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## How do heteronormative perspectives affect same-sex parents?

Michelle Nicole McNevin

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HOW DO HETERONORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES AFFECT  
SAME-SEX PARENTS?

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

---

by  
Michelle Nicole McNevin

June 2011

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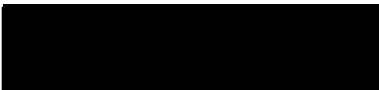
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by

Michelle Nicole McNevin

June 2011

Approved by:

  
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Dr. Teresa Morris, Faculty Supervisor  
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6-7-11  
Date

  
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## ABSTRACT

This study focused on how heteronormative perspectives affect same-sex parents. Explanation of how same sex-families are formed, the current literature on disclosure methods and heteronormativity was discussed. Through the use of a post-positivist paradigm, eighteen same-sex parents were interviewed throughout Southern California to discuss the ways they disclose their relationship with regards to their children. The use of open coding, axial coding and selective coding analysis assisted in the discovery of different disclosure methods to create a theory of disclosure. The study revealed that throughout the life of the child, the parents and children disclosed differently. The differences in the way family members disclosed were linked to the age of the children. Understanding how these families disclose the nature of their same-sex family provides the social worker with insights on how to work more effectively with these families and create more inclusive space for these families throughout the community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my deep gratitude and appreciation for the families that took the time to share with me their life experiences. It was truly an honor to meet each one of them. I would also like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Teresa Morris for all her help and support to finish this project.

## DEDICATION

I would like to take this opportunity to say, "Thank You" to everyone who believed in me and supported me through this process over the last two years. The page is too short to list everyone's names. I am truly blessed.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Chapter one provides a general overview of the project with the problem statement and purpose of the study. This study focused on how heteronormative perspectives affect same-sex parents. A brief summary is provided of the number and formation of same-sex families that live in the U.S. This chapter also gives a definition and context to the term heteronormativity and its affect on continuing social injustices toward same-sex families. Additionally, the chapter discusses the post positivist paradigm, which was the approach to this study. Finally, the implications of this study for social work practice are addressed.

#### Problem Statement

The 2000 US Census reported that there were approximately "4 to 6 million adults who self-identified as gay men and lesbians in the United States" (Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein, 2005, p. 1). Of those 4 to 6 million homosexual individuals, "594,000 householders identified themselves as living with a same-sex unmarried partner" (Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein, 2005, p. 1). The Williams

Project on Sexual Orientation found that "39 percent of same-sex couples aged 22-55 are raising children with 250,000 same-sex couples having children under the age of 18 in the US" (Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein, 2005, p. 1). Same-sex families are formed in various ways. Gay and Lesbian (GL) people may become parents after having been in a heterosexual relationship prior to coming out in later life. Lesbian couples may conceive from the use of anonymous or known sperm donors. Gay men may use a surrogate mother for the formation of their family and use sperm donation from both partners to conceive. Additionally, same-sex couples may adopt to form their families.

Once a same-sex family is formed, they may face unique challenges. The bias of heterosexism is directly connected with same-sex families. Heterosexism as described by Herek (1992) as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community" (p. 89). Heterosexism is directly connected with heteronormativity. Heteronormativity "refers to the complex ways in which heterosexual culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the

very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (Warner, 1993, p. xxi). Simply put, heteronormativity is the presumption that every person one sees is heterosexual and the belief that every family one sees is heterosexual (consisting of male and female parents). Further, it is the assumption that every client one sees in his or her office is heterosexual.

The willingness to disclose one's sexual orientation to a child's teacher, or questions from a child's doctor of "who is the mother of the child?" can be stressful situations for same-sex parents. While these seem like small faux pas in public settings, they could lead to increased and undue stress to parents and children. However, it is important to be aware of how one perceives all individuals without knowing the entire truth of their situation.

The role of social work in this context of empowering the same-sex family to meet their fullest potential is one that the Code of Ethics for the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) states is to "enhance the well-being and basic needs of people" (NASW,

1996, line 3), particularly those who are oppressed. One of the core values of the Code of Ethics is Social Justice. This challenges social workers to "promote sensitivity and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity" (NASW, 1996, line 164-165). Additionally, the NASW Code of Ethics (1996) states that social workers "should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status and mental or physical disability" (NASW, 1996, line 173-175). Through increasing awareness of the unique needs of this population, social workers will be able to promote further social justice for this underserved population.

#### Purpose of the Study

This research project studied same-sex couples that are co-parenting children in the United States and the differences in parenting that were elicited when faced with heteronormative perspectives in society. Specifically, the research question asked, "How do



same-sex parents navigate a heterosexual world while raising children?" This research was accomplished through interviews with same-sex parents in an attempt to measure the affects of heteronormative perspective on same-sex families and identify disclosure practices of same-sex parents.

The literature defines same-sex parents as anything from a gay male co-parents to lesbian co-parents to single gay or lesbian parents. Additionally, The Williams Project (Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein, 2005) found that same-sex parents "are more likely than different-sex parents to be black and Hispanic with over 46 percent of their children being of color as well" (p. 1). This calls to light that gay- and lesbian-headed households span different races and ethnic backgrounds.

This research project used the post positivist paradigm to study the affects heteronormative perceptions have on same-sex parent's parenting styles. The post positivist paradigm agrees with positivism that an objective reality exists, but suggests, "immutable laws and mechanisms driving that reality can never be fully comprehended" (Morris, 2006, p. 71). The post positivist worldview is one that suggests that the researcher will

never fully be on the outside of the experience being studied, that there is no way to fully remove oneself from the human subject that one is studying, but requires that the researcher remain objective, open minded and inquisitive while collecting data. The post positivist utilizes human experience and study participants' own experience through "interviews, observations, and/or reviews of documents using the inductive exploratory approach," (Morris, 2006, p. 71). This allows the researcher to draw from past interviews to develop furthering techniques to solicit information from participants. Each participant in this study shared a homosexual experience, but the way they became parents varied, as did their disclosure methods. This paradigm allowed the researcher freedoms to ask furthering questions to draw out each participant's unique experiences.

The rationale for choosing the post positivist research paradigm is that the paradigm allows the research focus to evolve throughout the literature review, data collection, and analysis of data and personal experience. This paradigm allowed the researcher to gather data in a naturalistic setting and then

continually ask questions to allow the research to evolve as more data were collected. This allowed the participants to tell their story about the importance of having various disclosure styles in their repertoire. This is a human experience that would be lost on a questionnaire and provided an opportunity for these families to have a voice. Specifically, this project studied the disclosure practices of same-sex parents who are raising children or have raised children in the Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego County areas of Southern California.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

Generalist social work practice discusses numerous levels at which a social worker may intervene with a client. This project provides support and insight for the generalist practitioner at the engagement, assessment, planning, and implementation phases of the model. This is done through providing insight to practitioners about the needs of same-sex families and how to overcome social injustices due to heteronormative perspectives. The current research project asked the question, "How do the heteronormative perspectives affect same-sex parents?"

This study addressed the social and personal challenges that same-sex parents raising children encounter. It offers much needed insight to micro social work. Much of the literature points to the need for practitioners to develop a greater awareness of their personal bias when working with same-sex families. Blackwell, Dziegielewski, and Jacinto (2006) suggest that heterosexual policies that have been put in place further discriminate against same-sex families. Social workers at the micro and macro level need to form an awareness of how policies and procedures in schools, clinics, doctor's offices, and legislation are designed to support these types of families. An additional call from the literature demands that practitioners must move away from "heteronormative presumptions that interpret sexual differences as deficits" (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001, p. 179) and look at the strengths that these families have and empower them to overcome their struggles. Recognizing "that gay and lesbian families are essentially different" (Hicks, 2005, p. 165) allows the micro practitioner a place to start to address the issues that the same-sex families have and learn how to best empower them.

## Summary

Chapter one provided a brief overview of the problem statement and purpose of this study. A brief explanation of how heteronormative perspectives affect same sex parents was discussed. The chapter concluded with the implications of this study on micro and macro social work practice.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Chapter Two discusses the different types of same-sex families described by current literature. The affects of children being raised in homosexual homes are discussed. A brief discussion of disclosure practices that same-sex families use follows. Further definitions of a heteronormative perspective are discussed, and an explanation of the Family Ecology Theory and Homosexual Identity Theory applied to this study concludes this chapter.

