

Chapter 1

BETWEEN FUTURE FAMILIES
AND FAMILIES OF ORIGIN
TALKING ABOUT GAY PARENTHOOD
ACROSS GENERATIONS

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My mum made a comment one day about, you know, being gay and having children. I went, 'Oh, you'll be a grandmother soon, don't worry!' And she's like, 'Oh, I didn't realize!' And that was fine. She's like, 'Oh, okay, whatever', you know ... It wasn't an issue, basically.

You know, she was neither supportive nor unsupportive, but just like, 'Alright, okay, it's fine.'
(Vicky, 28, in a civil partnership)

Academic debates about gay parenthood tend to concentrate on the parenting couple rather than the wider family (for brevity, I use the term 'gay parent/hood' as a synonym for 'nonheterosexual parent/hood', aiming to encompass gay men, lesbians as well as bisexual people in same-sex relationships). This is not surprising since it is the structure of the nuclear family unit that has made nonheterosexual reproduction seem historically unprecedented, and hence worthy of study in the first place. There has also been a premise that gay people are nothing like their (presumably heterosexual) parents, which has facilitated the interest in the peer-group relationships and commonalities. This horizontal understanding of generation, based

on identification with a cohort of contemporaries, has been popular, if not overstated, in the social study of specific groups – of which sexual minorities, with their prominent civil rights movements, are a good example.

Nevertheless, social scientists interested in lesbian mothers and gay fathers increasingly pay attention to extended kin networks, or what they call ‘families of origin’, showing a concern with the vertical dimension of generation in this context. This chapter seeks to extend this line of inquiry by considering the role of these families at the point when grandchildren are not yet on the horizon. In other words, rather than exploring the relationship between families of origin and lesbian-mother or gay-father families that have *already been created* – like most of the scholarship on gay parenthood – the chapter considers the relationship between families of origin and families that nonheterosexual people *might* create in the future. Drawing on in-depth interviews with young people who form same-sex relationships, the chapter aims to elucidate the ambiguities and intricacies encapsulated in the opening quotation from Vicky, a twenty-eight-year-old who hopes to become a parent with her civil partner.

Specifically, the chapter explores family relationships between heterosexual parents in middle age and nonheterosexual children in early adulthood. It asks whether lesbians, gay men and bisexual people, who are not currently parents themselves but may be at some point, talk about potential parenthood with their mothers and fathers – and, if so, how? What kinds of conversations are remembered and what emotions do these memories evoke? Who initiates the topic of grandchildren and in what contexts? Do experiences with families of origin influence nonheterosexual people’s visions of their future family life? And how do their current relationships with their parents affect their own family planning, whether it includes children or not? By examining a specific kind of intergenerational dialogue, the chapter reflects on how the concept of generation links to issues of sexuality, reproduction and kinship in contemporary Britain.

Revisiting Families of Origin

The meaning of the family has broadened in recent decades, comprising a range of family forms and practices. As a result, sociologists and anthropologists studying kinship in nonheterosexual contexts

often find it helpful to differentiate between the families that gay people come from, and the families that gay people create.

In her book *Families We Choose*, writing about lesbian and gay communities in the United States, Kath Weston observes: 'For years, and in an amazing variety of contexts, claiming a lesbian or gay identity has been portrayed as a rejection of "the family" and a departure from kinship' (Weston 1991: 22). Describing pre-1980s sexual minorities, she notes that 'people who equated their adoption of a lesbian or gay identity with a renunciation of family did so in the double-sided sense of fearing rejection by the families in which they had grown up, and not expecting to marry or have children as adults' (Weston 1991: 25). Emerging from this reading is the image of an insular generation of young people who, by becoming gay, are cut off from the past as well as from the future.

Ellen Lewin, one of the first scholars to study lesbian mothers, builds on Weston's observations. Writing around the same time, she finds that lesbian feminist popular literature, as well as scholarship documenting lesbian lives, rarely discusses lesbians' relationships with their own parents. For Lewin, 'the absence of discussion of these ties suggests that parents are unlikely to be supportive of one's choice to be a lesbian (conceived as a largely political choice), and that in any case their support is unimportant because they have little to offer to one whose life centres on being a lesbian' (Lewin 1993: 76). However, Lewin's own data show quite the opposite. In her study, lesbian mothers often regarded their own parents as their most reliable source of support. Surprised by this finding, replicated in her later work on gay fathers (Lewin 2009), Lewin points to continuities in kinship systems that are evident in nonheterosexual family life.

