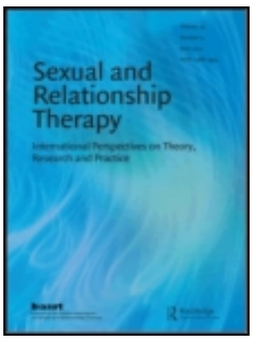

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Lesbian and gay parenting: babes in arms or babes in the woods?

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ABSTRACT *This paper will examine developments in parenting by lesbians and gay men. It will draw on available research evidence to address fundamental questions posed about the impact of parenting by this particular group of parents on the children whom they raise. The paper will also explore motivation and routes to parenthood and the specific arrangements lesbians and gay men have evolved to make parenting a viable option in their lives. Dilemmas and challenges faced by lesbian and gay parents will be explored, and the implications for practice are considered.*

KEYWORDS: *Parenting; lesbians & gay men; impact on children; evidence base; practice considerations; dilemmas.*

Introduction

Lesbian and gay parenting is no longer a concept but a reality which society as a whole is struggling to accept. According to Mallon (2004) ''For the last two decades a quiet revolution has been blooming in the gay male community, more and more gay men from all walks of life are becoming parents''. (p. xi). For lesbians, the trajectory in regard to parenting has an equally long developmental cycle, but one that historically has also not been properly recognised or embraced. The secrecy in which lesbians and gay men have had to conduct their lives as parents has been perturbed by high-profile cases challenging heterosexist beliefs and behaviours concerning the appropriateness or otherwise of lesbians and gay men as parents.

This paper will examine developments in parenting by lesbians and gay men. The title has been deliberately chosen to reflect the ongoing struggle to endorse lesbian mothering and gay fathering, and in view of this, the available research evidence will be invoked to answer the fundamental questions posed about the impact of their parenting on the children for whom they care. As two gay men, one of whom is

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currently a parent, we are very aware of the issues involved in writing such a paper, particularly for an audience who may continue to have doubts about the legitimacy of a homosexual lifestyle, let alone the question of such individuals raising children. Similarly, we are aware of the belief in the importance of a mother and father in a child's life within the context of a heterosexual union, and to a large extent we will be challenging, or, at least, expanding, the meaning of this particular frame of reference. In spite of the risks to ourselves, we feel strongly that the issues involved in lesbian and gay parenting need to be seriously addressed within the fields of counselling and psychotherapy, and that therapists themselves need to examine how developments in this area are impacting on their practice.

In writing this paper, our stance is that lesbians and gay men have much to offer children. However, we also wish to highlight particular dilemmas in relation to the decision by a number of lesbians and gay men to parent children. At the same time we shall be addressing some of the inherent difficulties for lesbians and gay parents, their children and extended families arising from their experience in the interface with the outside world. Theoretically, we embrace both systemic and psychoanalytic principles, and will also be drawing on lifecycle and developmental frameworks in considering the complexities faced by lesbians and gay men as parents.

Initially, we will explore the question of motivation and routes to parenthood, and the specific arrangements lesbians and gay men have evolved to make parenting a viable option in their lives. This will then be followed by an examination of the evidence base relating to lesbian and gay parenthood and the particular dilemmas and challenges faced by this group of parents. Towards the end of the paper we will begin to engage with practice issues in regard to this population and will consider what needs to be in place for individual practitioners and services to provide appropriate and responsive care for those lesbians and gay men who may present for treatment.

Motivation and routes to parenthood

Patterson (1994a,b) suggests that established lesbians and gay men are increasingly undertaking parenthood, either through donor insemination, surrogacy, or fostering and adoption, although the extent of this development is hard to determine as accurate data is not currently available. Nevertheless, two studies testify to the importance of children in lesbians and gay men's lives. Sobordone (1993) reports that the majority of the subjects in his research said that they would like to rear a child, and Bryant & Demian (1994) found that a third of their respondents (under the age of 35) were either planning or considering the idea of having a child.

