Qualitative Research on LGBT-Parent Families

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Qualitative analyses of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)-parent families tend to reside in and develop out of sexuality studies, being peripheral to mainstream agendas in family studies. Contemporary family studies can be characterized as a dynamic interdisciplinary engagement with shifting trends in the patterning of family and intimate networks of care (Williams, 2004), which create and consolidate wide-ranging relationships (Budgeon & Roseneil, 2004; Jamieson, Morgan, Crow, & Allan, 2006). In sociology, research methodologies are predominantly qualitative, focusing on how families are made and remade through "family practices" (Morgan, 1996), largely oriented around the connections between parent and child. In psychology, there remains a tendency to measure and assess family functioning and the impact of changing circumstances on children's well-being and development.

In many ways, studies of LGBT-parent families follow a similar conceptual trajectory; however, there is perhaps slightly more attention paid to narratives of planned conception (Nordqvist, 2011) and the negotiation and *meanings* of parenthood and kin-ties in lesbian father-free families (Almack, 2008; Clarke, 2006; Goldberg & Allen, 2007). In this work, the sameness and difference of (predominantly lesbian) same-sex parent families are afforded particular attention, as well as how these impact on children's emotional well-being and personal development (Clarke, 2002; Golombok, 2000; Hicks, 2005; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

Notwithstanding the richness of this interdisciplinary work, across both fields of study, their conceptual separateness has arguably perpetuated gaps in knowledge. We actually know very little about the ordinary experiences of *sexuality practices* in families per se, while the *sexual identities* of LGBT parents are afforded an excess of significance, determining parenthood through queer sexuality. As such, there is a schism between sexuality studies and studies of family life. In this chapter I pull together these two fields of study, demonstrating how a qualitative mixed methods (QMM) approach, defined below, can shed new light on everyday practices of "family sexuality" (Gabb, 2001a), enabling us to better understand the multidimensional identities of LGBT parents and the negotiated absence–presence of sexuality in queer family living.

I use the terms "family sexuality" and "family intimacy" to demonstrate the intersections of and distinctions between these terms and to simultaneously locate intimacy and sexuality in the context of everyday family relationships. My circumspection in how I use and define these terms stems from the (past and present) need to tread carefully around issues of sexuality in the context of parent–child relationships and LGBT-parent

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families in particular. Sexuality and children remain antithetical in the popular imagination (Jackson, 1982); intergenerational sexuality of any description is taboo both within and outside of the academy (Kinkaid, 1998). As a consequence, and with only a few notable exceptions (including Fineman, 1995; Gabb, 2004b; Malone & Cleary, 2002; Smith, 1992), social science research tends to "desex" families. I aim to resituate sexuality as part of family life. I deploy "family" or "families" as interactional units that are created and maintained through sets of relationship practices. This focus on everyday practice facilitates insight on the ways that partner and parenting dynamics are materialized in LGBT-parent families.

The conceptual thread that runs throughout this chapter is, therefore, my desire to nudge forward debate on how we can make sense of sexuality in the context of LGBT-parent families. The primary focus of the chapter is, however, methodological. I will demonstrate the usefulness of qualitative research in the study of LGBT-parent families. In particular, I evince the benefits of using a QMM approach to advance understandings of everyday family living, showing how it can help us to unpack the conundrum of LGBT parents' (sexual–parental) identities.

Although "mixed methods" is most commonly associated with the combination of quantitative and qualitative data (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), the term qualitative mixed methods (QMM) refers to research that deploys multiple qualitative methods. Research in this vein, my own work included, does not seek to cross-check data from different methods, to either prove the validity of findings from one method to another or to build up a definitive case to address a particular hypothesis. Instead, the rich data that are generated through a QMM approach are used to gain insight into multidimensional experience. The approach acknowledges the *contingency of experience* and seeks to retain and examine this through the methodological and analytical techniques that are adopted.

To illustrate the effectiveness of a QMM approach and the kinds of multidimensional insights that can be generated, I draw on data from two empirical research projects. Research on LGBT-parent families is dominated by studies on lesbian motherhood (Biblarz & Savci, 2010), and likewise my focus here remains limited to lesbian mother households. The first study focuses on families and intimacy (Gabb, 2008).[1] Data were collected from heterosexual and lesbian parents and their children: mothers ($n=9$), fathers ($n=5$), and children ($n=10$). The second study examined lesbian parenthood and sexuality.[2] Data were collected from lesbian mothers ($n=18$) and children ($n=13$). All participants lived in the North of England, UK. The sampling scale of QMM research is inevitably small; however, where the approach pays dividends is in drilling down through the multidimensional layers of practices, meanings, biography, and emotional attachments, to reveal the *fabric* of family processes. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, a QMM approach is therefore primarily useful when deployed to gain insight into the decision-making processes which inform family relationships and ordinary practices of sexuality and intimacy.

A QMMs Approach

In QMM research there are rich analytical rewards offered through creativity in research design. The methods that I detail here include emotion maps, diaries, participant observation, semi-structured and psychosocial (biographical narrative) interviews, photo elicitation, and discussion of vignettes. This is by no means an exhaustive list of techniques used in QMM research, and the

[1] *Behind Closed Doors* was an ESRC-funded project (RES-000-22-0854), completed in 2004–2005.

[2] *Perverting Motherhood? Sexuality and Lesbian Motherhood* was ESRC-funded doctoral research completed in 1999–2000.

Both studies focused recruitment strategies on parents who were not engaged in lesbian community activity. The content and scope of these projects were discussed in full with parents and children, using age-appropriate description. Children's age and maturity are important factors in making sense of family practices. I have therefore included the age of children when citing extracts from their data (for example, Reece, 10). Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

range of methods successfully deployed in studies of childhood and children's lives is particularly wide and dynamic (Clark & Moss, 2001; Mauthner, 1997). The primary benefit of the QMM approach is that different methods generate distinctive kinds of data, adding novel dimensions and distinctive perspectives that can be drawn together to enrich understandings of the phenomenon being investigated.

