



WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN? ARGUMENTS AGAINST LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTING

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Synopsis — In this article, I explore arguments commonly used to support the claim that lesbians and gay men should not be parents. Thematic analysis of recent media representations of lesbian and gay parenting and six focus groups with university students highlighted the repeated use of a number of arguments to oppose lesbian and gay parenting. I critically discuss the six most prevalent in this article. These are: (1) “The bible tells me that lesbian and gay parenting is a sin”; (2) “Lesbian and gay parenting is unnatural”; (3) “Lesbian and gay parents are selfish because they ignore ‘the best interests of the child’”; (4) “Children in lesbian and gay families lack appropriate role models”; (5) Children in lesbian and gay families grow up lesbian and gay; and (6) “Children in lesbian and gay families get bullied.” I examine these themes in relation to other debates about lesbian and gay and women's rights, and highlight the ways in which they reinforce a heterosexual norm. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist research has noted that while motherhood is socially constructed as fulfilling and essential for all women, many groups of women are excluded from the category “suitable” or “appropriate” mother and are devalued as “unsuitable” or “inappropriate” mothers (Woollett & Phoenix, 1991). Research has focused on the experiences of women defined as inappropriate mothers (such as teenage, older, disabled, and working mothers), and has examined the ideologies that underpin the construction of categories appropriate and inappropriate mothers. However, feminist research has often failed to consider the experiences of lesbian mothers (Kitzinger, 1996; Oerton, 1997; and gay fathers, who are equally, if not more, marginal). I redress this exclusion of lesbian mothers (and gay fathers)

from feminist research and theorising on marginal parenting in this paper, by focusing on the construction of lesbians and gay men as inappropriate parents.

While there is increasing support from members of the “public” for extending the rights of individual lesbians and gay men, few are willing to recognise and endorse lesbian and gay families (Ellis, 2001). Many people continue to cling to the notion of the traditional nuclear family, closely tied to the institutions of marriage, heterosexuality, and biological parenthood. Stereotypes of gay men as paedophiles and lesbians as “masculine, aggressive, and . . . confused about their gender” (Lewin & Lyons, 1982, p. 250) remain powerful determinants of public perceptions of lesbian and gay parents. Lesbian's and gay men's right or “fitness” to parent is vigorously debated in a number of contexts, from the legal and policy arena to tabloid newspapers and talk shows. The British press, for example, has accused lesbians of making “a mockery of motherhood” (Daily Mail, 31 July 1998: “A mockery of motherhood”), and one gay couples' attempt to have children together has been branded a “tangled saga” (Daily Mail, 1

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September 1999: "The tangled saga of two wealthy gays and the woman who is helping them realise their dream of having children together") and a "bizarre baby-making arrangement" (Women's Own, 6 September 1999: "Take two gay men, two donor eggs, and one surrogate mum, what do you get? A Family").

As the lesbian and gay campaigning group Stonewall point out, in the UK "it is generally assumed in law that lesbians and gay men do not form meaningful relationships with each other and do not have children" (Stonewall, 1998, p. 1). Contrary to this assumption, lesbians and gay men can and do have children. Lesbians and gay men become parents in a number of ways: through heterosexual relationships before they "come out" as lesbian or gay, through adoption or fostering, through the use of donor insemination or surrogacy, or by becoming the partner of someone who already has children. However, gay men "encounter enormous prejudice" (Stonewall, 1998, p. 1) when they attempt to gain custody of their children and lesbians have an "unspoken burden" (Stonewall, 1998, p. 1) to prove that they are like "normal" mothers. Additionally, many local authorities are hostile toward lesbians and gay men who apply to adopt or foster children, the majority of "fertility" clinics will not accept lesbians as clients (and lesbians experience heterosexism in the law when they self-inseminate with a privately arranged donor), and lesbian and gay coparents are "simply not recognised in law" (Stonewall, 1998, p. 4).

Beyond these basic parental rights, lesbian and gay parents are also widely discriminated against. First, they have to face the assumption that "lesbians are not mothers" (Pollack, 1987, p. 316) and gay men are not fathers. As Lewin and Lyon (1982, p. 250, emphasis in original) indicate, in relation to lesbian parents, the average person wants to know, "how . . . can a lesbian possibly be a mother?," "how is it possible for women who by *definition* do not engage in heterosexual behavior to be mothers?" These questions presuppose a primarily sexual view of lesbians which "puts the lesbian mother in a theoretically impossible category" (Lewin & Lyon, 1982, p. 250). This incomprehension is evident in lesbian and gay parents' interactions with social and health service providers, such as midwives (Wilton, 1996), social workers (Erllichman, 1989) and mental health professionals (Steinhorn, 1982). Wilton (1996, p. 129) sug-

gests, for instance, that lesbian parents who are open about their sexuality with their midwife can encounter "embarrassment, expressions of disgust, coldness or outright hostility." Discrimination is also evident in interactions with schools (Casper and Schultz, 1999), where lesbianism and gayness is perceived as a threat to the education of children (and the "promotion" of homosexuality and lesbianism is forbidden in the UK; Donovan, 1997), and in the workplace (Kitzinger, 1991, p. 238), where most lesbians and gay men are in the closet and "paternity leave, and leave to accompany a pregnant woman to antenatal care, is granted by some employers to fathers, but not to the lesbian co-mother" or gay coparent.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, psychologists began to identify arguments used to oppose lesbian and/or gay custody (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Mucklow & Phelan, 1979). Golombok et al. (1983, p. 551), for example, highlighted three arguments commonly used to support a denial of custody: "the supposed risks of aberrant psychosexual development . . . isolation from or rejection by peers . . . [and] emotional/behavioural problems arising from the general stress of being brought up in such an atypical family." More recently, research has examined heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbian and gay parenting (Crawford & Solliday, 1996; King & Black, 1999), and has found a strong correlation between "homophobia" and people's level of support for lesbian and gay parenting. However, while discussed across psychology and the social sciences (e.g., Raymond, 1992), there have been few attempts to empirically explore the arguments used to oppose full parental rights for lesbians and gay men. The purpose of this paper is to rectify this omission by identifying and critically discussing arguments used to oppose lesbian and gay parenting. As others (e.g., Alldred, 1998; Meyers, 1994; Pratt & Tuffin, 1996) have suggested, by examining the arguments used to oppose lesbian and gay rights, we can develop ways to challenge them. This article contributes to literature in psychology and the social sciences, which explores the construction of antilesbian and/or antigay arguments in the media and public debate (McCreanor, 1996), specifically, on talk shows (Clarke, 1999; Epstein & Steinberg, 1998), in the press (Alldred, 1998; Ellis & Kitzinger, 2000; Meyers, 1994) and in Hansard (Ellis &

