‘A lesbian family in a straight world’: The impact of the transition to parenthood on couple relationships in planned lesbian families

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Abstract
The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experience of lesbian women and their transition to parenthood, paying particular attention to the impact that this had on their relationship. Eight women were interviewed across three New Zealand cities. Data was analysed using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). Queer theory was used as the theoretical framework to interpret findings. Findings revealed that the transition to parenthood has similarities to that of heterosexual couples. However, lesbian couples experience unique challenges within their relationship during this transition in relation to key concepts of heteronormativity, homonormativity, biologism, and the queering of parenthood.

Key words: relationships, lesbian, transition, parenthood, couple, queer theory, impact, New Zealand.

Introduction
Lesbian women have for decades been parents, but have often parented children conceived in previous heterosexual relationships (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2007). Ripper (2007) discussed the newly emerging family formation whereby lesbian women make concerted efforts to conceive a child of their own and raise it within a family context. Golombok (2000) described this formation as ‘planned lesbian families’ (p. 57).

The current study follows in the footsteps of seminal New Zealand research on the topics of discrimination of lesbian and bisexual women (Rankine, 2001); interviews with children of New Zealand gay and lesbian parents (Hauschild & Rosier, 1999); the experience of planned pregnancy for lesbian women (Bree, 2003) and a recent study by Gun and Surtees (2009) exploring how lesbians and gay men create and maintain families in New Zealand. This article reports the findings from the first New Zealand based qualitative research study which explored the impact that the transition to parenthood has on the couple relationship in planned lesbian-led families.

The transition to parenthood
The arrival of the first child within a marriage was originally described as a ‘crisis’ by Le Masters (1957, p. 352) or ‘transition’ (Hobbs & Cole, 1976, p. 723). For heterosexual couples, gender differentiation becomes more pronounced post-birth as their roles change within the home (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010). Craig (2006) stated that even for women who work full time within the more egalitarian family structure, the impact of childcare, household tasks and overall responsibility still lies with the mother. Heterosexual couples are impacted by a number of significant changes; changes in sleep (Medina, Lederhos, & Lillis, 2009; Orzel-Gryglewska, 2010); changes in sexual relationships (Pacey, 2004); postpartum depression (Burke, 2010; Pacey, 2004) and a decrease in the time spent together as a couple (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; 2011).
Goldberg and Sayer’s (2006) study was the first prospective and longitudinal exploration of lesbian couples’ relationship quality, in the transition to parenthood in planned families. Goldberg and Sayer quantitatively examined relationship quality in 29 committed lesbian couples, where one of the women was the biological mother of the child. They found that conflict increased and love for each other decreased over the transition, mirroring that of heterosexual couples.

**Relationship conflict in lesbian couples**

Kurdek (2005) has described lesbian relationships as more empathic, egalitarian and satisfying than heterosexual relationships. Gay and lesbian couples tend to divide household work and paid work more equitably than heterosexual couples, even when they have children (Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004; Shechory & Ziv, 2007). Kurdek (2007) posited that increased satisfaction is found within relationships where there is fairly equitable division of labour in the home. Contrary to popular belief that their relationships are transient and uninvolved, most gays and lesbians prefer stable relationships (Julien, Chartrand, Simard, Boutrillier, & Bégin, 2003). Further, unstable relationships in lesbian women are attributed to the same relational difficulties which all couples experience (Julien et al., 2003; O’Hanlan & Isler, 2007).

**Lesbian-led families**

Reluctance in society to accept lesbians as parents relates almost entirely to their sexual identity and the associated negative stereotypes (Wilde, 2007). As Berkowitz (2009) discussed, lesbian motherhood has been described as an oxymoron; the concept of motherhood being incongruent with lesbian women. According to Wilde (2007), masculine traits associated with lesbian identity lead to lesbian women being regarded as unsuitable mothers by some in society.

Further, Henrickson (2005) argued that gay, lesbian and bisexual parents in the New Zealand context tend to be not dissimilar to heterosexual families. The main difference is that lesbian families experience higher degrees of social pressures, stigma, and heterosexual dominance (Bos & van Balen, 2010; Bos et al., 2007; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009).