Since Weston's and Lewin's pioneering ethnographies, a number of more recent studies have addressed families of origin in the context of 'intentional' gay parenthood (e.g., Almack 2008; Goldberg 2012; Nordqvist and Smart 2014; Sullivan 2004). Unlike lesbian mothers in Lewin's study, most nonheterosexual people whose stories feature in this newer literature became parents when already in a same-sex relationship, or as 'openly' gay or lesbian (as opposed to having children from previous heterosexual unions). Despite the fact that the pursuit of parenthood in these cases is based on nonheterosexual reproduction from the outset – and hence families of origin could be expected to be even further in the background – findings from this research overwhelmingly echo Lewin's early discoveries. For example, in a British study of

lesbian mothers via donor insemination, Kathryn Almack notes that many women 'worked hard at commitments to families of origin' even when they had been disappointed with their parents' limited recognition of their own families (Almack 2008: 1,191). Abbie Goldberg, who studied gay adoptive fathers in the United States, also emphasizes the importance of familial bonds, concluding that most men in her study perceived families of origin as supportive and involved, especially after the men became parents (Goldberg 2012).

Reviewed chronologically, spanning a number of cohort-generations, studies of gay parenthood include fewer and fewer cases of separation from families of origin, although even in the most recent literature stories of exclusion are certainly still present. However, if we read these narratives carefully, it is evident that they are rarely black and white. Across the cohorts, it is unusual for parents to be consistently supportive or unsupportive of their gay offspring and of the families that the adult children create. Much more common are accounts of shifts in response from families of origin over time, sometimes taking unpredictable directions. It is this complexity of straight-parent/gay-child kinship ties that this chapter seeks to examine further.

Research exploring the 'lived experience' of lesbian-mother or gay-father families, as insightful as it is, gives only a partial picture of what it means to be a parent for nonheterosexual people and how one's parental status affects relationships with the wider family. In the existing literature, stories about one's journey to parenthood are usually told from the perspective of those who had reached the end of this journey – the narrators are already parents. Moreover, the very strong parenting desires of these couples and individuals, while enabling them to be among the first 'openly gay' parents in their local settings, are likely to introduce a specific dynamic into the relationships with families of origin.

At a stage when societies are still 'getting used to' the idea of gay parenthood as it becomes increasingly visible in the public domain, it is illuminating to consider how the majority of gay, lesbian and bisexual people who are not parents approach the topic, and what role families of origin play in these cases. It is especially important to hear the voices of young people who, while being 'of reproductive age', are likely to face not only dilemmas regarding whether their future families should and could include children but also challenges regarding communicating these dilemmas to others, especially their own parents.

The Future Intimacies Study

Data presented in this chapter come from a doctoral research project, *Future Intimacies*, which explored attitudes towards parenthood among a young generation of nonheterosexual people in Great Britain. Specifically, the study aimed to examine what gay men, lesbians and bisexual people, who are in their twenties or early thirties and have no children, think about becoming parents in the future. The project asked what prospective parenthood, or remaining childfree/childless, meant to these young nonheterosexuals, paying attention also to how they talked about these issues with their significant others and loved ones, including partners, friends and their own parents. In order to prompt people to generate narratives about something they might not yet have begun to put into words, in-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method of data collection.

The generation of nonheterosexual people whose perspectives the project explored occupies a specific social and cultural space, geographically as well as historically. The majority of men and women who took part in this study were born in the 1980s and reached adulthood in the 2000s. To a large extent, this cohort experienced their late childhood and adolescence at a time when public debates about same-sex couples' parenting rights reached their climax and there was a noticeable shift in social attitudes towards 'nontraditional family forms' (cf. Hayes 1997; Duncan and Phillips 2008). In contrast to older generations of gay parents examined in existing literature, the young people in this study entered their adulthood when the legal possibilities for having children were either already in place or soon to be introduced.

