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# Lesbian Parenting in Sweden and Ireland

**The interaction between gender, sexuality and parenting**

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An increasing number of lesbians are choosing to have children in the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle. A substantial body of research exists which concludes that having lesbian and gay parents is in no way detrimental to children's development. This research has played a vital role in combating homophobia in the legal system and society at large. Researchers are now beginning to turn their attention to more interesting aspects of queer parenting. Recent research has shown that gender can be marked differently in positive ways in lesbian families. For example, lesbian couples in a British context provide new models for democratic ways of sharing childcare and domestic work. The potentially more fluid nature of gender in lesbian and gay relationships may enable a more flexible approach to gendered practices, which can provide exciting possibilities for transformative social relations.

In this paper, I consider the potentially more supportive nature of lesbian families for a wider range of gender practices, based on interviews with lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland. The lesbian parents interviewed articulated visions of parenting which include a broader gender repertoire. Children of lesbian (and gay) parents may be exposed to role models who perform all household and manual tasks, rather than simply those often viewed as 'gender appropriate'. Thus, children are encouraged to choose tasks based on individual preference, rather than as a result of social pressure to conform to gender norms. It is argued that lesbian families may be ideally situated to engage in non-sexist parenting practices and challenge heteronormativity. Participants considered their parenting practices to challenge dominant societal assumptions about the relationship between biology and gender. Their own sense of accomplishment in a variety of areas including gender atypical fields enables them to teach their children skills without attaching a gendered significance to them. In this way, their parenting practices challenged heteronormative ideologies. Certain activities were gendered in participants' discourses, but their practices emphasised the flexible nature of gender. Lesbian families were created in different forms in the two countries, with Swedish lesbians far more likely to choose to have an involved

father than Irish participants. However, there were many similarities in discursive articulations concerning the ways that gender is taught in these families.

### **Lesbian and gay parenting in Sweden and Ireland**

The different logics concerning gender and social policy in Sweden and Ireland illustrate their normative assumptions about gender. Hobson (2002) has characterised these two approaches in terms of citizenship frames as 'gender-distinctive' (Ireland) and 'universalist' (Sweden). Thus, Ireland like many post-colonial societies has a history and culture reflecting the dominant nationalist emphasis on traditional family forms and a strong male breadwinner role (Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989; Meaney 1991). In contrast, Sweden has a longer tradition of women's participation in the paid labour force and clearly encourages men to participate more in caring for children (Bergqvist et al. 1999). By examining the current conditions and perspectives of lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland, the impact of different cultural norms and possibilities will illustrate ways in which lesbian parenting is itself a product of the societal and institutional context in which it takes place.

Contrary to popular expectations, lesbian and gay parenting is relatively unregulated in Ireland. No law exists which prohibits lesbians from accessing insemination or fertility treatment from the medical establishment, including sperm banks. Similarly, fostering is a possibility for lesbians and gay men (Griffin & Mulholland 1997). The nature of debates about assisted reproduction in Ireland has been articulated as a medicalised discourse, rather than a moral one. The regulation of assisted reproduction has therefore been left to the discretion of individual practitioners and authorities. Although adoption is restricted to heterosexual couples and single women, lesbians and gay men are eligible for assessment as foster carers. In fact, advertisements to recruit foster carers have been placed by local health boards in queer publications in Ireland. The impetus for this was the chronic shortage of available foster carers in Ireland. Nonetheless, social authorities have therefore acknowledged that lesbians and gay men can be equally effective as carers as heterosexuals. One clinic, which has recently closed its services, openly advertised donor insemination for lesbians and single women. It appears that liberal market policy in Ireland (and Britain) may facilitate access to private services, unlike in a social democratic society such as Sweden (O'Connor, Orloff & Shaver 1999).

