial to a journal special issue on lesbian and

gay parenting, 'non-heterosexual parenting is, perhaps, one of the last enclaves of anxiety for those espousing the heterosexual assumption' (Donovan & Wilson, 2005, p.132).

### Way back when...

The history of my involvement with debates about gay and lesbian parenting dates back to about 1992, when I first began working on foster care and adoption by lesbians and gay men. Back then, things were very different and there was scant literature on gay parenting. In addition, although there was some work on the idea of the gay or, more strictly, lesbian parent/mother, there was nothing like the sense of a 'lesbian parent' or 'gay parent' identity that has emerged since. Certainly in the field of lesbian and gay fostering and adoption there was very little work going on.

The early 1990s in the UK was, in many ways, both an exciting and a difficult time for lesbian and gay parenting. In 1988, Margaret Thatcher's Government instituted Section 28 of a Local Government Act which outlawed the intentional promotion of homosexuality and the teaching of 'the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (Smith, 1994, p.183)<sup>1</sup>. Following this, the Department of Health issued a consultation paper on fostering services under the Children Act 1989 which stated that 'equal rights' and 'gay rights' policies [had] no place in fostering services' (Department of Health, 1990, para.16). Although the 'gay rights' phrase was removed from subsequent policy – in no small part due to the protests made by lesbian, gay and child care groups – Section 28 and paragraph 16 both contributed to a climate in which 'family life' was defined as for heterosexuals and under threat from lesbians and gay men.

My early work in this field involved interviews with members of the London-based Lesbian & Gay Foster & Adoptive Parents Network (LAGFAPN). This was an area in

<sup>1</sup> Section 28 remained on the statute in Scotland until the year 2000, and in England/Wales until 2003.

which – at that time – there was very little published work apart from a few pioneering studies in the UK and US (Brown, 1991; Ricketts, 1991; Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1987, 1990; Skeates & Jabri, 1988). I remember that it was difficult to contact lesbian and gay foster carers and adopters because there were so few in the UK. Those there were remained suspicious of ‘researchers’, partly because they wanted to protect themselves and their children from intrusion and from what they saw as misrepresentation, and partly because they were fearful of hostile media reports (e.g. ‘Stop This Outrage’, 1990). I found that, of those that I spoke to, most were providing only short-term care to young adults, there were few gay men involved, very few adoptions by lesbians and none by gay men, and that all had stories of rejection, discrimination and homophobia (Hicks, 1996). In addition, there was an inevitable focus on questions such as whether gay and lesbian foster care, adoption or other forms of parenting were even possible and, relatedly, how we could demonstrate that the children of gay carers did not suffer psychosexual, peer group, or other child development problems.

Thinking back over the changes that I have seen over the past 14 or so years, I am struck by the explosion of research and other writing on lesbian and gay parenting<sup>2</sup>. In addition, there has been a special issue of the journal *Sexualities* devoted to ‘New Parenting: Opportunities and Challenges’ (Donovan & Wilson, 2005), a new journal, the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, established in 2005, and now this special issue of *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*. Back in the early 1990s, I never imagined this would happen, and so I welcome these contributions greatly, mainly because lesbian and gay parenting is still an emerging field, in my view, and one in which there is much more to debate and discuss.

There are now greater numbers of lesbian and gay parenting support groups,

web-based discussions, magazines and other narratives. This has also contributed to the recognition by some state social welfare agencies, as well as adoption and fostering organisations, that they should respond to and work fairly with lesbians and gay men. However, this response is patchy and by no means applies to all agencies (Brodzinsky & Staff of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2003; Cahill, Ellen & Tobias, 2002; Hicks, 2005a; Mallon & Betts, 2005). Lesbian and gay foster carers and adopters have grown in number and now provide longer-term as well as short-term care to a range of children of all ages. There are more gay men involved and there have even been some gay male adoptions. Within the wider field of lesbian and gay parenting, questions about children from former heterosexual relationships, about donor-, self-, or alternative insemination, and about children living with single, coupled and even ‘multi-parental’ carers have all emerged. This has meant that questions other than just ‘is gay and lesbian parenting possible?’ and ‘do the children turn out okay?’ are being raised and debated – exemplified by the contributions to this journal issue – but there are still many more questions to discuss. In this sense, the field of lesbian and gay parenting still has many ‘empty spaces’, that is, questions that must be raised, researched, and debated.