Kitzinger, 2000; Epstein, Johnson, & Steinberg, 2000). In one of the only papers to empirically examine opposition to lesbian parenting, Alldred (1998) explores the arguments used to undermine a lesbian couple in one article in a British tabloid newspaper. Although, some of arguments I outline are similar to some of the ones she identifies, her analysis focuses on whether the arguments are presented convincingly—whether they are credible and coherent—and thus is an analysis of journalistic techniques as much or more than it is an analysis of the actual arguments used to undermine lesbian parenting. In addition, Alldred only analyses one article in a tabloid newspaper, and the arguments used to undermine lesbian parenting, not lesbian *and* gay parenting. Thus, this paper compliments Alldred's by offering an analysis of arguments used to oppose lesbian *and* gay parenting across a large and diverse data set. This paper also extends earlier attempts by psychologists and legal scholars to identify the arguments used to oppose lesbian and gay custody. Additionally, it contributes to feminist research on marginal mothers by adding lesbians and gay men into this research, and by making links between the rhetoric used to condemn marginal mothers and lesbian and gay parents.

ANALYSING THE DATA

The analysis is based on media data collected over a 3-year and 6-month period (between April 1997 and October 2000), and six focus groups with university students (Adams, 1997). The media data (which focus on issues relevant to lesbian and/or gay parenting) total 95 newspaper and magazine articles (see Table 1 below for a summary of the newspaper and magazine data), and 21 talk shows (see Table 2 below for a summary of the talk show data). The media data were primarily collected by monitoring the media output on lesbian and/or gay parenting over the 3-year and 6-month period, and 4 of the talk shows were either purchased as transcripts from U.S.-based companies, or obtained from the show's producers. The focus groups with university students explored their views on lesbian and gay families. Five of the focus groups were recruited in (or run as part of) social science classes on research methods, and were conducted by the author. The other was run by an undergradu-

ate student, and the members of the group were recruited through personal contacts. There were a total of 44 participants in these groups (between six and nine participants in each group), 37 were female and 7 were male, and most were under 20 years of age, white, heterosexual and able-bodied.

Although the sources of data differ substantially in purpose and format, the aim was to identify the *range* of arguments put forward to oppose lesbian and gay parenting; thus, I have largely ignored the context in which the arguments were produced. My concern is not to represent the newspaper and magazine articles and the views expressed in the focus groups and in the talk show discussions in their entirety, nor their overall tone (nor to examine how arguments against lesbian and gay parents are expressed on talk shows, or in newspaper articles); rather, I look across these data and focus on commonalities in arguments against lesbian and gay parenting.

The television programmes and focus groups were transcribed orthographically from beginning to end, and focus group participants were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. In analysing these data, the transcripts and press articles were read and reread to identify arguments used to attack lesbian and gay parenting, the six most prevalent are discussed in this paper. These are: (1) "The bible tells me that lesbian and gay parenting is sinful"; (2) "Lesbian and gay parenting is unnatural"; (3) "Lesbian and gay parents are selfish because they ignore 'the best interests of the child'"; (4) "Children in lesbian and gay families lack appropriate role models"; (5) "Children in lesbian and gay families grow up gay and confused"; and (6) "Children in lesbian and gay families get bullied" (see Clarke, 1999, for an analysis of some similar arguments specifically in relation to talk shows). These six themes comprise two types of arguments: arguments that highlight the immorality of lesbian and gay parenting, and arguments that focus on the children of lesbian and gay parents, and the effects on them of growing up in a lesbian or gay family. I analyse these arguments in relation to other debates about lesbian and gay rights and women's rights, and highlight the ways in which they reinforce the status quo. My analytic method is thematic analysis, which is informed by insights from discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), including a con-

Table 1. Newspaper and Magazine Articles: Summary of Data Collected

Newspaper and Magazine Articles: Summary of Data Collected			
Broadsheets (Total: 46 Articles)		Tabloids (Total: 35 Articles)	
The Guardian	12	The Express	10
The Independent	15	The Sunday Express	3
The Observer	1	The Daily Mail	10
The Daily Telegraph	7	The Sunday Mail	1
The Times	5	The Mirror	3
The Sunday Times	5	The Sunday Mirror	1
Unknown	1	The Daily Sport	1
		The Daily Star	2
		The Sun	4
Local Newspapers (Total: 8 Articles)		Magazines (Total: 6 Articles)	
The Coaville Times	1	Best	1
The Loughborough Echo	3	Marie Claire	1
The Peterborough Herald	1	OK!	2
The Daily Record (Scotland)	1	Woman's Own	1
The Evening Standard (London)	1	Unknown	1
The Evening Telegraph (Peterborough)	1		

cern for how arguments work, what makes them effective, and what (ideological) functions they serve.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTING

"The bible tells me that lesbian and gay parenting is sinful"

People often justify their opposition to lesbian and gay parenting with reference to their religious beliefs: what they claim are god's intentions for the human race and the bible "tells us" about the sinfulness of homosexuality and lesbianism. For example:

When God created man from nothing, then he formed the women, he made the women, but he created the man from the dust of the earth, he put them two in a beautiful garden and told them to multiply, he didn't mean for man to marry man and woman to marry woman, he meant for man and woman to have children together. (Audience member, Leeza, March 2000: "What makes you a family?")

I'm against homosexuality. I'm a Christian. I believe that God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve . . . the deed of homosexuality is wrong . . . Christ said, in the book of Revelations, He's going to judge everything,

that homosexuality, lesbianism is a sin. (Audience Member, The Oprah Winfrey Show, April 1991: "The whole family is gay")

The argument that homosexuality and lesbianism is sinful is often voiced in the form of simple declarations such as: "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" (Paul, focus group 5, June 1999); and "God made man and woman he did not make Albert and Adam or Emma and Eve" (Audience member, Kilroy, November 1997: "Should gay men and women have children?"). In relation to debates about other lesbian and gay rights, it has been dubbed the "you're-breaking-God's-rules" (Gamson, 1998, p. 107) argument, and "scourge rhetoric" (Jacobs, 1993).