According to Higgins (2009), heterosexuality remains the status quo, and therefore a desired social norm. Kitzinger (2005) further argued that heterosexuality is taken as both natural and normative and reinforces the oppression of lesbian women because they are viewed by society as violating the rigid boundaries of how gender is perceived. According to Hequembourg (2004), in response to oppression and discrimination lesbian women remain strong by forming egalitarian relationships both in their partnerships and through parenthood. In a New Zealand context, Gunn and Surtees (2009) concurred and identified several strengths evident in gay and lesbian parents, such as providing their children with a broader sense of family that recognises social diversity.

**The research question, aims and objectives**

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of the transition to parenthood on couple relationships in planned lesbian-led families. The study objectives were:

- To identify the key changes in becoming parents
- To explore how these key changes affected the relationship and
- To examine the responses from others, such as friends and family, during the transition to parenthood.\(^1\)

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1 The responses of health professional were also examined and will be published separately.
Method
This section presents the ethical considerations, recruitment, sample and participant characteristics. It also discusses the way in which data was collected and analysed using queer theory as the theoretical lens, concluding with the relevance of this approach to the research topic.

Ethical considerations
The research was approved by The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. An advertisement was placed through an internet site for same-sex parents, as well as through a local women’s centre. This advert described the study and invited participants to contact the researcher for further information. A Participant Information Sheet outlined the risks and benefits of the research. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research before signing the Consent Form. In order to maintain confidentiality participants were assigned pseudonyms by the researcher and used in all data collection and transcripts. Confidentiality of participants was maintained further by excluding the names of participants’ children, their partners, or age and cultural identity. Data were stored on a password protected computer and only viewed by the researcher and her supervisors.

Sampling and participant characteristics
Eight women who identified as a) lesbian and b) had been in, or were in, a lesbian relationship where they had chosen to have a family together and conceived through artificial insemination, were invited to participate. All participants identified as of European descent and one as Australian European. Several participants had children of mixed Māori and European descent, as the sperm donors had Māori heritage. All women had completed university study, six had Diplomas and two had a Master’s degree. The ages of the participants ranged from early 30s to late 40s and they lived in or around three of New Zealand’s major metropolitan cities. Two of the women were non-biological mothers and six were biological mothers; one of which was also a non-biological mother. The age of the participants’ children ranged from 9 months to 12 years of age.

Data collection and analysis
The interviews were semi-structured and the questions were open-ended. This ensured that the researcher was able to obtain the specific information required to answer the research question and at the same time enabled the participants to provide further information from their own experiences and views on the subject. Consent was sought for the interviews to be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data reached saturation after three interviews and continued to be replicated throughout the remaining interviews.

A general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) was used to analyse the data. The inductive approach allows the findings to emerge from the data without the restrictions associated with a specific methodology. Each transcript was read several times and sections of the text were copied to a separate document and assigned with numbered codes for easy reference. All codes were then merged together into a list. The different codes were then placed into nine categories with their corresponding codes. Data were further refined and converged into sub-themes and finally three main themes. Queer theory was used as a theoretical framework to interpret the findings.
Queer theory

Queer theory originated from the work of Teresa De Lauretis (1991) and merges with other theoretical viewpoints, such as feminist theory (Jagose, 1996). According to Valocchi (2005), queer analysis has four key components: a) rethinking gender, sex and sexuality; b) rethinking gay identity; c) performing identity, and d) rethinking power. Because queer theorists object to defining boundaries, these components are thus relevant to the queering of families. Therefore, according to Kirsch (2006), queer theorists would view the traditional heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy as outdated. Valocchi (2005) confirmed that ideas of queer analysis are understood within the context of power, whereby dominant sexual and gender taxonomies exist in order to regulate subjectivity and social life.

Findings

The findings are discussed in relation to three main themes; planning a family, the impact of baby on the relationship, and the responses of others.

