

# Out and About: Negotiating the Layers of Being Out in the Process of Disclosure of Lesbian Parenthood

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## Abstract

Discussion of coming out within lesbian and gay academic literature has focussed primarily on the individual process and consequences of disclosing a lesbian/gay identity. Drawing upon data from a qualitative research study of 20 lesbian parent families in the UK, who had planned and had their first child together, this paper considers dimensions of coming out that arise for lesbian parents having children in an openly lesbian relationship. To date little attention has been paid to these dimensions. Women identified how having children revealed new layers of being out as parenthood brought them into contact with a whole new range of people, settings and networks. Negotiating recognition of their parental and familial status involves making decisions about when, where and how to come out in these new settings and women also faced renegotiations of an acceptance of their lesbian identity and parenthood with family members. This paper utilises stigma theory to examine some of the additional complexities related to the decisions and negotiations involved in being out as lesbian parent families.

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**Keywords:** *Lesbian Parents, Stigma, Coming Out, Family Lives, Motherhood, Qualitative Research*

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## Introduction

1.1 The meaning of 'coming out' has shifted over time. In its current usage it assumes 'a dual sense of claiming a lesbian or gay identity for oneself and communicating that identity to others' (Weston, 1997: 44). It has been identified as 'perhaps the defining shift in 'homosexual consciousness in the 1970s' (Weeks et al., 2001:188). Since that time there have been many anthologies of coming out stories (see Penelope and Wolfe, 1989, as an example of this genre). Discussion of coming out within academic literature has focussed primarily on the individual and complex processes and consequences of disclosing a lesbian/gay identity. The largest body of research in this field to date stems from psychological perspectives (D'Augelli and Patterson, 1995) and includes considerations about the impact of coming out on self-identity and self-worth (Elizur and Ziv, 2001) and the effects of family relations on decisions and outcomes of coming out (Connolly, 2005). A smaller body of sociological research has reported on findings about coming out processes, usually explored in relation to the narratives of the individual who has disclosed his/her sexual orientation (in the UK this includes Plummer, 1995, Weeks et al., 2001, Valentine et al., 2003, and Yip, 2004). There is also a wealth of literature that documents the diversity of lesbian parent families, both in the auto/biographical literature (see Wells, 2000, as one example) and in research. For many, the term 'lesbian mother' still presents an oxymoron, insofar as the characterisation of lesbians as non-procreative beings contradicts the dominant image of the (procreative) heterosexual, biological mother (Lewin, 1993, Thompson, 2002). Psychological research has primarily focused on the 'normality' of lesbian parent families, arguing that there are no significantly different outcomes for children raised by lesbian parents as those raised by heterosexual parents (for a detailed review see Patterson and Redding, 1996). This has been a valuable body of work in contesting discriminatory attitudes towards lesbian parents, particularly legal discrimination (Harne and ROW, 1997, Tasker and Golombok, 1997). Some have argued the need to move on from such comparative approaches, to examine the social obstacles that lesbian parents face (Kitzenger and Coyle, 1995). More recently, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) call for the subtle differences that many psychological studies have revealed to be re-examined. They suggest, for example, that given evidence of social stigma faced by lesbian parents, studies may have underplayed the psychological strength exhibited by children of lesbian parents in overcoming the impact of such stigma. Sociological research has focussed more closely on lesbian parents' everyday family lives and the development of new

family narratives (in the UK this includes Dunne, 2000, Weeks et al., 2001, Gabb, 2005). Dunne (2000:13) suggests that, through motherhood, her respondents made their lives more 'intelligible' to others. In support of this claim she presents evidence of some respondents' previously difficult relationships with their parents, which had been transformed once those parents became grandparents, and respondents' reports of high levels of support from heterosexual friends in their plans and experience of parenthood. However, despite this positive analysis, there is evidence that some respondents had ongoing difficulties in their relationships with their parents and that some also had to work at friendships to receive support and affirmation of their familial and parental status (2000:20-1). In this paper I draw upon data from a study which focused specifically on lesbians who had their first and subsequent children in the context of a current and openly lesbian relationship. Few studies have focussed exclusively on this specific lesbian parent family form. It enables a consideration of aspects of coming out as lesbian parents<sup>[1]</sup> for lesbians who were already out in different spaces prior to becoming mothers. This offers another dimension to the literature that examines the claiming and declaration of a lesbian identity as an individual, and adds to existing knowledge about the lives of lesbian parents and the social context within which they parent. I explore lesbian parents' accounts of the work involved in gaining recognition with a particular focus on the processes of 'coming out' as a lesbian parent family, the consequences of which may involve negotiating social stigma and censure.