### **Everything is dangerous**

I would like to do the genealogy of problems, of problématiques. My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism (Foucault, 2000c, p.256).

Foucault was at pains to remind us that we can never step into a utopian realm free of power relations or, indeed, free of problems. Coming out as lesbian or gay, for example,

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<sup>2</sup> Limitations of space prevent me from listing these here.

does not release the 'true' self, hidden beneath a veil of oppression, because there is no place of freedom from power and there is no 'real' self to be revealed. Coming out does not release us from the effects of power, we simply step into a new web of power relations. As Halperin has noted, coming out is a form of resistance to heteronormativity, but it can never be liberation from the effects of dominant discourses about 'sexuality' (Halperin, 1995). This is because all our ideas about 'sexuality' are constituted within and through those discourses. This means that we cannot enter into a place of utopian freedom, nor should we search for a place where we cease to ask difficult questions about how we imagine our sexual, intimate and familial relations. Ideas about what it means to be 'lesbian' or 'gay', for example, are as much constraining as they are enabling, and most of us soon discover plenty that is wrong with the categories. One example would be that 'lesbian' or 'gay' have rarely allowed space to imagine the possibilities of 'mother', 'father', 'parent' or 'carer', and so many – from all sections of the community, including other lesbians and gay men – are opposed to the very idea of gay or lesbian parenting.

The need to ask more questions applies to the contemporary lesbian and gay parenting scene too. That is, although we have made huge progress, our ideas may still be very limited and – as I will be arguing – governed by problematic and constraining discourses about sexuality, gender, knowledge, parenting, family and so on. In that sense, and borrowing from Foucault, 'everything is dangerous' and 'we always have something to do' (Foucault, 2000c, p.256). It is, therefore, in this spirit that I have formulated my ideas and responses to the papers published in this special issue of *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*. Whilst they raise many important and vital concerns and contribute greatly to moving the debates about lesbian and gay parenting forwards, they are not without their own problems, and I shall be surveying some of these as well as

contributing some of my own ideas. This, of course, also means that my work and my ideas, too, should be subject to scrutiny. I have had the privilege of reading and responding to the contributors, and I hope that they – as well as others – will reply.

### Gender trouble?

The idea of 'gender role models' and, specifically, the question about whether lesbians and gay men are able to provide adequate gender role models for their children is, perhaps, one of the strongest tropes in arguments about lesbian and gay parenting (Clarke, this issue; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005; Demo & Allen, 1996; Golombok & Tasker, 1994; Hicks, 2006, forthcoming; Riggs, 2004a). This is an argument that is used by both sides in the pro-gay/anti-gay parenting debates. Christian and right wing social thinkers in the UK, for example, argue that children living with lesbians or gay men will develop inadequate and distorted gender roles (Morgan, 2002; Phillips, 1999). However, early research supporting lesbian and gay parenting argued that children developed correct or 'normal' sex roles (Hoeffler, 1981; Kveskin & Cook, 1982; Nungesser, 1980). Today, as Victoria Clarke points out in her article, a liberal discourse on gender role models is used by some gay or lesbian parents to reassure others that their children will come into contact with an adequate range of men and women.

This debate is a classic example of what Ralph Smith and Russel Windes have referred to as pro-gay/anti-gay rhetoric (Smith & Windes, 2000), or what Anna Marie Smith has termed 'the evidence game' (Smith, 1994, p.191). In this situation, anti-gay and pro-gay arguments simply vie to establish 'the truth'. So here, for example, arguments that lesbians and gay men promote problematic gender roles are countered with those that argue that they do not. But the point that I would make here, as elsewhere (Hicks, 2003, 2005d, 2006, forthcoming), is that this does not ask whether argument about gender role models, or

rather the idea of gender role models, is helpful. This is a point also made in Clarke's article when she discusses the need for a critical discourse on gender role models, that is, one that does not accept the idea as a necessary social fact.

Entering into the 'evidence game' on this and other issues will not, in my view, help us to progress debates about gay parenting very far for at least two reasons. Firstly, in this case, accepting the idea of gender role models is not very useful because it rests upon a view of gender as a 'thing' acquired and also upon fixed and limiting views of the 'roles' of men and women. Secondly, homophobic discourses will never be shifted by the assertion of a counter 'truth', and that is because they work to establish the priority of heterosexual ways of life through heteronormative accounts of sexuality. As Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz have noted, there is a 'hetero-normative presumption governing the terms of the discourse – that healthy child development depends upon parenting by a married heterosexual couple' (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 160).