Planning a family

Participants described a sense of readiness to start a family, based on their relationship being strong and loving and that their partner was a suitable candidate for shared parenthood. Commitment to each other was therefore important. There were a number of factors involved in the decision making process, such as the length of time it would take to find a donor and become pregnant and the participants’ or their partners’ ages. For the majority of the participants the process of planning to have a family and becoming pregnant spanned at least several years:

We spent probably two or three years on the waiting list ... then we were interviewed and then there was another wait of, say, six months or so. (Karen)

The possible financial costs associated with conception through a fertility clinic also became a consideration:

You really have to choose and decide, you really have to put everything into it. Otherwise you spend like a thousand freakin’ dollars putting this sperm inside you for nothing. (Leah)

Participants recognised that unlike some heterosexual couples, creating a family was a conscious decision. Two couples had chosen to use anonymous donors, the remainder were donors known to the couple. The nature of the relationship with the known donors was based around the fact that the lesbian couple were primary caregivers for their children. Thus involvement with donors was somewhat limited and generally controlled by the lesbian couple. Participants who had chosen anonymous donors had options for contact with the donor; both had made contact with their donors as their child had grown.

The essence of beginning a family in a planned fashion appeared to create opportunity for forethought around issues related to biology, parenting and the couple relationship:

We didn’t really want him to father or parent but we wanted [child] to know him and be more of an uncle, come over on the weekends take him out and play, and not have to deal with this hard stuff, or make those long term decisions about education and all the rest of it. (Rose)

The impact of the donor’s involvement was acknowledged as having potential to impact on the relationship. The couple needed to unite in their search for a donor. Attempting to identify and negotiate a donor, whether known to the couple or anonymous, was a key step in the process of creating a family.

For a couple of the participants, finding a donor was a simple and relatively stress-free experience. Yet most participants went through complex or lengthy negotiations in order to find
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And then his [donor] relationship broke up so he couldn’t do it anymore. We found it so difficult to find him as a donor that [my partner] said she didn’t want to do it anymore. Cos it was so hard. Well it was just a grieving process ... so we never talked about children again ... [my partner] had a relationship with another woman and we split up for over a year. (Lila)

The process of conceiving was the next step in beginning a family. For some couples this was difficult and took a long period of time. In contrast, some couples managed to become pregnant on their first insemination procedure, or almost immediately at home through self-insemination. The nature of artificial or self-insemination at home was explored by both Karen and Lila, who experienced disapproval and curiosity about this mode of conception from family. The dominance of the traditional mode of conception – male/female sexual intercourse – was challenged by the notion that conception could occur through the above methods.

The Impact of baby on the relationship

The changes couples experienced in relation to how their baby impacted on their relationship were not dissimilar to the transition to parenthood for heterosexual couples. This would suggest that despite the increased importance of egalitarianism within lesbian relationships (Kurdek, 2005), couples are still subject to external factors related to their child’s entry into the world and impacts on the way they relate to each other. The focus on the baby was one of the most significant changes in the participants’ lives and relationships with their partners:

[The baby] became everything really. All the joy was centred around [baby]. And I think that’s why eventually our relationship floundered. (Laura)

The switch in focus away from their relationship, the added responsibility for their child, and subsequent sleep deprivation, left little room for individual or couple pursuits. When participants were extremely tired they were unable to focus on their relationship:

It’s actually had a huge impact on our relationship ‘cos we get up in the middle of the night, we’re stressed trying to get [baby] back to sleep, and being sleep deprived ourselves, can have arguments in the middle of the night. Over nothing. Just that we’re tired, and we’re frustrated that [baby] won’t sleep... (Rose)

In this exhausted state of mind participants reported the sense of ‘surviving’, or going through the motions. The practical components of daily living became the focus in order to get through difficult periods, which impacted on the couple’s enjoyment: ‘I sort of remember that time as like, just surviving. Going through the motions to just survive’. (Alex)

Surviving to get through each day was associated with constant deprivation of sleep. This inevitably impacted on the couple relationship in a variety of ways, including their sexual relationship. The parental role, as the focus within the new found family, was acknowledged by all participants as being central and prioritised over being a partner: ‘You become a parent, and that becomes, all of a sudden, your primary relationship in life’. (April)