#### Types of Same-Sex Families

Same-sex families can come into form in many ways. Gay and lesbian people may become parents because they were in a heterosexual relationship prior to coming out in later life. Perhaps they were a lesbian couple conceiving from the use of anonymous or known sperm donors. Gay men may use a surrogate mother for the formation of their family and use sperm donation from both partners to conceive. Additionally same-sex partners may become parents through adoption. Allen and Demo

further described the evolution of lesbian and gay families as being "part of an increasingly diverse family landscape" (1995, p. 111).

Currently, the true number of children that are being raised in same-sex families is unknown. The 2000 US Census did not ask if the number of unmarried persons living in the same house were of the same-sex and in a relationship. However, the estimate that was reported in the 2000 Census was that there were about "594,000 households headed by same-sex couples, and children living in 27 percent of those homes" (Meezan & Rauch, 2005, p. 98). The Census did not actually count each child that was living in these homes, but conservative estimates suggest, "166,000 children are being raised by lesbian and gay parents" (Meezen & Rauch, 2005, p. 98).

#### Affects on Children Raised by Same-Sex Parents

The Encyclopedia of Social Work (2008) states that there are numerous ways to define oppression "all of which have the underlying theme related to the use and misuse of power in human relationships" (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008, p. 322). This can be seen in the domination of one group over another either politically, culturally,

socially, or economically. There are certain powers that are given to those who fall within the norms of society. These powers are seen in the differences of privilege that one receives if they fall into the socially acceptable norm of heterosexuality as opposed to that of homosexuality. Instead of blatantly stating that a person is not equal due to, in this case, sexual orientation, it is the act and process of devaluing same-sex families as not being equal to that of heterosexual families. This requires a greater explanation of one's private life than should have to happen at a school or doctor's office. That, in turn, continues the oppressive cycle of differences. Research is hard pressed to expose exactly how this social oppression affects the children that are raised by same-sex parents. The research that is found surrounding children growing up in same-sex parent homes suggests that there is little differences in these children's experiences and those of children raised in homes with heterosexual parents.

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (ADD Health) (Wainright & Patterson, 2008) studied adolescents and their peers, personal relationships, families, peer groups and communities and reported that



there "were no significant differences in adolescents' peer relations as a function of family type" (Wainright & Patterson, 2008, p. 124). Interestingly enough, while this study was a national study, there were only forty-four adolescents that were parented by female same-sex couples included in the study.

The findings from the ADD Health survey suggest that the gender of the "parent's partner was not an important predictor of adolescent well-being or adjustment" (Teltingator & Patterson, 2008, p. 1366). Stacy and Biblarz (2001) suggest that children that grow up with same sex-parents have some advantages. Those who grow up with two Moms "should develop less stereotypical symbolic, emotional, practical, and gender repertoires" (Stacy & Biblarz, 2001, p. 177). There are extraneous factors in a child's life that may cause greater harm. These could be the education levels of their parents, income levels, divorce of parents and their own self-awareness.

Further assessment of the research done on children of same-sex parents stated that the children will "encounter anti-gay sentiments in their daily lives" (Teltingator & Patterson, 2008, p. 1366), mostly among

their peers. This leads children to report having "felt angry, upset, or sad about these experiences" (Telington & Patterson, 2008, p. 1366). The long-term effects of such oppression are widely unknown because there is little research done on adults who were raised by same-sex parents. Limiting oppression of the homosexual community through equal rights, such as equality for same-sex marriages, could create a reduction in harm towards children of same-sex families.

Ultimately, the literature shows that if children are raised in a same-sex home, this will not necessarily cause harm to the child's adjustment. If the child is reared in a loving and caring home with adult parents who have a "close relationships with them" (Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004, p. 1895), it appears that those children are more stable regardless of the sexuality of the parents. A study conducted by Allen and Burrell (1996) looked at the impact of heterosexual and homosexual parents on children and found that there was little difference between these types of parents. The data looked at in the perspective of the "parent, teacher, child and no difference exist between

heterosexual and homosexual parents" (Allen & Burrell, 1996, p. 30).

The major factors that have the greatest effect on the child's development are all the stressors that they deal with outside of the home. More significant factors that stress the child include how the child and parents are perceived through the eyes of those in the community in which they live, the media messages they see on television or read in the papers expressing the political and moral implications of living a homosexual lifestyle.

#### Disclosure

In the literature, the greatest affect on the child's wellbeing seems to point to disclosure. Disclosure is described as how the parent or child is able to disclose outside of the home that they have one or more gay parents and how the parents let the child know that they are gay. Not only do the people who identify as non-heterosexual have to come-out, but their children "are also faced with the question of when and how to come out to teachers, peers, and other adults about their families" (Goldberg, 2007a, p. 101). Additionally, Goldberg (2007a) found that those

adolescents who felt more proud about their families were able to choose when and how to disclose to their friends and adults in their lives.

There are different methods of disclosure that same-sex couples can use when raising their children. One study by Fairtlough (2008), found that the response from the children of gay parents was not the most difficult to overcome. Once the children came out to friends as having gay parents, it was the negative views their friends had that caused the most issues with the child. Only "four out of fifty-nine young people expressed that homophobic views were not a significant problem for them" (Fairtlough, 2008, p. 525), when sharing their parents sexual orientation with friends. Some young people in the study suggested that the most difficult thing that they had to contend with was their parents' own internalized homophobia. Their parents' internal struggles for self-acceptance and living in secrecy seemed to be detrimental to the child. Ultimately, the children in the study conducted by Fairtlough (2008) noted that when they were able to decide, "when and how information about their family life is made public" (p. 526), they were better equipped to deal with negative situations.

## Heteronormative Perceptions

With a world perspective that suggests that the predominant population is heterosexual, heteronormativity is expressed as a "practice that reinforces the presumptions that there are only two sexes, that it is 'normal' or 'natural' for people of the opposite sex to be attracted to one another" (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 478), and that those who fall outside of this norm are considered deviant. Kitzinger (2005) goes on to state that the "reproduction of the heteronormative world both reflects the heterosexual privilege and (by extrapolation) perpetuates the oppression of non-heterosexual people denied access to key social institutions, such as marriage, and unable to take for granted access to their culture's family reference terms" (p. 494). The limitation of a belief that there is one gender norm, heterosexual male and female, restricts the unique constructions of the society in which one lives.

Little research has been done on same-sex families beyond the attempt to prove that children raised in these homes are not affected by the sexual orientation of the parents. Most of the research looks at children and adolescents in the school setting who are raised by

predominately Caucasian lesbians. One article that addressed adults of lesbian, gay and bisexual parents suggested that the children's and adolescents' attitudes or gender roles "must be interpreted in the context of heteronormative society and offspring's membership by association of a stigmatized group" (Goldberg, 2007b, p. 550). The lack of research on same-sex parents and their parenting styles further perpetuates the belief that heterosexual orientation is the norm.

This literature review has shown that children being raised by same-sex parents fair no less well than a child who was raised in a heterosexual home. Provided that the child develops a caring and supportive relationship with the parents and is given the discretion to disclose the sexual identity of their parents, the children of same-sex parents are said to be okay. This suggests that further exploration into how same-sex parents interact with society around them in a heteronormative world is needed, and this is the focus of this study.

## Theories Guiding Conceptualization

### Family Ecology Theory

There were no theories found that specifically identified the gay and lesbian family dynamic; what was found to explain their situation was the Family Ecology Theory. The Family Ecology Theory looks at the family as a system within a larger system. While the family itself has boundaries and structures, at some point, it will have to work within the community in which it interacts. This theory, while based heavily in systems theory, states, "human beings are both biological organisms and social beings that interact with their environment" (Alderson, 2003, p. 76).

Regarding gay and lesbian families, Ecology Theory can be seen as attempting to describe the unique issues these families face as being "a subculture, which lacks power and experiences discrimination and prejudice" (Allen & Demo, 1995, p. 123). The basic tenants of this theory include "justice, freedom, loving and nurturing relationships, a sense of community, tolerance and trustworthiness" (Allen & Demo, 1995, p. 123). This theory can be used to explain how these families interact with the communities to which they belong. As the

children age, the families will have challenges as they navigate through schools, doctor's offices and other community activities in which the children are involved. This requires the families to have a firm understanding of their family structure and have the ability to confidently interact with other systems in the face of oppression.