The motivations and individual needs to parent a child are diverse, although Hargarden & Llewellin (1996) simplify the matter by suggesting that parenting is a core human issue, highlighting the fact that all lesbians and gay men will have thought about parenting, if only to discount it as possibility in their lives. In many respects, the motivational factors organising lesbians and gay men to become parents are no different from those cited by heterosexuals, that is, a desire to nurture children through active parenting and a wish to have children because, like heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men actually enjoy having children around and want them to have a

valued place in their lives (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989). However, because of the ways in which homophobia and heterosexism has historically shaped the lives of lesbians and gay men, their decision to parent must be seen in the context of the prevailing social, moral, religious and legal mores of the day. For instance, for gay men and lesbians living in the 1950s, whose sexual behaviour and identity was considered illegal and immoral, marriage was the only acceptable route to parenthood. This has historically meant that many lesbians and gay men entered marriage, either by arrangement with a partner or by uninformed consent, as the only legitimate way of becoming parents and fulfilling their parenting needs. Inevitably, as societal attitudes have altered, and homosexuality has been decriminalised and slowly de-pathologised, it has been possible for lesbians and gay men to enter parenting through other routes. These will now be considered.

Marriage

Acknowledging and reconciling homosexual feelings is a core developmental process that can span a number of years and seriously challenge individuals as they negotiate the stages of the 'coming out' process. Historically, a number of lesbians and gay men have married and parented children within the context of these marriages, perhaps as a way of denying or delaying their 'coming out'. In fact, married homosexuals make up the largest group of gay and lesbian parents today, although this is likely to change as other routes to parenthood are embraced. It is also worth noting that some adults who sexually identify with same-sex and opposite sex partners have, as bisexuals, become parents, either within the context of a marriage or within relationships that are able to provide understanding and support for such an identity and lifestyle.

Planned lesbian and gay families

Since the late 1970s there has been a steady increase in the number of children born to lesbian and gay parents (i.e. planned lesbian motherhood, planned gay fatherhood and lesbian and gay co-parenting family models). Co-parenting family arrangements usually involve the mutual agreement, often of three to four lesbian and gay adults, who wish to biologically conceive and parent a child within an agreed family environment. This co-parenting model has a variety of forms in terms of the number of co-parents involved in raising the child, where and with whom that child will reside, and for how long the arrangement prevails. For instance, in situations where a gay father donates sperm to a lesbian mother, it is important to consider whether there is agreement as to the nature and extent of the gay father's involvement in the child's development, and how that involvement might pan out over the life of the child. It is precisely because of the complexities involved in negotiating with the relevant parties that some prospective lesbian parents decide to approach a donor clinic since, by choosing an unknown donor, they will have more control in regard to raising the child. With this in mind, each co-parenting system will need to discuss and establish its own family map based on a range of needs. As with any family model,

these issues may need to be sensitively negotiated, and given the complexities involved, will require a certain degree of flexibility.

Surrogacy

Lesbians and gay men wishing to have a child may also turn to a surrogacy arrangement, usually involving the identification of a surrogate mother who agrees to conceive, carry and give birth to an infant who is then handed over to the identified parent(s). A surrogate mother can be a relative, friend or stranger, although it is usually someone who volunteers to be a surrogate for some financial gain. This arrangement has not been without its difficulties and dilemmas, as the surrogate mother may decide to change her mind once the child is born. Given the legal tightropes surrounding this route to parenthood (surrogacy is still not legally sanctioned in the UK), not to mention the costs, it is not the most popular route to parenthood used by lesbians and gay men.

Fostering and adoption

It has been suggested that the motives for adoption by lesbians and gay men may be less connected to childlessness and failure to conceive biologically than with a wish to start a family in the context of establishing relationships and increasing security in work and home life. There is also a growing awareness by lesbians and gay men of having something valuable to offer children (Hicks & McDermott, 1999). Recent changes to the Adoption Act, and the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act, will hopefully address the issue of excluding one half of a couple from being a legally adoptive parent by virtue of the couple not being married. It is worth noting that in one study, over 80% of gay fathers were in committed couple relationships at the point of becoming parents (Mallon, 2004). However, current changes to legislation do not address some of the complexities of the co-parenting models that can be involved – for example, situations in which there are up to four committed parents.