In Britain, different pathways to parenthood opened up to lesbians, gay men and other nonheterosexuals in an exceptionally short period of time. Soon after homosexuality ceased to be legally defined as a 'pretended family relationship' (under Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, overturned in 2001), same-sex couples were allowed to jointly adopt (the Children and Adoption Act 2002), the rights of nonbiological parents were protected through a new form of relationship recognition (the Civil Partnership Act 2004) and it became generally easier to pursue parenthood through assisted conception (for example, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 replaced the reference to a consideration of 'the need for a father' with one of 'the need for supporting parenting', facilitating access to fertility treatment for lesbian couples). These

changes in law were accompanied by a growing presence of lesbian and gay parenting in the media, a more explicit acknowledgement of lesbian-mother and gay-father families by subsequent governments, and an increasing availability of information for prospective nonheterosexual parents.

This chapter draws on interviews conducted in England and Wales in 2012 and 2013 with people who self-identified as non-heterosexual. Twelve men and nine women were interviewed. The interviewees were between twenty-three and thirty-three years old, with a mean age of twenty-seven. Eighteen identified as lesbian or gay and three as bisexual. Thirteen were in a same-sex relationship (including two in a civil partnership), one was in a different-sex relationship, and seven were single.

There were three couples among the interviewees where I spoke with both partners, with one couple interviewed together. The interviews, all audio-recorded, lasted between one and three hours. Most interviewees were recruited via a dedicated study website. Information about the website was disseminated through multiple channels, including LGBT organizations and staff networks, Facebook advertising and personal contacts.

Most of the interviewees resided in urban areas, primarily cities, with only two living in rural locations. Three were from black and ethnic minority backgrounds; the rest identified as white (all but two were British). Five came from working-class families and sixteen had middle- or mixed-class backgrounds.

The interviewees had diverse family histories. Ten had parents who were still married to each other and living together, three had experienced the death of a parent, and eight had parents who were divorced or separated. The majority had siblings or half-siblings; five were only children for at least one of their parents.

Only two interviewees were not 'out' to one or both of their parents. Most described good relationships with their families and said that their sexual orientation was generally accepted. However, many had encountered at least some disapproval in the past.

The above description situates this analysis within a particular context of family relationships. Kath Weston wrote that: 'The longer I pursued my research, the more I became convinced that gay families could not be understood apart from the families in which lesbians and gay men had grown up' (1991: 3). A quarter of a century later, and writing from a different sociocultural location, this is very much the impression I have when thinking about the stories shared by the men and women with whom I spoke – even though the role

that families of origin play in these cases is not quite the same as that described by Weston.

In what follows, I discuss the four themes that were most prominent in my data, bringing them together in the conclusion.

When Not Much Is Said: The Role of Assumptions

The extent to which families of origin, including parents, featured in the interview narratives varied substantially. Not everyone had talked with their parents about their own 'family planning' or could recall doing so. For those who could, the topic had rarely come up. Some interviewees had a strong sense of knowing whether their parents expected them to have children in the future and what reaction they could anticipate should it happen. Others admitted that they had 'absolutely no idea' what their parents thought and how they would react if their son or daughter decided to pursue parenthood with his or her same-sex partner (or in any same-sex relationship if the person was single).

When parents had not articulated their stance on the issue, assumptions played an important role in the interview – they helped interviewees infer their parents' views. Sometimes assumptions had a dual presence in that they came from two directions. A common pattern was that the interviewee was assuming what his or her parents assumed about their son or daughter. As a result, when asked about their parents' views, interviewees often ended up talking about their parents' (assumed) assumptions, regularly using this very word. This made their reflection speculative but it also revealed the scarcity of direct communication about the topic between the two generations.