All eight participants commented on their feelings of distance or displacement, to some degree, in their couple relationship after having a child, or feeling overwhelmed and disconnected at times by the demands of being a parent: ‘Just a disconnection, so it’s not causing arguments as such, it’s just causing a feeling of being a little bit apart from each other’. (Leah)

Despite the challenges associated with transitioning from a couple to parents, participants also reflected on the strength that this added to their relationship with their partner:

Cos you see each other when you’re at your most vulnerable ever, but also when you’re at your most strongest. And through experience you realise you can get through some of the hard times. (Alex)
Mutual support had the potential to strengthen the relationship through the shared experience of parenting together, as participants expressed appreciation for one another. There was a clear expression of both thankfulness and appreciation for having had children added to participants’ lives and families. Participants’ families consisted of love, care and attention related to their children, partners, friends and extended family.

Responses of others

Couples faced challenges associated with being in a lesbian relationship due to the dominant model of heterosexuality and marginalisation; at an individual level, a couple and a family. More than one participant’s narrative noted that their family, unidentified members of society, and some healthcare professionals (i.e. counsellors), attempted to impose heterosexual modelling upon the couple:

[Counsellor] was just awful... she said ‘oh you’re like the husband’ and ‘you’re like the wife’... ‘See I have a bit of trouble with my husband’ she said. (Laura)

The experience of being alienated in regards to Laura and her partner’s true identity as a couple, and the attempt to heterosexualise their relationship, was unhelpful and insulting. Making the assumption of heterosexuality was reported by participants to varying degrees:

But the other thing is that you get ‘eunichified’ if you are a lesbian couple. It’s like ‘well she’s the aunty or the sister’... I think that when you have your partner with you, people turn you into a eunuch. They desexualise your relationship because it’s just two women caring for a kid. (Lila)

Despite the forethought in creating a family, several participants faced challenges in maintaining acceptable boundaries with their donor. These challenges came from family members, such as the child’s maternal grandparents, paternal family, or the donor himself, but did not occur through the couple instigating more contact with the donor than the donor was comfortable with. This impacted on the relationship with their partner, and created tension with the family members in question.

For the participants who experienced these tensions, attempts had been made by family members to include the donor in the family as a possible male or father figure. Lila spoke of her experience with their donor’s sister:

She [donor’s sister] was bringing food and she was really nice, but she didn’t acknowledge [my partner] as the parent and she kind of tried to make me and [the donor] as a couple. And actually I really didn’t like it. (Lila)

Natalie struggled with her partner’s parents making contact with their donor and his wife without the couple’s express consent, and the attempts made to form a relationship with him as a part of the family:

It’s had a huge impact to be honest. We’ve gotten through it. We’re pretty good now, but we had quite a long period where every time I looked at [partner] I saw her mother. I think I transferred a lot of my hurt and upset with her mother on to [my partner]. (Natalie)

For Natalie the emphasis on the biological link to the donor by her in-laws caused much frustration and hurt as they attempted to incorporate the donor in their heterosexualised view of the family which impacted greatly on her relationship with her partner. The difficulties with donor involvement also impacted on her role as a non-biological parent. For many of the participants, not being fully recognised as the non-biological parent also impacted on their relationship.

Being recognised as the non-biological parent was important, and this was achieved through spending time with friends who had a family. The gravitation towards others with children, regardless of sexual orientation, was regarded as family support for the lesbian couple. However, participants reported many challenges to their sexual orientation, being in a same-sex relation-
ship and raising children in a lesbian-led family; mainly from their own families of origin. Six of the eight participants interviewed had encountered challenges from their own or their partner’s family which were negative, frustrating or hurtful: ‘When I told my father that I was pregnant, I got the response, ‘oh... oh, you sleeping with men again are ya!’’ (Rose)