Instead, we need to begin to ask how and why homophobic discourses produce the idea that gay and lesbian parents are essentially 'different', whether that be in terms of 'gender role' or anything else, and how this notion of difference is used to maintain sexuality and parenting hierarchies (Hicks, 2005d). We must ask questions about the very idea of sex/gender role, rather than assuming that it is an already given, and we must ask similar questions about the notion of 'difference' in lesbian and gay parenting. As Steven Seidman has argued:

Social differences are not only an object of social knowledge, but shape the practice of knowing. Differences not only structure social life but because social knowledge, including the knowledges produced by experts, is itself part of society, they are structured by social differences. Social knowledges are, therefore, always situated ways of knowing not only in the limited sense of yielding partial perspectives but

in that they are made possible by, and give expression to, the particular social standpoint of their producers. Hence, social knowledges are not only perspectives on the world but are part of their making (Seidman, 1997, p.14).

Accepting a 'different but not deficient' stance on gay families is, therefore, problematic. Statements like those of Amaryll Perlesz and colleagues that 'children of lesbian parents are doing at least as well as children of heterosexual parents', for example, tend to promote the heterosexual family as that which must be lived up to. But, as Julie Mooney-Somers notes in her article, there are so many ways in which heterosexuals look for the causes of 'homosexuality' within families – 'transmission' between parent and child, between siblings, the 'gay gene' and so on – all of which see being lesbian or gay as a failure of some sort.

A 'gays as positive role models' stance, one that dates back at least to Dorothy Riddle's 1978 article, in which she argued that gay men and lesbians have the potential to model less traditional sex roles for children (Riddle, 1978), similarly accepts the terms of 'role model' theory. Clarke comments on this but, although she highlights the complexity of discussions about gender via her use of discourse analysis, still concludes that we should 'celebrate LGBT persons as positive 'role models' for children.' Indeed, it strikes me how much the idea of 'role models' features in the contributions to this journal issue. Perlesz and colleagues talk about the need 'to role-model appropriate attitudes' for children, Alessandra Iantaffi mentions that her daughter 'is exposed to a range of role models with many talents,' and Martine Gross discusses the 'social pressure to have the obligatory presence of 'opposite sex role models' available' in lesbian and gay families.

It seems, then, that lesbian and gay parents are up against a social requirement to provide 'virtual heterosexuality'. They are expected to ensure that their children

acquire traditional 'gender' through contact with male and female figures or, more properly, the idea of the 'true' man and woman. However, rather than accede to the demands of gender role models, the vital point, here, is to ask how gender is made via discourse and practice (Hicks, 2006, forthcoming). This requires us not to treat 'gender' as a social fact, but rather to ask how it is established through interactions and through discourse, so that we consider not whether people acquire correct gender/sex roles, but instead ask how they are positioned as gendered subjects. That is, how is the process of 'gender attribution' (deciding whether someone is male or female) achieved (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p.2)? And how are we 'held accountable for performance of [any] activity as a *woman* or a *man*' (West & Zimmerman, 2002, p.13)? This topic – the idea of gender within lesbian and gay families – is one that would benefit from much more research and debate. However, I still think that the most important question here is: do we really need 'gender' at all?

### Methodological dilemmas

One of the objections raised by the Christian right to research on lesbian and gay parenting is that it is methodologically flawed. The UK Christian Institute, for example, says that it is 'difficult to find such poor quality research as that which purports to show that same-sex parenting is at least as good if not superior to parenting by married couples' (Christian Institute, 2002). Patricia Morgan argues that the research is based upon flawed study design that fails to 'measure the relevant variables...control for extraneous variables,' or 'use the proper statistical tests' (Morgan, 2002, p.47). That is, these authors regard any qualitative work in the field as 'one-sided,' 'anecdotal,' 'gushing personal testimonies' (Morgan, 2002, pp.47–48), and insist that proper research ought to be of the 'random control trial' variety. Even the collection of personal

accounts that I co-edited with Janet McDermott (Hicks & McDermott, 1999), which makes no claims to be generalisable or representative, is written off by Morgan as 'a collection of self-congratulatory testimonials' that cannot count as 'evidence' (Morgan, 2002, p.49).