## **Stigma**

**2.1** Goffman's stigma theory provides the background to the discussions that follow where I examine respondents' strategies in coming out and negotiating potential or real responses to stigma. Stigma theory identifies stigma as deriving from 'a conceptualisation by society as a whole of what constitutes differentness or deviance, and the application by society of rules and sanctions against the individual so labelled' (Jacoby, 1994:269). According to Goffman (1968), one might expect that when an individual experiences a negative reaction from other people, attributed to an 'undesired difference' (1968:17), that person may take on board these same beliefs about her/his condition and come to perceive her/himself to have a shameful attribute.

**2.2** Goffman makes a distinction between the 'discreditable' individual whose stigma is not immediately perceivable or is not known about and the 'discredited' person whose stigma is visible or known about (Chapter 2: 1968). While noting that a stigmatised individual may have experiences with both types of situations, this distinction is made to consider the ways in which stigmatised individuals manage social interactions.

**2.3** The 'discreditable' individual has to manage 'information about his failing' (Goffman, 1968:57). This can include decisions of who to tell, how, when and where, to display or not to display, to lie or not to lie and so on. 'Passing' is one aspect of this 'information control' whereby the individual attempts to conceal the stigmatised attribute (1968:58). The impact of passing however can include the anxiety of being 'found out' and alienation from friends. The 'discredited' individual has to manage tension, which may be generated during social contacts with 'normals' (1968:15). Goffman suggests that the tension is characterised by the awkwardness created by the stigma, that the discredited person is obliged to manage to prevent the stigma from looming large. The strategies employed here are similar to those employed in passing. Goffman (1968:126) suggests that 'what will conceal a stigma from unknowing persons may also ease matters for those in the know'. He refers to this process as 'covering' and argues that 'many of those who rarely try to pass routinely try to cover'.

**2.4** In an everyday sense, the use of terms such as the above 'discredited' and 'discreditable' would imply something disreputable about a person and it is important to note that Goffman does not use these terms in this way. Rather he employs these terms in a specialised sense, to denote individuals who, in the eyes of others, are different in ways (either immediately visible or not) that may mean they are vulnerable to negative societal reactions. His interest lies not in casting aspersions on those who may be stigmatised, but to understand the ways in which society stigmatises certain individuals and how the individuals concerned then manage that stigma.

**2.5** Goffman's work on stigma has been extended and modified in relation to a range of conditions. These include epilepsy (Scambler and Hopkins, 1986, Jacoby, 1994), infertility (Riessman, 2000) and HIV and AIDs (Green and Sobo, 2000). Goffman (1968:23) notes that the 'very anticipation of stigmatising encounters can lead the stigmatised individual to arrange life so as to avoid them'. Scambler and Hopkins develop this point and outline a framework that incorporates two types of stigma, 'felt' and 'enacted' stigma (1986:33). For these categories to exist, individuals must accept that there is a social stigma attached to their 'condition' (epilepsy in Scambler and Hopkins' study) but not necessarily that this stigma is justified. They identified the category of enacted stigma as instances of discrimination based on the perceived unacceptability of the information being disclosed. Felt stigma relates to the fear of 'enacted stigma'. Scambler and Hopkins' main argument was that felt stigma - the fear or anticipation of a negative reaction -

was the major obstacle that their respondents had to deal with. They suggest that it is potentially far more disruptive since the anticipation of actual discriminatory responses may lead to individuals adopting policies of secrecy and concealment.

**2.6** In the discussion below I draw upon the theoretical framework of stigma theory and consider the extent to which this provides a useful framework to develop an understanding of respondents' accounts of negotiating both the anticipation and/or the reality of stigmatising encounters in everyday social interactions as they navigate the new terrain of coming out as lesbian parents.