Emotion Maps

This method, which I pioneered in the *Behind Closed Doors* study, adds depth to our understandings of the materiality of personal relationships. Emotion maps locate interactions in the context of the family home, facilitating analysis on the boundaries of family intimacy and sexuality. The method was developed from the household portrait technique introduced by Andrea Doucet (2001) in her study of gendered roles and responsibilities among heterosexual couples. In principle, the emotion map method is a form of sticker chart. The researcher is taken on a guided tour of the family home, an opportunity which can also allow children to talk through how they perceive different "territories" around the household. After this tour either the researcher or a family member sketches out a floor plan. This sketch is then reproduced using *Microsoft Draw* (or a similar word processing package). Several days later a large format (A3, 420×297 mm) copy of the floor plan is given out to each participant along with a set of colored emoticon stickers that denote happiness, sadness, anger, and love/affection. Family members (broadly defined) are individually assigned a color. Participants then place these different colored emoticon stickers on their copy of the household floor plan to indicate where an interaction occurs and between whom—that is to say, to spatially locate relational encounters. The merits of the emotion map method are that it is fun to complete and not reliant on language skills. It serves to flatten out intergenerational competencies among parents and children, and because children are familiar with sticker charts they tend to be extremely adept in completing this method. Later on in this chapter I will provide an illustration of this technique and the kinds of data that can be generated.

Diaries

Diary data add a temporal dimension to QMM research, generating information on everydayness and routine family processes (Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). They are also useful in the analysis of family lives because they can elucidate the personal meanings of relating practices. For example, in my studies they highlighted the "affective currencies" (Gabb, 2008, p. 141) that operate within a family. That is to say, how families use symbolic phrases, such as "hugs and kisses" and "I love you" as affective shorthand to stand in for more complex emotion work and/or ambivalent feelings. They can facilitate research in that they introduce the research topic to participants at a pace and pitch that feels comfortable to them and provide background information which enables the researcher to tailor subsequent interview questions around the individual family situation. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project, diaries were completed over a 1–2 week period. Most parents committed considerable time and thought to the completion of their diaries. Children were invited to complete them if they wanted to, although they were often perceived as a form of homework by older children, especially adolescents, and as such participation rates were low among this age group. Participants were all requested to use diaries to produce an account of everyday family interactions and as a space to think through their family practices and where appropriate their parental/partner roles.

Observations

Observation data add another layer to the participatory materials from diaries and emotion maps, giving a glimpse of everyday practices of intimacy and drawing attention to the *performances of family* which participants chose to render public. These data on the texture of intimate family

life and the mediation of lived experience bring to the fore where and how the absence–presence of sexuality becomes enacted, which opens up space for an interrogation of what determines the parameters of "family displays" (Finch, 2007).

Interviews

Notwithstanding the insights afforded through methodological creativity, interviews remain the method of choice in qualitative research (Silverman, 1996). Interviews enable participants to give their version of interpersonal relationships. Psychosocial biographical narrative or free association (open) interviews situate experiences of intimacy and sexuality across the life course, within the participants' own terms of reference, through events which they define as significant. Semi-structured interviews can be used to pick up particular (thematic) threads which feature in these biographical accounts, enabling more targeted research questions.

Vignettes and Photo Elicitation

Discussion of third-party vignettes and photographs facilitates examination of participants' perceptions and beliefs, at the social level (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). These techniques enable the researcher to approach highly sensitive topics that might otherwise be deemed too risky if tackled through personal experience. In my research, using vignettes and photo methods has enabled me to talk directly about the management of boundaries around children and sexuality and adult–child intimacy more widely. For example, an image taken from a parenting handbook depicting a man sharing a bath with a child facilitated conversation on how men, as fathers, negotiate issues of nudity and bodily contact. This opened up wider discussion on "family rules" and the normative judgments that are invoked to manage perceptions of risk associated with different practices of intimacy.

QMM data, such as those described above, produce a multilayered, richly textured account of *where, when, how,* and *why* family intimacy is experienced, adding in-depth knowledge on everyday practices of LGBT parenthood. Recent developments in mixed methods studies evince an eclectic approach (Bryman, 2006), with researchers adopting "complex methodological hybridity and elasticity" (Green & Preston, 2005, p. 171). This creativity in research design is requiring researchers to develop equally dynamic analytical strategies. There are various ways to bring together data generated through QMM research. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project the intensity and complexity of data inclined me toward an "integrative" approach (Mason, 2006). This analytical strategy aims to increase subject knowledge while simultaneously retaining the paradigmatic nature of each method (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). Through case study analysis the relational threads of a story can be traced; cross-sectional analysis brings social–personal connections to the fore (Gabb, 2008, p. 63). The integration of QMM data has enabled me to connect these different dimensions, to interrogate the fabric of everyday family intimacy. The use of critical discourse analysis has enabled me to focus attention on the patterning of language and how meaning-making can be read through the written and spoken word (Wetherall, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). Looking at language as a social practice has shown how wider power relations are embedded (and contested) in everyday talk and descriptions of family living. In the following sections I will now illustrate some of the kinds of data that are generated by using different qualitative methods before moving on to consider how these data can be combined in ways that represent the vitality of lived lives.

Listening to Children: The Value of Participatory Methods

Research on children's lives in many ways exemplifies the benefits of creativity in research design and a QMM approach. European scholars in the field of qualitative studies of childhood have presented a compelling argument that we need to listen to children when writing about subjects that involve them (James & Prout, 1990).

We can no longer rely on adults' reported accounts of children's lives if we want to fully understand how young people experience changes in family relationships (Smart & Neale, 1999). Similar arguments have been made about the incompleteness of LGBT-parent family research when intergenerational perspectives are omitted (Gabb, 2008; Perlesz et al., 2006). It is therefore surprising that in queer families' research, children's perspectives are often excluded (Dunne, 1998; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Some psychological accounts of lesbian and gay families do involve interviews with children (Goldberg, 2010; Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1997), and anthologies of children's experiences are produced by the "community press" (Saffron, 1996), but most sociological and ethnographic qualitative research on LGBT-parent families relies on second-hand accounts of childhood experience (Barrett & Tasker, 2001), often focusing on routes into planned parenthood (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist, 2011).