### Homosexual Identity Formation

Cass (1979) describes a six-stage model of homosexual identity formation. The author used the interpersonal congruency theory to explain this. Cass (1979) suggests through the article that the homosexual has a choice to move through each stage. Whether conscious or unconscious, the person makes an active choice to move from one stage to the other.

The stages are: 1) identity confusion (person personalizes the information outside regarding homosexuality and what it means); 2) Identity comparison (person accepts the possibility that they may be homosexual); 3) Identity tolerance (if the person moves through the previous two stages successfully, the person moves toward homosexual identity); 4) Identity acceptance (continued and increasing awareness and activity with



other homosexuals); 5) Identity pride (awareness of differences between the persons being acceptable as a homosexual and societies rejection of this concept); and 6) Identity synthesis (person moves toward those heterosexuals and homosexuals that support who they are as a person, sexuality aside).

Cass' (1979) model provides a picture of what the stages look like as a gay and lesbian -identified person walks through each stage. The implication of Cass' model in this study is that for a parent to be able to disclose who they are in regards to their child, they have to know who they are in regards to themselves. This study suggests that for the parents to be able to disclose that they will have to be at either stage 5 Identity pride or stage 6 Identity syntheses. Identity synthesis states that the "them versus us mentality no longer exists" (Cass, 1979, p. 234). This would assist the families as they move through different systems, such as schools, churches, doctors offices and other areas in the community that may or may not require them to disclose their relationship.

## Summary

This chapter included a literature review that described the types of same-sex families that exist, the affects on the child with a heterosexual versus same-sex parents and disclosure practices of these families and heteronormative perspectives. The chapter goes on to explain the ecological theory that supports the rationale for the study.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

Chapter Three outlines the steps that were taken in carrying out this project. Specifically described are: the study design; sampling; demographic data; data collection and instruments used; procedures; protection of human subjects; and data analysis.

#### Study Design

The post-positive paradigm, assumes an objective reality governed by laws and mechanisms that can never be truly understood; although the observer can never be truly separate from reality, researchers should work to control the influence they might have on reality, and data gathered in naturalistic settings give us an accurate understanding of reality. (Morris, 2006, p. xviii)

This allows the theory of the study to be developed through initial interest in a subject, collecting a literature review on the topic, interviewing participants and gatekeepers for the study and lastly analyzing the

collection of findings. Post positivism is a process of unearthing what is happening with a specific population and learning how the phenomenon affects those being studied.

This approach to the study allowed the researcher to identify an area of interest (gay and lesbian parents), explore the literature present in the field and apply those findings to the participants (through interviews) in this study. Gatekeepers were identified at the beginning of this project to assist in selecting participants. Participants were interviewed, and responses were analyzed that allowed the researcher to look at the social phenomenon of heteronormativity on disclosure methods with same-sex parents.

This paradigm allowed for genuine interactions between researcher and participants to express a very personal subject matter. This enabled subjects to share intimate details of their personal experiences that would be lost if answering a questionnaire. The researcher was able to listen to changing tones in participants' voices, view body language and interactions between partners in order to infer how personal these experiences shared

were. This allowed the researcher to feel the experiences of the families and made the project come to life.

### Sampling

In doing a post positivist study, the researcher acknowledged an objective reality and used research to build theory about patterns of behavior. The most appropriate way for a post positivist study to select a sample is by purposive sampling. Purposive sampling gives the research a sample of study participants who can provide the most complete data about the group being studied. For this study, the researcher used Homogeneous Sampling, this is "a strategy of picking a small homogenous sample, the purpose is to describe some particular group" (Patton, 2002, p. 235). This form of sampling gave the study insight on how same-sex parents work together to navigate the society they live in. Participants for the study were selected from interactions with gatekeepers at local churches and through the use of social work networking forums in the Inland Empire. Flyers were dispersed to allow participants to contact the researcher directly through a private e-mail account to set up interviews. The criteria

for participants was that they were over eighteen years old, living in San Bernardino, Riverside, or San Diego County, identified as gay or lesbian, and either currently raising children or have raised children in a same-sex relationship.

### Participants

The sample in this study was same-sex parents who were raising children in San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego Counties in California. Eighteen same-sex parents were interviewed. They were gay male-headed co-parents, lesbian co-parents, and single lesbian parents.

The demographics of the participants in this study are shown in table 1 below (see table 1):

Table 1. Demographics N = 18

Variables	Percentages (%)
Gender	
Female	89%
Male	11%
Age of Participants	
29-39	6%
40-50	50%
51-60	39%
61-70	5%

Variables	Percentages (%)
Ethnicity	
Caucasian	61%
Hispanic	33%
Native American	6%
Spirituality	
Agnostic	6%
Buddhist	12%
Catholic	22%
Episcopalian	11%
Spiritual	22%
United Church of Christ	17%
Sexual Orientation	
Gay	11%
Lesbian	89%
Relationship Status	
Domestic Partner	22%
Engaged	6%
Married	33%
Married and Domestic Partner	33%
Separated	6%
Age of Children	
1-12	24%
13-18	47%
19-25	29%
How They Became Parents	
Adopted	22%
Artificial Insemination	56%
Donor Insemination	11%
Previous Heterosexual Marriage	11%

Seven of the interviews were done with lesbian co-parents, two were identified as single lesbian parents, and one set of interview participants were gay male identified parents for a total of 18 people

interviewed. The age range for all participants was between 29-70 years. The ethnicities of participants were as follows: 11 participants identified as Caucasian, 6 identified as Hispanic and 1 identified as Native American. Of the participants, 5 identified as Christian, 4 identified as Catholic, 4 identified as Spiritual, 2 as Buddhist, 2 as Episcopalian, and 1 as Agnostic. The participants interviewed included: 3 couples identified as Married and Domestic Partners, 3 identified as Married, 2 as Domestic Partners, 1 engaged and 1 separated. Of the participants, 10 became parents through artificial insemination, 2 became parents through donor insemination, 4 became parents through adoption of the children, and 2 became parents through a previous Heterosexual marriage. The ages of the children represented by the participants ranged between 1 years old to 25 years old.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection included gathering information using 10 qualitative interviews through the use of an interview guide, (see Appendix A) created specifically for this study. During the interview, the participants were read



the definition of heteronormativity (Appendix A). The qualitative interview questions were open-ended questions about how same-sex couples perceive heteronormativity and how it affects their disclosure methods. Additional questions were asked regarding how the couples disclosed their relationship to the people outside of their home. Demographic information i.e., gender, age, sexual orientation, relationship status, age of children, and how they came to be parents were collected as well.

Four questions were asked to acquire how a same-sex couples disclosed their relationship outside the home, and seven questions were asked to elicit how these couples navigated a heteronormative world and how disclosure outside the home is done in conjunction with their role as parents. The instrument that was created for this study was to explore heteronormativity and disclosure practices inside and outside the home among same-sex parents.

### Procedures

Originally a cover letter (Appendix B) describing the research topic was sent to the Redlands United Church of Christ, Trinity Episcopal Church of Redlands, First

Congregational United Church of Christ of San Bernardino, Redlands First United Methodist of Redlands, the Community Presbyterian Church of Redlands, the First Congregational Church of Riverside, the Universalist Unitarian Church of Riverside, and the CSUSB Gay and Lesbian Center to solicit participants. Upon initial contact with these churches and the Gay and Lesbian Center, the researcher asked permission to solicit participants. Not every church was responsive to the solicitation by the researcher, and limited participants were elicited from the churches. Those churches that were responsive and embraced the idea of this study invited the researcher to send them flyers that announced the project and allowed the potential participants to directly contact the researcher. Participating churches received flyers stating the topic of the research project and how long the interviews would take.

Due to the limited responses of participants from the churches and the Gay and Lesbian Center at CSUSB, an addendum to the original IRB paperwork was created, and emails were sent to a network of identified professional social workers and other key participants in the community who had connections to gay and lesbian parents.

Data collection was carried out in informal settings, such as coffee shops in their respective cities and participants' homes, depending on the comfort level of the participants. The author was the primary data collector. The tools used during the interviews were a note pad and a digital audio recorder to get interviews in their entirety.

The interviews consisted of eleven open-ended questions interspersed with probing questions. Most of the interviews took approximately 40 to 50 minutes; however, there were two interviews that lasted 120 minutes. A debriefing statement and informed consent form was given to each participating set of parents. At the end of the interviews, the participants were asked if they could be contacted later to provide additional information. Interviews were conducted between January and March.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Identifying characteristics of participants were not recorded or requested to ensure confidentiality of the participants. The limits of confidentiality and anonymity of the participants in the qualitative interviews were

addressed in the cover letter sent to potential participants and prior to starting the interview. All participants received an informed consent and debriefing statement (Appendices C and D).