Although seemingly out of step with current opinion, religious condemnation is nearly always articulated or referred to in some way in media portrayals of lesbian and gay parenting. In newspaper articles on lesbian and gay parents, for example, religious authorities are often consulted for their views on lesbian and gay parenting. What is interesting about what the religious authorities say is that, while they almost always roundly condemn lesbian and gay parents, they rarely, if ever, use religious arguments to do so. For example, in this excerpt from an article about a lesbian couple seeking to have children together using donor insemination, the spokesperson for the catholic church in

Table 2. Talk Shows: Summary of Data Collected

Talk Show	Title of Show	Date of Broadcast (UK or US)	Transcript
The Wright Stuff	'Equal rights for gays?'	September 19 2000	Author
Leeza	'What makes a family?'	March 1 2000	Author
Trisha	'And YOU Want to be a Parent?!'	June 1999	Author
Vanessa	'Gay Marriage: 'Should it be legal?''	February 2 99	Author
Living Issues	'Gay Adoption'	January 15 1999	Author
Living Issues	'Should gays be allowed to marry legally?'	Not Known	Author
Vanessa	'Gay mums and dads'	June 8 1998	Author
Ricki Lake	'You shouldn't be a parent because you're gay'	April 17 1998	Author
Leeza	Gay parents	January 28 1998	Author
Kilroy	'Should gay men and women have children?'	November 1997	Author
Central Weekend Live	'Lesbian mums'	November 14 1997	Author
You Decide	'Should homosexuals have the same rights as Heterosexuals?'	August 1997	Author
The Time . . . The Place	'Should lesbian couples have children?'	April 24 1997	Author
Heart of the Matter	'Zoe and Phyllis Get Married'	Not Known	Author
Donahue	'Where do gays and lesbians get babies to start a family?'	November 29 1994	800-All News
Sally Jessy Raphael	'She had to give up her child'	October 1 1993	800-All News
Heart of the Matter	'Fostering Prejudice'	February 14 1993	BBC
Sally Jessy Raphael	'Gay interracial adoption'	February 5 1993	800-All News
The Oprah Winfrey Show	'Lesbian and gay baby boom'	May 10 1993	Author
The Oprah Winfrey Show	'All the family is gay'	April 30 1991	Author
The Oprah Winfrey Show	'Gay adoption'	August 9 1990	Author

Scotland emphasises the "naturalness" of heterosexuality, and heterosexual conception and child rearing¹, rather than grounding his opposition in christian principles:

The Catholic Church in Scotland branded them [the lesbian couple] "unnatural" and said it [lesbians having children] should not be allowed. Spokesman Father Tom Connelly said: "Children are the fruit of love between a married man and woman. They are not a product and you cannot pay to have one. We are totally opposed to artificial insemination whoever is involved. It's an unnatural situation." (Daily Record, 25 June 1997: "Lesbian lovers to have donors babies")²

The force of this argument derives as much from the status of a "father," as it does from the arguments he uses. This newspaper report shows that the mainstream christian church can nearly always be relied on to provide colourful opposition to lesbian and gay rights.

Religious rhetoric simultaneously constructs lesbian and gay parenting as sinful, as a perver-

sion of god's plan for the human race and morally wrong, and the nuclear family as the god ordained norm for society. It suggests that religion and lesbian and gay rights are fundamentally opposed, and that protecting lesbian and gay rights necessarily undermines religion (Ellis & Kitzinger, 2000). It also exhibits a rigid morality that denies lesbian and gay parents full humanity—it suggests that, according to Gamson (1998), who is generally optimistic about the opportunities talk shows afford lesbians and gay men for visibility in the mainstream, lesbians and gay men are "not right," "not loved" and they "don't really exist," "so much so that even God cannot stand us" (Gamson, 1998, p. 108). This argument unproblematically writes contemporary understandings of sexuality and family back into history and into biblical texts. The word "homosexual" was included in a revised translation of the Bible in the 1940s, even though the concepts of "homosexual" and "homosexuality" (along with "heterosexual" and "heterosexuality") were only "invented" around the turn of the last century (Weeks, 1985). This argument also has the dual effect of reinforcing the validity of con-

servative christianity and conservative interpretations of biblical texts, and fortifying the heterosexual norm. This argument is, in short, simple and robust. It is resistant to proof and difficult to counter with empirical evidence—after all, god’s plan cannot be put to scientific test (Gamson, 1998). Furthermore, the alleged sinfulness of lesbians and gay men provides people with a warrant for discriminating against them (Pratt & Tuffin, 1996).

Of the six themes I discuss in this paper, this one has the longest history as an argument used to oppose lesbian and gay rights. As Gamson (1998, p. 110) notes, religious condemnation of homosexuality is familiar from “so many of years of repetition in this culture.” The bible has been selectively used as a tool to “maintain political power, and wealth, wage wars, control populations, and regulate behavior” and “it has provided reason for persecuting minorities” (Hill & Cheadle, 1996, p. 4) such as lesbians and gay men. This persecution dates back to the Roman era and the middle ages. Although most people no longer regard homosexuality as a sin, the christian establishment, and particularly the christian right, “remains firm in its position” (Hill & Cheadle, 1996, p. 69). In the United States, the church, and the use of religious rhetoric, has helped many anti-lesbian and -gay measures pass into law, and “religious bias” accounts for a significant percentage of the antilesbian and -gay hate crimes committed each year (Hill & Cheadle, 1996). In Europe, religious arguments have been used to persecute lesbians and gay men, and more specifically to oppose lesbians’ and gay men’s right to marry (Bech, 1992), and gay men’s right to an equal age of consent (Ellis & Kitzinger, 2000). Arguments about the sanctity of marriage and the immorality of having children outside of marriage are also directed toward single heterosexual mothers.