In my studies, listening to children enabled me to piece together an *intergenerational* perspective that located young people as an integral part of family life. Research with children does not require highly specialized skills (Harden, Scott, Backett-Milburn, & Jackson, 2000); however it does require a creative methodological imagination. I deployed a "mosaic approach" (Clark & Moss, 2001), utilizing participatory methods that engaged children's interest, at an age-appropriate pitch, facilitating talk on the subject of study (Gabb, 2009). Task-centered activities have proven to be particularly effective (Morrow, 1998) in part because visual participatory methods avoid the need for eye contact and so reduce imbalances of power (Mauthner, 1997). Visual methods decrease the significance of age-related competencies which normally divide parents and children (Gabb, 2008); for similar reasons they are also useful for working with both adults and children whose first language is not English or whose language skills may be limited. Qualitative researchers who use "draw and talk" techniques suggest that this approach can help to structure children's descriptions of emotionally charged events and add depth of insight on complex phenomenon and/or abstract ideas such as family relationships, which may be otherwise hard to verbalize (Clark & Moss, 2001; Gabb, 2005a; Mauthner, 1997).

The youngest children that I have interviewed were 6-years-old, and even at this young age, by using participatory methods they were able to meaningfully contribute to the research projects. Individual informed consent from all children must always be obtained. For me this was achieved by talking each child through the research, in a way that was age-appropriate and comprehensible. This consent was subject to ongoing negotiation throughout the duration of the fieldwork, following ethical procedures that have been developed for research with children (Gabb, 2010). Younger children, up to adolescence, are often keen to speak about their families, and this includes an openness to talk about the impact of their mothers' sexual orientation on their lives and how they experience and perceive different relationships. Asking these children to describe their families can yield unexpected rewards and generate immensely rich data. Their accounts illustrate the power of family discourses and how these structure young people's perception and experience of relationships.

Children were largely adamant that their families are indistinguishable from any other.

Reece (10):	Erm…. [we're] just like a normal family really but with two women in it instead of a woman and a man really.
Interviewer:	Can you think of any differences between you and other kids?
Reece:	Only that I'm vegetarian and my friends aren't!
Interviewer:	Would you think of your family as a "lesbian family"?
Harriet (15):	(Laughs) Well I'm not a lesbian! No really it's just a family and a person in it happens to be a lesbian: "Wow big deal!" kind of thing.

Many children used the word "normal" to describe their families, because to them same-sex parent families were simply part of everyday life. Some children did, however, appear to perceive their families as different in some ways.

What constituted this difference was typically unclear although explanations tended to focus on difficulties in *fitting* the non-birth mother into traditional understandings of family. That is to say, the presence of the "other mother" represented an identifiable source of family difference which required explanation, and it was this which made children susceptible to being teased.

In all interviews with children, I did not directly ask them about similarities and differences between heterosexual-parent and lesbian-parent families. I used the words and concepts familiar to them, only asking about their mother(s)' lesbian sexuality if they ventured onto this subject. By taking my cue from them, and only referring to lesbianism at their instigation, I ensured as far as possible that I did not create anxieties where none previously existed. Asking young children to talk about such sensitive issues would have been hard to approach head-on. Instead, sitting down with these children, usually on the floor in their bedrooms, and unpacking my bag full of drawing paper and sets of pencils and colored crayons, eased the awkwardness of the situation because the power imbalance was lessened and the occasion was oriented around an activity that was familiar to them.

I usually started by asking children if they could draw me a picture of their family. This could include anyone and the drawings could and did often take on many forms. Some children's pictures were figurative; one child drew vehicles, because he "couldn't draw people" (see Gabb, 2005a). Schools and playgroups often focus teaching on stories and pictures of home and family life because these feature centrally children's worlds; the subject was therefore familiar to young children. Drawing pictures enabled children to focus on something that captured their imagination while facilitating conversation on my chosen topic. Thus, we both got something out of the encounter. Once I had made a copy of the pictures, the originals were all returned to the children, as promised.

Close analysis of children's pictures alongside their interview data can provide significant insight into their perceptions and experiences of LGBT-parent families. It is sometimes, however, children's silences that speak volumes. A qualitative approach that advances critical discourse analysis is able to incorporate pauses, diversions, and associations as part of children's data, paying careful attention to what is said and unsaid and the way that descriptions are articulated. For example, in my study of lesbian parenthood, one child (James) did not explicitly identify Jill ("other mother") as the source of difference, but his *train of thought* suggests this may be the case.

Interviewer: Are you going to draw Jill [other mother] in this picture? (see Fig. 21.1)

James (7): I'm not really sure about that [Interviewer: Why aren't you sure?] I don't know

Interviewer: Is your family the same as all your friends' families?

James: A bit different [Interviewer: In what ways different?] I don't know, just a bit different

Interviewer: So can you think of any things that make your family different?

James: I can try and draw Jill, but she's just dyed her hair.

While "draw and talk" techniques may be highly successful in research with young children (aged 6–12 years old), with teenagers, research encounters are typically most successful when they are framed as gentle conversations. In my research, young people from this age group often welcomed the opportunity of getting their viewpoint heard. For example, Jeffrey spoke quite eloquently about the politics of sexuality, using the space of the interview to "have his say." He was keen to question the distinction between the homo/heterosexual divide and expressed dissatisfaction with the categorization process of sexual identity-based politics.

Jeffrey (19): I don't know why anybody makes a big deal about anything. I mean Gay Pride, why are you proud to be gay. It's nothing to be proud or ashamed of. It just is and if everybody thought like that then there would be no bigotry in the

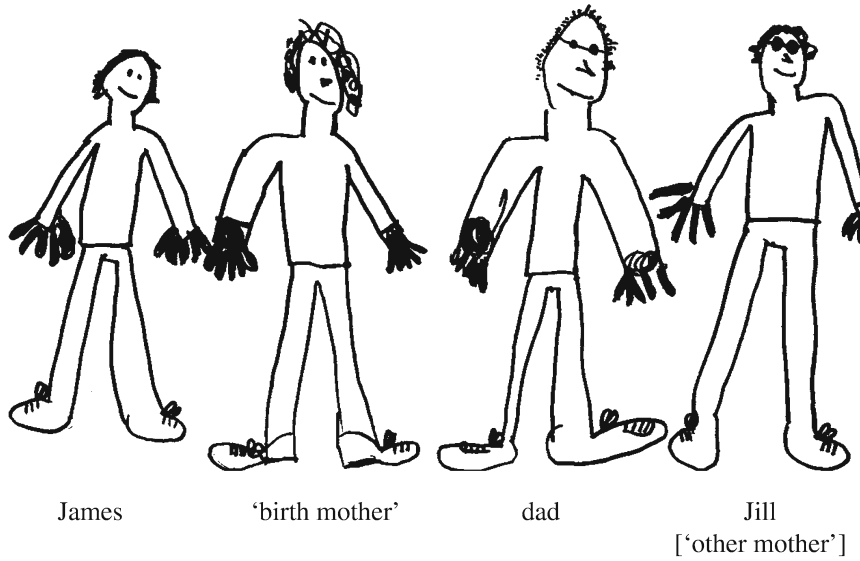

Fig. 21.1 James (aged 7). "My family"