Approved foster carers, and, indeed, prospective adoptive parents who are lesbian or gay, continue to complain of being unfairly treated within the fostering system, believing they are not being used as often as their heterosexual counterparts and are often offered only the most hard to place children (Hicks & Mc Dermott, 1999). Nevertheless, it would appear that there is a much greater tolerance and recognition of lesbian and gay foster carers as legitimate carers than there used to be, and many fostering agencies are beginning to equip staff with the necessary training in this area.

Relative and kinship care

When considering a broader definition of parenting it seems that many lesbians and gay men have made a regular commitment to caring for children who do not necessarily live with them, and who are not biologically related to them. In addition, some have agreed to care for a relative's child, known as 'relative care' or 'kinship care parenting'.

Based on the above it is clear that there are a variety of different parenting arrangements in families led by lesbians and gay men, perhaps providing a greater diversity of family constellations than exists in families led by a heterosexual parent or couple. This diversity is reflected in two recent works, the first an American study entitled *Families of Choice* (Weston, 1991), and the other, a British study in which attention is drawn to the wider networks of care-giving within the families of lesbians and gay men (Weeks *et al.*, 2001).

Lesbian and gay parenting: the evidence

From the forgoing, it is clear that lesbians and gay men are increasingly engaged in parenting at a number of levels, yet the odds are stacked against them. Questions are raised not only about their right to parenthood but also about the damaging effects their parenting has on the children in their care (McCann & Tasker, 2000). To address these concerns the available research in this area will now be examined.

Tasker (2002) suggests that early research about lesbian and gay parenting centred on evaluating the psychological well-being of school-age children of lesbian mothers who had initially been raised within a heterosexual family unit. Once these mothers were identified as lesbian, and because of the assumption that their children would suffer in a number of developmental areas, the mothers would often be subjected to scrutiny within the legal process regarding residence and contact arrangements. To some extent, the questions posed about the rights of lesbians and gay men to raise children, and the supposedly damaging effects of their parenting upon them, has been very influential in directing and shaping research endeavours with this population.

One area researchers addressed was the widely held belief that children raised in lesbian and gay households would themselves become homosexual. Conversely, of course, if a parent's sexual orientation affects a child to that extent why, asks Mallon (2004), ''aren't gays raised by heterosexual parents not heterosexual?'' (p. 12). To properly address questions concerning the development of sexual orientation one needs to draw on longitudinal data. To that end the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Mother Families (Tasker & Golombok, 1997) and evidence from North America (Bailey & Dawood, 1998) indicate that the vast majority of children of lesbian and gay parents not only grow up to be heterosexual young adults, but also seem to be more aware and comfortable than their heterosexual counterparts about sexual orientation, including validating lesbian and gay relationships.

A second area of concern has been the quality of relationships within lesbian and gay families, particularly concerning patterns of attachment. Drawing on evidence from a British study of primary school-age children raised in planned lesbian families, which examined mother–child interactions, the findings indicate that these children had closer relationships with their birth mothers than children in the two parent heterosexual family comparison group (Golombok *et al.*, 1997). Furthermore, the children in the planned lesbian families had secure attachment patterns, and there was a greater involvement of non-biological mothers in childcare compared with that of most fathers in heterosexual two parent families (Tasker & Golombok, 1998). The greater involvement of non-biological mothers may also be understood within the

context of lesbian households employing a more equal division of household labour (Dunne, 1998). Other studies in the USA (Chan et al., 1998) and in the Netherlands (Brewaeys *et al.*, 1997) have also found little to be concerned about in regard to the psychological development of children raised by lesbian mothers.

Anxieties have been voiced about the absence of opposite gender contact, or appropriate opposite gender role models, for children raised in same-sex households. It should be noted that this appears to be less of a concern for children raised by single mothers or fathers within the heterosexual community, a further manifestation, perhaps, of hetero-normative thinking and behaviour. Nevertheless, researchers have covered the ground necessary to put peoples' minds at rest by highlighting the effective social networks available within the lesbian and gay communities which provide lesbian and gay parents with rich and diverse alternative family forms referred to as 'Families of Choice' (Weston, 1991). Such families are characterised as flexible, informal and varied, but having strong supportive networks of friends and lovers, often including families of origin. They provide frameworks for developing mutual care, responsibility and commitment, and undoubtedly involve both same and opposite gender contact and relationships. One study of children raised in planned lesbian-led families highlighted the opportunities for these children to have regular contact with other adults not in their immediate household, including grandparents, other relatives and male and female friends of the family (Patterson, 1996).