This is, of course, both a moral as well as a purely methodological question. These Christian authors use a traditional or positivist view of what counts as knowledge in order to discount much research on lesbian and gay parenting (even that which, it could be argued, does use carefully controlled statistical testing), but they also suggest that work that does not meet these standards has a 'political' agenda. Their own viewpoint, they state, is objective or value-free, and they adopt a 'from nowhere' position on knowledge, that is, a claim to be free of bias or politics (Hicks, 2003, 2005d)<sup>3</sup>.

Working, as I do, from an interpretivist research position influenced by interactionist, feminist, queer and poststructuralist views of knowledge, means that I cannot accept the view that positivist accounts of the world are 'better' or that anyone is apolitical or 'theory-free'. My view of the Christian right, for example, clearly sees their accounts of knowledge as motivated by homophobia and as attempts to discount the views of lesbians and gay men, including parents. However, unlike the Christian authors mentioned, I do not see the field of gay parenting research as dominated by qualitative or 'anecdotal' studies. Sure, there are a number of personal narratives by lesbian and gay parents and their children, but much of the formal research in this field is based upon a quantitative survey-based approach. Important studies, like that of Fiona Tasker and Susan Golombok (1997), use psychological tests that measure the significance of key variables in order to disprove the idea that the children of lesbian mothers will suffer psychosocial problems. Such studies use 'the tools and logic of

<sup>3</sup> The same technique is adopted by Christian opponents of lesbian and gay parenting in the US (Cameron & Cameron, 1996) and European countries such as Spain (Fontana, Martinez & Romeu, 2005).

science to bash myths about gay people' (Gamson, 2000, p.350), but, in some cases – as we have seen – they may not do much to challenge either conventional views of knowledge or heteronormative discourses on child development.

Methodologies matter, then, because they are not only 'concerned with the 'getting of knowledge', but are also 'key to understanding and unpacking the overlap between knowledge/power' (Stanley, 1997, p.198). Particular methodologies specify how to go about research, but also what counts as knowledge and, importantly, whose knowledge counts. Approaches that draw upon narrative-based data are beginning to ask about the ways in which ideas about sexual identities, notions of parenting and family are arrived at, rather than treating aspects of gay parenting as obvious or 'real' variables that can be easily isolated and tested. And this means that we must pay attention to the contextual basis of meaning, the range of multiple accounts or voices about a given topic, the discursive techniques that speakers draw upon to legitimate their positions, and the ways in which accounts of gay parenting attempt to establish or justify particular ways of seeing the world (Hicks, 2005b).

It is for these reasons that I am pleased to see the emergence of interpretive, narrative and discourse-based approaches within the field of gay and lesbian parenting (Carrington, 1999; Donovan & Wilson, 2005; Mallon, 2004; Plummer, 2003; Sullivan, 2004; Weeks *et al.*, 2001) and within this journal issue. Clarke's article uses discourse analysis, which is also reflected in other important work by her (Clarke, 1999, 2001, 2002; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005), and Karin Zetterqvist Nelson also concerns herself with the function of narrative forms in producing ideas about lesbian and gay families. This is a perspective that I have also used (Hicks, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2006, forthcoming). It is my view that research that considers how

concepts like kinship, family, gender, sexuality and so on are achieved and put to use through discourse will help us, not only to challenge relationship or sexuality hierarchies, but also to ask how we can expand our ideas about these concepts in new ways.

I think that concerns about achieving 'representative samples' of gay or lesbian parents/families, such as that used by Perlesz and colleagues are, therefore, problematic. Firstly, they rely upon a positivist account of knowledge, secondly, they suffer from the inevitable problems of trying to achieve any representative sample of lesbians or gay men (Stanley, 1995), and, thirdly, they may encourage categorical claims about categories like 'the lesbian family' which deserve discussion and dispute, rather than settlement. I think that this problem is recognised by Perlesz and colleagues because they make only a 'tentative' suggestion that 'children raised in *de novo*<sup>4</sup> lesbian families are likely to be more comfortable in disclosing about their parents' lesbianism,' and have to temper this with acknowledgement that the 'social context inhabited by the families' affects whether or how they choose to disclose about their sexuality. That is, making foundational claims about gay or lesbian families without taking account of context will always run into problems.