> world. It's not "oh you're a lesbian we'll treat you different." It's not. Or "we're lesbians so we have to treat you the same" it's just you're you. So what, who cares! It just doesn't make a difference, or at least it shouldn't. Nobody's different anymore. There's a broad spectrum and we're sitting here categorizing people.

From the evidence of my data, it would appear that Jeffrey is most perceptive; the differentiation between homo- and heterosexual families may be ultimately more discursive than experiential. That is to say, research and writing may be foregrounding sexuality differences in ways that obscure the *similarities between all kinds of families.* Children's data may be opaque and sometimes even contradictory, but a child-centered approach to LGBT-parent family studies holds great promise because it adds an intergenerational dimension to the picture. Taking account of children refocuses the analytical lens onto lived experience rather than sexual identity politics; it requires that we begin to look at families "from the ground up," demonstrating the value of family practices above and beyond categories of family and family function (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Morrow, 1998). From the child's point of view, all parents, kin, and even significant friendships may constitute family (Allen & Demo, 1995). The shift in emphasis—from adult to children, discursive to experiential—reorients our thinking, and calls into question the merit of reifying different kinds of family through sexuality descriptors (Gabb, 2005a). As Judith Stacey (2002) points out:

> Why would we want to designate a family type according to the sexual identity of one or more of its members? … The more one attempts to arrive at a coherent, defensible sorting principle, the more evident it becomes that the category "gay and lesbian family" signals nothing so much as the consequential social factor of widespread, institutionalized homophobia. (p. 396)

Highlighting lesbian parents' *sexuality difference* simply reaffirms an imaginary heteronormative model against which we are measured and to which we remain deferent. It may be, as Stacey goes on to argue, that a more productive way to proceed would be to acknowledge that the monolithic cultural regime that governs our intimate bonds is in fact collapsing. "Gay and lesbian families simply brave intensified versions of widespread contemporary challenges" (Stacey,

2002, p. 404). Data from children add credence to this assertion, querying the significance afforded to parents' sexuality. This does not contest the particularities that may comprise same-sex family forms, nor does it occlude the queering of parental categories that takes place in LGBT-parent families (Gabb, 2005a). What it does do is to shift the emphasis away from sexuality as *the* defining criterion of these particularities.

Balancing Sexual–Maternal Identities: Combining Interview and Visual Data

Lesbianism and motherhood are not antithetical. Discourses on homosexuality may suggest that sexuality is to be found at the juncture of our subjectivity, making us who and what we are (Weeks, 1995, p. 235), but lesbianism especially has never been *just* an identity or wholly typified by (homo) sexual activity and same-sex desire. Empirical research contests the ontological basis of this kind of demarcation (Gabb, 2005a; Stacey, 2002). What a QMM approach can effectively demonstrate are the particularities of experience and understandings of sexuality and maternity *in context,* and it provides the methodological tools to interrogate the slippery boundaries *between* these two factors. Combining data from methods that interrogate the materiality of sexuality practices and identity formations adds rich insight to existing knowledge on parents' strategies to manage sexual and maternal identities (Malone & Cleary, 2002; Rust, 2001). Findings from my research demonstrate how parents' parental–sexual selves are not experienced as mutually exclusive; they are experienced through sets of circumstances with sexuality and parental responsibility being negotiated around the absence–presence of children (Gabb, 2005b). In the *Perverting Motherhood?* project, this was articulated in open and often quite explicit terms:

Michelle: Obviously […] you don't shag in front of your kids, anyone will tell you that hopefully, but we're quite openly affectionate in front of Rob [son, aged 7].

Janis: [Bedrooms] become baby-feeding spaces actually (laughs)! Well that's what happened. Oh yeh, that's definitely true. […] So in a way the bedroom has always kind of been a cross between sort of where you go to sleep and where you go and do 'it' or whatever, or have a cuddle. […] If she [daughter] was a problem it was because she woke up every night until she was three and a half, and not just once (laughs). […] Which doesn't leave a lot of time to think about the bedroom as a place for sex (laughs) let's face it!

Data such as these substantiate the truism that "having a child changes your life," but this does not set maternal and familial identities beyond sexuality. Instead, it illustrates intersections between sexual–maternal feelings and expressions of intimacy (Gabb, 2004b, p. 409) and the need for linguistic management of these shifting identities (Gabb, 2005a). Data generated through semi-structured interviews, talking to mothers about the significance of their sexuality on everyday family life, produced on one level broadly conflicting accounts. Whether lesbian sexuality was manifestly *on display* fell into two camps: "It's everywhere!" (Michelle) and "It's not really noticeable!" (Matilda). Notwithstanding mothers' polarized assertions, when QMM data were combined together, there was far more commonality of experience than was presented in interviews. Observations detailed the underlying presence of lesbian sexuality. "Subtle signifiers of lesbian identity" (Valentine, 1996, p. 150), such as lesbian iconography and media aimed at the queer market, were visible in all homes, here and there, if you knew where to look and what to look for. However, more often than not it was the abundance of pictures of women and the absence of male equivalents that provided the most "telling signs." Iconic images of favorite celebrities, snapshots of family and friends, and pictures of women predominately adorned the walls and shelves of rooms. Research may have shown that many lesbian parents go to elaborate lengths to include men and male role models in their family networks (for example, Clarke, 2006; Goldberg & Allen, 2007), but in my studies' observational data indicate that this does not necessarily

translate into ambient surroundings. Lesbian-parent homes were not essentially feminized, but images, keepsakes, and decorations were predominantly associated with women, and there was a notable lack of paraphernalia that could be linked with men and masculinity. Observations of this kind, documented in field notes, add another layer to interview data on how maternal and sexual identities are experienced, adding depth of insight on the impact of the absence of male presence in lesbian households. This information may have easily slipped beneath my analytical radar if I had relied on interview data only.