In Sweden, parenting is more clearly restricted by law to a heterosexual matrix. Despite the existence of registered partnerships, fostering, adoption and assisted reproduction are available only to heterosexuals. There is one known case of a gay couple fostering a gay teenager, but it remains exceptional (Griffin & Mulholland, 1997). Paradoxically, single women are allowed to adopt but not

inseminate at a clinic. A study of attitudes towards homosexuals revealed that only 29 per cent of the population are supportive of lesbian and gay parenting (Landén & Innala 2002). Nonetheless, recent political debates and media attention indicates that lesbian and gay parenting is very much on the current political agenda in Sweden. It seems clear that legislative change will be introduced at some point in the future. A government commission (SOU 2001:10) investigating the well-being of children with lesbian and gay parents in Sweden concluded that children of lesbian and gay parents develop psychologically and socially in similar ways to children who grow up in other family forms. The report recommended that the laws on parenting be changed to provide equal opportunities and status for lesbian and gay parents. Changes to the law on adoption are currently being reviewed. Disappointingly however, the legislative changes currently being debated do not address the area of assisted reproduction, despite the recommendations of the SOU report.

There is a clear need for further research on lesbian and gay parents in different social and institutional contexts. How do different institutional contexts, such as are found in Sweden and Ireland, affect lesbian women's reproductive decision-making and experiences of parenting? Broader societal scripts concerning parenthood, such as are found in Sweden and Ireland, with strongly contrasting parenthood norms, are likely to affect lesbian family forms. The majority of published research originates from the US and the UK. Cross-cultural research is productive in indicating how lesbian parenting is illustrative of ways in which gender, sexuality and parenting are shaped by the wider social context, but also transformed given the lack of role models for queer families and therefore potentially more flexible approach to parenting and gender.

### **Lesbian families**

The literature on lesbian families falls into two main categories: psychological outcome studies of children in lesbian families – most of which concern children who were the product of a previous heterosexual relationship – and psychological and socio-cultural accounts of the experiences of lesbian couples and their families. The first category is by far the larger. Much of this research has been carried out in a British or North American context (e.g. Patterson 1995; Tasker & Golombok 1997).

Until very recently, most research in this area has focused on the children of gay and lesbian parents and not the parents themselves. This research has been used to refute three widely held beliefs about homosexuality: that homosexuality is incompatible with effective parenting; that having lesbian and gay parents influences children to become gay themselves; and that homosexual parents abuse their children (Patterson 1992). No study has produced evidence to lend

credence to these myths. Studies comparing children raised by lesbian and heterosexual mothers repeatedly find little or no distinction in the child's gender identity, sex role socialisation, or personal sexual orientation (see for example Golombok et al. 1983; Tasker & Golombok 1997). In Patterson's (1992) comprehensive review of outcome studies, she reported that children of lesbians rated comparably to children of heterosexual mothers on all measures of psychological adjustment, including separation-individuation, emotional stability, moral judgment, object relations, gender identity, and sex-role behaviour. Again these studies focused almost exclusively on children born into a heterosexual arrangement. Many of these studies are based on psychological tests that are highly problematic, not least for their cultural and androcentric biases.

A more recent study of children of the 'lesbian baby boom' was conducted by Patterson (1994). She investigated the self-concept, behavioural adjustment, and sex role behaviour of 37 children born or adopted into families headed by a single lesbian or a lesbian couple. On all variables studied the children were found to develop along the same lines as the children of heterosexuals. Patterson's findings also correspond to the findings from studies of children of previously married lesbians that she reviewed in 1992. One new finding was that children in lesbian-headed families felt more stressed than did the children in the other families. According to Patterson, this may be because they experience more stress living in a homophobic society than children in more traditional families do. However it may also be the case that the apparently higher stress levels may be related to another finding – that the children of lesbian families in this study were unusually articulate about their emotions. Laird (1993) points out that these findings – that children in lesbian and gay families cope at least as well as the children of heterosexuals – are particularly striking given that these children are raised in families that are widely acknowledged to be marginalised and stigmatised. It is notable that these conditions do not seem to have an adverse effect on children's development. The recent Swedish SOU commission report (2001:10) also concluded that a lesbian or gay identity does not affect a parent's ability to provide children with a nurturing and caring upbringing.