### Data Analysis

Open coding, axial coding and selective coding were used to analyze the qualitative data collected during the interviews and build a theory of disclosure practices among gay and lesbian parents over the life of the child. Open coding is an "inclusive process of gathering data from several key players, so that all relevant concepts are identified and carried out" (Morris, 2006, p. 112). Axial coding is a "procedure for linking the emergent categories and making statements about the relationship between categories and their dimensions" (Morris, 2006, p. 115). Lastly, selective coding is "the process of integrating and refining the categories and their dimensions to develop theory" (Morris, 2006 p. 116).

Each of the digital audio recordings was transcribed verbatim. This provided approximately four to seven page accounts for each set of participants and approximately 43 pages of combined content for all participants

interviewed. The open coding technique was used for the initial analysis of the transcribed data using the ATLAS.ti Qualitative Data Analysis Software program. Axial coding was carried out to identify similarities in the codes and to group the codes together with similar themes to continue to analyze the data. Selective coding was done by looking at the emerged themes, refining the major codes that emerged out of the first two axial analyses, and identifying the theory of disclosure.

#### Summary

The study used a Post Positivist paradigm that evaluated qualitative data. This type of study allowed the researcher to meet the participants with general questions and a hypothesis that evolved as the researcher evaluated that data. The researcher used open coding, axial coding and selective coding to evaluate the data and found similar concepts that emerged from the interview process.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

Chapter four reports the analysis of the qualitative data collected during this study. The chapter describes the open codes, axial codes, and selective codes. Each phase of analysis is explained followed by a discussion. The first stage was open coding and it resulted in twenty-seven codes. These were affects of having kids, affects on the kids, appropriate disclosure, assumptions of heterosexuality/heteronormativity, creating safe and supportive systems, defining their family, disclosing to the kids, disclosure, extra work, family support, generational differences, Heteronormativity, hiding, honoring the kids, insight, kids' disclosure, life experiences, limited disclosure, mindful awareness of systems, no disclosure, oppression, parenting, private life, protecting, protection from oppressions, self acceptance, and social norms.

## Open Coding

Table 2 shows the 27 codes that emerged through open coding of the responses from the participants (see Table 2).

Table 2. All Codes

Affects of having kids	Kids' Disclosure
Affects on the kids	Life experience
Appropriate Disclosure Assumptions of heterosexuality/heteronormativity	Limited disclosure
Creating Safe Supportive Systems	Mindful awareness of systems
Defining their family	No disclosure
Disclosing to the kids	Oppression
Disclosure	Parenting
Extra Work	Private Life
Family support	Protecting
Generational Differences	Protection from Oppressions
Heteronormativity	Self Acceptance
Hiding	Social Norms
Honoring the kids	
Insight	

### Affects of Having Kids

The participants explained the affects of having kids as requiring them to disclose their relationship in their public and private lives more frequently than they may have had if they did not have children. Parents felt that the kids either brought put them farther out of the closet or further in the closet depending on the age of the child. For example, one parent noted that,

Prior to having "J" we were a little more private about our life. And that was 16 or 17 years ago and it wasn't that accepted then. (Interview-8, Survey Interview, March, 2011)

#### Affects on the Kids

The code affects on the kids was seemingly that the children who grow up with homosexual parents are more diverse, open and accepting of those who are different. Parents felt that growing up in a gay and lesbian home is not always negative and builds character, helping children to be better people. For example one participant noted,

I think it makes the kids better people. The reason why it has made them better people is because they tend to be more accepting and more tolerant. Our kids can go into any environment and fit in.

(Interview-5, Survey Interview, February 2011)

#### Appropriate Disclosure

The participants interviewed explained that the there were various considerations that affected the decisions that they made in becoming same-sex parents. They realized it that they would have to be truthful in who they were with regards to their children. Part of



that truth was making the conscious decision when and with whom to disclose their sexuality. Appropriate disclosure was interpreted by the ways and the different places that the parents or children disclosed their family types. Parents do not deny that they are gay and lesbian, but most responded that they do not announce their sexuality. For example one participant noted that,

We don't lie and that was a decision we made when we had kids we thought that that was important, that we would never deny what our family makeup was, but were also not going to wave flags in inappropriate places. (Interview-2, Survey Interview, February, 2011)

#### Assumptions of Heterosexuality/Heteronormativity

This code showed how assertive a participant was and how likely they were to correct a person when they assumed they were heterosexual. The participants gave various examples of times when they would gently correct a person when they were being perceived as heterosexual. This described how comfortable the person was with his or her own sexual identity. Parents felt that because of the way people dress, hairstyles, rings on the fingers, and pictures of their children, other people make assumptions

of what the person's sexuality is. An example that was give was,

It's not like I say "I'm gay;" I don't do that. I used to travel a lot and on the airplane cause I am wearing a ring people would say oh what does your husband do, I would say actually it's my partner and she is a school teacher. I just correct them if they assume that. (Interview-8, Survey Interview, March 2011).

#### Creating Safe Supportive Systems

This code was interpreted by the researcher as how the families took the lead in defining and creating safe environments for their children. This normally meant that the parents would take the brunt of any initial oppression. The parents would be present in the classrooms and participate in church activities so that the teachers and other parishioners would be comfortable with them and they would be known for being just everyday people and less defined by their sexuality. This meant that the parents would surround the children in environments that provide acceptance and tolerance for their family.

It took a few years for us to feel really embraced by the church; nobody ever said anything mean to us, but over the years, it was probably about at year 4 or 5, the most unlikely parishioners would come up to us and say gosh she is getting so big and you guys are the most amazing family. (Interview-8, Survey Interview, March, 2011)

### Defining their Family

Defining their family was how they expressed what their family design meant when they interacted with the communities of which they were a part. Parents reported that the way that the children define their family is through being safe, taken cared of and loved. The level of acceptance that the children come to evolves over time. An example of this was,

They don't think fathers, they think families; they go to a church that is very mixed and welcoming. This is who your people are! They don't consider it, as a family has to look just like this. They are loved and safe. (Interview-3, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Disclosing to the Kids

This code described how the parents explained to the children how their family was formed. At age appropriate times and with age appropriate language, the parents would explain the donor process, the adoption process or what it meant now that Mom was with a woman. This might have involved an explanation that their family is not the norm, but that the kids are loved. One example of this was,

Yes, she knows the whole story. We call him the donor dude. We don't refer to him as dad or father, she knows that that is a title earned. (Interview-8, Survey Interview, March 2011)

### Disclosure

Disclosure took on two different forms. A non-verbal disclosure style meant that the two parents showed up. They would show up at schools, doctor's visits, baseball games, after school activities and be supportive and represent their children. The verbal type of disclosure was done through interviewing doctors and schools to ensure that these would be safe places for their families to be. For the parent to be able to do either types of this disclosure, they had to be comfortable with their

homosexual identities. The parents reported that they did not wave flags or carry banners; they were just being themselves. It seemed that it was more important for them to create and provide safe accepting environments for their children. One parent expressed this as follows,

As they were growing up, through soccer or band we just both showed up. We both volunteered, we both went to conferences, and we were part of the soccer team those who wanted to figure it out did, and those who didn't assumed we were sisters.

(Interview-2, Survey Interview, February 2011).

