1       **Abstract**

2       **The heterogeneity of family: Responses to representational invisibility by LGBTQ**

3                                                      **parents**

4               This article draws on qualitative research data collected in semi-structured interviews

5       conducted during 2013 and 2014 with 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ)

6       parents living in England and Scotland. It explores how LGBTQ parents respond to media

7       representations of families like theirs, and build narratives of family identity from limited

8       cultural resources. Media, encompassing a range of cultural representational resources,

9       including advertisements, television, books and films, produces specific knowledges about

10      LGBTQ families. Participants argued that popular entertainment media (including *Modern*

11      *Family*) offered a limited range of representations of LGBTQ parents and concretizes

12      knowledge about the shape of families. I argue that available representations fail to

13      acknowledge the diversity of non-heterosexual family forms and that this representational

14      gap results in socio-cultural invisibility. I explore the responses LGBTQ parents had to such

15      gaps and how they negotiated, or rejected representational meanings in order to consolidate

16      new narratives of family.

17                                                **Keywords:**

20 **Introduction**

21 **The role of representation**

22       Media is a core constituent of identity (Kellner, 2011). It is through a complex and

23 ongoing process of refusals, re-articulations and identifications with representation, that we

24 can craft a sense of self (Driver, 2007). Cultural representations, their restriction, availability,

25 and circulation "have real consequences for real people" (Dyer, 2002a, p.3) as they try to

26 craft stable lives and access socio-cultural legitimation. It is in this context that this research

27 is located: focusing as it does on the interaction between available media representations and

28 the experiences of ordinary people in building social and family lives.

29       Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people have been historically

30 marginalised through the censorship of representation and the use of legislation to restrict the

31 circulation of images and narratives of the legitimacy of non-heterosexual identity. In the UK

32 for example, until 2003 Section 28 prohibited local authorities from "intentionally

33 promot[ing] homosexuality or publish[ing] material with the intention of promoting

34 homosexuality" and from "teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of

35 homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (*Local Government Act 1988*: chapter 9,

36 section 28). A book for children which represented a child with two gay fathers, *Jenny lives*

37 *with Eric and Martin* (1983), was decried as the tipping point of increasing circulation of

38 media which both represented *and* legitimated lesbian and gay relationships and was a key

39 prompt for the introduction of this legislation (Robinson, 2007, p.171). Both LGBTQ people

40 and their families were deemed an unsuitable topic for children to encounter. The availability

41 of media representations remains strongly tied to the politicised project of constituting and

42 publicly articulating stable identities for LGBTQ people (Dyer, 1990, p.286; Gross, 2001;

43 Muñoz, 1999). Examining LGBTQ people's relationships to and use of media, therefore

44 offers a productive way to make sense of their experiences of constituting, sharing, and

45    transforming family identities in a socio-political context which recently refused the

46    legitimacy of such work. This project of transformation and narrative making is strongly tied

47    to cultural representation (Driver, 2007; Hall, 1996; Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011).

48        In a media-saturated culture, representation offers a way to locate ourselves in the

49    social world (Silverstone, 2007) and a route by which we might stake a claim in social

50    discourses and the process meaning-making. Representation, whether through restriction or

51    diversification, generates different possibilities in people's lives. This article asks what

52    possibilities of identity-narrative production and recognition in culture are created or

53    foreclosed for LGBTQ parents and their families.

54    **The representation of LGBTQ-parented families**

55        Visibility for LGBTQ parents' identities and families has been increasing for more

56    than two decades (Clark, 1995; Doty and Gove, 1997; Gross, 1994; Shugart, 2003), however,

57    the meanings and uses of the available representations are less clear-cut (Phelan, 1993;

58    Walters, 2012). Walters (2012) has described the current trend in LGBTQ representation as

59    one of "banal inclusion normalisation, assimilation, everyday unremarkable queerness but

60    also, of course, continued abjection" (p.918). Whilst LGBTQ people may be able to find

61    increasing number of images which ostensibly represent them, the diversity of lives and

62    identities which are depicted is limited. Further, representational visibility has increased

63    unevenly for the different identities under the LGBTQ banner (Barker et al, 2008; Dyer,

64    2002b; Clark, 1995; Gross, 1994; Halberstam, 2005; Weeks, 1977).

65        In this context of changing visibility and representational prominence, the experiences

66    of LGBTQ people who parent and collaboratively produce narratives of family identity out of

67    available cultural resources, remain underexamined. In particular, existing research does not

68    indicate how LGBTQ parents locate their families within a media culture which does not

69  equally represent the identities of those people involved in parenting, or routinely

70  acknowledge the validity of non-heterosexual family arrangements.

71      This article offers a way to understand the ongoing work of LGBTQ parents, who are

72  embedded in a media culture, as they shape and stabilise non-heterosexual family narratives.

73  This research aims to illuminate how the heterogeneous experience of family is revealed and

74  validated within what participants described in 2013/2014 as a narrow representational

75  context. To achieve this, I explore the available meanings and narratives offered in the

76  contemporary media productions which directly address, or allow scope for storytelling by,

77  LGBTQ parents. Using data from qualitative interviews, I detail the experiences of LGBTQ

78  parents in finding themselves in media, and report their work to produce and stabilise

79  narratives which affirm family validity, and recognise their family diversity.