A further area of concern, about children of lesbian and gay parents is the belief that they will be the victims of serious teasing and bullying within schools and the community at large. These anxieties centre on the negative effects this bullying would have on their psychological development. As with previous concerns, the available research does not support this belief. In one comparison study the children raised by lesbian mothers were no more likely than the sons and daughters of heterosexual mothers to have experienced teasing or bullying, although Tasker & Golombok (1997) suggest that they may be more sensitive to homophobic remarks because of their identification with their families.

Before concluding this section it is worth noting the current situation in regard to gay father studies. Taken as a whole, the research literature on gay fathers remains relatively sparse (Bozett, 1989), particularly the area relating to planned gay fatherhood. Research has also yet to examine the developmental outcomes of children of gay fathers.

Initial attempts at researching gay fathers were focused on the transition from heterosexual to homosexual father identity, a reference to the number of gay fathers who had children within the context of marriage. During the 1980s the focus shifted to an examination of the family backgrounds of gay fathers, and then to an exploration of sexual orientation and the gay fathers' child-rearing attitudes and behaviours. What these comparison studies show is that gay fathers, in contrast to heterosexual fathers, are more concerned with providing paternal nurturance than economic provision (Scallen, 1981), that they try harder to create stable home lives and positive relationships than would be expected among traditional heterosexual parents (Turner, Scadden & Harris, 1990), and that there is a more even division of responsibilities for household maintenance and child-care (McPherson, 1993). It has

also been suggested that gay fathers may feel additional pressures to be proficient in their parenting role, as they may believe that they are being closely scrutinised owing to their sexual preference (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989). This, however, also appears to be the case for some lesbian mothers.

Mallon (2004), who conducted a study of 20 gay men who had become fathers by choice in the 1980s outside of the boundaries of a heterosexual union, suggests that gay fathers appear to violate two of societies' unspoken rules: namely that gay men should not be trusted around children, and that women rather than men are the preferred primary caregivers for children. On the basis of his research he comments that ''One of the most enduring impressions that I had of the gay dads whom I interviewed was of their deep commitment to family and parenthood, despite the challenges and frustrations of living in a society that presumes that parenthood is the sole province of heterosexuals.'' (p. xiii). Of the studies conducted on self identified gay men who are fathers (Frommer, 1996; McPherson, 1993; Sbordone, 1993), it appears that the self esteem of gay fathers is much higher than those who are not fathers, and that gay co-parents are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to share household responsibilities, including tasks involving childcare.

Taken together, this body of empirical evidence supports the idea that children of lesbian and gay parents do just as well as the children of heterosexual parents (Elovitz, 1995; Patterson, 1994, 1995, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). The evidence also lends support to the belief that the major impact of parenting on child development comes not from the sexual orientation of the parents but from the commitment of those involved and the quality of parenting that the child receives.

Issues and dilemmas for lesbian and gay parents and their offspring

Although there are obvious strengths which lesbians and gay men as parents offer to the children in their care, increased levels of parenting stress, parental conflict and relationship dissatisfaction appear to be associated with higher levels of psychological problems among their children, as is the case for children raised in heterosexual families (Chan *et al.*, 1998). The difficulties and dilemmas that we consider in this section should not be viewed as in any way exhaustive, since they are representative of questions relating to lesbian and gay parenting that have been presented in our respective clinical practices and in our lives as gay men.

Managing internalised homophobia

Each parent carries with them their personal history and experiences regarding sexuality as they enter adulthood. These may embody very stereotyped notions of what it is to be a man or a woman, and particularly the impact of being a gay man or a lesbian woman. The numerous and accumulative negative and self-loathing messages collected along the way may well have left the individual with very hesitant and distorted ideas about self, and about self in relation to being a parent. In some cases, especially those relating to gay men, there may also have been a tendency to internalise anxieties and fears about being seen as a 'potential paedophile',

undermining confidence about what they can offer a boy or a girl child. It should be noted that this dynamic continues to exercise homosexuals and heterosexuals alike, even though the evidence is unequivocal in showing that lesbians and gay men are no more likely than heterosexuals to commit sexual crimes against children (Strasser, 1997). In more extreme situations, the sensitivity about this issue may influence prospective lesbian or gay parents to discount the possibility of parenthood, or to organise themselves in such a way as to keep a safe distance from their children.