Indeed, I would go further than this to say that feminist, queer and discourse theorists argue that statements about lesbian or gay parenting are not 'fact' or 'data'-derived, but rather motivated by theoretical, personal and political stakes. The very idea of the gay or lesbian subject has been problematised within these theories so that queer theory, for example, tends to involve questions about how homo/heterosexual distinctions are achieved and maintained and how queer subjects are brought into being through discourse. This is a position that I welcome and hope that others will begin to use in gay parenting research. Iantaffi, for example, notes the potential of queer theory for this

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<sup>4</sup> By *de novo* they mean families in which the lesbian couple was established prior to having children.

work, and I think that we still have many more questions to ask about the ways in which ideas about gay parenting are established in and through legal, social, cultural and research-based narratives. Feminist calls for accountable research knowledge (Stanley, 1997) are also important, here, because I hope that future research on gay parenting embraces the need for reflexivity. As Kath Weston has noted, reliance upon 'social science as a source of 'facts'', will not help us to ask about theoretical positions adopted or about 'data's uses, derivation, or production' (Weston, 1998, p.12).

### New stories?

Dorothy Smith has analysed the ways in which the 'Standard North American Family' – the traditional conception of the heterosexual, married couple with children – functions through discourse to insert 'an implicit evaluation into accounts of ways of living together in households' (Smith, 1999, p.171). It maintains the primacy of heteronormative and traditionally gendered relations over and above others. That is, all other family 'types' are maintained as deviant forms. In the UK, for example, newspaper reports on lesbian and gay parenting regularly do such work. Christian Gysin and Sarah Chalmers' 1998 piece, 'A Mockery of Motherhood,' represented a lesbian couple, who had 'DIY babies' through donor insemination and subsequently split up, as 'selfish', 'mistaken', and their children as 'victims'. The couples' 'experiment' – for these are the terms in which the story was reported – was seen as a failure, and the authors delighted in being able to report that one of the women said, 'I would like to marry one day and have a traditional family' (Gysin & Chalmers, 1998, p.1). Caroline Baron's 2004 piece, 'Scandal of the Gay Dads: how could couple be allowed to adopt three little children?', similarly suggested a 'mockery of the law,' and that the gay couple were exploiting, rather than protecting, children (Baron, 2004, p.1). Under a second headline, 'The children call both men Daddy',

readers were invited to text or telephone vote on whether 'gay couples be allowed to adopt' (Baron, 2004, p.2).

Foucault talked about the emergence of a 'reverse discourse' wherein 'homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often on the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was...disqualified' (Foucault, 1990, p.101). And we can see that an explosion of narratives by and about lesbian and gay parents have emerged, partly in order directly to challenge the hierarchical notion of the 'family' or relationships asserted through 'Standard Family' accounts. As I have noted elsewhere, lesbian and gay parents' accounts, in my view, are neither *inherently* radical nor conservative, rather they are complex, contradictory and – as Foucault argued – they do sometimes draw upon and make use of categories by which they have otherwise been disqualified – 'family', 'normality', 'legitimacy' (Hicks, 2005b). Accounts of lesbian and gay parenting challenge heteronormative discourses by asserting different ways of living, drawing upon the language of 'invention' and 'experimentation' (a word that appears wholly pejorative in Gysin & Chalmers' 1998 article). But they also claim legitimacy by talking about the 'ordinariness' of mundane family life, using such legitimacy claims to highlight and challenge everyday homophobia (Hicks, 2005b).

Ken Plummer's work on sexual stories has drawn our attention to the emergence of a whole range of contemporary narratives about intimate issues or citizenship (Plummer, 1995, 2001, 2003). He makes the important point that such stories should not be seen as copies of 'reality', but rather should be studied as topics in their own right: What form do they take? What are they trying to achieve? This concern with the form and structure of narrative, with the motivations and effects of claims-making, is something that I think deserves greater attention within research on lesbian and gay parenting, much of which tends to treat personal accounts as if



they provide straightforward access to the 'reality' of everyday lives. Instead we should consider how new stories contribute to the process of identity discovery and formation, and how they draw upon the development of new practices and discourses about kinship, family or relationships.