It is worth noting that some studies refer specifically to the strengths observed in lesbian families. For example, children of lesbian and gay parents often see themselves as more tolerant and open-minded than their peers from heterosexual families (Morningstar 1999 p. 216).

### **The interaction between sexuality, gender and parenting**

While lesbian families undoubtedly experience discrimination and harassment, there is a growing level of awareness and acceptance. Although full equality for

lesbian and gay parents has yet to be attained, a substantial body of research exists, which indicates that children are not adversely affected by having lesbian and gay parents. The political significance of this body of research cannot be underestimated. It has proved vital in the broader struggles for equality for lesbian and gay parents and continues to be used in custody cases and demands for access to assisted reproduction services and the social recognition of non-biological parents. However, it would seem that research on children of gay and lesbian parents has reached a significant turning point. Having addressed heterosexist and homophobic concerns represented in psychological theory, judicial opinion, and popular prejudice, researchers are now in a position to explore a broader range of issues raised by the emergence of new kinds of lesbian and gay families. Researchers are beginning to ask different kinds of questions about lesbian and gay parenting. There has recently been a shift to research exploring identity, embodiment, gender and parenting practices in lesbian and gay families. New issues are being addressed, such as how does lesbian parenting challenge traditional models of parenting and gender?

Recent research in Britain on lesbian motherhood has suggested that lesbian couples demonstrate more egalitarian living arrangements than heterosexual couples. Dunne (1998) argues that while motherhood provides lesbians and heterosexuals common ground on which to interact, the sexuality and gender dynamics of the relationship between lesbian parents parenting as two women together “necessitates the transformation of the boundaries, meaning and content of parenthood and facilitates the construction of more self-reflexive, egalitarian approaches to financing and caring for children”.<sup>1</sup> In this way, she argues, lesbian motherhood represents a fundamental challenge to existing gender structures. Even when parenting was not a shared project, lesbian mothers experienced enormous support from partners and domestic work was shared equally. Unlike in many, particularly middle-class heterosexual relationships, where women anticipate financial dependence on their male partner while the child is young, the mothers she studied waited until they had achieved work goals which promised long-term financial security before having children.

In her research, Dunne found that biological kin featured strongly in respondents’ accounts of their social interaction. Rather than lesbian motherhood taking place within a vacuum, lesbian families are usually extended families that are supported by elaborate networks of friends and kin. Raising children often opened the door to a new dialogue between lesbians and previously estranged heterosexual family – especially parents. Although motherhood was often associated with improved familial relations and formed a common bond with heterosexuals, the structure of lesbian family life differed significantly in terms of equality of responsibility for domestic work and a willingness to work

part-time in order to share childcare by both partners. Another factor that demonstrated a move away from heteronormative practices, was a marked preference for gay men as biological fathers. Men were chosen for the positive qualities they could bring. Gay men were seen to embody a more appealing form of masculinity than many heterosexual men.

The respondents in Dunne's study emphasised that the co-parent was equally involved in the day to day life of the child and held equal responsibility for the child's well-being. Tasker and Golombok (1998), studied the role of co-parents in children's lives by comparing the role of co-mothers in fifteen British lesbian mother families with the role of resident father in two different groups of heterosexual families (forty-three families where the study-child was conceived through donor insemination, and forty-one families where the child had been naturally conceived). Their results indicated that co-mothers played a more active role in daily caretaking than did most fathers.