In some cases, parental opinions were inferred from casual comments made about the adult child's interactions with babies and toddlers or about his or her personality:

I'm sure [my mum] said something before, I can't remember ... I think they know it's possible ... And then there's these things like, 'Oh, you're really good to [your nieces]!' So, yeah, I think they would probably assume [that I'll have children] in that regard. (Gavin, 25, in a relationship)

I think that they know my character, so I think that they know I'll have kids at some point. They know my character, they know I love

kids. They know I'll be a good parent. They *definitely* know that ... It's just ... they're just thinking 'when'. (Sophia, 28, single)

Interestingly, three interviewees claimed to be more maternal or paternal than their heterosexual siblings, an observation that their family members apparently shared:

We always laugh because when my cousin tried to pass her baby over to [my brother], he didn't know how to hold it ... Whereas I was kind of like I knew how to straight away. And my mum always jokes, 'Oh, you'll give me grandchildren before he will'. (Patrick, 28, single)

For gay men like Patrick, more so than for women in this study, humorous situations like the one described above seemed to provide rare occasions when the topic of parenthood was indirectly brought to the fore. While on the surface perhaps trivial or insignificant, such anecdotes give meaningful insights into how, in contemporary Britain, the relationship between parenthood, sexuality and gender becomes even more complex when considered from an intergenerational perspective. Patrick's mother's comment is bittersweet. On the one hand, it appears to recognize the 'procreative potential' of a son whose gay identity is known and accepted. On the other hand, the 'prediction' that Patrick will have children before his brother does not seem to be treated seriously by either Patrick or his mother – after all, it is a joke. There is a sign of welcoming or even encouragement from the mother for Patrick to become a parent in the future, yet his 'gift of grandchildren' remains elusive.

When some interviewees spoke about their parents' views, their primary reference point was knowledge of how their parents' understood what a family is:

I don't know how my mum and dad would react if I had a child, to be honest with you ... 'Cause again, I think my dad especially, he's so ... traditional, in a way. And I think he would sort of be ... a man and a wife and all that, and a dog and a cat ... I think that's the sort of way of thinking his mind would work. (Thom, 23, single)

Even when parents were described as 'socially liberal', their ability to imagine their child pursuing parenthood in a same-sex relationship was questioned, as in the case of bisexual Gemma:

My mother doesn't *really* seem to consider girls an option on the grandkids front. Well, I don't think she doesn't, but I think ... her

default assumption would be that life would be easier, let alone what's there biologically, to be with a guy ... Yeah, there is the base assumption that that's the easy one and that's the normal one. (Gemma, 27, single)

At times, interviewees had a more informed sense of their parents' negative attitudes, but it was still unclear to them what exactly underlay parental prejudice:

My mum really wasn't that supportive of the idea [that my partner and I should have children]. She didn't *really* give a good explanation ... I think I don't want to know why she doesn't [agree with it], because ... yeah, I think that could be a little bit painful ... And probably for the same reason she doesn't want to [tell me]. (Sally, 31, in a relationship)

Sally's case demonstrates that, in situations where parents' lack of support has been communicated, it can be arduous, for both sides, to even begin speculating about what the other thinks, let alone move beyond assumptions. Sally implies that being aware of her mother's negative attitude is less painful than trying to understand the motives for the disapproval. Although the mother, according to Sally, 'really gets along' with the daughter's same-sex partner (and, indeed, encourages the couple to get married), parenthood remains a taboo subject, for reasons that are unknown.

Maureen Sullivan, who studied lesbian-mother donor-conception families in the San Francisco Bay Area, observes that 'because the categories of acceptance and rejection are so fluid, not only were [lesbian] mothers' expectations and reactions from blood kin often discrepant, but relatives themselves, mostly parents, moved from positions of shock and concern to becoming the most doting of grandparents' (Sullivan 2004: 128). Other studies also reveal that parents of the older generation, more often than not, seem to let go of their negative views once a child is born or adopted, sometimes astonishing the new parents with the unanticipated changes in approach (e.g., Almack 2008; Goldberg 2012). Yet cases like Sally's show that the awareness of parents' negative attitudes can be a barrier for people to act on their initial parenting instincts. Although likely to be one of a number of factors, this awareness can have a substantial effect on young people's family planning. As Sally pointed out later in our interview:

In all honesty, I did wonder, at some point I really did wonder whether that was probably the thing making me so indecisive about [whether

or not to have children] ... It's your mum, you know, you can't help it. Your mum, you know, *can* have a very strong influence on what you think, what you feel. So I don't really know ... how I feel about that.