“Lesbian and gay parenting is unnatural”

The second moral argument brands lesbian and gay parenting “an insult to nature” (Coalville Times, 8 August 1999: “Homosexuality is not an acceptable way of life” [local newspaper]), and lesbians’ and gay men’s use of donor insemination and joint-parenting arrangements “mechanical” (Audience member, Kilroy, November 1997: “Should gay men and

women have children?”). Lesbian and gay parents are often asked “how can *you* multiply?” (Audience member, Trisha, June 1999: “And you want to be a parent?!”), and lesbians are told that they “are *only* built that way in relationship with a man” (Audience member, Central Weekend Live, November 1997: “Lesbian mums”). In contrast, heterosexual parenting is described as “the *only* natural way” (Audience member, Central Weekend Live, November 1997: “Lesbian mums”), and opponents of lesbian and gay parenting frequently claim that men and women are “*designed* to procreate and live together as man and woman, [and] children are *designed* to grow up in a nuclear family” (Audience member, Central Weekend Live, November 1997: “Lesbian mums”). For example:

. . . children are made through procreation and that is how it is meant to be, not in tubes and other ways, that’s just not natural . . . It is not meant to be like that . . . they are not meant to be parents. (Paul, focus group 5, June 1999)

What these women are doing is against the natural order of things. I find it completely horrendous. If these women want a child so badly then nature says they should get married and bring the child up in a stable and secure relationship . . . Just because lesbians are opting for motherhood, it doesn’t make it right. (Yvonne Stayti of the campaign group Concern for Family and Womanhood, quoted in Daily Mail, 10 July 1998: “Lesbians order a baby on the Net”)

The implication of this argument is that the only natural and moral way to have and raise a child is within a heterosexual relationship. Parenting is delimited as the “natural” consequence of “biology” (Donovan, 2000), invoking a concept of the family as a naturally occurring unit of “man and wife” and their biological children. Lesbian and gay parenting is by definition unnatural because it represents a challenge to, and an attempt to disrupt, this “natural” order.

The media, and newspapers in particular, often display a salacious interest in how lesbians and gay men “get babies to start a family” (Donahue, November 1994: “Where do gays and lesbians get babies to start a family?”).

According to the press, lesbians use “do-it-yourself artificial insemination” (Sunday Express, 14 February 1999: “Lesbians can make better parents”). An article in the Daily Mail about a lesbian couple, Lisa Dawson and Dawn Whiting, noted that, “the women sterilised a pickle jar and used a plastic syringe for the artificial insemination” (31 July 1998: “A mockery of motherhood”). This is portrayed as “fake” and the opposite of “natural” heterosexual conception, as the vagina is “designed” for a penis (Braun & Wilkinson, in press) and “children are the fruit of love between a man and a woman” (Father Tom Connelly quoted in the Daily Record, 25 June 1997: “Lesbian lovers to have donors babies”). This rhetoric of “artificial” conception constructs lesbians’ pregnancy by self-insemination as “amateurish” and “it implies that the conception is improper because it’s outside of institutional or male control” (Alldred, 1998, p. 13). Likewise, a lesbian couple who ordered donor sperm from the website of a U.S.-based company were described by the press as “try[ing the] internet for perfect baby” (The Sun, 10 July 1998: “Lesbians try internet for perfect baby”). And, a gay couple who had children with a surrogate mother were described as “expecting £200,000 twins” (The Daily Telegraph, 2 September 1999: “Gay men are expecting £200,000 twins”), and “pay[ing] for surrogate mother’s twins” (The Guardian, 2 September 1999: “Gay couple pay for surrogate mother’s twins”). Because donor insemination and surrogacy services often have to be paid for, this leads the media to argue that lesbians and gay men view children as “products” or “designer accessories” (which can be purchased if the price is right), and this is, of course, roundly condemned. This is powerful antilebian and -gay rhetoric because it constructs lesbian and gay parenting as unnatural and morally wrong. Indeed, the rhetoric of the natural imports morality by the back door. It is often used to justify and legitimate points of view, to persuade rather than describe, and in a normative sense to imply good, healthy and virtuous (Pronk, 1993; Tiefer, 1997). This moral imperative is evident in the use of words and phrases such as “how it is *meant* to be,” “they are not *meant* to be parents” (Paul, focus group 5, June 1999), and “nature *says*” that lesbians “*should*” get married if they want children (Yvonne Stayti, quoted in Daily Mail, 10

July 1998: “Lesbians order a baby on the Net”). The argument that lesbian and gay parenting is unnatural recycles the hidden morality in claims about what is natural and unnatural, and it reinforces common sense beliefs about the universality and “naturalness” of social constructs such as the nuclear family.

References to “nature” are also very common in debates about other lesbian and gay rights, recent discussions about lowering the age of consent for sex between men in the UK, for example, often focused on the unnaturalness of homosexuality (Ellis & Kitzinger, 2000; see also Bech, 1992, in relation to debates about lesbian and gay marriage). The rhetoric of “unnaturalness” is also used to vilify marginal mothers (Alldred, 1996) and to condemn women who choose not to mother (Gillespie, 2000).

“Lesbian and gay parents are selfish because they ignore ‘the best interests of the child’”

The third theme constructs lesbians and gay men as selfish and juxtaposes this with concerns about the best interests of children. For example:

It isn’t right for you to impose that on a child for your selfish needs, because if you’re thinking to yourself “I want a child, I want a child,” you’re not thinking of the child or the psychological effects. (Audience member, Kilroy, November 1997: “Should gay men and women have children?”)

This was a case of pure selfishness and they appear to have no regard for the welfare of the children. We believe children need partners of both sexes to develop and reflect the world as it is. (Trevor Berry, president of Families Need Fathers, quoted in Daily Mail, 31 July 1998: “A mockery of motherhood”)

An article in the “Daily Mail” about Lisa Dawson and Dawn Whiting “splitting up,” asks about their children: “How will those babies feel in later life when they learn that they are merely the outcome of a selfishly irresponsible stunt?” (Daily Mail, 1 July 1998: “Brave new world”). Lesbians and gay men are told (by a gay man in this instance) that “children aren’t designer things that you can pick up one day and say “I think I’ll have a child today be-

cause I'm gay and happy . . . it's a . . . life" (Gay man in audience, Trisha, June 1999: "And YOU want to be a parent?!"). Lesbian and gay parenting is branded "a really selfish idea" (Audience member, Vanessa, June 1998: "Gay mums and dads") and "totally selfish" (Audience member, Vanessa, June 1998: "Gay mums and dads"), and the "life of the child" is the "thing thing what matters" (Audience member, Vanessa, June 1998: "Gay mums and dads"). Lesbians are told that they "should not just gratify [their] own sensibilities" (Audience member, Central Weekend Live, November 1997: "Lesbian mums"), and lesbians and gay men are accused of "only thinking about themselves, they're not considering the child" (Audience member, Ricki Lake, April 1998: "You shouldn't be a parent because you're gay").