This attention to the format of new parenting stories emerges strongly in the contributions to this journal issue. For example, Zetterqvist Nelson's piece, and Perlesz and colleagues' discussion, are both concerned with everyday life, disclosure, time and other narrative issues in lesbian or gay families. This signals that we are now beginning to ask a fuller range of questions about lesbian and gay family forms and issues. Nevertheless, as Zetterqvist Nelson notes, these accounts are not just counter or resistant to heteronormativity, because – as I have also suggested – they may draw upon dominant ideas about kinship (Hicks, 2005b). We should also remember that kinship itself is changing vastly. That is, there is no one, dominant account of kinship and the family against which *all* lesbian and gay accounts are positioned (Hicks, 2005c). Accounts are more complex than that, and I am glad that this complexity is now entering into research.

The *possibility* of gay or lesbian parenting seems to emerge in these contributions as a new narrative form, compared with past impossibility (Weeks *et al.*, 2001). Zetterqvist Nelson, for example, analyses the ways in which possibility appears, or rather is used, in accounts by her respondents, and it would seem to me that possibility, and the assertion of lesbian and gay parenting 'success stories', are important factors in contributing to the emergence of new identities and new ideas about relationships. However, I am also concerned that, in necessarily challenging heteronormative relationship values, we do not substitute new hierarchies for old. This is a tendency that I have noted in some commentaries on lesbian, gay and other queer parenting (Hicks, 2005c), and I think it needs to be challenged.

For example, David Strah's work on gay fathers has argued that:

...gay men having children is a sign that they are growing up...If coming out was the first step and forming a movement the second, then perhaps asserting our fundamental right to be parents is the third step in our evolution as a community. It's a step out of the ghetto-like colonies many of us understandably walked into when we came out as gay men (Strah with Margolis, 2003, p.7).

Here, then, is an assertion that gay parents are more 'grown up' than other gay people, that they have removed themselves from the gay 'ghetto'. But I read this suggestion of greater 'development' as a moral claim, as a claim to be a better person. This idea – that gay people with children are superior to others – is just as objectionable as anti-gay parenting arguments, in my view. From another perspective, some versions of queer theory see all lesbian and gay parenting as assimilationist, conservative or 'non-queer'. David Bell and Jon Binnie, for example, describe what they term a 'retreat into family-space' as containing 'an inevitable trace of assimilationism' (Bell & Binnie, 2000, pp.5 and 137). In both cases, what, in my view, amount to simplistic or categorical statements about 'gay parents' (Hicks, 2005b) are used to construct new hierarchies about who is the more evolved, who is the most queer.

Worryingly, I find a similar problem with Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli's article, because she argues that 'polyfamilies' are more silenced than lesbian/gay ones (as though they are mutually exclusive), and even that polyamorists are 'responsible non-monogamists.' I can only read this phrase as a respectability claim – there are *responsible* and, therefore, *irresponsible* non-monogamists – and I am concerned as to why work which is supposed to be questioning relationship hierarchies needs to set up new ideas about who is the most oppressed but also who is respectable. Arlene Istar Lev's article hints at a similar problem when she justifies gay surrogacy on

the basis that Michael, George's dad, says surrogacy avoids having a child with sadness in its life story, that is, avoidance of the 'adoption wound'. Here, again, it seems a shame to justify one route to parenthood by suggesting it is 'better' than another and, concomitantly, better for a child. In my view, we need to avoid the justification of new relationships by the denigration of others, for this is the way that 'Standard Family' heteronormativity works (Riggs, 2004b).

Some of the articles talk about the development of new kinship forms. Perlesz and colleagues, for example, talk about the creation of 'more fluid family relationships,' and Gross discusses the ways in which gay and lesbian families challenge cultural ideas about parental sex and number in France. However, surely seeing 'biparental' lesbian and gay families as conforming to 'a relatively traditional family image: a couple and children' is an oversimplification. Many lesbian and gay couples with children are seen as threatening to the family, just as single, or multi-parent gay families are, and – once again – I am concerned that these ideas should not feed into categorical statements about which family structures are seen as the most 'queer' within the gay and lesbian parenting literature.