80                                              **Methods**

81  **Participants**

82      This article draws on qualitative data collected during in-person, semi-structured

83  interviews with 30 LGBTQ parents, which were conducted during 2013 and 2014. The

84  participant criteria sought the following: people who were over 18, self-identify as lesbian,

85  gay, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, trans, genderqueer, non-binary, or queer, and a parent

86  living in the UK.  Participant recruitment was restricted to those living in the UK given the

87  culturally specific nature of media representation and reception (Silverstone, 2007).

88  Participants were recruited through LGBTQ studies mailing lists, community organisations,

89  community radio, personal networks, and Twitter.

90      Despite a flexible approach to recruitment, with a combination of snowball and

91  purposive sampling, the sample referred to here is largely homogenous. Only eight

92  participants described their class in another way than middle-class and all participants, except

93  one, described themselves as white. Participant ages ranged from 26-56 years and included

94    British, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, European and American people, all of whom were living in

95    Scotland or England at the time of our interview.  Children of participants ranged in age from

96    5 months to 27 years old. Six participants identified as gay, 7 as bisexual, 12 as lesbian, 1

97    used the terms both lesbian and queer, and 4 identified as queer, non-heterosexual, or

98    "heterosexual with a bisexual past" (Sarah). The sample included 4 participants who

99    described themselves as poly (or 'polyamorous', see Sheff, 2014), and 4 participants who

100    identified themselves as trans.

101          The sample was not representative, nor was it intended to be.  There is sparse data on

102    the number of people in the UK with non-heterosexual identities and even less on how many

103    of those people parent. This study, therefore does not represent all LGBTQ people, or even all

104    LGBTQ parents; achieving this, Weston (1997) has explained, is impossible for a "population

105    [which] is not only partially hidden or closeted but also lacks consensus as to the criteria for

106    membership" (p.9). Rather, this study is a glimpse at the lives, experiences, and media

107    interactions of a given group of people who are diverse in some respects (age, location,

108    nationality, life experience) and homogenous in others (race, class).

109    **The interview and analysis**

110          Interviews were conducted in person and there were no restrictions on how many

111    people could take part in each interview; a number of participants chose to be interviewed

112    with their partner. In total I conducted 7 'couple' interviews with 14 people (including one

113    participant's non-parent heterosexual partner, whose responses are not included here), and 17

114    individual interviews. Conducting interviews with two people present provided an

115    opportunity for "insights into the practice of knowledge production" within these families

116    (Cameron, 2005, p.117) as participants jointly explored their perspectives on their family and

117    its place in a wider social context.

118        Participants were interviewed in a range of locations. Sin (2003) has noted that being

119    able to receive researchers in one's home indicates a degree of economic and social capital

120    and insisting on this location may therefore exclude some from participation. Participants

121    were therefore invited to select a space which they felt most comfortable in.  Those

122    participants with young children most frequently chose to be interviewed at home as they

123    could attend to childcare whilst we spoke. In all, 12 interviews were conducted in

124    participant's homes, 7 in café-bars or coffee shops, 3 in workplaces, 1 in a hotel, and 1 in a

125    community centre.  Interviews lasted between 45 minutes, and 2 hours 30 minutes.

126        Interviews were semi-structured with a small set of core questions regarding family

127    narrative (who is in your family? What story about your family do you invite your children to

128    tell?), media usage (what media do you like and dislike? What media represents families like

129    yours?), and how decisions about family narratives were made (have you used any parenting

130    guides or resources? How did you make decisions about what to call the adults who parent in

131    your family?).  Participants were briefed that 'media' could encompass a broad range of

132    sources from broadcast, to community and online productions; television; film; radio; books;

133    magazines; blogs; music; or anything else they felt constituted 'media'. Demographic data

134    was collected verbally, at the end of interviews.

135        Interviews were audio recorded on a digital Dictaphone, stored electronically on a

136    secure hard drive under randomly assigned pseudonyms, and later transcribed verbatim. At

137    the point of transcription identifying information, such as detail on workplaces and schools

138    were removed, and names of family members and pets were replaced with pseudonyms.

139        All interviews were coded in Nvivo. Nvivo allows data to be coded at multiple top-

140    level 'nodes' representing key themes and further coded to sub-category 'nodes' within each

141    theme.  Informed by a discourse analysis approach to identifying significant content, those

142    topics or issues which were repeatedly commented on, or those which were discussed at

143 length in multiple interviews were designated as having "worth and validity" (Waitt, 2005,

144 p.182) and formed 'top level' nodes. Repetitions of prominent phrases, ideas, and meanings

145 in the data were noted and used to establish which themes were most significant within the

146 data (Hannam, 2002; Smith, 1995). This article deals with the two most prominent themes:

147 lack of representation and feelings of invisibility.