Stereotypes of lesbian and gay sexuality as hedonistic contradict the image of parenting as demanding responsibility and a readiness to make personal sacrifices (Radford, 1991). Laura Benkov (1994, p. 25) argues that lesbianism in particular is perceived as "an affront because it reveals the mother as a person who declares her own sexual identity and so pursues fulfilment of her own needs and desires—the implication being that she does so in opposition to the needs of her child." Although women are frequently assumed to possess a natural maternal desire, some groups of women, including lesbians, are expected to forego parenting "in the interests of the child." As Alldred (1998, p. 16) points out, this argument does not question the desires of heterosexual women for children and "assumes for them a moral high-ground of less selfish reasons." Indeed, married heterosexual women "are accorded a monopoly on acceptable reasons for wanting a child" (Radford, 1991, p. 10), although heterosexual women who choose not to have children are often labelled "selfish" (Gillespie, 2000; Woollett & Phoenix, 1991).

This argument derives much of its rhetorical force by focusing on children and alluding to their "best interests," it also suggests that opponents of lesbian and gay parents are morally superior to lesbians and gay men because they *are* thinking of the child. It is hard to undermine with specific facts or information, because what "thinking of the child" involves is not spelled out, but it is meaningful because of widely circulating beliefs about homosexuality and lesbianism as "sinful" and "unnatural" Al-

ldred (1996). Indeed, the notion that we should always act in children's best interests is so paramount in Western societies that questioning this is virtually unheard of, and risks criticisms ranging from callousness to child abuse. This argument assumes that having a lesbian or gay parent is not in a child's best interests, and that children would automatically be better off in a heterosexual family, by virtue of the parents' (hetero)sexuality.

Selfishness is a charge frequently levelled at lesbians and gay men—as well as being labelled selfish for wishing to become parents, they are also labelled selfish for their rejection of heterosexuality, and by extension, opportunities for parenting (Raymond, 1992). It is also an consistent theme in criticisms of marginal mothers, and, as Alldred (1998, p. 17) notes, it "remains powerful because it is constructed as antithetical to true, virtuous motherhood."

"Children in lesbian and gay families lack appropriate role models"

The fourth theme focuses on the need of all children for male and female role models. Children in lesbian and gay families are assumed to have a deficit in their family structure, they are thought to lack opposite sex role models, often expressed as a concern about a lack of "appropriate," "suitable," or the "right kind" of role models. This argument is driven in part by popular perceptions of lesbians and gay men: that, because they have sexual relations with persons of the same sex, they are assumed to also only live and socialised with, relate to and love people of the same sex, and sexuality. In other words, they are thought to live on "planet lesbian" (Brenda, lesbian parent, Modern Times, November 1998: "Pink parents") or planet gay. Lesbians in particular, influenced by widespread (mis)conceptions of radical feminism and lesbian politics, particularly separatism, are branded "man-haters" (Councillor Frank Cooke, Children Need Fathers, Central Weekend Live, November 1997: "Lesbian mums"). Consider the following examples of this theme:

Not having a male role model . . . I don't know, I just reckon it'll have a really damaging effect on the child because, you've gotta have a male figure in your life, haven't you? Especially if you're a boy. I mean poor thing,

brought up with two mothers. I reckon it'll be really confusing . . . you wouldn't be used to men at all, you wouldn't know how to relate to them. (Sarah, focus group 1, December 1997)

. . . there was criticism last night from family welfare groups. Dr Adrian Rogers, adviser to the campaign group Family Focus, said of the gay couple: "They have no right to be parents. To deprive the child of one of its natural sexual role models should be a crime" . . . Trevor Berry, president of parent support group Families Need Fathers, said the children of gay parents could grow up confused. "Until the age of seven I believe it is better for children to have a parent of each sex so they understand the way the world works in terms of relationships between the sexes," he said. (Daily Mail, 1 September 1999: "The tangled saga of two wealthy gays and the woman who is helping them realise their dream of having children together")

This theme encompasses claims about children's need for, or right to, a mother *and* a father: "a child needs the input of a male and a female" (Roger Williams, Families Need Fathers, Central Weekend Live, November 1997: "Lesbian mums"); "what's best for a child is a mother and a father" (Audience member, Kilroy, November 1997: "Should gay men and women become parents?"). As well as the claim that "the ideal is a man and a woman" (Audience member, Kilroy, November 1997: "Should gay men and women become parents?"), and heterosexuality is best for children. Lesbians are told that "a child deserves a father" (Roger Williams, Families Need Fathers, Central Weekend Live, November 1997: "Lesbian mums"), and they are accused of making "a mockery of traditional family values" (Reverend Bernie Saunders, Opposes Gay Interracial Adoptions, Sally Jessy Raphael, February 1993: "Gay interracial adoption"). Arguments about role models are predominantly directed at lesbian parents, largely because more lesbians are parents than gay men, and because there is a particular anxiety about children, especially boys, growing up without a father. This said, one of the primary "concerns" expressed in public discussion of the recent case of British gay couple Barry Drewitt and Tony Barlow, was, as the above quote il-

lustrates, that their children would lack female (or "the right kind of") role models.