Visual data shed yet further light on the opaqueness of LGBT-parent family living. In the *Perverting Motherhood?* Project, I asked parents and children to take pictures that represented their "lesbian families." Anonymity was assured and I guaranteed that none of these images would be used in publication; for this reason I am reliant here on descriptive detail. The photos that were produced were extremely interesting not just because of what they depicted but also because they illustrated how difficult it was for parents and children to represent lesbian parenthood. In some cases, after their interviews, families who did not take photographs described conceptual images—pictures they would have taken had the pressures of simply *being* a family not taken up all of their available time. One parent presented an existing "family album" as a substitute, using this to talk through what and who constituted family.

The images that were produced, and likewise the discussion over why pictures were not taken, illustrated the uncertainty about what constitutes lesbian-parent family life. Images of people reinforced ideas of "the couple," valorizing normative ideals of the dyadic two-parent family model. Other images were either concerned with household chores or with showing loving relationships—closeness and embodied intimacy that was captured in family embraces. Images were also interesting, in part, because of what they did not show. Sexuality was notably absent and the "family displays" (Finch, 2007) that were depicted said more about normative ideals of family rather than advance understandings of the particularities of lesbian-parent family living (Gabb, 2011b). As such, perhaps the most insightful depiction was of a bathroom shelf which included three toothbrushes in a pot, two adult, colored blue and green, and the third a child's toothbrush depicting a superhero. Simply stated, this signified the "lesbian family," ordinary, like any other, concerned with mundane everyday life.

Taking Account of Biographical Data and Psychosocial Dimensions

In the *Behind Closed Doors* project, I used this rich methodological palette alongside biographical narrative (free association) interviews, with the aim of adding another layer of understanding focused on the emotional–social biographical factors that combine to shape LGBT-parent experience. To demonstrate the depth of insight that can be achieved through this psychosocial method and its combination with other data, I will primarily draw on one case study. This case study data also serve to illustrate the ways that a QMM approach can begin to build up multidimensional understandings of a phenomenon, in this instance a person's family story. Claire is a 43-year-old lesbian single parent. She has three sons aged 21, 19, and 17 who were conceived in a previous heterosexual relationship. She is in full-time employment in a professional job and lives in a comfortable semi-detached suburban home. She is in a LAT (living apart together) relationship with Jade (aged 48) who lives nearby.

Developed from the biographical narrative integrative method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001) and free association narrative interview (FANI) (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), the "open" interview enabled me to examine the interplay between the psychic and the social, located in the cultural context and biography of the individual (Roseneil, 2006, p. 851). The legitimacy and limitations of this approach remain hotly contested (Layton, 2008), being primarily focused around the authority that researchers have to make sense of and interpret participants' psychic reality, transposing methodological and analytic techniques which originate in clinical settings onto academic empirical research data. It does nevertheless

usefully reorient the analytical lens onto the connections between past and present experience, foregrounding relationality and emotions in studies of family living. The psychosocial approach is based on the *Gestalt* principle, suggesting that through the framing and telling of stories the speaker produces a *biographical narrative* (Wengraf, 2001, p. 113) that reveals the *significance* of experiences and/or events. Psychosocial interviews are wholly nondirective, with the researcher asking a single open question at the start of the interview and thereafter the interview narrative is participant-directed, framed in their own terms of reference.

Participants were asked: "Tell me about significant emotional events in your life." This question, at first glance, may not appear to be particularly relevant to research on LGBT-parent family lives, but in my description of Claire's account I will show how posing an open question of this kind can reap unforeseen analytical rewards. It enables participants to orient the interview around events and encounters that are meaningful to them, producing sometimes unexpected data. For example, in my project on family relationships I had presumed that becoming and being a mother would feature centrally in women's lives. In their psychosocial interviews, however, many women focused on other emotionally significant events in their lives. A couple of mothers did not raise the subject of motherhood at all. For others, in line with findings on motherhood more generally, maternal experience and becoming a mother remained a source of great ambivalence and was surrounded with many mixed emotions, including happiness, depression, and distress. Individuals stitched connections between different life events and in so doing shed light on some of the underlying factors that shape personal decision making.

The nature of biographical narrative interviews means that in the following section I have needed to paraphrase much of Claire's data, dipping in and out of extracts to illustrate the analytical point being made or provoke new insight. This is because this method typically produces a long unbroken monologue, which is not structured around tightly framed questions and answers. The kind of descriptive writing that I will therefore use is in some ways akin to a detailed pen portrait, this is to say, fragmentary notes which when combined together begin to sketch out an outline picture of an individual and her "story." Claire's interview describes a life steeped in change, peppered with moments of emotional–physical disruption and continuity. She recalls paternal death, difficult stepfamily relations, failing to achieve at school, unplanned pregnancy, marriage, domestic violence, divorce, remarriage, and coming out. The narrative that she recounts appears well rehearsed and neatly packaged. It is told in "fast forward," moving from one event to another, in quick succession. She talks about how her personal needs and those of her family and the couple relationship are often hard to balance.

Claire is evidently struggling to incorporate Jade within her family life. Trying to make sense of why this separation exists, she distinguishes her own family from that of the ideal (heterosexual) norm, based on parent–child relationships that are grounded in birth origin. Whereas the children cited earlier in this chapter seemed inclined to accept diversity in family composition, Claire sets up an imaginary ideal as something that her situation can only ever imitate: "it's not a day-to-day family existence as a whole family unit." Her lesbian-parent family is "a recreation" and not a "*family* family." She appears to be unable to trust that adult couple relationships may last and that things may work out for the best:

> Claire: Probably during a car drive somewhere, we've had little discussions and it's been touched upon, "Why doesn't Jade move in?" and, and things like that. And I said because I preferred the separation […] I think the boys are probably happier. They would have accepted it, but I know that they, they feel more comfortable that this is their home […] we were a nice little family unit for a couple of years while the children…. [were young]. It, it was a nice time for all of us. There was no bad feeling anywhere it was just nice, comfortable, content, but it couldn't last, it really couldn't.