#### Extra Work

The extra work code was the different lengths to which the families worked toward normalizing their families. The participants explained that they felt the extra work involved doing research on pre-schools and interviewing doctors to ensure that their children were in a safe environment and accepting of same-sex families. One parent expressed this by noting,

Like Girl Scouts, we had to find a new troop so we went and we interviewed the lady and said this is her family do you have a problem with it. If it was

we would have gone on to the next one. (Interview-1, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Family Support

Family support was explained as the support that these parents received from their families, including support for being gay and lesbian people who are raising a family. Not every participant mentioned having this type of support, but some reported that their families are involved in their children's lives. Parents felt that it was advantageous to have supportive caring involved relationships with their parents and siblings. For example, one parent noted,

Even my family and especially her family are very open too. Her mom is almost 90 years old and she will say this is my daughter in law. (Interview-7, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Generational Differences

This reflected the perceived differences by the older participants regarding coming out as opposed to coming out twenty years ago. The ease of caution that they perceived that younger gay and lesbian parents had today was discussed. One participant noted that,

I think if I were a young person now, and coming out now, I think I would be a different person. I would take more risks. (Interview-2, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Heteronormativity

This code represented how participants gently corrected people when they assumed that they fit into the binary of the heterosexual lifestyles. They participants expressed how they would gently correct people if they made such an assumption and asserted their homosexuality. The participants expressed that this was something that they have to do from the moment that they make the decision to have children. Such a decision was going to place them in doctor's offices, schools, and other settings where they would have to claim status of their children and orientation to their partner. Parents expressed that the assumption that a family is defined as mother/father is obsolete; a family can be comprised of mother/father, mother/mother, father/father, grandparent/aunt and extended families, giving way to increasingly diverse ways of raising children. An example from one participant was,

Like at school they had a father daughter dance or a BBQ for the fathers, and that was one thing but what if there are straights and the father is absent you exclude all these kids. (Interview-5, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Hiding

Initially hiding was interpreted as the parents hide their sexual orientation with the community in which they are involved, but the researcher came to understand that it is more about blending in with the surroundings than drawing attention to themselves. Parents viewed hiding as making a conscious decision about reveling their sexuality. This may result in a lack of public displays of affection when they are with the children or no disclosure unless directly asked. One participant expressed this,

I think we decided that when we had her. We decided we couldn't hide. (Interview-1, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Honoring the Kids

It involved not showing public displays of affection, letting the kids define whom their parents were in public settings (mom, aunt), staying in the



background, as the kids got older to navigate the teen years. One participant explained this as follows,

I modify my behavior to honor their ability to be anonymous. To give them control of their own information. I do try to allow them to make the choice when they will disclose. (Interview-2, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Insight

Insight describes the ways in which the participants began to verbalize in the interviews that they recognized that there are differences in their daily lives with regards to disclosure and heteronormativity. Parents expressed that on a daily basis it is not something that they thought about. Being interviewed about the subject called their attention to differences in the way that they perceived the world and how the world perceived their families. One participant's example of this was,

I don't expect anything any different. I need to be treated with respect and if I am not I will take you down, professionally, through whatever resource I need to. Then I will make sure you don't do it again. (Interview-3, Survey Interview, February 2011)

## Kids Disclosure

This represented how the parents perceived the way that the children disclosed their parents' sexuality or their family design. This was only the parents' perception because the children were not interviewed for this research study. The parents described the children disclosing with ease when they were younger, below twelve years of age, and then again above eighteen years of age. The most difficult time for the kid's disclosure was between the ages of twelve and eighteen.

Parents expressed that there was uniqueness with the children's language. As the children moved from elementary school to middle school to high school and then into college. At elementary school, the kids would say, "I have two mommies/daddies." Then in middle school and high school, they protect themselves through their own kinds of disclosure whether it is, "I have parents" or "my mom and my aunt," but reportedly this was the hardest times for these children because of the social pressures at school. Then when they got to be college age, the children's language is more definitive with "I have two moms! What do you have to say about that?" An example a parent gave was,

They had parent tag along day in 7th grade and I went and I remember when she introduced me as here Aunt. I didn't say anything, I just went along with it. When we got home, I approached it I said hey look I noticed you did this I asked her if she was embarrassed, she said 'No I am not, I just don't want to have to explain.' (Interview-5, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Life Experiences

The participants described this code as how they move through the world. This may include the processes of coming out or disclosing their family at work or in the community. Parent felt that they were human beings who happen to be gay or lesbian. This did not define who they were or dictate how they lived their lives. One example of this was,

On a daily basis, no, it doesn't affect my life in general. On a very regular basis, I do come up against things. I don't think about it every day. I had a crappy day yesterday, but it had nothing to do with being gay. (Interview-2, Survey Interview, February 2011).

### Limited Disclosure

As the children moved through early childhood to adolescences and into adulthood, the parents used these operational stages as indicators on how and when they would disclose. Limited disclosure describes how the disclosure of one's personal life is mostly on a "need to know" basis, but also influential in the disclosure of parents' sexual orientation is the ages of the children. The conflicts that the children are dealing with at specific age ranges are taken into consideration subconsciously by the parents. Not one parent could conceptualize that this was going on, but the way they described the different timeframes that the children struggled with and their disclosure practices at these times allowed this researcher to infer what was happening. An example of this was,

The only time I felt the need to limit my disclosure was based on how it may or may not affect our children. (Interview-4, Survey Interview, February 2011).

### Mindful Awareness of Systems

Mindful awareness explained how the parents would make sure that the physical location was safe for their

family. This would dictate how and when they would disclose. The parents stated that the physical location could be in the community they live in, church, school, work, or the soccer field. Each of the families each are very mindful of the surroundings and listen to their intuition in ensuring their safety and security and that of their children. One participant expressed this,

I think we are aware of our surroundings at all times also. Like am I really going to kiss her inside of a Catholic church or where I am somewhere were I am thinking this could end bad. No I won't do it. (Interview-6, Survey Interview, February 2011)

#### No Disclosure

No disclosure explained that there were times in the parents' and children's lives that they did not disclose the nature of their relationship even when asked directly. These situations were seen as being irrelevant to the necessity of the parent's, or child's life. Parents noted that during casual encounters in public they would neither correct people when they assumed they were heterosexual, nor introduce themselves as the child's parents. An example of this was,

If I think that I can trust the person, but if some random person came up to me and asked me if I was gay, I would not disclose to them. (Interview-7, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Oppression

Oppression was interpreted to mean that the families were constantly facing situations that they internalized and had to accept. The most recent form of oppression that many of the families said directly affected them and their kids was Proposition 8 that was on the ballots in California in 2008. Many of the participants stated that their kids were involved in the political rallies and influenced by the results of this historical ballot measure. For many of the children this was the first time that they saw how the public really felt about the design of their family. No matter how much these parents tried to protect the kids from this, it was unstoppable. One participant expressed this as,

Then we had Prop 8. Our little one was just irate with that. He was in middle school, and it was a personal attack on him. And he went to the rallies, and he would stand out there holding the signs.

(Interview-2, Survey Interview, February 2011)

## Parenting

The participants in this study stated that they did not feel that being gay or lesbian parents was any different than their heterosexual counterparts. The idea that they wanted their kids to grow up to be good people was consistent with all responses. These parents reflected on the straight parents that they know and saw how they protected, clothed, fed, sheltered, advocated for, and showed up for their kids. That is what a gay parent does, too. Keeping their kids safe and protected was their goal with each disclosure or non-disclosure that they made. One participant expressed this,

I would say staying true to us is still loving her regardless, just making sure that she is fed clothed, has a roof over her head, because whether you are straight or gay those are the things that you would want to provide for your kids anyways protection and that shouldn't change at all ever.

(Interview-6, Survey Interview, February 2011)

## Private Life

Participants expressed that being lesbian or gay was not the number one issue in their lives, so the necessity to be out and open everywhere they go holds no importance

to them. They are parents, employees, community member, soccer moms, and church members. This played a role in non-disclosure styles that the parents practiced. A common response was that they did not carry a banner displaying their sexual orientation everywhere they went. One participant expressed this by noting,

The issue is what kind of human beings are we, and I think most people pick up on that right away and that is why they are comfortable with us. I think that is why we got along too, because we didn't push it on anyone. (Interview-5, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Protecting

Protecting was a code that expressed how the parents kept the kids safe from oppressions throughout their lives. Protecting was the parents wanting to keep the child away from socially oppressive environments. They would not want the child to see them being demeaned by others by having to define their family to the schools, doctors, coaches. They wanted to allow the kids to share what kind of family they have without bias. With the goal of creating a safe family, many turned to a church's supportive network around the child to ensure safe



journey through childhood into adulthood. One parent expressed this as,

We would not put ourselves or go to places that we might be able to handle heckling, but we would never do that if she was with us because we just did not want her to have to notice that or see us trying to defend ourselves. (Interview-8, Survey Interview, March 2011)

#### Protecting from Oppressions

This code was very similar previous codes protecting and oppressions. The participants reflected on how they did not want the kids to be treated any differently because of the parents' sexual orientation. They did not want the children to have to put up with the ignorance and intolerance of others. There was no roadmap for these participants to follow while raising their kids. They did the best they could with what they had. The decision to disclose their relationships was often times measured against how it would affect the child and if the child would suffer oppressions from the parent's disclosure. An example from a participant was,

Because I don't want someone to judge her because of who I am. That's what worries me for her. And I feel

that discrimination happens because of ignorance and ignorance happens because you are not familiar with it and if you see us and you get to know us and we become familiar to you there is no threat.