### **Women parenting together: the study**

**3.1** As noted, this paper draws upon data from a study of lesbians who had children in the context of an openly lesbian relationship. This is a qualitative research study of 20 lesbian parent families in the UK, who planned and had their first child together. Fieldwork for this study was carried out in the UK in 2000 – 2001 and involved a set of joint and separate interviews with each couple - a total of sixty interviews. Themes covered included mapping out social networks as part of the joint interview and individual perspectives on decision making processes and coming out as part of the separate interviews. Respondents were recruited to the study mainly through use of my own and others' personal networks, although this involved minimal use of 'snowballing' or drawing upon any well-defined lesbian networks. The majority of respondents identified as being middle class and were educated to degree level or above. One or both women in each couple were in relatively well paid employment. Thirty-seven women were White (including 5 Jewish women and two Irish women), three were African Caribbean. Twelve couples lived in urban areas and eight in rural areas across England. Respondents were aged between 28 and 47 (most were in their 30s) and had been in their current relationship for an average of 10 years. At the time of interview the ages of respondents' children were between 3 months and 6 years, with a median age of 2. This meant I was able, for example, to access accounts of the first stages of negotiating new terrains, coming out as lesbian parents. However it misses dimensions worthy of further exploration, including the ways in which children develop social networks beyond spheres that their mothers may move in, such as friendship networks formed at school.

**3.2** Respondents, in common with most other parents and perhaps mothers in particular, noted that their social networks extended to include a new range of (mainly heterosexual) networks upon having children. These included parents of other children, professionals in health networks (midwives, health visitors and doctors) and professionals in childcare (childminders, staff in nurseries and schools). In this paper I draw upon the interview data about women's interactions with some of these child-related networks (primarily the early networks encountered at parent/toddler groups) and with family, friends and colleagues as examples to examine the new 'layers of outness' that respondents identified and the strategies employed in negotiating coming out as lesbian parents in negotiating perceived and real social stigma and censure.

### **Respondents' layers of outness**

**4.1** Donovan et al., (1999) have usefully identified the notion of 'layers of outness' which lesbians, gay men and bisexuals continually negotiate and re-negotiate:

Respondents may be out to themselves and to a sexual partner but to no-one else; to some but not all of their family of origin; to some or all of their work colleagues – so they may be out to an individual colleague but not out at work; they may be out and involved in lesbian, gay and/or bisexual activities but not out to their mother, doctor or neighbours. The decision(s) to be out in whatever layer of one's life is dependent on what the perceived consequences are for the respondent's life and livelihood and those of their loved ones (1999:695/6).

**4.2** This relates to the experiences of coming out reported by respondents in my study. However, while Weeks et al., (2001) recognise coming out as an ongoing process in all spheres of life, it is also not always as consistent or deliberate as the above quote may suggest. As I shall discuss, sometimes respondents made 'on the spot' decisions about what to tell someone about themselves, and others told of being outed by their children or people 'guessing' that they were lesbian.

**4.3** The length of time since respondents had first come out varied. Usually women came out to close friends and/or family as a first step and most had taken these initial steps many years prior to having children. For two couples, four women, their first steps in coming out to family and friends were made at the same time as announcing their pregnancy. This was motivated by a recognition that having children would make it difficult to continue to conceal their relationship if they want to negotiate recognition of their parental and familial status.

**4.4** Thirty-nine out of the forty women I interviewed were out to immediate members within their families of

origin (parents and siblings). Most had received some level of acceptance and support from family members but several experienced ongoing difficult relationships with family as a result of coming out. About one third of respondents who were in employment were not out at work or were only out to a selected few colleagues. At a general level, being out to other people within child-related networks varied. Some respondents were not out in any explicit way, but felt that people within these kinds of social networks 'must know' or that 'it must be obvious'. Other couples were 'mostly out'. About quarter of the couples described themselves as 'very out', meaning they could think of few, if any, areas of their life where their sexual identity was concealed.

**4.5** Respondents all identified coming out as an ongoing process and suggested that having children was a new step in that process, involving new decisions about coming out. These decisions about disclosure involve the additional complexities of coming out as lesbian parents and to date, relatively little attention has been paid to these additional dimensions of being out.

### **Coming out as lesbian parents**

**5.1** Having children is a point at which women's networks can change. For lesbian mothers an additional dimension can be that these networks are predominantly heterosexual (Dunne, 2000). Respondents identified ways in which their networks changed such that coming out became part of everyday family activities:

You can be on the bus or in Tesco's with Molly and you end up in conversation. I mean the other day, we were all on the bus, Molly was on Jenny's lap, I was sitting next to this woman and Molly wanted me and this woman said 'Are you her Mum?' And, you know, I just said 'well, we both are' (...) I think she was a bit taken aback but to just say 'Yes' and leave it at that would leave out Jenny (Paula).

I've taken Rosa to this playgroup, sometimes with Tessa, and then one session the playgroup leader came up to me and asked about Rosa's father. (...) I gave some explanation as to who he was but said I wasn't in a relationship with him. What I should have said as well though is 'Tessa who you've met, is Rosa's other parent' (Vicky).