Some opponents of lesbian parenting, draw on men's rights discourses to argue that we "cannot afford to exclude fathers from the family" (Mark Thomas, United Kingdom Men's Movement, Central Weekend Live, November 1997: "Lesbian mums"). Indeed, concern about a lack of male role models in lesbian families taps into broader anxieties about "fatherless families" in Western societies. Blankenhorn (1995, p. 1), for example, describes fatherlessness as "the most harmful demographic trend of this generation." He argues that lesbian families "seek to deny the importance and even possibility of any effective fatherhood in our society" (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 177), and that they "insist upon the essential irrelevance of all fathers" (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 177). The claim that every child needs a father or a male role model to model maleness "seems to suggest that any model of maleness is preferable to none" and that the presence of a male is more important than the calibre of their parenting (Saffron, 1996, p. 186). It also ignores the fact that lesbians are individuals, and that each partner in a lesbian couple will care for their child(ren) in different ways and bring different skills and perspectives to parenting (Saffron, 1996).

People can find it difficult to specify why exactly opposite sex role models are necessary, and to identify their unique contribution to family life. Some argue that male *and* female role models are necessary for children to have a "stable and balanced life" (Yvonne Stayti, quoted in *The Mirror*, 10 July 1998: "Lesbian couple plan baby with internet sperm"). Others point to a purported "special bond" that exists between father and son, for example, which cannot "be replaced by a female" (Audience member, Leeza, January 1998: "Gay parents"). Arguments about role models are also driven by anxiety about the "normal" development of children's gender and sexuality, and some people use lay versions of social learning and cognitive development theory to explain why role models are important. For example, Dr Adrian Rogers (quoted in *The Express*, 16 October 1999: "Gays should be free to adopt says leading judge") claims that "children learn by observation"³—presumably he means that they learn how to be appropriately masculine or feminine and heterosexual by observing their

mother and father interact. What underlies panic about growing numbers of lesbian and gay households with children is the concern that lesbians and gay men cannot be trusted to teach boys how to be “real men” and girls how to be “little ladies.” As Raymond points out:

our unarticulated assumption that the presence of a mother and a father is necessary to teach and reinforce gender-role behavior seems to ground most discussions of parenting: how else will little girls learn what it means to be a woman and little boys what it means to be a man? (Raymond, 1992, p. 126)

Arguments about role models indicate that popular conceptions of gender and sexuality are closely linked, and some people assume that lesbians and gay men have a faulty gender identity. This assumption is wed to the idea that lesbians and gay men constitute a “third sex,” or they are trapped in the “wrong” body, that is, the body of the opposite sex.

The notion of role models is widely used to condemn; it is used to question the ability of single mothers to successfully rear their children, especially their sons. A lack of male role models is thought to be responsible for crime and delinquency among young males, and lesbians and gay men are repeatedly accused of being unsuitable role models for children. Indeed, lesbianism and gayness are regularly believed to be the “negative outcome of development stemming from either homosexual or inadequate heterosexual role-model identification” (Riddle, 1978, p. 39). It is sometimes assumed that a single contact with a lesbian or gay adult could irrevocably shape a child’s identity (Riddle, 1978), by reinforcing opposite sex-typed behaviour—effeminacy in boys and tomboyism in girls.

“Children in lesbian and gay families grow up gay and confused”

The fifth theme focuses on the presumed negative effects on children of growing up in a lesbian and gay family. The primary negative effect that causes concern is the greater likelihood that children will be lesbian or gay, or, at least “confused” about their sexual identity. Paramount in this theme is a preoccupation with the welfare of children:

you don’t want kids to grow up with a homosexual couple in case they become homosexual as well. Next thing you’ll have loads of homosexuals walking around, and then where are you? . . . bent parents make bent children, if not very fucked up ones at least. You can’t confuse a child like that. (Simon, focus group 5, June 1999)

. . . when we’re looking at other children, children younger than sixteen, children who do not know whether they’re gay, children who do have questions, as so many do about their sexuality in their adolescent years, you know, teen years, I would suggest it’s probably deeply confusing for them, and more confusing to be put into a family with a homosexual or lesbian couple because that would definitely influence them massively. (Ingrid Millar, “The Star,” *Living Issues*, January 1998: “Gay adoption”)

This argument is motivated by concerns about the apparent delicacy of “normal” child development (Allred, 1996). Children in lesbian and gay families are often thought to be in “grave danger” (Audience member, *Central Weekend Live*, November 1997: “Lesbian mums”) of “not having their emotional needs met” (Lynette Burrows, family campaigner, *Living Issues*, January 1998: “Gay adoption”). They are at risk of being “mentally disturbed” (Dolores Ayling, *Says Children Should Not Live With Gay Couples*, Sally Jessy Raphael, October 1993: “She had to give up her child”) or “emotionally impaired” (Audience member, *Central Weekend Live*, November 1997: “Lesbian mums”) as a result of their parents’ chosen lifestyle. But most worryingly of all, “they don’t know if they’re gay. They don’t know if they’re lesbian” (Dolores Ayling, *Says Children Should Not Live With Gay Couples*, Sally Jessy Raphael, October 1993: “She had to give up her child”).

As Raymond (1992, p. 117) points out, the concern is that “gay parents might produce gay children; or could pressure a child into a same-sex sexual orientation; or, minimally, would needlessly confuse the child with their oppositional sexualities.” This discourse draws on the “congenital disease” theory of homosexuality (Copper, 1987, pp. 233–234) and the “contagion theory,” as well as the notion that lesbians and gay men actively “recruit” children to les-

bianism and homosexuality. In the words of Anita Bryant, "since homosexuals cannot reproduce they must freshen their ranks with our children" (quoted in Hill & Cheadle, 1996, p. 69). The antilesbian and -gay psychologist Paul Cameron (1999, p. 289), in a paper entitled "Testing 'Common Sense,'" argues that the:

"fulcrum of common sense" with regard to the sexuality of children raised in lesbian and gay families is that "like produces like." Children are expected to become like their parents. Folk psychology also suggests that homosexuality is a learned pathology . . . and therefore parents will very likely teach it. (Cameron, 1999, pp. 289–290)

In response to such claims, Diane Raymond (1992, p. 118) asks: "children of gays and lesbians may be more likely to be gay; why should that matter, unless we are uncomfortable with the prospect of more gays and lesbians?" The argument that children should be protected from "displays" and discussions of homosexuality and lesbianism recycles the idea that they are "naturally" heterosexual unless corrupted by some outside force. Yet, as many lesbian feminists have pointed out (e.g., Rich, 1987), the only sexual identity that is truly actively imposed on children is (compulsory) heterosexuality.