Coming Out, Coming Around and Coming to Terms

My parents must have dismissed children for me. *The second* I said I was gay they must've dismissed that thought. (Scott, 29, in a relationship)

The impossibility of nonheterosexual parenthood was the most common assumption that parents seemed to have held. Although sometimes not articulated, as in Scott's case, at other times the assumption was openly expressed – often when the parents found out about their child's sexual orientation. As we saw in the previous section, it can be difficult to recall conversations that reveal parents' views about the prospect of their son or daughter having children with a same-sex partner. In contrast, it was very easy for men and women in this study to remember how they came out to their families (if they had done so), which usually happened in their late teens. Here, the topic of parenthood came up too, but in a very different way, as the two quotes below demonstrate:

I remember, when I came out to my mother, the *very* first thing that she said was, 'But you so badly want to be a mother.' As if, 'This is going to impede upon your ability to become a mother.' And I remember feeling at the time that she was being *so stupid*, that of course I could still be a mother, that there were lots of other options available to me, whether it be through adoption or IVF or whatever ... I'm sure I told her off quite immediately. (Katie, 31, in a civil partnership)

With mum, we [talked about parenthood] pretty soon after I came out. She was *really* angry and she was trying to sort of get me to apologize for being gay. And she was chipping and chipping away – I mean, I remember this in the kitchen – chipping away at me, saying that I depressed dad and everything and all of this. And she was like, 'Oh god, and what about grandchildren?! And what about marriage?! And us?!' I just snapped at that point. I said, 'I am *not* apologizing for being gay and you should *not* make me. This is who I am!' And I said, 'You are *still* going to get grandchildren – may not be in the way you envisage – but you are *still* going to get grandchildren and you

will love them just the same.’ And she kind of went, ‘Oh.’ She ... respected being put in her place, I think. (Becky, 25, in a relationship)

Both Katie and Becky gave vivid accounts of coming out to their mothers, who clearly saw parenthood as an exclusively heterosexual domain. For the mothers, judging by their reactions, being a lesbian was incompatible with having children. This belief echoes findings of many studies about gay parenthood and families of origin (e.g., Nordqvist and Smart 2014). However, what is less common in stories recounted in previous studies is the unapologetic attitude demonstrated by Katie and Becky during their coming out. Both women had strong desires to become parents in the future before they knew they were gay. At the time of telling their mothers about their sexuality, they seemed sufficiently convinced in themselves that being a lesbian did not preclude motherhood. Their handling of their mothers’ reactions, as they describe it, is firm and immediate. In a way, the young women ‘took over’ the emotional rollercoaster of coming out by ensuring that their mothers were not left under the illusion that parenthood was not an option for their lesbian daughters.

Coming out stories, especially when they involve different generations, are often highly gendered. It is thus not surprising that men and women gave largely different accounts of how their parents had reacted to the news that they were gay or bisexual. Based on these retrospective reports, it seems that it was rare for men to be ‘confronted’ about grandchildren upon the disclosure of their sexuality. Nevertheless, the issue of parenthood was often important for them to consider before coming out:

I’m an only child, which I think probably made coming out a little bit more difficult, ‘cause one of my considerations when I came out was that my parents probably aren’t gonna have any grandchildren. And I think when I came out that was something that probably concerned my mum as well ... But I think she sort of resigned [herself] to the fact that she’s not gonna have any grandchildren, and if she sort of ever mentions it, I’d sort of say, ‘You know, we never know what’s gonna happen!’ (Ollie, 25, in a relationship)

Ollie’s parenting desire may not be as strong as Katie’s or Becky’s, but his gender – the fact that he is a gay man rather than a gay woman – is also likely to contribute to the evaluation of his chances for future parenthood. The inability to give birth to a child makes it, generally speaking, more complicated for men to become a parent

in a same-sex relationship. This may also make Ollie less convinced than Katie or Becky that he will ever have children. Although he gives his mother a tentative hope of grandchildren, he believes that she has 'resigned' herself to a future without them.