Claire can be seen here to be moving back and forth, imagining and justifying her decisions, working hard to make the right decision. After reading these kinds of data there is a temptation to fall back on psychoanalytically determined interpretations: to join up the experiential dots and make sense of Claire's experience for her. I contend that this delimits the potential of psychosocial interviews (Gabb, 2010). One of the key strengths of this kind of method is to illustrate the connections that are made *by the narrator/interviewee*, between different life events. To overwrite these individually crafted associations disregards the fabric of the accounts that are presented. Going back to the data again and again, often in the context of research group analysis, requires that we keep looking at what is there while holding at bay the analytical compulsion to tie up loose ends. Taking as an example the extract from Claire (above), it is possible to see how different facets of her experience come to bear in dynamic and contested ways that resist clear-cut interpretation.

Reading and rereading this extract, I am still unclear what the "it" is which Claire is referring to in her last sentence. It is probable that "it" has various meanings here. *It* could be referring to the contained family unit that she shared with her children while they were growing up, before they started to work and live away from home. *It* could be that she is talking more hypothetically, about how introducing her partner into their household might not be a long-lasting arrangement and therefore *it* is not an option that she wants to risk. Alternatively, in the broader context of the whole interview, *it* may be happiness. The flux and lack of surety which characterize her biographical narrative have shown that things do not last—adult relationships, family cohesion, and the closeness of mother–child relationships—all things change and lack constancy. Goodbyes are commonplace. The point I am trying to make here is that there is no need to close down meanings through tightly defined interpretations. It is highly plausible that the extract, as with Claire's family story, has multiple meanings which shift over time and in accordance with different sets of circumstance. Retaining this dynamic perspective is a crucial part of the QMM approach, something that I will return to later on.

The Spatial–Temporal Patterning of Intimacy: Emotion Maps and Diaries

In the *Behind Closed Doors* project, I tried to develop methods that generated data on *how* intimacy and family sexuality are experienced in *different contexts* around the home, and to extend the methodological toolkit to include techniques that engage with the abstract realm of our emotions, feelings, and connections with others. To facilitate insight on the deeply personal and often strictly guarded aspects of families' private lives, I used two simultaneous participatory methods—dairies and emotion maps. Claire was a diligent diarist and she indicated that she thoroughly enjoyed this method. Her diary facilitated self-reflection, enabling her to think through the day's events and the significance of different interactions.

Claire: Day 6 [date]. [Jade] is not responding very well to my needs. She's also struggling with flightiness and hormonal imbalance due to the menopause and I am actually quite relieved to see her go. I want to be by myself […] I went to make a cup of tea and have come to my room to write this down, read and then sleep alone.

Diary data such as these provide insight not only on everyday events but also on personal thought processes, describing how decisions are reached and the emotional impact of events on the diarist. For Claire, being a mother is a crucial part of her identity and her lifestyle. Jade has no investment in either "the boys" or this area of Claire's biography. The only solution that seems to work for them is to carve out an emotional–spatial–temporal separation between these different parts of their lives. Diaries produced by participants were steeped in temporal referents—clock time, age and generation, personal time, family time, precious time for the self, and the time needed to maintain and manage relationships. Emotion maps data on the boundaries of family intimacy added a *spatial* dimension to these understandings of LGBT-parent family living.

Emotion map data and the conversation generated through these graphic materials chart the emotional geographies of the family home.

Rooms and intimate space were described as having multiple uses that change over time, as children grow up. Considerable mobility was evident in the uses of space, which countermanded the otherwise static environment of demarcated rooms. Some mothers talked about "bed hopping" as they moved in and out of the "marital" bed to provide comfort and/or company for children. Others identified certain spaces, such as the kitchen, as both a "hot spot" for family tension and a site for family togetherness. Combined diary and emotion data illustrated how furtive embraces and brief moments of intimacy were fitted into the spatial and temporal cracks of family living.

In studying the "boundaries of intimacy" (Jamieson, 2005, p. 189) in LGBT-parent families, one of the most potent sites to investigate is the parents' bedroom, and yet not surprisingly it remains one of the hardest spaces to effectively research. The bedroom is traditionally afforded great symbolic resonance. It is a *cultural sign* of sexuality that personifies "the sexual family" (Fineman, 1995). As the site of parental sex it marks the child's separation from the mother and signifies the hierarchical difference between parent and child. In psychoanalytic terms, the "maternal bed" is a sign of sexual activity and adult intimacy, a space where children are supplanted in the mother's affections by the father The double bed thus signifies the real and cultural difference between generationally defined adult (sexual) relations and parent/child (nurturing) relationships (Hollway, 1997).

Participatory methods, such as the emotion map, begin to open up such private space for qualitative investigation. The interview data which this method generates elicit rich insight on how different kinds of relations are kept separate and how ordinary family intimacy is policed. They add to understandings on the factors which inform decision making on who gets entry into certain spaces and how permissions are granted and by whom. This advances knowledge on how and why "rules" are set up to separate self and other (Gabb, 2011a), with the policing of relations often being informed by social understandings of risk and gender:

Claire: Probably keep the intimacy within the family rather than a family friend or an uncle.

Claire was keen to establish clear boundaries around codes of conduct, "just in case." The in/significance of gender in lesbian-parent families is much debated (Gabb, 2001b, 2004b). In parents' accounts of family relationships and the boundaries of intimacy, it was never far from view and often shaped opinions and practice. Talking about the intimate behavior depicted on her emotion map (Fig. 21.2), Claire seeks to categorically disassociate denoted interactions from any inference of sex, including those between her and her partner. In her account she therefore shuts down all possibilities for misinterpretation, but in so doing she also removes sexuality from the lesbian-parent family equation and from family intimacy more widely.

Interviewer: Right, so on the bed in your room, erm there's kind of stickers at one end and stickers at the other end. Is that significant?