This theme, like the others, constructs lesbian and gay parenting as pathological and "bad for children" (Knight & Garcia, 1994, p. 1). It also promotes "common sense" folk wisdom about psychosexual development (and, in particular, about the aetiology of homosexuality and lesbianism), and constructs the nuclear family as a guarantor of "normal" child development and heterosexuality. Additionally, it supports the idea that only parents, especially mothers, are responsible for children's development, and that other influences are relatively unimportant. Thus, this argument lends itself to mother (and father) blaming, and it ignores the primary role of the social in shaping children's gendered and sexual lives. This romantic image of family life, and the development of children within it, is contradicted by a wealth of feminist research on motherhood and the family, which points to the oppressive and often abusive nature of family relations, and the potential risks that heterosexual men pose to the women and children in their family (see, e.g., Russell, 1986; Yllö & Bograde, 1988).

This argument, like some of the others I dis-

cuss in this paper, is powerful because it promotes a particular image of children. Children are portrayed as innocent and vulnerable, and in need of the care and protection of "appropriate" adults. Anyone attempting to counter arguments about children growing up lesbian and gay risks being charged with "not thinking of the child" or "treating children as guinea-pigs" (Catherine MacAskil, lecturer in adoption and fostering, Heart of the Matter, February 1993: "Fostering prejudice"). Hence, concern about children's welfare is used to provide a justification for discriminating against lesbians and gay men. The use of this argument has the effect of making lesbian and gay parents feel compelled to lie about or hide their lesbian and gay children, and thus it contributes to the continuing silencing and suppression of lesbian and gay sexuality. It helps create an environment in which it is very difficult for lesbians and gay men, especially young lesbians and gay men, to feel pride in their sexual identity.

The juxtaposition of lesbians' and gay men's rights with children's rights is common in debates about lesbian and gay equality. For example, child protection arguments were abundantly evident in recent debates in the UK about Section 2(a) of the Local Government Act 1998 (better known as Section 28), which makes it illegal for local authorities to "promote" homosexuality and lesbianism, or for school children to be taught that lesbian and gay families are anything other than pretend families (Donovan, 1997).

"The children of lesbian and gay parents get bullied"

The sixth and final theme apparent in the data is organised around the claim that children in lesbian and gay families get bullied because lesbians and gay men raising children is socially unacceptable. For example:

The child is brought up, he goes to school, he's got two men coming with him, one for his mum, one for his dad, and- or two ladies, and they know they're in for a bashing . . . they get bullied, they get chased out, and they're put upon (Audience member, Vanessa, June 1998: "Gay mums and dads")

I really have quite strong feelings about the inappropriateness of lesbian and homosexual

partners adopting children . . . If you think of a child in school, we know that other children can be cruel and may say to another child, "There's something different about you, you've got two mummies," or "You've got two daddies" . . . I think we're adding to the complexity of children's situations, and that really concerns me. (Catherine Mac Askil, lecturer in adoption and fostering, Heart of the Matter, February 1993: "Fostering prejudice")

The argument here is that "society doesn't accept lesbians as parents" (Audience Member, Sally Jessy Raphael, October 1993: "She had to give up her child"). It highlights "the stigma society attaches to gay couples with children" (Audience member, *The Time . . . The Place*, November 1997: "Should lesbian couples have children?"), and the consequent "ridicule" (Audience Member, Sally Jessy Raphael, October 1993: "She had to give up her child") and bullying that children of lesbian and gay parents will face. According to opponents of lesbian and gay parenting, children will get "picked on" (Audience member, Trisha, June 1999: "And YOU want to be a parent?!"), "teased through high school" (Shelly, sister to a lesbian parent, Ricki Lake, April 1998: "You shouldn't be a parent because you're gay") and have to "grow up facing those problems" (Audience member, *The Time . . . The Place*, April 1997: "Should lesbian couples have children?"). Arguments about bullying are frequently articulated in terms of concern for the welfare of lesbians' and gay men's children. For instance, a participant on *The Time . . . The Place* talk show explicitly claims that she has "got nothing against gay couples having children and bringing them up, I can't see a problem with that" (April 1997: "Should lesbian couples have children?"), but "what worries [her] the most" is the possibility that their children will get bullied.

Such arguments, while expressing sympathetic concern for the hardship endured, demand that lesbians and gay men adapt to heterosexism by not having children: "loosing the right to parent, in this view, is the price one pays for social deviance" (Raymond, 1992, p. 117). Citing social prejudice when attacking lesbian and gay parents is a prime example of blaming the victim (Allred, 1996, 1998; Raymond, 1992). These arguments put the responsibility for heterosexism on lesbians and gay

men, accept the inevitability of heterosexism, and collude with heterosexist ideology (Raymond, 1992). Hence, they maintain a heterosexist status quo, and use the fact that people discriminate as a reason for institutionalising discrimination (Mohr, 1988; Raymond, 1992). Mohr (1988, pp. 199–201) argues:

If one does not think such discrimination is illegitimate . . . one would seem equally obliged to argue for the sterilization of interracial couples; for only then would their "progeny" be spared the needless suffering created by the strong social recrimination directed against mixed-race children in current society. (Raymond, 1992, p. 117, also draws parallels with "race" to undermine the bullying argument)

The responsibility for stigma lies with the individuals and institutions that perpetuate it, not with lesbians and gay men. Note also that in these examples of the bullying argument, everyone except the speaker perpetuates homophobic bullying. For instance, people place the responsibility for bullying with "society" (Audience Member, Sally Jessy Raphael, October 1993: "She had to give up her child") or with "other people" (Tetita, partner of a lesbian parent, Ricki Lake, April 1998: "You shouldn't be a parent because you're gay"), and thus avoid being held accountable for their discriminatory behaviour. As with some of the other themes I have analysed, concern for children provides people with a justification for discriminating against lesbians and gay men.

Bullying arguments are frequently used to curtail adult's behaviour (to object to "mixed race" partnerships, e.g., Phoenix & Woollett, 1991), and claims about social prejudice are often used to justify lesbian and gay oppression. For example, Pratt and Tuffin (1996) found that the police officers they interviewed used arguments about social prejudice to justify their view that gay men should not be police officers. The police officers emphasised what they claimed to be the "public's" lack of support for gay officers in order to remove their responsibility for discriminatory behaviour.