Instead, we need to ask questions about how far *any* gay family is 'challenging', focusing perhaps on the ways in which conformity and rebellion claims may be used by the same parents for different reasons in different contexts. And here, we should also be suspicious about the 'newness' and even 'radical' nature of polyamory claims. It may be that new relationship forms are emerging through polyamorous relationships and even that a 'polyamorous identity' is being constructed, but the idea of nonmonogamy or multi-parental relationships is hardly new. Is any lesbian or gay family form really *inherently* radical?

The emergence of 'new stories' on lesbian and gay parenting has been necessary for many reasons, not least because, as Mooney-Somers puts it, 'we require so much

explanation.' This is an important point, in my view, because we need to ask how family discourses work, how we assert or achieve the idea of 'family' and to whom this is, and is not, attributed (Hicks, 2005b, 2005c). The process of narrativisation of lesbian and gay parenting involves a search for a language to describe relationships that, in many ways, are not describable without recourse to problematic distinctions (for example, the idea of the 'biological' parent versus the 'social' parent) or the invention of new ways of speaking (Swainson & Tasker, 2005). Nevertheless, there is still much work to do on the emergence of such stories and I hope that future research will continue to ask questions about narrative form, not just content: How do descriptions construct versions of events? What do these accounts try to achieve? And what work goes into this? What part do moral judgements, subject positioning, or power relations play? And how is meaning arrived at?

#### **More questions than answers?**

Finally, some questions that I think need more work, and to which I do not really have any answers. Firstly, as I have noted, the search for a language with which to describe new possibilities leads to problems, including reliance upon inappropriate familial distinctions. For example, Perlesz and colleagues' use of the phrase children 'conceived within a lesbian relationship', or Lev's reliance upon the language of biogenetic links to justify surrogacy, reflects problems that we all face in trying to account for various forms of lesbian and gay parenting without maintaining old distinctions about 'true'/'biological' versus 'false'/'non-biological' relations. However, these real/unreal parent distinctions still apply, and we need to challenge them.

Secondly, Perlesz and colleagues' search for lesbian parents' 'authenticity' also worries me. They talk about restrictions on lesbian parents being 'fully authentic' in public settings, and, whilst I understand that lesbian parents may have to hide aspects of

their lives in order to protect themselves and their children, a search for 'authenticity' is perhaps misguided. Ideas such as 'sexuality', 'gender', 'parenting', 'lesbian' and so on are all achieved or performed through everyday practices. They are always context-dependent and, crucially, rely upon how they are 'read' or 'seen' by others. In addition, these ideas are not fixed – there is not one 'lesbian' way of being – and so gay and lesbian parents must achieve those identity categories through the assertion and negotiation of meaning. Becoming 'gay', becoming a 'lesbian parent' is both a process and is about the ascription of meaning. As Plummer argued, 'nobody becomes ['gay'] 'all at once'...' (Plummer, 1975, p.27).

Returning to my earlier discussion of gender role models, for example, 'gender' is not a fixed role but rather something attributed, all of which is further constrained by dominant and limiting accounts of 'gender' itself. Therefore, my view is that our work should be to challenge discourses of gender, sexuality and parenting, since I think that the 'authentic' lesbian or gay parent will only establish others as inauthentic or lacking in some way. Authenticity claims are problematic because they actually privilege one version of the category in question – 'the lesbian mother' – over others, so we need to ask whose version of 'authenticity' is being proposed and what others it excludes (Sawhney, 1995). In addition, there is no 'authentic self' held in check by social forces, rather the idea of the subject is produced through the operations of power within discourse. Our question should be not what social constraints prevent us from being 'authentic', but, instead, what version of 'the lesbian parent' is produced in different settings (Hicks, 2000).

This brings me on to questions of context. Perlesz and colleagues note that social context impacts upon how 'out' lesbian families were, but it strikes me how much questions of opportunity and respectability – clearly linked to ideas about social class – enter into discourse here. For

example, Perlesz and colleagues demonstrate that disclosure strategies relate to the opportunities afforded by particular social contexts, Lev identifies the high economic cost of gay surrogacy, and I have already commented on the respectability claim of 'responsible nonmonogamy' used in poly-parenting debates. These questions – about the opportunities that come with middle-class status, about the classed privilege that adheres to ideas about 'responsibility' – need further work and debate, in my view, and represent an area within lesbian and gay parenting studies that has received little attention to date (Boggis, 2000), including – it has to be said – within my own work. The same point can be made about questions of race and ethnicity – why are these missing from most studies? (for more on this see Lorde, 1988; Riggs, 2006; Silvera, 1995).