148 The media examples discussed here were all identified by participants. These named

149 texts were given both in response to questions which directed participants to list their

150 favourite and least favourite media, and in more wide ranging discussions on the type of

151 representation which participants found useful or valuable. Once identified from the

152 interview data, each text was viewed multiple times to identify particularly salient features of

153 the content, with reference to the key characteristics which participants suggested it

154 contained. In subsequent viewings, I reflected on how these features contributed to the

155 overall narrative or discursive meaning of the text (Riggs, 2014, p.160). Analysis of the

156 meanings and discourses available in the media texts is offered here in order to situate

157 participant responses to representation, and to facilitate reflection on the role these texts

158 played in shaping and supporting the narratives participants offered of their families (Kress,

159 1996; Thompson, 1988, pp.12-13).

160 **Language**

161 This work aims to acknowledge and represent the complex and multi-faceted

162 experiences of LGBTQ parents in the UK today. With this in mind, I note that the available

163 language to describe relationships tends toward a division of couples into either

164 'heterosexual' or 'same-sex' pairings. These terms both collapse gender and sex, and allow

165 no room to acknowledge non-heterosexual identities of individuals in different gender

166 couples. Additionally, same-sex is increasingly used interchangeably with 'gay' or

167 'homosexual' (see Bingham, 2014, for example) and this risks erasing the non-binary,

168 multiple, and non-homosexual attractions of bisexual, queer, and non-heterosexual parents

169 who are in same-sex or same-gender relationships. In the interests of clarity, I chose to refer

170 to couples who are in relationships with someone who describes their gender in the same way

171 as them, as being a 'homogendered' couple; and to describe couples whose gender identities

172 are different as a 'heterogendered' couple.

173        Finally, I note that I did not ask participants if they were cisgender but I did actively

174 recruit trans participants. Cisgender describes people whose gender identity is the same as the

175 one they were assigned at birth. It forms a counterpoint to transgender, which describes

176 people whose gender identity differs from the one they were assigned at birth. In order to

177 most accurately represent individuals' identities, I use trans and cisgender only in relation to

178 participants who explicitly described themselves with reference to those terms.

179 **Findings**

180 The two key themes which I will explore mirror the findings of previous research on LGBTQ

181 people's responses to media representation (Barker et al, 2008; Halberstam, 2005; Pallotta-

182 Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003). Namely that certain identities remain proportionally

183 underrepresented in mainstream cultural images (theme 1) and that this representational

184 homogeneity results in feelings of cultural and social invisibility (theme 2).  These two

185 themes offer an insight into the prompts and challenges LGBTQ parents experience in

186 producing culturally intelligible family narratives in the media landscape of 2013/2014.

187 **Theme 1: Limited representations in mainstream media sources**

188        Participants felt strongly that there was a limited scope of representation for LGBTQ-

189 headed families in the contemporary media landscape.  They had forceful criticism for the

190 different ways they felt representations which ostensibly addressed people like them, failed to

191 equally validate or represent their experiences.

192     **The 'anti-lesbian thing': Good gay men and the refusal to acknowledge the value**

193     **of lesbian parenting.**  In response to prompts to tell me about the media they enjoyed as a

194     family and media which they felt represented families like theirs, over half of all the

195     participants I spoke with identified American sitcom, *Modern Family*. *Modern Family*, which

196     first aired in 2009, follows the lives of 3 generations of the Pritchett family living across three

197     households. Presented in a 'mocumentary' style, it includes a gay couple – Mitchell and

198     Cameron – who parent their adopted daughter Lily.

199     *Modern Family* was commonly watched collectively by a participant's whole family

200     and was deemed by participants to contain broadly positive representations of non-

201     heterosexual parents. However, participants were not uncritical of the way in which this

202     representation was constructed. Darren, a father to two children, whom he co-parented with

203     his ex-partner and two lesbian women said:

204          there's an anti-lesbian thing sometimes [in *Modern Family*], which I think is

205          uncomfortable for me, when I'm watching with the kids. Sometimes it feels like –

206          their Mums are lesbians – so I think interestingly in a supposedly inclusive [show],

207          actually what gets marginalised is lesbian parenthood and lesbians as a group."

208     (Darren, gay man)

209     To understand the context of Darren's stated discomfort, it is useful to examine the

210     themes present in the sole *Modern Family* episode to prominently feature lesbian characters:

211     'Schooled' (Levitan and O'Shannon, 2012). In the episode, gay couple Cam and Mitchell are

212     called into their daughter Lily's school to meet with the principal after Lily fought with

213     Connor, the son of lesbian couple, Pam and Susan. The moment Cam and Mitchell discover

214     that Connor's parents are lesbians their demeanour immediately changes; they exclaim in

215     horror "lesbians!" Pam and Susan are portrayed as aggressive through their explosive

216     entrance, their confrontational introduction (Pam exclaims: "whoever made our son cry has

217   messed with the wrong Moms!") and signalled as non-feminine by their utilitarian style of

218   dress. In their antagonistic exchange with these women, Cam and Mitchell go on to imply

219   that Pam and Susan, like all lesbians, are incapable of maintaining a welcoming home

220   (Levitan and O'Shannon, 2012).