Oerton (1998) argues that "virtually no woman escapes the processes and practices which constitute women (even lesbians) as having a *gendered* relationship to family and household work".<sup>2</sup> Taking the role of the housewife as a starting point, she argues that although analyses often assume that lesbians cannot be housewives, due to the absence of a male head of household, this approach is limited in that it ignores or disguises the caring and household work done by lesbians for family and kin. She suggests that lesbians, like heterosexual women, do work for their families and in their homes, and must be analysed as gendered subjects, rather than non-heterosexuals. The assumption that lesbians can be analytic subjects only in terms of their sexuality occludes the ways in which sexuality and gender are interrelated. To ignore the ways in which gender is significant to lesbian experience is to render a construction of lesbians as other, by reinforcing the notion that the category of woman is inherently heterosexual. This theorising of the interaction between sexuality and gender is an important development. The debate has shifted from the effect of gender on sexualities, to the influence of sexuality on constructions of gender. When applied to the area of lesbian and gay parenting, this theoretical shift transforms the kinds of research questions formulated about queer families.

### **The challenge of lesbian parenting**

It is clear that there are many cultural forces which operate to maintain specific ideologies of motherhood. It seems equally clear that these ideologies are bound up with the structure of heterosexist society. The vast amount of research in the area is an indication of the pivotal role that mothering is considered to play in Western societies. Feminist social scientists have developed the research on motherhood, so that it no longer rests on the assumption that a mother exists

only in relation to her child and is of interest solely in terms of how she affects her child. From widespread criticism and rejection of motherhood by feminists in the 1970s, there was a move towards attempts to find a way of being a mother that was not oppressive to women, to considerations of the subjectivity of the mother. The initial rejection of motherhood was an important part of developing a space in which women could articulate their disappointment and frustration with motherhood (Bassin et al. 1994).

The overwhelming image of acceptable motherhood in Western Society is that of a heterosexual married woman. Although this has changed significantly in recent decades, with a greater diversity of images of motherhood, such alternative images are still rare. This is despite that fact that an increasing number of families do not exist in a nuclear structure (Phoenix et al. 1994; Golombok 1999). There are still many stigmas attached to teenage mothers and lone parents. Black and migrant women are often actively discouraged from having children (Phoenix et al. 1994; Slater 1995). While an earlier generation of lesbians often chose not to have children, either because it was not socially supported or as a reaction to both compulsory motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality, in recent years more and more lesbians are choosing parenthood (Slater 1995).

Lesbian mothers cannot be analysed simply as non-heterosexual mothers. Their gender is influenced by their sexuality and must be treated as an analytic concept. The ways in which lesbian couples negotiate parenthood may be quite distinct from many heterosexual couples. Gender appears to be marked differently among lesbian parents and as such, it offers exciting potential for new ways of thinking about gender and creating transformative social relations. This is illustrated in the new arrangements for sharing childcare and domestic work among lesbian parents, for example. Unlike heterosexual parents, lesbians who choose motherhood are raising children in the context of relationships where dichotomous gendered parenting roles are absent. As the current wave of lesbian parents building families are a pioneering generation, they may be less constrained by normative ideologies. The construction of new family forms reflects the interaction between wider societal scripts and the creative potential of pioneering families. In the following section, I will explore some of the ways in which lesbian parenting illuminates questions of gender, sexuality and cultural codes regarding parenting practices and ideologies, based on my research in Sweden and Ireland.

### **The research sample:**

This research is based on 43 interviews with 69 lesbian parents, either individually or in couples. The Swedish interviews were carried out in 1999-2000. Forty Swedish women took part in the study, of which 25 were biological mothers.

Interviews were usually carried out with couples. Fieldwork in Ireland took place during 2000-2001. A total of 29 Irish women participated in the study, of which 19 were biological mothers. These figures are described in the table below:

Interview participation & relationship status	Couples both partners present	Couple one partner present	Lone parent	Post break-up biological mother	Post break-up non-biological parent	Total
Swedish	16 (n=32)	1	2	4	1	40
Irish	10 (n=20)	2	5	1	1	29
Total	26 (n=52)	3	7	5	2	69

Altogether 69 women participated in interviews. One couple in the Swedish sample was beginning insemination at the time of the interview, as were three of the Irish couples. The number of children being parented by participants was 52. All participants were planning or had already embarked on parenthood within the context of an openly lesbian lifestyle.