**5.2** Respondents gave many examples of these kind of everyday encounters, which are indicative of what Weeks et al., (2001:80) call the 'heterosexual assumption'; these encounters carry an implicit taken for grantedness about family set-ups which most heterosexual mothers would not have any need to navigate. For example, in response to the question 'What does your partner do?', a heterosexual mother is unlikely to hesitate about revealing the gender of her partner or husband (if she has a partner/husband). Any deviation from the dominant heterosexual nuclear family model may require extra work in negotiating social interactions but this work is particularly evident in the very visible efforts involved for same sex couples parenting together. In one example a respondent recalled a health visitor asking 'Right so who's the Mum then?' Her reply 'We both are' outs them as a lesbian couple. However, there is then another question that hangs in the air – that of 'who is the real mum?' (i.e. who is the birth mother?). Coming out as a lesbian parent can encompass different dimensions for birth and social mothers (I discuss these terms and the complexities of these different dimensions in more detail elsewhere, Almack, 2002). The implications of *not* coming out differ for birth and social mothers. In the above encounters, Vicky and Paula, both birth mothers, are aware that if they are not out about their lesbian relationship, they 'pass' as single parents. It is interesting however that they take their own status as mothers for granted, in contrast to social mothers. Social mothers have limited access to institutional recognition and everyday material practices can thus take on an additional symbolic significance in obtaining recognition (such as casual enquiries made on the bus/in the playgroup to either of the couple). Fieldwork for this study was carried out prior to the implementation of recent shifts such as the Civil Partnerships Act, 2004 and legal avenues of recognition were limited. Five social mothers in my sample had sought and gained legal recognition through a Joint Residence Order (which gives parental responsibility, under the Children Act, 1989). Four others had made enquires with solicitors but had received misleading or incorrect advice about their position or else were advised to avoid court proceedings if at all possible (Almack, 2006). Such advice may be a reflection of the recent history of stigma and censure that lesbian parents faced in custody disputes with their children's fathers (Hame and ROW, 1997, Thompson, 2002) but also adds a further dimension to the work (and risks) of coming out as lesbian parents - at different points in time and place.

**5.3** In contrast to the accounts of birth mothers such as Vicky and Paula above, for social mothers the implications of not coming out are more likely to include examples of feeling anxious about being 'found out' (as opposed to anxiety about 'passing' as a single parent). Typical expressions of this include:

I almost feel as though I'm lying ... I feel a bit of a fraud saying I'm a mother when, you know, ... if I don't come out at the same time so they know yes I am his mum but he has two Mums

(Joanne).

I say I'm his Mum, I mean I am his Mum but I feel like I'm pulling a con trick ... (Pat).

**5.4** 'Fraud' and 'con-trick' are strong expressions of some sense that their claims to being mothers are made on potentially spurious grounds. As I discuss later, Joanne notes that another dimension of this dilemma is a question of whether she can be bothered to 'manage' the interaction by giving a full explanation. As Goffman identified, the management of information about stigma can require revealing personal facts about oneself that are 'more personal than the relationship really warrants' (Goffman, 1968: 95). In part this relates to the issue of timing in coming out to people one may never have met before. Many respondents highlight this as an issue at playgroups where different parents may come and go. It can thus involve deciding 'on the spot' how much they reveal about themselves at a first meeting, which also involves the issue of whether this is a person they will meet again or not. On the other hand, there is an awareness alluded to in the above quotes that if one does not come out, it can leave you feeling like a 'fraud'.

### **Anticipating negative responses - felt stigma**

**6.1** Another example of coming out at different times and in different places arises in work settings as I discuss below, using the example of a respondent who initially felt unable to come out at work. Over time she has felt more confident about coming out but she is unsure about how to begin, having 'concealed' her relationship and daughter (Laura) for several years:

I was totally out in my last job and on reflection now I wish I'd said something when I started work there like 'I share a house with a friend who has a little girl'. At least then I wouldn't have to deny Laura's existence but I still wouldn't be seen as her mother of course. I suppose I just felt I had to be really careful, you don't know who you can trust and some people can make life very difficult for you (Cheryl).