Rose explained that even though it took many years for her father to finally accept that she was lesbian, she was astounded at how quickly he defaulted to his homophobic and heteronormative assumption that pregnancy could only mean that she was heterosexual, thus his relief that she was now straight. In conjunction, Rose’s partner felt ostracized by her family as they initially failed to accept the role her partner played as a mother to Rose’s biological child. The couple now had to increase their efforts to preserve their lesbian identity and the survival of their relationship as they transitioned to parenthood:

It took perseverance and it took a lot of honesty and just saying ‘we’re not gonna take any crap’ basically. And they were fine. The second [baby] came along, there was teething problems, because they just didn’t really know how to relate to the three of us, as a family. (Rose)

The participants who were non-biological mothers, not being fully recognised by their family as being a parent to their child was a common struggle and impacted negatively on their relationship. Lack of acknowledgment by one’s family of origin created further tension in the couple relationship and was hurtful:

She [my mother] sort of didn’t acknowledge [my partner] that much as a parent. But she was absolutely fine with me being lesbian. I mean that took years... years of talk and years of you know, her saying the most awful things, you know, to get to a place where she sort of finally understood. (Laura)

The lack of recognition as the non-biological parent devalued the lesbian family as a cohesive unit. Rose discussed the challenges their relationship faced in relation to her partner (a non-biological mother) not being acknowledged appropriately:

My family didn’t really recognise [my partner] as the other parent. And so that was a bit rough. But [my partner’s] family did acknowledge me as the parent. (Rose)

Rose also felt that her partner was concerned that Rose too held these same perceptions as her family, which impacted on their relationship. Alex, initially a non-biological parent, had concerns that others would not understand that she too was going through a huge change in becoming a parent, despite the fact that she was not pregnant herself. She pointed out the value placed on the biological connection to other people:

I wondered how that would go down, in terms of discrimination and did people understand what it was actually like for me? That I was going to be a parent, and [whether their] view valued as much [my experience as being the same] as what [my partner] was going through. (Alex)

The biological emphasis did not just impact the non-biological mother but also the biological mother who would often strive to protect her partner from the hurt feelings and frustration from people who expressed these biologically-orientated views. The effect of varying levels of acknowledgment and recognition of the other mother had the potential to strain the relationship when the couple had to navigate this heteronormative and straight world.

The participants described having to navigate the complexities of raising their family within the dominance of a heteronormative world: ‘Being a lesbian parent in a straight world is what impacts on the relationship.’ (Laura)

The presence of children, or the presence of a pregnancy, made the assumption of heterosexuality even more pronounced. Participants described varying degrees of being out as a family. These appeared to be related, in part, to the age of the children and the type of situation they encountered, such as schooling, extended family or the healthcare environment. Generally
participants were open about their family structure; however this was sometimes dependant on
the degree of perceived safety. For example, the need to protect one’s child from bullying was
raised by Laura:

I think I would’ve been more open earlier on and more inclusive, but... out leaps this fierce protectiveness for
[child]... and what’s best for [child] and nothing else matters really. (Laura)

The ‘fierce protectiveness’ Laura described placed her in the position of choosing the import-
ance of being in the parent role, rather than as a partner. Despite the potential cost to her
couple relationship, the need to protect her child from potential bullying was of utmost impor-
tance: ‘I thought if they knew it might make her life difficult. And if their kids knew it might
make her life difficult.’ (Laura)

The drive to protect their child from the negative effects from others because of Laura’s
sexual orientation, impacted on her relationship. This denial of her sexual orientation in public
arenas meant that in some settings Laura’s partner was somewhat invisible as a mother:

[My partner] didn’t come to parent teacher interviews and... She didn’t come to everything that [our child]
went to. You know, like every event that parents could go and watch. I’m sure it had a big impact on her. And
in retrospect, I would do that differently. (Laura)

While Karen was happy to be open about her sexuality and her family, her partner was opposed
to this, citing concerns around the protection of their child: ‘[Ex partner] is very concerned
about what may happen to the children if other kids discover that we’re a lesbian couple.... [or]
were. [Laughs]. (Karen)