### **Gender and parenting practices among lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland**

There were numerous differences among lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland with regard to reproductive decision-making and experiences of parenting. While cross-cultural research highlights the diversity of parenting discourses and practices, this aspect of the study will be addressed in less detail here, rather the focus will be on the methodological and epistemological shift in the framing of research questions about lesbian parenting. Furthermore, there were many instances in which discourses among lesbian parents in the two countries were similar.

In exploring participants' views on gender and parenting, it became apparent that there are ways in which gender may be taught differently in lesbian families in a positive way. Proponents of non-sexist parenting practices have often stressed the importance of exposing children to a range of activities, without attaching a gendered significance to them. For example, boys may be encouraged to play with dolls, or girls may be encouraged to play with trucks and so on. It is often considered important to teach children a variety of skills usually associated with the other gender. So for example, boys may be taught to sew and girls may learn how to construct materials. In this way, it is argued, children are able to develop

all their abilities, rather than being forced to concentrate their energies in areas traditionally considered gender appropriate (Peets 2000).

Interestingly, the lesbian parents interviewed often articulated their conviction that their children would be exposed to gender role models who themselves engaged in a wider range of activities. Participants often viewed dominant social norms as encouraging certain gender segregation in household and play activities. Having a partner of the same gender necessitated the ability to perform a variety of household tasks, rather than only those stereotyped as traditionally 'female'. Thus, while feminist research on equality within households has overwhelmingly indicated that men in heterosexual couples generally do not contribute equally to household work or childcare responsibilities (e.g. Brannen & Moss 1991; Ferree & Smith 1996), recent research indicates that lesbian couples do share housework and childcare equally (Dunne 1998). Furthermore, they are likely to find new models for achieving this, such as both partners choosing to work part-time in order to participate equally in childcare. Similarly, participants expressed their domestic work arrangements in terms of equality and preference. Lacking the pressure associated with traditional gender roles in relationships, all women were skilled in all areas of housework *and* maintenance. If there were any areas in which they chose to concentrate their energies, it was based on personal preference and the other partner would compensate by focusing on another area. So for example, one partner might take care of the laundry, while the other did the ironing. Being freed from some of the confines of gender roles in relationships enabled them to share housework in a democratic way that was personally satisfying.

This was also perceived to be of benefit to their children, who saw women doing traditional tasks like cooking, but also fixing cars for example. In addition, the men they chose to be in their children's lives were also selected on the basis of the kind of masculinity they embodied. Gay men were often seen as more progressive role models than many heterosexual men:

But in a way I don't like, I don't want my kids to have a stereotyped male role, I don't like that, or a stereotypical female role model, as it's seen in this society. I really love and like it that our kids are in a gay community as well and I think it's necessary for all kids to see all diversity and for example I really love to see my kids, that they see both their fathers or other gay men who are not these stereotype, not this macho, because they see that both their fathers like to knit and sew and all those things and they can build houses, and take care of the cars and making good food, taking care of their own clothes and clean and all these things, they see that when two men are living together they have to do all these things and they learn that it doesn't depend on if you're a man or a woman, if you want to do something you can do it because and it's okay. And it's the same way they see other men because, for example in the Pride Week and they see men dressed like women and transgender people and they

see women running motorbikes and all this, I love it. I would like, that's the kind of role models I want to see because I want my kids to get, to be as free as they can be in this society and see that it doesn't depend if I'm a boy or a girl, whatever I want to do, I can do it and I see all these examples around me that it's possible. And that's the most important thing I think for our kids, not necessarily that they have fathers. Because we live in a gay community, they have all these things. (Gunilla, Swedish participant)

The gay community was seen as a positive resource for the production of non-oppressive genders. Gender in lesbian families was described as being transmitted in ways characterised by an emphasis on diversity and flexibility. Although society in general was associated with monolithic gender norms and roles, the lesbian and gay community provided a counterculture, which emphasised the multiplicity of genders and provided a basis for a less rigid approach to the acquisition of gender. This is not to say that all participants articulated the belief that gender is entirely socially constructed, but that it was seen as largely socially determined and participants considered it important to enable their children to have a broader gender repertoire than the socially dominant norm. The result of this was that children would develop all sides of themselves, rather than repress some of their interests or aspects of their emotional life. The emphasis was on a more holistic approach to development and awareness of diversity, rather than the acquisition of traditional gender roles.