**6.2** Cheryl asserts that when she started her current job it was in a very different environment to her previous employment where she had been out, such that she felt unable to come out to new colleagues. Scambler and Hopkins (1986) argue that felt stigma is potentially more disruptive to people's lives than enacted stigma. Here it severely disrupts Cheryl's ability to talk openly to work colleagues about a centrally important aspect of her life. This situation has changed over the time she has been in her current job and while Cheryl spoke of now feeling confident that she could come out, she has become 'stuck' by her initial concealment. She does not know how she could now begin to come out, which would include telling people about her daughter having concealed that information from colleagues for several years. This kind of dilemma has been noted elsewhere as a consequence of mediating a perceived stigmatised identity (Goffman 1968:84). At the same time Cheryl is out in many other settings, including with people she meets through her work outside her office based environment, indicating the fluidity and complexity of the layers of outness across time and place.

**6.3** In a range of different settings as diverse as the local playgroup and place of work, women were thus frequently faced with decisions about what to reveal, to whom and how, about their family set-up. Many respondents expressed some trepidation about whether other people would accept their difference from the norm.

We do sometimes get a bit paranoid about parents at nursery who don't speak to us, are they just like that anyway or is it about us being a couple? (Hilary)

**6.4** Hilary's experience and those outlined above are illustrative of a general concern that centred on the anticipatory possibility and consequences of negative responses. Scambler and Hopkins (1986) suggest that one effect of felt stigma is that it leads to strategies of concealment rather than openness. However, this does not reflect the whole picture. In many circumstances, respondents overcame the anxieties associated with felt stigma and did not conceal their lesbian parent identity, particularly in settings that directly impinge on their children's lives. Respondents frequently presented their need to be out as motivated by the overriding concern to be positive about, and to gain positive recognition of, their families for their children:

With children you're dredged in domesticity. If you're not at the park you're in someone else's house or they're at your house, you know the boys' friends and their parents coming round, they see photos (gestures to photos of the boys and their two Mums) ... it's pretty obvious anyway isn't it?! Unless you're gonna hide stuff all the time - and what would that say to the boys - you can't not be out in most situations. (Rebecca).

... having kids involves coming out all the time. Just coming out anywhere and everywhere,

it's important for the children ... (Ali).

**6.5** Respondents articulated a sense that concealing who they are can be potentially damaging to their children. Rather, they emphasise the need to give out messages (to others and to their children) that they have nothing to be ashamed of, in contrast to Goffman's assertion that the stigmatised person may take on board these same beliefs about her/his condition and come to perceive her/himself to have a shameful attribute. This work was also presented as important in anticipation of the ongoing development of new networks. Rebecca, for example, went on to explain how she was 'starting out as she intended to go on' so, for example, not putting photographs away when people came to visit. Ali also further explained her strategy of 'coming out all the time' to be in part about anticipating and avoiding future scenarios of disapproval that might impact on her sons' lives.<sup>[2]</sup>

**6.6** A reverse dimension of having to engage in the work of making their parental status visible is being 'outed' by one's children. For example:

Every time we walk out the door together and there's Bronwen shouting Mummy Mummy to us both. So the neighbours can't think we're lodgers or something. You'd have to be on a different planet not to figure out we're lesbian parents really ... (Jan).

**6.7** Being 'lodgers' is a common example respondents gave of the 'heterosexual assumption' – assumptions made by others in making (heterosexual) sense of their relationship - whereby they are perceived as just friends living together. Others reported being mistaken as sisters. Jan highlights how there are times when 'coming out' or 'passing' is involuntary rather than a conscious strategy – including this example where they are outed by their daughter. As noted, children of respondents were young, aged between 3 months and 6 years - respondents demonstrated an awareness that the processes and encounters involved over time would also require constant re-visiting as children developed their own agency and own networks<sup>[3]</sup>.

**6.8** All of the women in my study had an awareness of the potential judgements that might be made by real and imaginary others about their parental and familial status, once visible. Gaining recognition necessitates being visible as lesbian parents but in turn this may involve dealing with the possibilities of social stigma. Coming out can be hard and many respondents indicated that there were times when they did not come out. While strategies of concealment relate to 'felt stigma', they are not necessarily applied uniformly across all the different 'layers' involved in respondents' social interactions with others. A major influence is the extent to which their actions in different areas of their lives also directly impinge upon their children's lives. Scambler and Hopkins (1986) argue that one effect of felt stigma is that it reduces the possibility of enacted stigma. However, in adopting a general policy to overcome the impact of 'felt' stigma, respondents in my study did encounter enacted stigma in some spheres of their lives.