Claire: Yeah, well that was because she [Jade, partner] stayed over one night and this is because erm I've got a hug but it wasn't sort of, of a, a sexual nature or anything like that … it's changed, it does change over the years. No this doesn't surprise me. This is, is fairly usual. But things have changed and I think that's the noticeable thing for me is that Jake often comes into my bedroom and has a chat. They'll always knock at the door and they'll always come in and, and have a chat and that doesn't happen so much now. Probably because they're older.

The approach adds rich insight into parents' management of family sexuality practices, enabling us to trace the spatial–temporal patterning of intimate behavior in LGBT-parent households. In the above quote Claire alludes to earlier relationship incarnations, when sexual activity between her and Jade was more frequent. As time has passed, this dimension of the relationship has cooled down, something that is commented upon as unsurprising. She identifies the children's freedom to come into her bedroom "on demand" as a

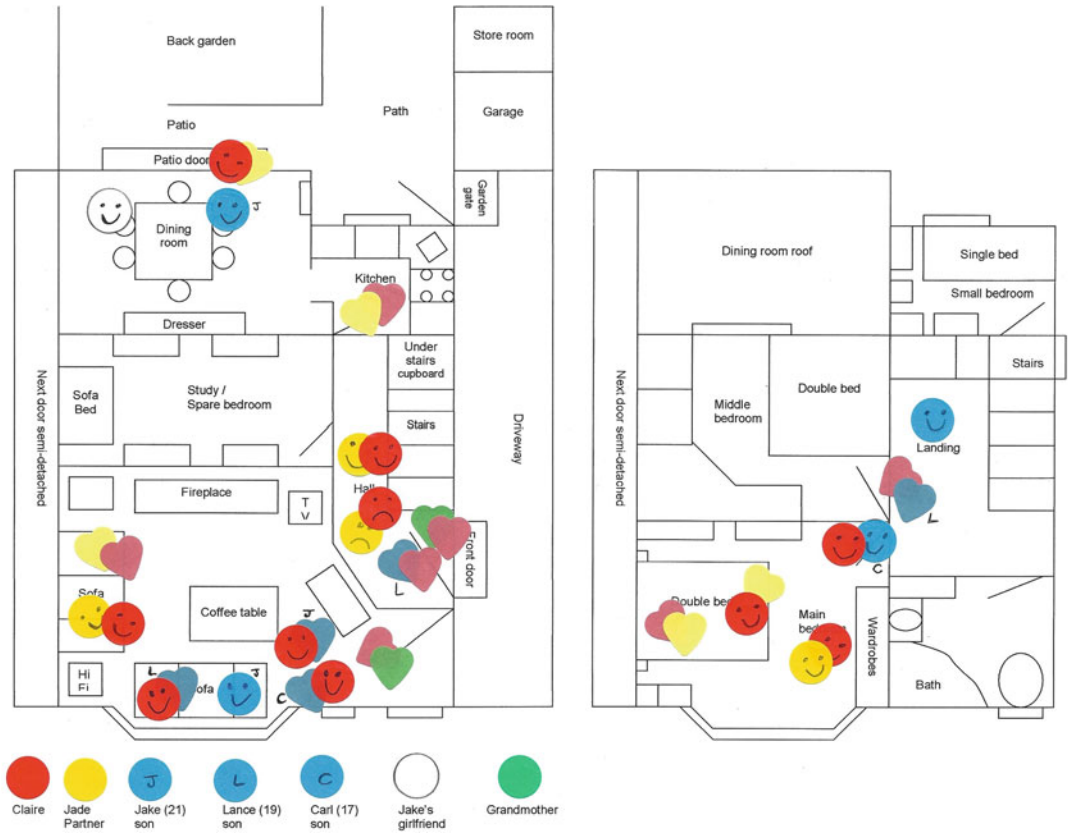

Fig. 21.2 Claire's emotion map

factor that has delimited sex when they were younger. It is plausible that this practice and the "open door" policy that existed during this time have had a lasting impact on her experience of adult-sexual relationships. Her bed (the maternal bedroom) now remains associated with being a family space rather than a site of adult-sexual intimacy.

Mapping Categories of Behavior: Inhabiting Class

In qualitative analysis of the patterning of family intimacy at home, it is important to remain attentive to the ways that affective practices are shaped by sets of circumstances and "choices" that are not always of parents' own making. Separate spaces and personal privacy at home are luxuries that not every family can afford (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). Widening the scope of the academic research lens to incorporate socioeconomic diversity is crucial in opening up understandings of LGBT-parent families. Family studies research on heterosexual motherhood has clearly demonstrated the impact of financial factors and cultural resources on the pragmatics of parenting (Gillies, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2006). Social circumstance affects the ways that women mother, and these maternal practices are then duly mapped onto categories of mothering (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). This stigmatizing process reinforces ideas of good and bad parenting, wherein the working class parent can never fully attain the status of respectability because she does not have access to the financial resources and cultural capital that are needed to achieve

this (Skeggs, 1997). In LGBT-parent family research, however, issues of class and the material impact of socioeconomic status on the practices and identities of queer parents remain under-researched (Biblarz & Savci, 2010) and samples selected remain predominantly middle class (Almack, 2008; Dunne, 1998; Nordqvist, 2011). This is in part a consequence of the costs involved in pursuing assisted conception through official routes. Even in the UK, where the National Health Service subsidizes fertility treatment, significant sums of money are involved for each insemination attempt. Other reasons for the sample composition are likely to be informed by the demographic profile of those who participate in organized parenting activities and by the personal biography of the researcher (Gabb, 2004a).

Some qualitative studies of lesbian and gay parenting are beginning to examine the ways that class simultaneously reproduces and ruptures understandings and experiences of sexuality (Taylor, 2009). Such analysis adds another much needed perspective in the otherwise partial LGBT-parent family narrative, usefully accounting for the ways that class positioning, educational advantage, and cultural capital shape perceptions and experiences of parenthood. In my own research I have ensured that the sample comprises socioeconomic diversity so that the picture painted is not steeped in privilege, thereby furthering the marginalization of traditionally stigmatized families. Notwithstanding the richness of data which this sampling provides, I can nevertheless find little correlation between socioeconomic factors and discernible differences in the patterning of intimate behavior (Gabb, 2009). The decision-making processes around risk and family sexuality practices and the boundaries that are set up around intimacy do not appear to readily map onto differences in cultural resources or class status. Instead findings seem to indicate that it is emotional–social biographical experience combined with wider sets of sociocultural meanings which variously shape patterns of behavior, contributing to where boundaries are set up around understandings of "appropriate" codes of sexuality conduct.