221        Whilst *Modern Family* is a comedy, and Cam and Mitchell's disdain for lesbians is

222   dramatized as an opportunity for comedic conflict, the meanings of such representation which

223   insists on an antagonistic and oppositional relationship between lesbians and gay men

224   exceeds the boundaries of the show, as Darren's uneasiness attested. Although *Modern*

225   *Family* broadly offers celebration and legitimation of gay men parenting (Cavalcante, 2015),

226   it does this by marginalising and abjecting lesbians and gay women who take on the same

227   roles. In the confessional-style segment to camera in the 'Schooled' episode, Cam and

228   Mitchell explain their aversion to lesbians; characterising them as fundamentally estranged

229   from gay men because of both their gender, and their sexual desire for women. As gay men

230   (or sexual outsiders) parenting, Cam and Mitchell are potentially threatening to the dominant

231   order but, through the resignification of lesbians as the "constitutive outside", the show

232   consolidates the mainstream inclusion of, and the (presumed heterosexual) audience's

233   identification with, gay men (Hall, 1996). Cam and Mitchell's description of their 'natural'

234   solidarities with heterosexual women and straight men offers the audience an assurance that

235   accepting gay male parents does not mean all the structures of hetero-patriarchal power must

236   be undone (Rothmann, 2013, p. 68. Rich, 1980). Indeed, through the assurance of their

237   fraternity with straight men and women, Cam and Mitchell's non-heterosexuality is

238   constituted as benign and their style of parenting is 'normalised' by their expression of

239   distance from the "uncontainable" lesbian mothers (Riggs, 2011, p.298). Gay men are

240   positioned as allies of patriarchy, champions of heteronormativity (Shugart, 2003), whilst

241   lesbians' capacity to parent well is dismissed off-hand. This representation therefore offered

242    an implicit denial of the parenting arrangement which Darren had with his children's mothers

243    and rendered his family unimaginable within the representational language of the show.

244        **Femmes only: Invisibility of gender non-conforming women**. In addition to

245    participants arguing that gay men parenting are preferentially represented (as in *Modern*

246    *Family*), a number of the lesbian, bi and queer women interviewed also suggested there were

247    further gendered inequalities in the media representations they referred to.

248        Ivy spoke passionately about the type of femininity on show when women were

249    represented in the media. Speaking about the advertising choices made by a buggy

250    manufacturer, she expressed her frustration at what she felt was an implicit denial by the

251    company that their advertised products could appeal to her, a non-heterosexual women with

252    little interest in traditional femininity:

253        I was quite irritated by Phil and Teds […] because Phil and Ted's pushchairs actually

254        appeal to lesbians, they are off-road pushchairs, you can go hiking, and they're

255        missing a fucking trick! […] they've marketed to gay men. Gay men parenting are

256        much more of a minority than lesbian parents and I think lesbian parents still get

257        marginalised in that way and they get kind of forgotten about […] I don't know if I

258        feel represented myself […] if they'd done an ad with a lesbian couple going hiking,

259        with a Phil and Ted's pushchair, I'd have been like 'hey! That's me!' because that's

260        why I got that fucking pushchair, not because I want to go hiking, but because it

261        appeals to me. I'm not prissy and I like functional. (Ivy, lesbian woman)

262    Ivy described a desire to see both lesbians, and non-traditional femininities represented in

263    buggy advertising, and for the buggy to be sold for the qualities she valued in it; that it is a

264    functional, robust tool to fit her active and practical lifestyle.

265        In the advertising for Phil and Teds which Ivy referred to, immaculately turned out,

266    femme women in urban environments jump for joy, with lipsticked-smiles, as they push their

267     buggies in colour-coordinated outfits. Similarly slick, groomed men in fashionable outfits

268     dote on children sitting in buggies dubbed 'travel systems' which come in colours such as

269     'noir' and 'graphite' (see Phil and Teds, 2017). These glamourous bodies engage with stylish

270     products which promise effortless, luxury childcare; offering a link from "off-road" and

271     "functional" buggies to a lifestyle which "transcends the banalities of femininity" (Skeggs,

272     1997, p.111) and the mundane tasks associated with childcare and motherhood. By contrast,

273     the practical and 'functional' marketing Ivy wished for, would serve to reinforce bodily

274     labour. Butch or non-femme bodies that may visually indicate lesbian subjectivity (in a way

275     these images of hyper-femme women and metrosexual men do not) are thus associated with

276     toil and cannot be deployed to signal aspirational lifestyles and products. Ivy was explicit in

277     arguing that this representational inequality in images of women and lesbians parenting

278     needed to change: "there's an awful lot of butch lesbians having kids and they are beautiful

279     people too, I think that [representational invisibility] needs to be redressed really." (Ivy,

280     lesbian woman).

281         Other women also commented on the way in which they felt media only offered

282     representations of women who conformed to traditional femininities. Talking about what she

283     felt this meant for trans women's cultural visibility, Sarah said:

284         Paris [Lees – a trans woman, activist, and journalist] is young and beautiful and

285         consequently he [sic] can get on to television whereas I couldn't, and there are many

286         far more prominent trans women than me in Britain who also would never be on

287         television because they're not good looking enough. (Sarah, trans woman)

288         Available representations of both trans and cis women in mainstream media are

289     defined by narratives and images which affirm traditional femininity as ideal, and restrict the

290     possibility of increasing cultural visibility of and knowledge about women who do not fit this

291     model. This has particular significance for non-heterosexual women who parent, who may

292    only find mainstream representation if their gender performance conforms to these narrow

293    possibilities; something both Ivy and Sarah expressed in their comments.