### **Experiences of negative responses - enacted stigma**

**7.1** My focus in this section is on the most commonly identified experiences of enacted stigma, which came from people within respondents' families of origin. A few respondents also recalled instances of enacted stigma that came from professionals such as midwives. The latter encounters of imputed stigmatisation were resisted, presented as encounters of homophobic behaviour that were unacceptable, coming from professionals who, as one respondent put it, 'should know better'.

**7.2** As noted, thirty-nine out of the forty women had, at some point, come out to their families of origin, with varying degrees of acceptance. Announcing plans to have a child proved to be a significant point in time where these degrees of acceptance are revisited or, for two couples, the point at which they explicitly came out to their families for the first time. A significant number of respondents reported that their parents' reactions at this juncture were negative:

As soon as I started talking about children, my mother said 'If you ever have children I'll have them taken away and make sure you never see them' and things like that so it was awful ... (Lauren).

My mother said I had shamed her. She was absolutely disgusted to find out that we were having a child, she thought it was completely immoral (Jayne).

**7.3** Others reported parents being 'utterly horrified' 'aghast', 'totally appalled'. For some parents, there was also the issue of 'shame'. In Goffman's terms this is 'courtesy stigma' (Goffman, 1968:43) whereby a degree of stigma is shared by association. Respondents would probably be more unlikely to tolerate these kind of prejudicial encounter in wider networks. They are also unlikely to maintain friendships with people who do not approve of their sexuality or support their decision to have children - encapsulated in the saying that

one respondent noted 'you can choose your friends not your family'. It is also possible that relatives felt able to freely express these kinds of views while others did not.

**7.4** Several said that their anticipatory anxiety of negative responses about coming out to family members (felt stigma) was borne out in the reality of enacted stigma:

My Mum's response was exactly what I'd imagined, no wonder I kept my mouth shut for so many years, far less aggravation! (Jayne).

**7.5** Jayne was one of the respondents who came out at the same time as announcing her partner's pregnancy – to her mother but also to friends and colleagues. Jayne and her partner, Suzie, realised that as lesbian parents they could not adopt the same strategies of 'passing' and 'covering' that they had used as lesbian couple. It was having a child that enabled Jayne to overcome her apprehension (felt stigma) to come out, even though this opened up encounters of enacted stigma. Jayne's mother used to visit Jayne and Suzie's home but now refuses to and she does not acknowledge Jayne's son as her grandchild. Jayne however has felt very positive about finally coming out:

It's sad for her really, she's missing out on knowing Josh but also I'm glad he is not facing her homophobia. Overall I feel like this whole person rather than a half person sneaking around, making sure I don't say 'she' when mentioning Suzie and all that kind of stuff. It's a relief not to have to do any of that anymore, I didn't realise quite how debilitating it all was.

**7.6** Jayne talked about her mother feeling 'shamed' and 'disgusted' by Jayne's sexual identity. However, contrary to Goffman's assertion that the stigmatised accepts the stigma, Jayne refuses to accept any sense of shame herself<sup>[4]</sup> and is concerned that her son should not have to deal with her mother's feelings of shame either. She stresses that, despite her mother's reactions, coming out has had many positive benefits including acceptance from colleagues and friends. The ability to be open about her life rather than having to be constantly vigilant about what she says about her personal life has, in many ways, been liberating. This illustrates how the risks involved in revealing rather than concealing a potentially stigmatised identity can have positive outcomes (such as increased levels of self acceptance and support from others) in contrast to the negative outcomes (rejection, isolation, loss of status) that stigma theory tends to emphasise (Green and Sobo, 2000).

**7.7** In the final section below, I examine the kinds of everyday strategies that respondents may employ in avoiding and resisting being stigmatised. These variously include purposefully avoiding potential confrontations, refusing to accept the stigmatised identity, and challenging prejudicial attitudes through speaking out or through actions. To some degree, these strategies overlap with Goffman's strategies 'passing' and 'covering'. However while Goffman (1968) emphasises the defensive management of stigma, I examine the possibilities of resisting a stigmatised identity, possibilities which are not fully recognised by Goffman.

## **Resistance and resilience**

**8.1** Strategies of avoidance may include making decisions to not come out in certain situations. This has similarities to Goffman's strategy of 'passing'; the concealment of information about a stigmatising attribute. However these strategies are not as static as Goffman suggests. Avoidance can be a fluid rather than a fixed response, used some of the time and in some circumstances. The majority of respondents' accounts of avoidance strategies suggest that the strategy is one of weighing up the costs and benefits of coming out rather than any belief that they should 'conceal' their family set-up:

I'd never lie about how I live but erm ... I might be economical with what I'd say to people. And lots of time it's a spur of the moment thing. Just the other day I was talking to a new colleague at work and something came up about Matty and about how was my pregnancy. There's a split second decision, how do I answer or don't I? Sometimes it's a question of can you be bothered really, can you face this huge explanation? (Joanne).