Managing Public–Private Space: Vignettes and Photo Elicitation

While there are undoubtedly specificities in circumstance and experience that can be teased out, what I want to focus on here are the common methodological challenges that are presented in trying to investigate sensitive and closely guarded aspects of people's personal lives. One strategy that I have found useful in working my way around such barriers is to approach the topic using methods that draw on the third person, asking the participant to respond to an abstract scenario rather than begin from their personal experience. This can be a central feature in the design of the photo interview. Used in this way, the method can produce data on where parents set boundaries around intimacy and the codes of conduct that are invoked to legitimize personal–family sexuality management. In the *Behind Closed Doors* project parents were shown six images. One was an illustration that depicted a double bed, occupied by a man and woman, separated by a happy sleeping child in between them, with a cat curled up on the end of the bed. In response Claire says:

> Claire: Yeah. Mmm quite typical I think isn't it (laughs) yeah… Sleeping quite happily, yeah nothing wrong with that, I would have thought […] My cat used to sleep on my bed and yeah. I'm probably a little bit relaxed about things like that and a lot of people are more strict, they don't want pets in the bedroom but I'm not like that […] the boys have on occasion, on regular occasions, come into [my] bed, up until, the last time I remember was when [son] was about 13 and he'd had a really bad dream so mmmm…

In the previous section I discussed Claire's desire to set up categorical boundaries around different activities and practices of intimacy. Here, talking in the third person, she becomes less prescriptive. When talking earlier about her sleeping arrangements, she presented a quite

defensive response which emphasizes the need to protect children. This tells us something about the impact of societal pressures to conform and parents' role in the management of sexuality and risk, but it does not, however, tell us much about everyday practices of intimacy. By tackling the subject *indirectly* I was able to facilitate Claire to talk about her experience *in comparison*. This generated another layer of information on personal past experience, times when she shared a bed with her teenage son, something that had previously been only inferred.

Methods which use third-party scenarios aim to generate information on people's beliefs and opinions; conversations which then ordinarily move on to include how these beliefs and opinions translate in everyday practice and experience in their own families. In response to another scenario, presented in a vignette, Claire again shifts between third and first person. She reflects on the ways that a scenario relates to issues of boundary setting in lesbian relationships generally, before moving on to describe more personally revealing details concerning her relationship with Jade. The vignette described an intimate (nonsexual) relationship that is developing between a "married" woman and male colleague at work. Participants were then asked what the woman's partner should do:

Claire: Oh this is exactly what's going on with [my friend] at the moment […] I mean same sex relationships are more difficult in that respect because it's difficult for me to have friends, female friends over […] very difficult because there's a, there's a boundary there but for some of them, for others it's fine, if the boundary is set, but for others it isn't and it's difficult for Jade…

Issues of boundaries feature high in Claire's account of her family and different kinds of relationship. These data from discussion of the vignette added another piece of the jigsaw, helping me to begin to understand why boundary setting is so important. Again, Claire is caught between her own needs and those of others, in this instance her partner, Jade; these data generated through third person narratives would be difficult to access through other means. They add a crucial dimension to understandings of both the participant (as an individual) and some of the factors that combine to shape LGBT-parent family living. Combined together with findings from other methods, a dynamic and highly illuminating picture begins to emerge, providing depth of knowledge to understandings of sexuality management and how parents balance sexual–parental identities in everyday practices of intimacy.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter I have demonstrated how a QMM approach can provide rich multilayered accounts. To conclude, I want to caution against trying to piece together these layers of data to either reconstruct holistic portraits of individual participants or to make grand claims about trends in the patterning of intimate behavior and sexuality conduct. In my analysis of Claire's data I have tried to demonstrate the benefits of retaining the frayed ends and incongruities that weave in and out across her data, resisting the temptation to produce a finished case study portrait from the composite pieces of data that are available. QMM research does produce comprehensive findings on LGBT-parent family relationships, but I propose that we need to find ways to retain and reflect the *complexity of relational experience* and, in so doing, to challenge the sanitization of queer family lives that characterizes so many studies in this area. I want to tease open the contained picture which edits out sections that make for uncomfortable reading (Gabb, 2004a), looking across the constellation of multiple methods in the dataset to create multifaceted pictures of phenomenon (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006, p. 54).

I concede that on a sheer practical level the amount of data collected through a QMM approach, per participant, per family, does require the researcher to edit, synthesize, and paraphrase these complex and capacious data. This process does not, however, lead us inexorably toward the narrativization of experience. We should be mindful of any individual and/or external impetus to neaten the research picture: "life experience is

messy, we may do well, in our portrayals of that experience, to hold onto some of that messiness in our writings" (Daly, 2007, pp. 259–260). This desire to retain messiness calls into question epistemological certainties, a theme that has been taken up in recent work on the relationship between research and meaning-making (Law & Urry, 2004). It has been argued that social phenomena can be captured only fleetingly in momentary stability because the research process aims to open space for the indefinite. Method, therefore, should be slow and uncertain: a risky and troubling process (Law, 2004).

Undoing the certainties created through methods has great salience in making sense of everyday family relationships (Gabb, 2009). Thematic analysis of different threads *across* the dataset can freeze the frame and conjure up a series of analytical snapshots of LGBT-parent families, but it is attentiveness to the subtle interplay of threads which crisscross the breadth and depth of data which evinces the *contingency* of lived lives. Meanings are produced through relational connections which shift as we twist the analytical kaleidoscope (McCarthy Ribbens, Holland, & Gillies, 2003, p. 19) and which shift again as different dimensions are brought into view. This dynamic mode of analysis is not designed to trace trends in family formation and networks of kin; this task is better suited to micro–macro, qualitative–quantitative analyses. Instead I suggest that a QMM approach is best suited to the examination of the materiality of LGBT-parent family lives, a messy process that inevitably produces loose ends. Leaving in methodological and emotional uncertainties is not analytical sloppiness rather it reflects the ephemera and flux of LGBT relationships across the life course.

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