294    **The two-parent model: The disappearing of co-parents and lone-parents.** Moving

295    beyond evaluation of the differences in the way in which lesbians are represented compared

296    to gay men parenting, participants also offered reflections on which models of family

297    arrangement were privileged in representations. A lack of representations of families beyond

298    the two-parent model, which acknowledge co-parenting arrangements, was a frequent point

299    of discussion.

300    Seb was a step-parent to two children and was in a homogendered relationship with

301    the children's father, who in turn co-parented with a lesbian couple. He reflected on the

302    images and narratives of LGBTQ family which had dominated news media during the

303    campaign for civil partnerships:

304    to gain that equality there almost had to be a lot of [representation about] the

305    significance of a civil partnerships […] but I think one of the secondary effects of that

306    is that it's almost narrowed the idea of family down to couples. Which in a way kind

307    of, it can be about, but then you try to expand on that or do something that's leftfield

308    of that, or a bit different and there isn't any visibility of that […] it's quite

309    deterministic now whereas if you go back before that, the idea of LGBT families […]

310    felt like it could be a bit more creative." (Seb, gay man)

311    Seb lamented how these dominant narratives on the arrangement of LGBTQ families limited

312    the possibility to imagine different ways to arrange parenting and queer relationships. But he

313    also went on, in common with other parents I spoke with, to highlight how such

314    representations prevented him from achieving recognition and comprehension for the non-

315    dyadic parenting arrangements of his family:

316        People really struggle to understand the set up because there isn't any point of

317        reference for it. [I have to tell them that] co-parenting isn't to do with sexual

318        relationships, that it isn't to do with previous relationships, isn't to do with people

319        being infertile, isn't to do with adopting, there isn't much representation of that or any

320        points of reference for that. (Seb, gay man)

321        Lynne was a lone parent who had conceived through self-insemination and initially

322  co-parented with a male heterosexual friend. Like Seb, Lynne reported that disbelief and

323  misunderstanding were common when her daughter, Zoë, attempted to tell people the story of

324  her family: "She sometimes finds it difficult when people don't quite get it – I think their

325  assumption is 'have you got this quite right Zoë?'" (Lynne, bisexual woman).

326        Lynne described how she had put a great deal of energy into seeking out media which

327  represented parents and families like hers, in order to make herself and her family

328  "recognizable" subjects (Butler, 2004). Despite this undertaking, she found that the majority

329  of resources for LGBTQ parented families presented parenting dyads. Books including *King*

330  *and King* (2002), *If I Had 100 Mummies* (2007), *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), and

331  *Mommy, Mama and Me* (2009) were widely cited by participants as offering representations

332  of 'families like ours' for their children, but these texts continued to privilege a two parent

333  model. Such dyadic images offered little help for parents like Seb and Lynne who sought

334  material to support their narratives of family, and make the arrangement of their families

335  comprehensible to the people they and their children encountered.

336  **Theme 2: Feeling invisible in culture and society**

337        Participants were united in their belief that the various representational restrictions

338  and narrow range of cultural narratives available resulted in feelings of invisibility. In

339  addition to a lack of diversity in media images, they detailed how their individual

340  circumstances and identities complicated the potential to be identified as non-heterosexual,

341 and limited the possibility of finding representations to identify with. Mary and Paul, a

342 heterogendered couple, spoke about how their poly identities inflected their sense of

343 invisibility. Paul described his perception of how his family was misread: "when we're just

344 out and about with just [son] James [it] looks like a straight, monogamous, het[erosexual]

345 relationship, you know?" (Paul, bisexual man). Similarly, Charlie, a bisexual woman in a

346 heterogendered, poly relationship, lamented that "pregnancy and childbirth and so on are

347 horribly heteronormative" and concluded that such 'heteronormative' associations

348 compounded "the normal bisexual problem, which is of invisibility" (Charlie, bisexual

349 woman). Participants suggested that their apparent conformity to heterosexual models of

350 parenting and families meant their non-heterosexual identities were "invisibilised" (Pallotta-

351 Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003 p.56). The parents I spoke to said that a lack of cultural

352 supports by which they might be known and recognised made this invisibility difficult to

353 challenge or change.

354  Julia, a lone parent to one daughter, suggested that for her such cultural support would

355 transform her interactions with other, heterosexual, parents at her daughter's playgroup:

356  I feel like [having] someone to identify with – [being able to say:] 'yeah that's pretty

357  much how it is for me' – you know, would make me feel a bit less 'the only one' at

358  the playgroup, as the only person that doesn't fit into the norm. (Julia, queer woman)

359 Julia's wish for people "to identify with" echoes Valentine's (1993) summary of the

360 strategies employed by lesbians in heterosexual environments, who "consciously seek out

361 other gay people…to affirm their own identity and right to be there" (p. 244).