**8.2** Earlier I discussed how Joanne (a social mother) had anxieties about feeling fraudulent if she talked about being Matty's Mum without explaining the rest of her story (being a lesbian parent whose partner had given birth to their son, Matty). Joanne here gives an example of talking about children with a new colleague who had made the assumption that Joanne is Matty's biological mother. Joanne presents potential avoidance of this nature as a tactical strategy used some of the time, in certain situations and generally on the spur of the moment. Behind this, there lies a common theme, the anticipation of managing social interactions where one's non-conformity might be revealed. Respondents often balanced this against the extra work that could be involved in revealing their family set-up. In scenarios of casual encounters or chatting with a new colleague, revealing a great deal of information about oneself may be perceived as

necessary in order to both explain and manage the disclosure, but this can also feel inappropriate.

**8.3** A main strategy of resistance is to re-interpret discriminatory interactions (Riessman, 2000). Some examples have already been discussed above in the ways in which women responded to instances of enacted stigma whereby they re-interpret prejudicial interactions to resist self-blame and to re-locate blame and shame on other individuals or society. Respondents provided many examples of such re-interpretations:

What might have a negative impact on the children isn't us but societal attitudes to us! If you saw some of my caseload, children in dire situations, you know it makes you think, we're raising cared-for, bright articulate children, children that accept difference (Judith).

As I see it we're pioneers, the trouble is that most people don't know anyone who has done this before but people are becoming more aware and more open to it I think. You just have to hope that public thinking and legislation catches up with us as Josh gets older we won't seem like such pioneers and there won't be such prejudices (Suzie).

**8.4** In such accounts, women resist and reject the negative stereotypes of lesbian parents, locating the blame firmly on societal attitudes and a lack of tolerance of difference. The 'problem' is identified to lay in a society that has yet to catch up with their 'pioneering ways'. Furthermore what others may perceive as a flaw, women turn round to being a positive attribute, here contained within the suggestion that lesbian parents may in fact not only be providing a good family environment for their children but potentially a better environment *per se* compared to some. Difference is presented as a positive attribute, one which children can benefit from as they grow up with the experience of living with parents who are modelling pride and acceptance of different family forms, and rejecting different forms of discrimination and prejudice<sup>[5]</sup>. This form of resistant thinking highlights rather than minimises their non-conformity, but presents it as a positive rather than a negative attribute, rejecting any notion of what Goffman (1968) might term 'undesired difference'.

**8.5** At other times women may also present themselves as very ordinary, and in many ways no different from any other families:

We're boring really, very ordinary, you know, nothing outrageous, we lead very ordinary lives (Irene).

Our families are no worse and no better than any other kind of family. People need to realise we haven't got two heads. Not all lesbians have pink hair and nose rings, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that but it's not the only type of lesbian (Sara).

**8.6** To some extent downplaying 'difference' resonates with what Goffman terms 'covering' whereby the stigmatised individual engage in the work of making it easier for themselves and others 'to withdraw covert attention from the stigma' (1968:125). However, Goffman presents 'covering' as a primarily defensive management strategy, where the individual adopts strategies to prevent the stigma looming from large. Here, respondents' disavowal of lesbian stereotypes and downplaying of difference is linked to a rejection of negative stereotypes and therefore fits more closely with the notion of resistance than with defensive management.

**8.7** Within their everyday lives, respondents also gave many examples of the ways in which they challenged stigma by positively affirming their difference in ordinary settings:

... things like I'm the Chair of Adam's school PTA and we'll go to the PTA social as a couple and dance together ... it's not about huge big actions but what it says is look, here we are, we're a couple and a family involved in our school community (Sara).

What I have found is being a lesbian parent is so inherently bloody political, every day of your life is political you know, just turning up at school together or birthday parties we've had here. You're putting yourself on the line because you're there as a couple, totally visible (Jan).