As previously discussed, the presence of children in a lesbian relationship signified to the
straight world that as parents they were therefore heterosexual, unless their identity was clearly
stated and made known. For some participants, the assumption of heterosexuality was inevi-
tably exposed as their children grew older. Participants’ recounted stories of the type of situa-
tions, as Laura explained:

The teacher said, ‘take this note home to your mum and dad’ and [child] put up their hand and said ‘I’ve
got two mums’, and the teacher just continued, and there was a few parents in the background including my
friend, and there was a sort of ‘wooooooh’... so the teacher just carried on and said ‘well just take this home,
that’s what you need to do with this notice’. And then another boy, my friend’s son, put his hand up and said
‘did you hear what she [just] said?’ (Laura)

This example highlights the heartening response of Laura’s friend’s young son, who was aware
that his school friend having two mothers had not been acknowledged by the teacher. His ques-
tion to the teacher was an innocent attempt to have his classmate’s statement validated by the
teacher, who had failed to do so. This young child’s response highlighted the misperceptions
that adults have about family structures and perpetuates the invisibility of the lesbian parent.
Further, this challenge to the straight world underlines the impact of homophobia on the off-
spring of lesbian parents and the lack of recognition of their parent’s relationship.

Discussion
The research findings revealed that the transition to parenthood for lesbian couples in planned
families has some similarities reported by heterosexual couples. For example, lack of sleep and
focusing on the baby, as opposed to the sole focus on their relationship. However, this study
reveals that lesbian couples experience unique challenges within their relationship during this
transition that are not experienced by heterosexual couples. To contextualise these findings,
queer theory provides a lens to explain that the transition to parenthood for lesbian couples
is impacted by concepts such as heteronormativity, homonormativity and biologism and the
queering of parenthood which are discussed in the following section.
Lesbian transitions to parenthood

Heteronormativity
Warner (1993) defines heteronormativity as the institutional, cultural and social norms which are firmly embedded within society. Heterosexuality is thus situated as being normal and therefore natural whereas homosexuality is outside of the normal boundaries; thus an unnatural and abnormal coupling. For example, Lila discussed the process of ‘eunichifying’ when an assumption was made that her partner was an aunty or other family member rather than the other parent. Several participants in this study reported that their identity as a mother was challenged. For instance, unlike heterosexual couples, the participants were subjected to scrutiny such as how they had conceived their child, or whether they should be called mum or dad. These examples situate heterosexuality as not only normal, but the basis of parenthood.

In contrast to heterosexual couples, the heteronormative assumptions of how a child is conceived were also a unique challenge for the lesbian couple. The unease demonstrated by the couple’s family members about the method of conception had a major impact on their relationship. Because the lesbian couple had not followed the traditional method of sexual intercourse to conceive, the heteronormative assumptions expressed by their wider family were hurtful; especially at the time when they needed their support the most. Similarly to the findings from this study, Short (2007) has reported that many lesbian mothers felt that they were subject to experiences that made them feel judged, invisible or scrutinised by others such as asking who the ‘real’ mother was, or how the participants had become pregnant.

Heteronormative assumptions also related to perceptions of deviancy of the lesbian couple when assumptions of being parents are solely located within the heterosexual view of childbirth. In terms of society’s expectations, being a lesbian parent is not acceptable when a father is not apparent (L. Goldberg, Ryan, & Sawchyn, 2009). When Rose announced her pregnancy to her father, his immediate heteronormative assumption was that she must now be in a heterosexual relationship, not only negating her current relationship; his response also invalidated her identity as a lesbian. The absence of sexual intercourse and the lack of a defined father was thus a source of confusion for her father. When others close to the couple do not acknowledge the couple relationship, their role as parents, particularly the identity of the non-biological mother, has a major impact on their relationship in their transition to parenthood.