Negotiating the decision to parent and raise a child

As with any parenting arrangement there are a variety of factors that are instrumental in the decision to have a child, and many ongoing negotiations as that child grows and develops. These processes are particularly pertinent for same-sex parents, since the complexities of negotiating the decision to have a child across two households, with the possibility of two non-biological parents also wanting to be included in the decision making process, may be a source of difficulty. There are situations where the non-biological parent(s) are against their partner having a child, and we have both worked with couples who have come close to splitting up over this issue.

Religion

In situations where there are different religious or cultural considerations, it will be important for parents to be clear about how they will approach these aspects of a child's upbringing. What religious focus, if any, will the child be exposed to, and how will this be managed within the system as a whole? How will agreement be reached and acted on, especially if there is more than one religious belief within the parenting system?

Education

When co-parents do not live close to one another and both sets of parents wish to have an ongoing role in the child's life, how and where will that child be educated? Often this decision is one that requires the main parental carer or couple to be clear, if possible, about their commitment and housing intentions over the next ten years. What involvement will co-parents have with the child's school programme? Who will attend school parent evenings and other events? Who will decide the type of school that is attended? What are the different attitudes or philosophies around learning, discipline and education? How will differences be understood and reconciled when they become difficulties?

Naming of the child

Difficulties can also arise in regard to the naming of a child, especially when there may be up to four potential naming parents. Naming is a potent and symbolic area of concern, as it carries so much historical and narrative significance. There can also be

particular questions surrounding the surname of the child. Although, in an ideal world, one would hope for flexibility and compromise, some lesbian and gay parents may have to contend with wider family considerations, where grandparents, siblings, and even friends may have an investment in the selection of a particular surname. Another consideration for co-parents is how they wish to be addressed by the child: will there be two 'mummies' or two 'daddies', or, 'mummy and Jean', or 'daddy and John'? In one study, the factor most associated with family satisfaction was shown to be the degree to which the new gay partner had become integrated into family life (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993), and names have a particular significance in this process.

Contact and degree of involvement

The question of contact and degree of involvement can be the area that has most potential for creating difficulty. Some couples and co-parents approach contact and involvement in an informal and organic way. Although at the outset this may appear to be the most sensible and appropriate way forward, it can contribute to later confusion when it is not structured or formalised. A routine of contact is particularly important for children, as it is for those who are living and not living with them. Unpredictable arrangements may interrupt the rhythm and pattern of contact and involvement which can then be unsettling for the child. Although this discussion has similarities with debates concerning families following divorce and separation, the dynamics are different. Lesbians and gay men are faced with these potential difficulties before ever having a child, whereas in situations of separation and divorce the couple are usually exposed to these long after the child has been born.

Managing conflict

Realistically, raising children always involves conflict at some level or other. For lesbian and gay parents, who are attempting complex co-parenting arrangements, the potential for conflict, misunderstanding and exposure to what can be unmanageable primitive feelings is quite high. Disagreements may be fuelled by differences of gender and sexuality, differential role expectations and confusion, as well as testing tolerance of the unexpected. In situations where things turn ugly, it is hard to determine who and what the enemy is. For instance, as mentioned earlier, lesbians and gay men have reached adulthood fighting the pernicious effects of homophobia and heterosexism. There has also been a degree of segregation between lesbians and gay men. Residues from these experiences may be played out in co-parenting conflicts, as may issues within the couple relation of the two men or two women be deflected into and across the co-parenting relationship. A further source of difficulty derives from the need for same-sex parents to prove themselves as 'good enough' parents. The pressures inherent in maintaining this position may breed conflict if everyone is not seen to be pulling their weight, or someone else is trying to monopolise the agenda. It is worth mentioning in this context that as co-parenting arrangements are not legally sanctioned, and as non-biological parents are not properly recognised, lesbians and

gay parents may feel they have to go out of their way to assert their position, which, in turn, may cause stress for both parents and for their child. However, Ali (1996) suggests that because lesbian and gay parents know they will encounter prejudice, they have had to go much further than heterosexual parents in thinking through a wide range of practical, emotional and educational issues in relation to their child. This, in turn, may serve as a protective factor with regard to developing more collaborative parental relationships on behalf of the child.