(Interview-6, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Self-Acceptance

This code revealed the necessities of the participants to have an understanding of who they are and how they have successfully moved through Cass' (1979) homosexual identity formation theory. Being gay or lesbian is just one piece of who the participants reported that they were. They were whole people who interact with society on many different levels: as parents, workers, church-goers, tax payers, home owners, etcetera. Heteronormative perspectives and disclosure styles affect people at every stage of their development, but if the participants showed a good sense of self acceptance they seemed to be able to share this with their children and have a positive outlook on their lives. One parent expressed this by stating,

We live our lives honestly, we live our lives with integrity, we enjoy what is around us, we provide for our families, we provide for the community and

we just are good people. We respect others and live honestly without having to be in your face.

(Interview-5, Survey Interview, February 2011)

### Social Norms

Social norms showed how the participants expressed the norms that they were not a part of, because of their sexual orientation. Faced with heteronormative perspectives, participants recognize that they have choices whether or not to disclose their family structures. Making the decision to disclose such information could produce greater oppressions for the family because of being outside the social norms. One parent expressed that limitations on adoptions and marriage among gay and lesbian people in some states highlight the differences between heterosexual people and homosexual people. An example from the interviews was,

I do not need to wave a flag to get the parenting job done, particularly when the flag is perceived as red! I (we) pick out battles, and yes coming out is still a battle, do not be fooled, thank God for Glee! (Interview-4, Survey Interview, February 2011)

Through the twenty-seven codes that were identified, there were themes that were shared in each interview. It

showed that parents should make concrete decisions prior to having children on how they will deal with oppressive situations. As the children of the participants developed and progressed through school, the disclosure styles that parents used changed to support the kids.

### Axial Coding

Axial coding was the second round of analysis for the collected data. Axial coding was carried out to identify and interpret the meaning of the narrative of the open coding. Morris (2006) explained that axial coding "is where relationships between themes and categories are proposed" (p. 112). The proposed major areas that the researcher found were heteronormativity, parenting, and disclosure. The table below describes how the researcher grouped the sub categories of each emergent theme (see Table 3).

Table 3. Themes and Codes

Themes	Categories
Heteronormativity	Assumptions of heterosexuality/heteronormativity Heteronormativity Social Norms
Parenting	Affects of having kids Creating safe supportive systems Defining their family Extra Work Family support Oppressions Parenting Protecting Protecting from Oppressions
Disclosure	Affects on the kids Appropriate Disclosure Disclosure Disclosing to the kids Generational Differences Hiding Honoring the kids Insight Kids disclosure Life experience Limited Disclosure Mindful awareness of systems No disclosure Private life

The three themes that emerged of heteronormativity, parenting, and disclosure were drawn from the initial axial analysis of the coded data. The heteronormative theme was how the participants interviewed defined heteronormativity as the innate differences of being homosexual versus being heterosexual. They believed that

there were layered to prejudices that "straight" couples never have to worry about. These participants were aware that they fell outside of the norms that made their family different.

The participants faced heteronormative perspectives with every new experience encountered with their children throughout the each child's lifetime. This consisted of filling out forms at the doctor's office or talking with a new Cub-Scout leader about their family. Parents expressed a need to be constantly evaluating if this is going to be a place that accepts my family for who we are or is the child going to have to deal with oppressive behavior because of my sexual orientation. The codes that were put into this category expand on how the participants responded to heteronormative bias when experienced while the children were growing up. An example of this from an interview follows below:

When the kids were little, we went to Niagara Falls, Canada, we had to have their birth certificates to get out of the Country. That is a heteronormative thing if it had been a man and a women with these kids no one would have said anything. But because it was two women we had to prove that these kids were

ours and we weren't kidnapping them. It's true.

(Interview-2, Survey Interview, February 2011)

The next category, Parenting, contained two main topics the first was the conscious decision these participants made to have children and the secondly was protecting their kids from harm as the kids aged. The decision to become parents for gay and lesbian families is a more unique process than the heterosexual childbearing process. The participants revealed that, at times, they made sure that they had support systems in place so that the child would be secure and safe while growing up. The extra work involved required the parents to seek outside resources and get creative to ensure that the children would grow up with an understanding that while their family may look different, they were loved and well provided for. The following are examples from the interviews that are representative of the categories listed in Table 3. They will first address conscious decision to become parents, then how they protected their children:

That also allowed other people to understand and relate better cause they had kids. I'm sorry once you have kids, everything you do is around the kids.

We didn't entirely understand that twenty years ago. It is we are starting to get our life back and our own time back. We are starting to have time. When you have kids it does two things. It put you more out and it put you more in the closet. (Interview-2, Survey Interview, February 2011)

We went to many gay prides with her, and she wasn't the head of the line passing out stickers and everything because she knows it's safe. But even there, when we would come up to the crowds that are yelling anti gay slurs. I remember getting her and running her to another part so she wouldn't think that something was wrong. (Interview-8, Survey Interview, March 2011)

The disclosure theme revealed within its categories how the parents' handled disclosures throughout the life span of the children and how the children disclose their parents' sexuality and what kind of family they have. The examples below highlight some of the parents' disclosures and thoughts about how they disclosed and how they perceived the children disclosed their relationships:

We were very closed and very closeted when we met and nobody knew anything about us for years, so we



had that coming out as well, so it was five years of deciding that, then five years of discussing a kid, then trying for a kid, so kind of just flowed one safety net into the next. (Interview-1, Survey Interview, February 2011)

I don't think she is announcing it. I think she will have a response to something that has been said. I think she keeps it at that. That is the best way that I can describe how she discloses it. It was a lot easier when she was younger. At this age she is at a new school and there are all new friends; this is her second year. I think it is getting easier, but last year was hard she wanted to fit in.

(Interview-8, Survey Interview, March 2011)

Axial Coding revealed that the parents would go to any lengths to ensure that the children were not treated differently because of their sexual orientation. Parents expressed that it was a conscious decision to become a parent and they did the extra work required to ensure the children were safe and supported as they aged. Decisions surrounding disclosure through the lifespan of the child were also revealed through axial coding. The children were initially shown how to disclose when they were

younger, then allowed to make their own decision on how they disclosed as they got older.

### Selective Coding

Once the emergent data in the categories was analyzed there seemed to be a relationship between them that went beyond the three themes. Using a selective coding process to build a core category, the researcher realized that "all categories in open and axial coding could be related to it, it is a repeated pattern in the data, it has explanatory power, and it explains the main pattern in the data" (Morris, 2006, p. 117). What became apparent was that disclosure was the strongest theme and affected every other theme and category.

Throughout the life of the child, the parents, and children disclosed differently. Either the parent took the lead in the disclosure of the parent's relationship depending on the age of the child, or the parents allowed the child to take the lead in the disclosure of their relationship. There is a linear progression that occurred; as the child got older who was in charge of disclosure what the families took into consideration before disclosing their relationship was explained

through the categories in Table 3. Figure 1 explains the unique considerations that parents and children had to consider prior to disclosing at the various age ranges. The codes provide guidance through the different age ranges the children were in and provided guidance for the parent and child (see Figure 1).