The potential outcomes of these practices and ideologies may be very similar to those of non-sexist parenting in heterosexual families. It must also be acknowledged that it is perfectly possible for lesbian families to engage in normative discourses and practices. It is not my intention to argue for an essentialist view of lesbian parenting, in which lesbian parents are constructed as the new normative ideal to which others should aspire. Rather, I wish to critically examine the ways in which gender and sexuality dynamics are discursively (re)constituted in the pedagogical practices of gender in lesbian families. Rather than constructing gender as a rigid binary relation, the diversity of gendered practices and support for choosing activities on the basis of enjoyment and ability rather than social norms, was a distinct discourse among lesbian parents interviewed. The ways that lesbian genders were seen to incorporate a broader range of skills was significant in their articulation of themselves as parents. This was irrespective of whether participants viewed gender as entirely socially constructed or expressed a conscious commitment to non-sexist parenting. Their parenting practices resulted from their gendered locations as lesbians, for whom gender was experienced in the context of a lesbian lifestyle. The prevalent social assumption that sex and gender are mutually determined was therefore continually destabilised.

Lesbian parents in Ireland were far less likely to have an involved donor than in Sweden. Nonetheless, while Swedish participants emphasised the importance of male role models, they did not view fathers as the only possible male role model. This was because of different discourses around the importance of having contact with a known biological father. Both groups considered it important for children to spend time with women and men. Men who were involved in the children's lives, whether they were donors, friends, or other kin, were chosen on the basis of the qualities they possessed as individuals, rather than as examples of hegemonic masculinities. Indeed gay men were often viewed as better role models in their subordinate masculinities than many heterosexual men:

Yeah it's like, I don't know if it's typically for gay men but there are a lot of men who do things that aren't what you consider in today's society to be typically male and at the same time if you have a son and he sees this, my daddy does this as well and it's okay then you change an attitude in somebody and hopefully that, I would hope it makes the world a little better. (Lena, Swedish participant)

In families where donors did not play an active role, participants pointed out that children were taught traditionally male activities as well. One parent of two sons expressed this in the following way:

They're lucky in a way, I mean they are lucky in a way because em as well as those things, em we've always done...a lot of DIY and so they've always had tools around and learned how to use tools so you know it's not, not as though it's only been the more 'female' in quotation marks, activities that they've been offered, they've also been offered the more traditionally male things as well and they've seen me under a car you know. (Aileen, Irish participant)

This participant considered her sons lucky because they were exposed to a variety of activities and free to choose to concentrate their energies in areas that were personally appealing, rather than being socialised to follow gender traditional norms. The fact that her sons learned these activities from women rather than from a man, could be seen as a new form of pedagogy, where the dominant essentialist association between gender and certain activities is constantly undermined. Indeed, some lesbians expressed positive feelings about having sons, whom they hoped would share their enjoyment in certain traditionally male domains such as football. However, they acknowledged that daughters could be equally enthusiastic about this sport. In this way, lesbian parents were open to a multiplicity of gendered behaviours in their children, which were not necessarily dependent on biological sex. They also saw themselves as providing support and encouragement in different areas, not just traditionally female ones. Interviewees negotiated their practices in relation to a dominant

social order by gendering certain activities. The necessary connection between gender and certain activities was then destabilised through the pedagogical practices of parenting.