**8.8** Sara and Jan identify some of the ways in which everyday kind of activities can take on new meanings, being visible as lesbian parents in interactions with others in ways that can challenge implicit social judgements and stigma. In this sense everyday actions are turned into political actions. This is another form of extra work that lesbian parents do in order to negotiate recognition and challenge stigma. For a heterosexual couple to attend PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) social functions or to hold a birthday party for their child or pick up their child together from school does not require 'putting yourself on the line' or publicly presenting themselves as a family, in the same (political) sense. Families resembling the norms can see themselves reflected in many cultural representations but this can require an extra effort for lesbian



parents. It again highlights the silences within the taken for granted family forms that same sex couples cannot take for granted.

## **Conclusion**

**9.1** The lesbian parents in this study all recognise that coming out is an ongoing process but also identify that parenthood brings with it new layers of outness to negotiate. Having children expanded the range of networks and people in their lives, and for the few whose children were in nursery and school these networks expanded further through their children's own developing networks. Respondents were aware their networks would continue to change as their children grow older and anticipated helping their children with strategies to negotiate potential stigma - an area worthy of future research. They also noted that many of the child-centred networks they encounter are primarily heterosexual spaces.

**9.2** Respondents suggest that having children makes it important to be out and also less easy to 'pass', particularly in settings that directly impinge on their children's lives. A primary motivation for coming/being out was to give a positive message to their children and to others about their family, with an emphasis on feeling a sense of pride rather than apology. This paper draws upon a small study of lesbian parenthood and does not claim to be a representative sample of lesbian parent families. It is not currently possible to know what this might be. Couples in my sample however, did have access to a range of resources that may enable lesbian parents to protect themselves from stigmatising encounters. For example, most respondents have reasonable access to economical resources and to decent housing, and are able to live in areas where they feel relatively safe and at ease living openly as lesbians.

**9.3** Overall stigmatising encounters were anticipated rather than actual and it is interesting that the harshest encounters stem from interactions with families of origin, most of whom appeared to have accepted their daughters' coming out as lesbians albeit with varying degrees of affirmation. Possibly this coming out could be tolerated because respondents' parents could avoid dealing directly with their daughters' lesbian identity or their relationship. This becomes harder when their daughter or daughter's partner has a child, especially if they want to acknowledge and develop the biological or social kin relationships to their grandchildren. Relatively little is known about the consequences of coming out in terms of how families of origin conceal or negotiate this within their own networks. Even less is known about the strategies adopted by relatives in acknowledging the lesbian parent family within these same networks in order to claim and validate kin relationships to the lesbian parents' children and this is another area worthy of further research.

**9.4** Recent shifts such as the Adoption and Children Act, 2002 and the Civil Partnerships Act, 2004 may also impact upon some of the issues that have been explored and thus warrant further study. However despite positive developments, the potential of continuing stigmatisation still exists where society remains anxious about LGB ways of life. Parenting potentially heightens such anxieties. Respondents are thus vigilant to the potential anticipated or real stigmatisation that can occur within social interactions with others and variously employ a number of strategies to avoid, deflect, resist and/or reject the potential stigma perceived to be attached to lesbian parents and families. Importantly women present these more often as positive rather than defensive strategies and highlight how coming out has consequences beyond the individual.

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## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> My attachment of a general 'label' of 'lesbian parent' does not fit every respondent's self-definition of their sexual orientation (or of their parental or familial status). Because most women did identify as lesbian, this is the generic term I chose to use when referring to my sample as a whole, rather than adopt a term such as 'non-heterosexual' or similar (Weeks et al., 2001). However, like Weeks et al., (2001: viii) I also recognise that terminology (and identity) around sexual orientation and parenthood remains a contested area in both emotive and political terms (Almack, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See note below – it may be that there are situations where children don't want their parents to be out, as they move through various stages of childhood and adolescence.

<sup>3</sup> As one example, in a pilot interview with a couple who had older children, they reported how their children

had at different times made up their own minds about when and how and if to come out. One of their children told friends at his new school that his two mums were in fact sisters, his mum and auntie, and he wanted them to go along with the story when his friends visited his house. Another had confided about his mothers' relationship to a 'best friend' who then told others, indicative of further ways in which 'coming out' can not always be a deliberate/conscious choice.

<sup>4</sup> Jayne, a Black woman, also presented her mother's response as a cultural response: 'It's more of a cultural thing with my Mum; that was the whole basis for her reaction, saying it's a Western disease', she probably thinks I've been led astray by Suzie. This raises additional dimensions to being out as a Black lesbian and to being in a relationship with a white woman.

<sup>5</sup> Goffman writes about such benefits of stigma as 'secondary gains' or a 'blessing in disguise' (1968:21-22).

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