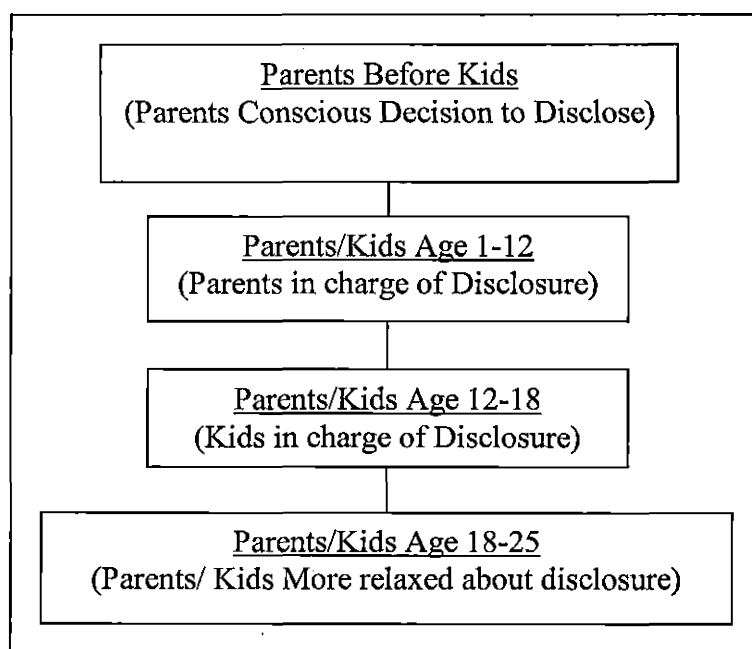


Figure 1. Disclosure Methods of Parent and Child

### Disclosure Methods

The act of "coming out" is a stressful exercise in identifying oneself. Disclosing one's parental role can be equated with the act of coming out. The participants

in this study recognized that the decision as a lesbian or gay person to raise children required them to disclose the nature of their sexuality quite frequently. Disclosing one's parental role is equated with coming out, because coming out is essentially what these parents are doing potentially doing with every new situation with their child, including school, doctors office, sports, acting, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts friends, meeting potential boyfriends and girlfriends and any other social situation. While one's sexual identity can be private, the parents and children have to choose where and how to disclose.

The theory of disclosure among the different ages of the children was formed through analysis of the data gathered from the participants. Those gay and lesbian parents who are more secure in a) healthy level of attachment and b) identity formation have no qualms about confronting oppressive behaviors and disclosing the nature of their relationships.

It is important at this time to reiterate that the reflections of the disclosure methods of the children during the different age range are only a perceived

account by the parents. In this study, there were no interviews with the children.

#### Parents Before Having Kids

The participants in this study reported that when they made the decision to be parents, they had to be comfortable with themselves and solid in their foundation as a gay or lesbian person. They stated the necessity of being comfortable with themselves was important, because they did not want the children to think that something was wrong with their family composition. By having a strong self-acceptance, this allowed them to define their family and honor the children as they aged.

Participants reported that it was necessary to create a safe and supportive community for their children, made up of family, friends, and church associates. As the children aged, the ability of the parents to be mindful of the systems that the children were involved in and the different places that they would have to disclose changed.

The participants recognized that there was opposition to them having children, and that gay and lesbian parenting went against the social norms that we know today. However, a parent's ability to parent and

protect their children by providing a safe, loving, and stable environment was the driving force in many of the participants' decisions to have children.

An interesting finding in this study was that depending on the age of the child, the parent's level of disclosure of their relationship varied. The younger the child, the parents choose who, what, where, when and how to disclose. This involves protecting, parenting, creating safe systems, and being mindfully aware of systems.

#### Parents/Kids Age 1-12

The participants reported the most disclosure when the children were ages 1 to 12. The parents modeled for the children during these years how to create safe spaces, what it meant to be mindful of situations and people with whom they were involved, with the goal of limiting the amount of oppressions that they received as a family. During these years, the parents would go directly to the schools, talk to the principals and teachers and disclose openly about the composition of their family by saying, "Rachel has two Moms", "Brian has two Dads" and by asking, "Will there be an issue with this at your school?" The parents dealt directly with the

perceived rejection and/or acceptance of the institutions and people with whom they were dealing.

#### Parents/Kids Age 12-18

During this age range, the children are in charge of how and when they will disclose the nature of their parents' relationship and how they define their family. At this age the children are moving through what Erickson coined Identity versus Role Diffusion (Lesser & Pope, 2007, p. 67). During this time, the children are working on developing their own identities and realizing what their roles are in life. They have a more complex life and they see the world as their parents thought it might be, but are being influenced by media, school, teachers, and friends. The parents modeled for the children how to disclose when the kids were younger. They modeled creating safe spaces and people. They showed how to be open and out about defining their family.

The issues for the teen revolve around how they will disclose and to whom and when. If the attachment to the parents was securely made in ages 1-12, then the child gained the ability to identify and create safe people in their lives, and they know how to be mindful of

disclosure methods and how to find safe ways to navigate the world.

At this age range, the parents take the backseat in disclosure. What could be perceived as hiding when raising kids was not. It was protecting and defining who they were as human beings. At first, it appeared that they were ashamed of being gay, but then it became clear that as parents they would have to have been at "Identity Synthesis" which is the final stage of Cass' (1979) model. With the "them versus us" mentality gone, this would allow them to create secure attachments to their children and move toward being whole people themselves.

Parents noted that while they may take the backseat during this age range, they are still an active part in their children's lives. They let each child decide if they tell a friend that their parents are gay or lesbian and they follow the child's lead, so to speak. There were two reports from the parents where they said that the child either asked one parent to stay behind or introduced one of the parents as "Aunt" in certain situations. The parent said that they confronted the child about this after the fact, and the children responded that the people that they were meeting were not



safe and they felt that the repercussions would be greater. So the children learned to protect themselves from oppressive behavior as well as they got older.

#### Parents/Kids Ages 18-25

At this stage, the child has gone through two different phases of disclosure. Phase one is the parents disclosing and defining and navigating ways to keep the child safe, warm, secure, and alive. Phase two is where the child takes the reigns and defines through their own disclosure as a child of lesbian and gay parents who they are as a person.

At this point, the parents reported that the children have surrounded themselves with people that tend to be welcoming and affirming of gay and lesbian people, families, and diverse populations.

The selective coding analysis showed that disclosure was different at every age range of the child's life. When the child was young, the parents made the decision to disclose to ensure they were safe and protected from oppressions. When the child reached middle school age, the parents allowed the child to take the lead on how they would disclose the nature of their parents' relationships. Then once the children were at college age

the child and parents were more relaxed about disclosing the nature of their parental relationship. At the later ages, the children were more likely to have surrounded themselves with people who were more accepting and safe.

#### Summary

This chapter looked at the analysis of the interviews through the use of open coding, axial coding and selective coding were described. An explanation of the theory of disclosure methods among parents and their children as the child aged was discussed.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Chapter five looks at the link between the initial question of this study, the implications of the findings of this study for the theoretical orientation of the study and the implications of the study findings for social work practice. The strengths and limitations of the study are discussed followed by a conclusion.

#### Heteronormativity

The question that was addressed by this research project was, "How does heteronormative perspectives affect same-sex parents?" Each participant had to have the definition of heteronormativity read to him or her at least twice. Heteronormativity is a form of oppression that these families have internalized and use as a motivation to do whatever it takes to ensure their children are safe and treated equally.

Participants did not define the lengths that they went to as extra work. They described the ways that they meaningfully disclosed or did not disclose their sexual orientation as just being parents. This could be a

subconscious decision that parents made when they decided to have children. While there is limited research on how the long-term effects of children growing up in homes where they are exposed to heteronormative perspectives, this project looked at the different ways that parents and children navigate through different social systems disclosing the nature of the family composition. The different disclosure styles used by these families are innate strengths that these families possess to overcome differences and avoid oppressive situations.

These participants knew that their families were different, but they did not let the differences dissuade them from advocating for their children. Some participants equated being a gay parent to having a child with a special need. In a way, children of gay and lesbian parents do have special needs, they have a unique family structure that requires parental involvement perhaps above that of a child from a opposite-sex family.

Interestingly enough participants pointed out that heteronormative behavior in regards to a family is not limited to homosexual families. The language that is used in many forms limits the diversity of the family design in the 21st Century.

## Practice Implications

The macro practice social worker may come across same-sex families when working in schools, hospitals and clinics or in their communities. The awareness of how heteronormative perspectives affect these families and their children is important to the practitioner. Understanding that the type of disclosure that happens is directly reflected by the identity formation stage of the parent and the developmental phase of the child is in would be an important place to begin.

Within organizations, it is important to review the verbiage that is used on paper work. Simple changes, such as Parent 1 and Parent 2, opposed to mother/father on such documents would support more inclusive environments for these families. Additionally, social workers should work toward eliminating policies that openly discriminate against same-sex marriage and same-gender parent adoptions across the United States. Allowing same-sex marriage provides validation to homosexual couples and their children that are missing under current legislation.

Additionally, the micro social worker should work to understand the way that these families internalize the

perceived extra work of protecting their families from oppressions to ensure that they are able to have a seemingly normal life. This study did not examine possible stressors that the children may take on due to the internalized oppressions of the parents or children, but these are things of which a clinician working with same-sex families should be aware.