362  There were two key elements which resulted from this sense of needing to resolve

363 feelings of cultural invisibility in order to "affirm their…right to be there" (Valentine, 1993:

364 244) which are explored in detail below. Firstly, there was a sense of pressure on, and

365 instability in family narratives. Secondly, participants appeared to feel prompted to generate

366   creative responses to media representation in order to heal or mitigate this sense of pressure

367   or instability.

368   **Pressures of invisibility: Difficulties sustaining non-heterosexual family**

369   **narratives at home.** Jelena and Hannah were a homogendered couple. Hannah had one

370   daughter with a gay male friend, George, when she was single. After beginning her

371   relationship with Jelena, Hannah had a second daughter, again with George as father. Hannah

372   and Jelena co-parented both girls with George. George was also in a homogendered

373   relationship, although his partner was not involved in parenting decisions. Jelena and Hannah

374   told me about the occasionally painful interactions Jelena had with their daughters, Lexi and

375   Becca, who indicated an ambivalence about Jelena's role in the family:

376   Jelena: They've got the Sylvanians, the little [animal toy] families. When they were

377   playing one day they said 'oh that's a Mum, that's a Dad' I said 'where is the Jelena

378   then?'

379   Hannah: Their games are still quite mummy-daddy-baby.

380   Jelena: But I've had that conversation with them both and they try, they say 'ok, well this

381   is a Jelena' and sometimes they say 'we do! Sometimes we do play Mummy and Jelena'

382   and I say 'no. Not often enough!' […] again I got upset sometimes and Lexi had done

383   some drawings 'there's Mummy, there's Daddy, and me and my sister gone on holiday' I

384   said 'how often has that been the case? Never. There is either just Mummy and Daddy

385   and Joe [Daddy's partner], or two of you, or all of us' […] so again, it's a bit personal.

386   Hannah: It doesn't get much more personal than that. How you are seen by your kids,

387   how you are valued within the family, it's highly, highly emotive.

388   (Hannah and Jelena, lesbian women)

389    The dominance of the nuclear family narrative within mainstream media provided a source of

390    resistance to the narrative of family which Jelena and Hannah offer, and this is indicated in

391    the preferred model the girls reproduced in their play. Lexi and Becca had reshaped their

392    experience to fit a heterosexual mould. In Lexi and Becca's play, the biological father was

393    reoriented in the centre of their family, replacing the space and role which Jelena would have

394    taken and, as Hannah presented it, generating a highly charged emotional exchange in which

395    Jelena had to push the girls to reinvest her in their family. Whilst parents can offer different

396    family narratives, the narrative of the heterosexual nuclear family was so culturally

397    significant (Nelson, 2006, p.16) that it repeatedly reasserted itself within the homes of these

398    non-heterosexual families.

399         **Talking family through media: Finding ways to locate families in culture.** It is

400    notable that parents explicitly stated that feeling invisible, and experiencing significant

401    emotional pressures in narrating family, as above, were not new or unexpected experiences.

402    When I asked if a sense of invisibility weighed heavily upon her and her partner, Ivy said: "I

403    think feeling alienated is just a way of life for most gay people. It's just something you

404    become very used to, you don't really even realise it." (Ivy, lesbian woman). I suggest this

405    expectation or feeling that it is "a way of life" is indicative of a "border existence," where

406    subjects do not comfortably or neatly fit into existing categories (Pallotta-Chiarolli and

407    Lubowitz, 2003: 74). Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz (2003) suggested that experiencing

408    such alienation and marginal subjectivity does, however, "open up space for

409    experimentation" (p.74). The parents I spoke to responded to emotional pressure and

410    alienation by experimenting with [re]reading representation, placing their families in dialogue

411    with different types of media images, and attempting to establish a place in the cultural

412    imaginary.

413    Lynne described how she prompted and pushed her daughter to consider identities

414    which were not visible:

415        you could have a story book about a single parent and they might be bisexual but it's

416        not stated. I think I would sometimes say those sort of things to Zoë […] things like

417        'that person, who knows? They might be bisexual, they might have a trans history, we

418        don't know do we?' It's not explicit but it might be in there. So sometimes books

419        were – probably it's not been in the author's mind – but I would put it in there.

420        (Lynne, bisexual woman)

421    In this way, the specific representational needs of Lynne's family could be drawn from pre-

422    existing representational resources. Her practice of prompting and questioning functioned on

423    two levels, both highlighting to her daughter the invisibility of certain identities, and

424    emphasising the sameness of their family to these narratives by inserting identities like hers

425    into the gaps in the text.

426        Other parents cited texts including *Lilo and Stitch* (Spencer, 2002) (a film which tells

427    the story of Lilo, her adult sister Nani, and their journey to forming a new family with an

428    alien named Stitch, after their parents die), and *The Gruffalo's Child* (Donaldson and

429    Scheffler, 2005) (a picture book which narrates the adventures of the apparently lone-parent

430    Gruffalo and his son) as resources which allowed space for this type of reading. These

431    parents sought to draw parallels between these culturally legitimated, but *flexible* images (see

432    Jenkins, 2006), and their unique family arrangements and values.

433        For Mary and Paul, a heterogendered couple who had poly relationships, texts which

434    offered flexible representations of gender, reproduction, and family provided a foundation for

435    building their narrative of family. *The Clangers* was a popular choice for both them and son

436    James. They spoke to me about the episode 'The Egg' (Postgate, 1970). In it, the Clangers, a

437    diminutive mouse-like race who live on a small moon, rally around their friend the Soup

438      Dragon to help create a Baby Soup Dragon and ensure she is "no longer the only Soup

439      Dragon in the universe" (Postgate, 1970). In our interview, Mary spoke about a lesbian friend

440      she had supported through pregnancy and birth, and continued to support as a lone parent.