Managing disclosure

Having children forces the issue of how to manage disclosure within the wider family and community at large. Ali (1996) advocates parents telling children of their sexual orientation to avoid breeding a sense of shame. However, the timing of the disclosure will need to be appropriate to the child's particular stage of development and the lesbian or gay father's particular circumstances. At the same time, a disclosure can be helpful in educating a child or young person about managing the interface between the privacy of the home and the outside world. Bigner (1996) suggests that children may use a number of strategies for managing this particular task: instituting boundary controls, such as asking the father to conceal his sexual orientation when friends visit the family home; choosing not to disclose to others the fact that one's father is gay; or utilising selective disclosure (for example, timing the disclosure to assert some level of control). Clearly this is another area for negotiation both within and outside of the family home, and relies upon the parents' ability to think together over time as the issues of disclosure are gradually worked through.

Involving families of origin

The evidence relating to families of origin about the amount of support lesbian and gay fathers receive is mixed. For instance, Oswald (2002) suggests that many same-sex couples, including those with children, receive less support from their families of origin than do most heterosexual couples, whereas the participants in Mallon's study (2004) found that their parents and families were often more supportive than had at first been anticipated. Perhaps the most important consideration in making sense of these different findings concerns existing relationships within the family of origin prior to the decision to embrace parenthood. The complexities surrounding obtaining support may reinforce the importance of lesbian and gay communities for these parents, although for some this may be a step too far. It is also worth noting that parenting support programmes have been shown to be effective in helping same-sex parents overcome isolation and improve confidence in parenting skills (Davis & Hester, 1996).

Thinking the unthinkable

According to Etchegoyen (2000) ''Parenthood brings about an irrevocable change in the essence of primary relationships. It involves a renegotiation of current relation-

ships which may reactivate earlier problems and conflicts which need to be re-worked and resolved. In most cases a constructive process of adaptation takes place, and becoming a parent brings happiness and a sense of fulfilment. However, for some men and women, contrary to the idealised images of parenthood, the birth of a baby may lead to marital breakdown, psychiatric illness and very occasionally, infanticide'' (p. 60).

Although she was speaking about heterosexual couples, in our view this may apply equally well to lesbian and gay parents. In preparing for this paper we were struck by the failure of researchers and theoreticians alike to consider the possibility of serious risk or harm to the child or mother in same-sex parenting arrangements. Given the incidence of miscarriage, stillbirth and serious physical and psychiatric morbidity associated with conception and childbirth, it seems somewhat surprising that there has been little or no thinking about this in the field. For instance, what happens in co-parenting situations where a child has a serious or chronic physical illness or learning difficulty, or where there are legitimate concerns about a parent's ability to manage the child?

Practice considerations

Given the developments and complexities facing lesbian and gay parents that we have outlined, it is likely that some individuals, couples and indeed families from this population may turn to therapy or counselling for help in resolving their particular difficulties and dilemmas. It goes without saying that the context of therapy can be invaluable as a 'safe harbour' where the relationship and its strengths can be appreciated and validated.

Unfortunately, the experiences of lesbians and gay men themselves do not endorse this idealised view of the therapeutic encounter. A recent report commissioned by PACE highlights the fact that lesbians, gay men and bisexuals who use services often complain that their specific family patterns and situations are not properly recognised or valued. Platzer (2003) suggests that same-sex couples who are parenting children often experience counsellors and therapists using inappropriate models based on heterosexual relationship patterns within rigid and segregated gender roles. These models can often feel inappropriate and pathologising, as outlined in the main body of this paper, since same-sex couples often work with more flexible family models than their heterosexual counterparts. These findings are endorsed by research conducted in Britain (Annesley & Coyle, 1998; Milton, 1998) where, for example, one therapist, through her line of questioning, suggested that lesbianism was caused by the adverse reaction or violent sexual responses of men towards women, and other therapists struggled to accept the individuals sexual choice by questioning lesbians 'dislike of men' and gay men's 'dislike of women'. This, of course, immediately raises the question of when issues presented in therapy relate specifically to sexual orientation and when they do not.