CONCLUSION

I have identified six arguments frequently used to oppose lesbian and gay parenting in a num-

ber of contexts from popular television talk shows to focus groups with college students. The common function of these arguments is to warrant the view that lesbians and gay men should not be parents, and thus to maintain the heterosexist status quo. In using these different arguments, opponents of lesbian and gay parenting either place the responsibility for their views with god, nature, children's developmental needs or society, or they highlight their concern for children's welfare and thereby protect themselves from having to be answerable for their prejudicial opinions. These themes represent the primary resources available for attacking lesbian and gay parents. They provide people with effective weapons for opposing lesbian and gay parental rights, and they are often combined to provide powerful accounts of why lesbians and gay men are unfit to parent. As a consequence, they contribute to the continuing oppression of lesbians and gay men.

My analysis of these data has highlighted that some of arguments used to deny child custody to lesbian and gay parents in the early 1970s, such as claims about children growing up lesbian and gay or suffering homophobic bullying, are still today being drawn on in popular discussions of lesbian and gay parenting. These arguments appeal to folk wisdom about parenting, child development and the genesis of homosexuality and lesbianism. They also invoke images of children as vulnerable and in need of protection. My analysis has also emphasised the persistence of these arguments over time—some have even endured for centuries. These arguments draw on themes that are common throughout Western culture, and that are familiar from years of repetition in countless controversies over “homosexuality and society” (Bech, 1992) and debates about marginal mothers. They are enduring because they are simple and easy to use, and are wed to widely circulating and deeply held common sense beliefs about sexuality, morality and the family. Cultural common sense, because it is so well embedded in our collective consciousness, is very difficult to challenge, thus arguments about role models or the unnaturalness of lesbian and gay parenting are potent weapons in the fight against lesbian and gay parental rights. As Alldred (1998, p. 19) argues, in relation to her analysis of the construction of lesbian parenting in an article in the British tab-

loid press, the use of these arguments is a “powerful reminder that heterosexuality and the family remain powerful social institutions despite many sites of liberalization (including some aspects of the legal sphere).”

While these arguments are rhetorically potent, there *is* evidence of “resistance” on the part of lesbian and gay parents in my data. Elsewhere I have explored how lesbian and gay parents and their apologists respond to attempts to undermine their parenting (Clarke, 1999, 2001a, 2001b). Like their opponents, they repeatedly draw on a limited number of themes, such as the idea that “love makes a family” and lesbian and gay families “are just the family next door.” In response to arguments about a lack of suitable role models, for instance, lesbian and gay parents and their apologists typically list all the “right kind of role models” in their family or their support network. Lesbian and gay parents also frequently draw parallels between their families and heterosexual families, lesbian parents often claim that their families are no different from those of single heterosexual mothers—their child simply has two female parents, rather than one. In general, lesbian and gay parents highlight the similarities between lesbian and gay and heterosexual families, stress the importance of qualities such as love, which transcend the boundaries of sexuality, and emphasise the ordinariness of lesbian and gay families.

I now briefly consider the issue of how best to respond to arguments against lesbian and gay parenting from a scholarly perspective. The literature on lesbian and gay parenting rarely engages with arguments against lesbian and gay parenting apart from casting them as myths, the product of homophobic attitudes, or analysing them as a series of abstract arguments (see Raymond, 1992). A common strategy in many studies and reviews of the literature is to contrast arguments against lesbian and gay parenting with the findings of scientific research. DiLapi (1989, p. 114), for instance, discusses “five common myths used again women during custody hearings.” These myths include that “children growing up with lesbians will be gay” (DiLapi, 1989, p. 115) and “lesbians are sexually perverse and molest children” (DiLapi, 1989, p. 117). She then contrasts these myths with what “research indicates . . . (DiLapi, 1989, p. 115), the “evidence shows . . . (DiLapi, 1989,

p. 115), and what “matched studies of children from lesbian single mothers and heterosexual single mothers reveal . . .” (DiLapi, 1989, p. 115). She concludes that arguments against lesbian parenting have “no basis in reality” (DiLapi, 1989, p. 117). More recently, Pihama (1998, p. 200) has “deconstruct[ed] myths about lesbian and gay families” such as “children of lesbian and gay families become lesbian or gay” (Pihama, 1998, p. 201) and “lesbians are anti-male” (Pihama, 1998, p. 201). Like DiLapi and others, Pihama contrasts these myths with what “research . . . shows . . .” (Pihama, 1998, p. 201). While this is a useful approach in some contexts (see Clarke, 2000), in others it is ultimately unproductive, because we are no better informed as to how these arguments work, what they are used to do, and what effects they have. To effectively disarm and challenge our opponents, we need to take their arguments seriously (as I believe I have done so in this paper). While the arguments I have identified in this paper are obviously deeply offensive, we must move beyond our gut reactions to mount an effective critique and challenge, and examine how, for example, these arguments serve to reinforce heterosexuality, and use common sense notions of the naturalness of heterosexuality and the vulnerability of children to undermine lesbian and gay rights. Once we have deconstructed arguments against lesbian and gay rights in this way, we will be well placed to answer them or to develop our own agendas for public discussion of lesbian and gay oppression.

In conclusion, opponents of lesbian and gay parenting repeatedly draw on arguments about the sinfulness, unnaturalness, and selfishness of lesbian and gay parents, and the negative psychological and social effects of lesbian and gay parenting. These arguments are endlessly recycled and serve to reinforce the heterosexual status quo.

ENDNOTES

1. Arguments about the sinful and unnaturalness of lesbian and gay parenting are often intertwined—a popular argument is that the “natural” order is also ordained by god and “the way he planned it” (Pihama, 1998). Religious authorities/figures frequently voice the view that the nuclear family is part of the natural and “ordained” order, and to move outside of this order is to undermine society and god’s plan for the human race (Pihama, 1998).
2. This is one of the few arguments against lesbian and gay parenting I quote that is contrasted with a pro-lesbian and -gay perspective (I quote it again on p. 12).
3. This is the only other antilebian and -gay parenting argument I quote that is juxtaposed with a pro-lesbian and -gay parenting argument.

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