Because of the diverse ways that same-sex families are formed, it would be important for the micro social worker to work with these families on a case-by-case basis to understand how to best serve them. Saleebey's (1997) empowerment theory suggests that the necessity "to discover the power within people and communities we must subvert and abjure pejorative labels, provide opportunities for connections to family, institutional, and communal resources, assail the victim mindset; foreswear paternalism; trust people's intuitions, account, perspectives, and energies and believe in peoples dreams" (p. 12). Utilizing the empowerment theory to assist the families in discovering the strengths they have individually and as a family is one way to work toward eliminating the affects of heteronormativity on same-sex parents and their families.

The family ecology theory explains how families interact with other systems. Clinicians would benefit from having an understanding of the tenants of family ecology theory, which are, "justice, freedom, loving and nurturing relationships, a sense of community, tolerance and trustworthiness" (Allen & Demo, 1995, p. 123). These relate to same-sex families because the tenants play a large role in assisting the parents and children in making a decision to disclose or not. This study revealed that depending on the age of the children the disclosure styles of the parents and the children differed.

Armed with this knowledge the micro social worker would be able to understand what the parental role in disclosure depending on the age of the children. When the children are zero to twelve the parent may seem over involved and aggressive in the way that they interact with outside systems. On the other hand, when the children are thirteen to eighteen years old the parents may seem absent or uninvolved in the child's life activities. Additionally, it may be odd for the clinician to understand how at ages nineteen to twenty-five the parents and children have little issues surrounding being involved in outside systems. It is not that the parents

are abrasive, absent or nonchalant. The parents have made subconscious decisions and actions first show the children how to disclose, and then allow them to disclose on their own and finally accept that the children have enough experience to create safe environments once they reach adulthood.

#### Limitations and Strengths of the Study

This study had several strengths the first was addressing how heteronormative perspectives become internalized within these family systems. Additionally, the study brings awareness of the need to update language that is used on forms at doctors' offices and schools to include the diverse nature of today's families. The diversity of the family unit is ever changing in the 21st Century, and the assumptions that children are being raised by Mom and Dad are no longer safe. Creating language that encompasses all family designs could be beneficial to children and adults. Next, this research project shows that there is a greater need for the actual study of the adult children who have been raised by gay and lesbian parents. The insight on how to deal with bullying, communication styles, and overcoming oppressive



situations could be beneficial to the social work community as a whole.

There were numerous limitations to this study. There is little published information regarding the actual disclosure methods of children between the ages of one to twenty-five, this study provided some insight to that population. Unfortunately, the responses to how the children disclosed their parent's relationship were only perceptions on the part of the parents. While parents tend to romanticize their children, this researcher took statements into consideration, but also ascertained that the parents in this study had a firm grasp on the perceptions of their children as provided through the interview process. Other limitations of this study were the lack of diversity of the study participants. Most of the participants were Caucasian females living in upper middle class areas of Southern California. Additionally, the small number of participants plays a part in the limited diversity that was collected in this study. Finally, there was only one researcher that worked on this project. Additional people working on the project would allow for discussion of the findings as the project evolved and, including a shared workload. It could have

potentially increased the number of participants, which would increase have increased validity of the study as well.

### Conclusion

This study identified parents' different considerations when disclosing their sexuality with regards to their children. The confidence in the parents' sexual identity, assumptions of heteronormative perspectives and overall permission for the children to decide when and how they will disclose their family design as they aged were important. This study has progressed the knowledge about working with gay and lesbian families by identifying ways that the parents and children disclose their relationships through the child's life. Work toward making schools, doctors offices, churches and other community organizations inclusive to all family designs is not long off as shown through the participants in this research study. Continued work with these families will increase awareness of their needs and work toward creating more inclusive environments for all families.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE AND DEFINITION

## Interview Schedule

### Demographics

- 1) Gender: M/F
- 2) Age: 18-28, 29-39, 40-50, 51-60, 61-70, 71-80.
- 3) Ethnicity
- 4) Spirituality or Religious beliefs
- 5) Sexual Orientation: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
- 6) Relationship status: Domestic Partnered, Married, Partners, Divorced, Separated
- 7) How did you become parents?

### Disclosure

- 1) How do you as a couple disclose your relationship outside the home? If so, how so you do this? How many times have you done this?
- 2) Do the child or children know that you are gay or lesbian? Do you disclose to the child's teacher, doctors, coaches, boy scout/girl scout, church people you sexuality? Examples are both parents' names on emergency cards?
- 3) Have the children been given the opportunity to disclose your relationship to close friends, teachers or adults in their lives?
- 4) How do the kids disclose and how often? What is your perception of how or why they do this?

### Heteronormative Perspectives

- 1) Does heteronormativity influence your disclosure methods outside of the home? If so, how?
- 2) Do you feel the need to protect your kids from oppressions surrounding your sexuality? If so, to what lengths?
- 3) How do you stay true to yourself as a gay parent in a straight world?
- 4) Do you feel that you are a member of a stigmatized group? If so, how does this influence your child? For example are you more protective?
- 5) When you are out in public with your family do you feel the need to take precautions regarding your sexual orientation?
- 6) How do you navigate a structure such as a school or doctors office being homosexual parents? For example parent teacher conferences or doctors visits disclosing the nature of your relationship.
- 7) Overall, what are the main ways that you navigate your way through a straight world as a same-sex parent?

Questionnaire created by Michelle McNevin

## Heteronormativity Definition:

**Definition:** Heteronormativity is the cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature, and against same-sex relationships of a sexual nature. Because the former are viewed as normal and the latter are not, lesbian and gay relationships are subject to a heteronormative bias.

## Examples of heteronormativity might include:

The under representation of same-sex couples in advertising and entertainment media. Laws that actively discriminate against same-sex relationships, such as laws banning same-sex marriage. Religious bias against same-sex couples. (Reference.com, December 4, 2010)

APPENDIX B  
COVER LETTER

December 07, 2011

Dear Church Director,

I am a Masters of Social Work student at California State University, San Bernardino in my second year and am doing research on same-sex parenting under the supervision of Dr. Teresa Morris (Faculty, School of Social Work (909) 537-5561). I am writing to request entrance to your church to post flyers to recruit same-sex parents to participate in this study. I am specifically researching how heteronormative perspectives affect same-sex parents.

If you are willing to allow my presence on your church and post flyers to recruit participants I can meet with you and you may review my interview questions. The interviews should take no more than 45-50 minutes and can be done wherever the participant feels most comfortable.

Please know that all the information is confidential. When participants are interviewed pseudonyms will be applied to names to protect participants privacy and keep responses private as well. I respect everyone's right to privacy and confidentiality in the responses is important as well.

Respectfully,

Michelle McNevin  
MSW student CSUSB  
(909) 747-5814

APPENDIX C  
INFORMED CONSENT



## INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a study of heteronormative perspectives and their effects on same-sex parents. Michelle McNevin, Master of Social Work student at California State University, San Bernardino, is conducting the study. The researcher is operating under the supervision of Professor Teresa Morris, Ph.D., Faculty, School of Social Work. The Social Work Sub-Committee of the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board has approved this study.

In this study you will be asked to respond to questions regarding your demographics and some of your insights into disclosure of your sexuality. The interview should take approximately 40-50 minutes. All of your responses will be held in the highest confidence by the researcher and no identifying information will be used in the research. All responses will be coded and analyzed anonymously. Participation is completely voluntary, you are free to skip any question at anytime, and should you be uncomfortable for any reason the interview will stop immediately. At the time of the interview the participant will receive a debriefing statement describing the details of the study. You may obtain the study results in the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after September 11, 2011.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation of this study. The benefits in participating in this study is to bring a greater awareness of the effects that heteronormative perceptions have on same sex parenting and how alternative disclosure methods of parents sexuality has effects on the family as well.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study you can contact Dr. Morris (909) 537-5561.

By placing a mark in the box below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of and understand, the purpose and nature of the study, and I willingly consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.

Place mark here

Today's Date:

Again, thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX D  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **DEBRIEFING**

Thank you very much for sharing your valuable time to let us know your thoughts and feelings. The interview you just completed was for a study of how heteronormative perceptions affect same-sex parenting styles. Michelle McNevin, Master of Social Work student at California State University, San Bernardino, conducted the study. The researcher is operating under the supervision of Professor Teresa Morris, Ph.D., Faculty, School of Social Work.

If you have any questions regarding this study you can contact Dr. Morris (909) 537-5561. You may obtain the study results in the Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino after September 11, 2011.

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