Homonormativity and biologism
Vitulli (2010) has argued that heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality rely on the normative assumptions of gender, sex and procreation. According to Vitulli (2010) and Duggan (2002), homonormativity describes how the acceptance by others in society of one’s gay or lesbian identity is secured by adopting the heterosexual expressions of normal, such as being parents and the creation of the normative view of a family. Participants reported that their families participate in activities, sports and family events in the same way as it is assumed heterosexual families do, which can be viewed as examples of homonormativity. The desire to have marriage equality for lesbian couples could also be regarded as homonormative. Henrikson (2010) reported that the majority of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in New Zealand indicated that they welcomed government recognition of their relationships, however it could be argued that civil union partnerships are viewed as inferior to marriage (Beresford & Falkus, 2009) and perpetuates the heteronormative regulation of relationships and their positioning within families (Kim, 2011).

Because heterosexual parenthood is seen as the ‘gold standard’ (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 162) of parenting, lesbian and gay parents are viewed from the perspective that they and their children are inferior. By basing the creation of family around an emphasis of biology and
homonormativity, gay and lesbian parents are acquiescing to what has been culturally sanctioned through heteronormativity. The findings in this current study however, are consistent with Ripper’s (2007) thesis; parenting through donor insemination reinforces the notion that love was central and more important for lesbian parents than the biological emphasis. This is further supported by Lovelock (2010) who suggests that lesbian and gay families align with the social nature of parenthood thus rejecting the notion that their sexual orientation and biological connection to children is important in the role of parenting.

Short (2007) contends that ‘biologism’ reinforces the idea that only biological parents are a child’s true parents, including donors. Likewise, to maintain their identity, the participants in this study described the necessity of reinforcing their partner’s role as a non-biological mother within both private and public arenas. Gabb (2005) further argues that the difficulties in living outside of a biologically-centred world results in the family suffering from ‘linguistic absence’ (p. 11) resulting in social exclusion. Thus, the lesbian family has a task of defining itself in the absence of language commonly associated with family, such as father or non-biological mother.

Similar to Goldberg’s (2010) findings, the participants in this study reported that their friends and family perceived the non-biological mother as less of a mother or equal parent and consequently reinforcing the status of the primary, biological mother. The lack of recognition or visibility of the non-biological mother lead to participants’ feelings of uncertainty and in need of reassurance from their partner. In other words, non-biological mothers are not necessarily considered a mother at all (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006).

Despite the lack of recognition, Wilson (2000) posits that non-biological mothers, or co-mothers, stress that parenting is parenting, regardless of sexual orientation. The main goal of family is to create happy homes, which participants in this study strove to achieve. Further, Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen and Brewaeys (2003) found that relationships between the non-biological mother and her children are found to be essentially the same as the biological mother. Therefore, the belief that the absence of the essential biological link would impact negatively on the child was not supported by the findings in this study.

The queering of parenthood

In contrast to heterosexual couples, an important finding from this study was the process of planning and finding a donor and the energy and time invested in the process of negotiating and navigating the complexities of obtaining a suitable donor. According to Finer and Henshaw (2006), 50% of pregnancies in heterosexual women are unintended. This clearly diverges from the participants’ experiences, whereby all pregnancies were planned in detail. Aside from the planning, participants also described the high level of emotional, physical and financial investment required to become pregnant. Against all these odds, Gunn and Surtees (2009) regarded the transition to parenthood by the lesbian couple as a huge achievement.

There were, however, many disappointments and setbacks experienced by the participants in their transition to parenthood which impacted negatively on their relationships. For example, the negative emotions associated with not securing their preferred donor, or the couples’ difference of opinion about the suitability of a donor has also been reported by Ripper (2007). Further, several participants reported that the inclusion of a donor led to less than ideal involvement in their family, impacting significantly on their couple relationship. All participants reported that the level of involvement of the donor needed to be discussed by the couple prior to conception.
The protection of the lesbian couple as the primary caregivers for their child/children was also a priority in negotiations with the donor. Dempsey (2010) also found that partnered lesbian couples wanted to keep their reproductive relationship with the donor distinct from their couple relationship. As Donovan and Wilson (2008) stated, it is important for the lesbian couple to be central in the parenting relationship and negotiate such boundaries in the formation of their family.