Participants appropriated dominant narratives of gender, but reinscribed them with their own meanings in the context of their families. While gendering certain activities, they subvert this gendered significance by emphasising their abilities in both traditionally male and female areas, as a result of being in relationships with other women. By acting as a role model for their children in both traditionally male and female activities, the children are provided with a greater degree of choice, encouraged to develop their skills in all areas, not just those stereotyped as gender appropriate.

The involvement of co-parents is another way in which lesbian families deconstruct the dominant narratives of kinship and gender. Children were usually raised in families with two female parents, one of whom was a biological parent. This raises many interesting questions about who and what is a mother, the role of biology in the construction of parent-child relationships and the theoretical distinctions between 'mothers', 'mothering' and 'parenting'. Does the term 'mother' assume new/different connotations/meanings in this family form? The disjuncture between gender, biology, sexuality, parenting and kinship intrinsic to lesbian families potentially illuminates broader assumptions about these interconnections. The ways in which lesbians negotiate parenting relative to wider society and how they locate themselves in relation to their perception of socially imposed norms, potentially offers new examples of parenting that challenges heteronormative practices and ideologies. Indeed, the very concept of lesbian parenting creates a chasm in the heteronormative assumption that parenting is necessarily a product of heterosexual relations.

In both contexts, participants considered wider society to promote a view of gender as a binary divide with clearly segregated activities. This is perhaps to be expected, given the nature of gender politics in Ireland, but it seems surprising that participants did not relate to Swedish society as particularly deconstructive of gender norms. This may be associated with age – most participants in the study were in their late thirties and early forties. However it could also be argued that the experience of being lesbian or gay requires a significant re-evaluation of gender identity, as so much of what constitutes appropriate gender behaviour is intricately bound up with heterosexuality. All participants expressed awareness that gender roles are reinforced by social norms and expectations.

### **Conclusion: A new agenda for research**

The main body of research on lesbian and gay parenting originates in response to homophobic assumptions about the impact of having lesbian and gay parents

on children's development. This almost exclusive focus on children neglected the ways in which lesbian families illuminate broader cultural discourses about parenting and gender, and situate themselves in relation to these. Gender can be marked in multiple and myriad ways and there is tremendous diversity concerning what constitutes a family.

The majority of research on lesbian and gay families has been carried out in the US and the UK. It is clearly important that original research be carried out in specific cultural contexts, as queer families' narratives will inevitably be informed by dominant cultural norms and ideologies. Research on queer families renders these implicit cultural assumptions visible and the means by which queer families may subvert these norms can provide new ways of thinking about gender and parenting practices.

As researchers, we must question dominant assumptions about queer families and begin to address the positive potential of lesbian and gay parenting. There is a large body of research that refutes the homophobic assumption that children thrive only in heterosexual families. The notion that queer families are a 'deviant Other', whose parenting must be constantly subjected to scrutiny on the basis of their sexuality, must be challenged by contemporary researchers. In the research described here on lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland, participants emphasised the flexibility of gender and undermined dominant ideologies about sex roles through the pedagogical practices of gender in their families. In this way, heteronormative ideologies and codes were continually challenged and critiqued. This is not to say that lesbian parents should become idealised – there are also ways in which lesbian (and gay) parenting can be normative. Nonetheless, much previous research on queer families has implicitly assumed that these families may be marked differently in a negative way and this is clearly a homophobic assumption. It is most likely the case that there are more similarities than differences between queer and heterosexual families. However, if queer parenting takes a distinctive form, this difference may be positive. Rather than assume that queer families are necessarily different, or that difference if it exists is negative, we can have self-confidence in our family practices. Parenting practices shaped by queer genders may produce new insights or challenges to heteronormativity. In conclusion, rather than being parents who must be monitored in case their sexuality has a negative impact on their children, the creative potential of queer parenting can produce new ways of challenging heteronormative practices that are relevant to all families.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Dunne, G. (1998) Abstract.

<sup>2</sup> See Oerton, S. (1998) p.79.

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