441      Mary also had another partner, Matthew, who lived with her and Paul. Mary clarified that

442      whilst Matthew did not take on a parenting role towards James, he did support her and Paul in

443      caring for their child. The multiple and flexible relations which constituted Mary and Paul's

444      family, and their friends' families, found representation in *The Clangers*, which cheerfully

445      narrated a community-centred family analogous to the one which James was being raised in.

446      Like Susan Driver's (2007) 'queer girls', Mary and Paul's reading of this popular text offers

447      the possibility of meaning-making which is "convoluted" and multiple (Driver, 2007, p.13).

448      Engaging with *The Clangers* in their family-activities therefore helped open space for family

449      identity to be constituted through unclear and obtuse narratives of formation; something

450      which corresponded with Mary and Paul's stated wish to model expanded notions of family,

451      relationship arrangements, and families of choice.

452      Some parents I spoke to narrated their similarity to images that relied on more

453      traditional parenting-dyads, I suggest this is a strategy for achieving recognition and stability

454      for their family stories. Martha and Paige, a homogendered couple, who co-parented with a

455      homogendered male couple, described their response to children's books which limited

456      images to two-parent families:

457      I realised that anything we read, most books obviously have Mommy and Daddy but

458      she has Mommies *and* Daddies so it's actually not a problem, um, I mean the book

459      we're talking about, the page says 'some kids have two mommies and some have two

460      daddies' and I always say to her 'and you have two mommies *and* two daddies!'

461      (Paige, lesbian woman, participant's emphasis)

462 However, for Lynne and some other parents this approach did not fully address their wish for

463 easy recognition of their identities and the intentionally chosen shape of their families. By

464 using images of family which rely on the idea that non-heterosexual family-difference is

465 identifiable exclusively through cues of homogendered relationships ("some kids have two

466 mommies"), parents unwittingly reinforced to their children a notion that families can be

467 easily categorised into 'heterosexual' or 'same-sex', and that identities do not expand beyond

468 what can be signalled by a romantic-dyadic relationship. Poaching from media which is so

469 heavily tied to dominant binary heterosexual or same-gender couple narratives of family can

470 mean that parents are no closer to making their bisexual or non-monosexual identities visible.

471 Reflecting on this, Lynne said:

472 It's not all about same-sex relationships, it's not [even] just about relationships, how

473 do you show images of people who are single and bisexual? You take a picture of me,

474 who would know? So I think it's really hard to find and depict visually. (Lynne,

475 bisexual woman)

476 Participant's comments indicated that they felt strategies of representation which

477 *visually* signal inclusion of non-heterosexual parents would always fail to fully represent

478 some parents. Within this context, the work many participants reported doing to mitigate

479 representational restrictions and invisibility of their family, was of limited success.

480 **Discussion**

481 The LGBTQ parents who participated in this study felt that the scope of media and

482 cultural images which represented non-heterosexual families was severely limited. This lack

483 of representational diversity generated discomfort and frustration for parents.  Returning to

484 Darren, who identified *Modern Family's* portrayal of lesbians as 'uncomfortable', it is

485 possible to see how even comedic representations can have wide reaching impacts on the

486 experience of family and the possibility to celebrate and affirm LGBTQ people's suitability

487    and desirability as parents. Representation can thus enact a symbolic violence on LGBTQ

488    people denying validation and recognition of life patterns through the use of specific types of

489    characterisation (Gross 1994, p.143). In the case of *Modern Family*, it was not only lesbians

490    who were marginalised by this representation, but also any GBTQ person who shared a

491    connection with lesbian women.

492         Similarly, Ivy and Sarah's comments about their feelings of cultural invisibility as

493    women who perform non-traditional femininities, pointed to a degree of representational

494    invisibility which amounts to symbolic annihilation of butch women in mainstream media

495    (Gross, 1994, p.143).  For these women, and the various parents whose families expanded

496    beyond a two-parent model, representational invisibility placed them in "nonplaces [sic]

497    where recognition…proves precarious if not elusive, in spite of one's best efforts to be a

498    subject in some recognizable sense" (Butler, 2004, p.108).

499         These findings are in contrast to various studies which cautiously point to an

500    expansion of the "lexicon of legitimation" (Butler, 2004, p.108) and cultural normalisation of

501    families headed by LGBTQ parents (GLAAD, 2015; Schacher, Auerbach & Silverstein,

502    2005; Walters, 2012; Warner, 1999). This study indicates the importance of continued

503    scrutiny for the emergence of new hierarchies of insider/outsider, preferred/other in cultural

504    representations.  As Seb argued in his comments, the debate accompanying the changes in

505    UK law to allow same-sex marriage in 2013 (*Marriage [Same Sex Couples] Act 2013*) offer

506    one example of the way in which the arrangement of a two-parent non-heterosexual family

507    may be concretized both in the cultural imaginary and in legislation.