Finally, the queering of parenthood changes the meaning and construction of what is family. Gabb (2005) discussed that couples are often aware of typical feminine and masculine roles played out in their parenting and relationship. Some lesbian non-biological mothers may define themselves more as fathers than mothers. As Hadley and Stuart (2009) suggested, lesbians may have flexibility in terms of their gender identities which allow for fluidity on the gender continuum, and therefore, lesbian mothers do not fall victim to the inequalities associated with the gender of the parent experienced by heterosexual couples. As Gabb (2005) identified, queer parental identities unsettle the cultural understanding of what is maternal when viewed through a lens of queer theory and further disrupts the accepted notion of family.

**Strengths and limitations of the study**

To our knowledge, this is the first New Zealand qualitative research study that explores lesbian-led families and the impact that the transition to parenthood has on the couple relationship. The strengths of this study relate to the qualitative research design, which allowed for rich data to be generated. Using queer theory as a theoretical framework to analyse the data can also be regarded as bringing several strengths to the research. Firstly, it provided a fuller critical interpretation of the findings by revealing the impact of heteronormativity, homonormativity and biologism on participant’s relationships. Secondly, the framework of queer theory allowed lesbian relationship to be viewed without the constraints of gender and provided openness in the interpretation of the data.

A possible limitation of the study is that the participants in this study were a homogenous group; all participants identified as European therefore findings will not be reflective of other ethnic groups within New Zealand. In addition, participants all had a tertiary education, and all had at least one partner in paid employment. Therefore, lesbian women in lower socio-economic groups were not represented within the sample. However the findings of the study highlight heteronormative privilege within society and the continued experience of marginalisation and invisibility by lesbian women, as individuals and as parents.

**Implications of the study**

This research has implications for lesbian women in New Zealand who are considering parenthood and for lesbians who have already commenced this process. Specific implications relate to the emphasis on changes that couples experience within relationships post-birth, and the consideration of factors external to the relationship. The findings also have implications for nurses and other health professionals, professionals who work in the areas of family related care, social work and psychology. The findings also highlighted the implications for teachers and early childhood educators. An overarching recommendation is that professionals who have contact with lesbian couples embarking on parenthood and raising families must reflect on their assumptions and actions towards the couple and reflect on the understanding of the impact of their practice upon lesbian couples and their children. Finally, teachers and health professionals require training and support to enhance their understanding of diversity and lesbian-led families within the environments that they teach and practice.
Recommendations

Further research
It is recommended that further research be instigated in areas of non-biological mothers’ roles within the family and their experience in their transitions to parenthood. Exploration of the process of acquiring a donor and how this may impact the relationship is also recommended, as is the role that the children of lesbian mothers and their peers play in the challenging of heteronormative assumptions.

The education sector
The understanding and acknowledgement of the diversity in the family structure is recommended, particularly in all school education settings. The undergraduate preparation of teachers and early childhood educators should incorporate education about the role heteronormativity plays in the perpetuation of homophobia in the classroom.

Legislation and policy
Steps must be taken within healthcare and tertiary education to ensure that the principles of cultural safety include the needs of lesbian-led families. It is also recommended that legislation regarding the Adoption Act be reviewed, as the current Act is discriminatory towards lesbian-led families who currently do not have the right to legally adopt a child together as a couple. Finally, legislation relating to human rights and anti-discrimination policies needs to be emphasised within all settings that lesbian couples and their children encounter.

Conclusion
This research study set out to explore the impact of the transition to parenthood on couple relationships in planned lesbian-led families. In contrast to heterosexual couples, lesbian couples face unique challenges and barriers when navigating the transition to parenthood. The challenges include finding a suitable donor, and his involvement in the lesbian family. The significant investment in planning, conceiving and transitioning to parenthood in a straight world also has major and often negative impacts on their relationships. Likewise, lesbian couples have to navigate the heteronormative and homophobic straight world which silences and renders invisible the non-biological mother. Finally, by decoupling the biological emphasis on conception and heterosexual notions of family, the successful queering of parenthood by lesbian women will enrich the diversity of what it means to be a family.

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References