Saunders (2000) suggests that the most relevant determinant of outcome in working with gay and lesbian couples is the therapists fundamentally held beliefs

as to how he or she understands gayness itself. For instance, is the therapist able to affirm a lesbian or gay identity as having equal value to that of a heterosexual identity? This means that a therapist must take seriously the specific cultural contexts that shape beliefs, values and behaviours, and that this wider view is built into his or her therapeutic formulation (Tasker & Mc Cann, 1999). This is not to suggest that the therapist needs necessarily to be lesbian, gay or bisexual since, according to Davies (1996), what is important is the therapist's ability to empathise with and accept the client. To that end, all therapists must develop a knowledge base which incorporates an examination of heterosexism and which unearths the roots of fear and prejudice with regard to sexuality in general (Davies, 1996). In situations where therapists are unable to offer this level of acceptance then, on ethical grounds, they must refer such people on to others who are.

In working with both trainees and qualified counsellors and psychotherapists, we have observed the use of heterosexist beliefs and language when undertaking therapy with those from sexual minorities. For instance, the absence of thinking about the possibility of someone being lesbian or gay, based on the assumption that everyone is straight, will make the disclosure of this extremely difficult. This not only diminishes the unique experience of lesbians and gay men but also sends a clear message about the therapist's position in relation to the issues and dilemmas individuals, couples and families from sexual minorities may present within the context of therapy. For example, one lesbian mother, who had recently divorced and was entering into her first lesbian relationship, contacted a therapist to explore the issues involved in this major transition for her, and the potential impact of this on her two sons, aged eight and twelve. What this woman experienced, however, was a therapist who lacked curiosity about her sexuality, who was working on the assumption that she was heterosexual, and that the problem was essentially related to post-divorce issues. The woman felt unheard within the therapeutic encounter and sensed she would not receive an empathic response were she to disclose her sexuality. She subsequently found a therapist within a specialist service offering help to those with sexual minority issues.

As specific services for lesbians and gay men are few and far between, the therapeutic community as a whole has, in our view, a responsibility to develop therapeutic practices which are both responsive and sensitive to the specific needs of sexual minorities. In addition, counsellors and therapists must also be aware of developments relating to lesbian and gay parenting, and consider the wider contextual issues. In evaluating the PACE Lesbian and Gay Family Service, it became apparent that those from sexual minorities did not feel safe to explore their difficulties unless they believed that the practitioner had an understanding and acceptance of lesbian, gay and bisexual identity (Platzer, 2003). Once this was in place, the difficulties and dilemmas relating to couple and parenting issues could be usefully explored, including questions relating to internalised homophobia. This finding may have important implications for developing training programmes which specifically address the needs of therapists and counsellors working with those from sexual minorities.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that a number of lesbians and gay men, like their heterosexual counterparts, have strong motivations for wanting to become parents and to raise children. Although the research evidence does much to dispel the myths that continue to dog thinking about what lesbian and gay parents can offer to the children in their care, therapists and counsellors must go on exploring the ways in which heterosexism and homophobia organise lesbians and gay men in their parenting roles so that they do not lose sight of the gifts they too can offer their children. At the same time, researchers must continue their efforts to expand our knowledge base about lesbian and gay parenting. For instance, Tasker (2002) suggests that there is a need for research to examine the cultural diversity of different lesbian and gay parenting contexts. This should be expanded to capture some of the complexities that we have outlined with regard to co-parenting dynamics. It is important to remind ourselves that sexual orientation does not determine the ability to love and care for a child (Sullivan, 1995), and so heterosexuals should not be allowed to continue monopolising the parenting agenda. Returning to the title of this paper, it seems that the children of lesbians and gay men are very much babes in arms rather than babes in the woods. Perhaps for that reason, public policy is beginning to affirm and endorse lesbians and gay men as legitimate and valid parents who have much to offer the next generation of children.

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