508         Even whilst media "limits what can be said" about any identity, it also "makes saying

509    possible" (Dyer, 1990, p.1). Without mainstream cultural narratives of non-heterosexual

510    families which affirm and represent family heterogeneity, the possibility of speaking about

511  these families, and accessing legislative change which recognises and protects different types

512  of family, is significantly restricted.

513      The lack of media representations depicting diverse non-heterosexual families

514  generated emotional stress. Meanings which circulated in media spilled out into homes and

515  the interactions these parents had with their children, as Jelena and Hannah's comments

516  detailed. Participants in this study reported investing an enormous amount of ongoing

517  emotional energy to help resolve the resulting cultural invisibility and alleviate symbolic

518  annihilation. This was significant as it was in addition to any work they had done to stabilise

519  their *individual* identities as non-heterosexual people. They worked to orientate their children

520  within their family, and to locate their families within a media culture that did not offer

521  significant recognition for either multi-parent or non-heterosexual families. Participants'

522  work illuminates two key elements of contemporary life within a media saturated culture.

523  Firstly, it points to the impossibility of stepping outside of representation (Abel, 2007).

524  Instead, LGBTQ parents must commit to transforming representations and finding spaces in

525  the cultural lexicon, through which they can enable recognition and validation for families

526  like theirs. Secondly, it evidences the central role of media in producing ourselves as social

527  and cultural subjects, and the active participation with, and critique of media which subjects

528  must maintain, and expand, when negotiating new collective identities.

529      This second point was well illustrated by both Lynne's, and Mary and Paul's family

530  media-engagement and practices of narrative making. They offered their children examples

531  of how to find alternative, evolving, and open-ended narratives of family within mainstream

532  and conventional representations, but also modelled how to *respond* to representation. These

533  parents employ skills honed as LGBTQ youths in a heteronormative culture – the skills of

534  queer reading (Driver, 2007; Liming, 2007) – to reclaim and repurpose the content of

535  representations in support of collective, family identities. Parents' knowledge of the potential

536    of queer[ed] practices of reading to help [re]locate them in a heterosexist culture is leveraged

537    as a strategy which can be used by their whole family to respond to, and redeploy, the narrow

538    media representations which they saw. As families, they worked reflexively and discursively

539    with mainstream media representations to achieve meaningful identification, and to signal to

540    their children the culturally-validated location of their families.

541          Passing on the skills of critical queer reading is part of the everyday maintenance and

542    production of these families and marks them as a formation distinct from the rigidly

543    structured, authorised, images of family which circulate in culture. Teaching, repeating, and

544    reinforcing these critical responses is an integral part of what these families mean. LGBTQ-

545    headed families are reflexive, participatory, and continuously created and stabilised through

546    discursive practices. The reflexive discourses of LGBTQ-led families contrasts with

547    traditional, dyadic, nuclear family identity-building which, although still involving reflexive

548    narrative practices, draws on a much narrower range of meanings and sources, and can

549    comfortably be legitimated through pre-established discourses.

550                  **Conclusion**

551          This study has highlighted the significant degree to which the representations that

552    circulate through the mainstream media and cultural productions of the UK shape the

553    experiences of non-heterosexual families. Whilst participants agreed there were an increasing

554    number of images and representations of non-heterosexual family, they repeatedly

555    highlighted the lack of diversity in these images. When the messages and meanings of these

556    images were set against participants' individual family-identity narratives there was a

557    disjuncture between the types of family arrangements which were represented and culturally-

558    known, and their lived experience of forming family as LGBTQ people. In particular,

559    participants repeatedly attributed feelings of cultural invisibility, ongoing social-dislocation

560    or exclusion, and experiences of family conflict to this representational lack.

561    Attempts by these LGBTQ parents to heal representational invisibility through

562    strategies of queer reading and creative use of mainstream media texts were of limited

563    success. Participants who had co-parenting arrangements, non-dyadic romantic relationships,

564    and non-monosexual identities continued to report feelings of cultural invisibility and

565    lamented the ongoing emotional labour required from them to alleviate the associated

566    pressures.

567    For future research, this study points to the importance of acknowledging identities

568    beyond gay men and lesbians in research on non-heterosexual lives. Exploring connections

569    between groups under the LGBTQ banner is especially instructive when considering the way

570    representation facilitates different family narratives even as lesbian and gay subjectivities are

571    increasingly represented by mainstream media. Secondly, responses of participants to media

572    representations indicated that media not only contributes to the ordering of everyday life

573    (Silverstone, 2007) but is also central in [dis]allowing the production of [stabilising] family

574    narratives.  Media which offers diverse representations of social groups, and represents these

575    various subjectivities as equally valuable and legitimate, are urgently needed.  Such

576    representations facilitate LGBTQ people to speak their experiences and families, open

577    dialogue with their children about family identity, and provide a foundation on which

578    narratives of location and connection can be built, ultimately providing families with a sense

579    of fitting or being 'in place'.

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