Finally, we need to be wary of setting up lesbian and gay, or even bisexual, transgender, or poly-, families as 'cutting edge' (Gabb, 2004; Hicks, 2005b). Although Lev says gay families 'continue to develop cutting-edge and innovative options', and Iantaffi argues that polyamorous parenting is 'challenging' or 'transgressive', I am concerned that we may be setting up lesbian, gay or queer families as inherently radical. My view is that such families are not *inherently* anything, and I think we need to pay more attention to the contradictions and complexities within lesbian, gay, polyamorous and queer families rather than suggesting all are challenging of the gender or sexual order. Certainly these families will help us to ask some novel questions, but we need to ask how and why a 'cutting edge' family status is achieved within various discursive contexts. We also need to ask how and why lesbian, gay, poly and queer families sometimes draw upon and use traditional ideas about gender, sexuality, biogenetics, class, respectability, knowledge, kinship and so on. These issues affect us all and it is only through analysis of how they work and are put to use that we may begin to reformulate our ideas.

### **My body, this paper, this fire**

I hope that this paper contributes to an emerging field of work on lesbian and gay parenting that continues to develop questions and debates. As someone who has produced a body of work on gay and lesbian foster care and adoption, my view is that many of the themes I have raised here are in their 'infancy', so to speak, and I encourage others to dispute them further. This Special Issue of *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* makes an important contribution to furthering research in the field of gay and lesbian parenting, and has raised much for us to think about. But it has been, in many ways, a struggle to get to this point – to engage in research, to encourage gay and lesbian parents, to achieve publications, to establish support groups, to feed research into state welfare practices, and so on – reflected perhaps in Weston's use of the phrase 'long slow burn' (Weston, 1998). Sexuality has gradually emerged within social science and within parenting studies as an issue worthy of attention, yet it remains a topic that provokes.

For example, when Lev says that 'nearly 60 per cent of all adoption agencies in the US [have placed] children in LGBT homes', I would offer a less optimistic reading of David Brodzinsky and colleagues' work. Their survey actually states that, while the 'majority of all responding agencies (60 per cent) said they accepted applications from self-identified lesbians and gays in 1999–2000', 59 per cent of agencies did not respond at all (in the vast majority due to religious affiliation), and *only* 39 per cent had actually placed a child with gay or lesbian adopters (Brodzinsky *et al.*, 2003, pp.3–4). The field of foster care and adoption remains one in which homophobic practices regularly surface, and in which limited ideas about lesbians and gay men work to constrain who may be approved as a carer (Hicks, 2000, 2005a, 2005c, 2006).

My suggestion for countering the 'fire' of heteronormative ideas about kinship is that we remember knowledge is made by us

through our practices, and that we can use it to question homophobic discourse. I have argued, for example, that ideas about gender and sexuality are achieved rather than factual, and I would remind us that we all use our research data and their interpretation to assert particular perspectives on lesbian and gay parenting. That is, none of us presents an impartial or factual account, despite what the Christian right says. We are making stories about new relationship forms, and this includes the making of ideas about ourselves, about identities and about what 'sexuality' means (Hicks, 2005e). Crucially, all of us are constrained by dominant discourses on sexuality, and so it is possible that we may sometimes rely upon traditional accounts of parenting that set up new hierarchies, authenticities and exclusions. As Foucault has noted, discourses work to discount some ideas through the procedures of exclusion – prohibition, the idea of the 'reasonable', and 'true/false' distinctions (Foucault, 1981). It is these problematics – discussed within my contribution – that we need to analyse. A genealogy of ideas, if you like, about lesbian and gay parenting.

This means that 'we always have something to do' (Foucault, 2000c, p.256), that there is still much to challenge if we are to create new possibilities in the field of family/kinship as a whole and within lesbian and gay parenting studies. Eribon's suggestion that the desire for recognition as 'family' by lesbian and gay parents is not about adopting heterosexual models, but rather about seeking the kinds of familial bonds that many of us have left behind (Eribon, 2004), can be rewritten to suggest not that we reformulate 'family' but that we seek new forms. There are empty spaces, there are always new possibilities.

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