There are two common narratives in literature exploring gay people's relationships with their own parents (where the former recollect their past experiences with families of origin). One revolves around the emotionally negative *coming out* – when parents find out that their son or daughter is gay, which more often than not (as we have also seen above) invokes feelings of sadness, anger or fear (e.g., Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003; Weston 1991). Another narrative (and one that is relatively recent) presents a positive *coming around* – when parents learn about their gay offspring's parenting intentions, or when an 'unexpected' grandchild joins the family, and the overriding feelings are ones of delight and excitement (e.g., Goldberg 2012; Sullivan 2004). A frequent narrative in this study concerned an ambivalent *coming to terms* – with the fact that there will probably be no grandchildren (or anything that grandchildren may signify). This phrase was used by several interviewees, especially men, when they recalled how their parents had gradually come to accept what they perceived to be the reality of their son or daughter being gay.

Ollie, quoted above, like several other interviewees, thinks that his mother has come to terms with the fact that she will not be a grandparent. The phrase 'coming to terms' in this context has both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, it demonstrates an increased acceptance of an adult child's sexual orientation and an acknowledgement that being gay is not 'just a phase'. It can also imply that the parent has developed an appreciation that not having grandchildren is 'not the end of the world', as another interviewee put it. However, the phrase also denotes giving up and resigning oneself to an undesirable outcome, which here means losing hope of ever having a grandchild. I suggest that, in today's British culture, coming to terms with future 'childlessness' of gay offspring, loaded with ambivalence as it is, constitutes another crucial milestone in the life course of many family relationships between gay children (some of whom *will* end up having children themselves) and their parents. Coming to terms, like coming out and coming around – although even more of a *process* than an *event* (and hence, perhaps, less of a conventional 'story to tell') – appears to be a reoccurring narrative whose importance should not be overlooked. The significance of this narrative is most evident in

stories of young people who, like Ollie, are only children. Not having siblings adds a new dimension to how nonheterosexual men and women talk about parenthood with their parents, as we shall see next.

Talking Biology and Genes: Family Lines, Family Names, Family Trees

Being an only child often carried an additional awareness of the expectation to become a parent in the future. Among the men and women who had no siblings, it was common to express feelings of at least some unease about the relatively small likelihood of having children due to same-sex couples' inability to procreate 'conventionally'. A usual scenario, according to interviewees' accounts (and in line with the 'coming to terms' logic), was for the parent to experience an initial disappointment upon finding out about their son's or daughter's sexual orientation, which then gradually lessened. However, the topic of grandchildren did not always arise at the time of coming out. Nathan, for example, became more conscious of the issue some time after he told his parents that he was gay:

My mum was very accepting of [me being gay] initially, but in further conversations it was, it came to light that she ... the thing that she missed most about it was the chance of having, um, direct grandchildren. And she certainly, in discussions I've had with her, she's very ... biological grandchildren is the thing. As much as she would respect it if I adopted or fostered or got into a relationship with someone who already had kids, it's the lack of the biological link that she finds hardest to deal with. (Nathan, 26, single)

Nathan's account makes it explicit that often it is not just *any* parenthood that is at stake when it comes to the young people's future families, but more specifically having children 'of one's own'. The prospect of having no 'direct grandchildren', and therefore no 'biological link' to subsequent generations, is something that Nathan's mother seems to struggle with, even though – as he points out later in the interview – it does not 'weigh on her mind' too much.

Concerns about signifiers of family continuity – including lines, names and trees – were frequently referred to in the interviews. In these reflections about lineage (and its potential breakage), the issue of sexuality also played a part:

As I've got older, I kind of feel like I want to, um ... It sounds silly in a way, but [I feel like] I don't want to – this is *one* of the reasons anyway – I don't want to stop our family tree, you know. I don't want it to stop at me because, you know, because I'm gay ... Because if I don't have kids, then, you know, I'm probably stopping kind of like our family name going. (Patrick, 28, single)

Patrick attributes a potential failure to continue his family tree to his being gay. Although he does have an older heterosexual brother, he feels partly responsible for keeping his 'family name going' – perhaps because his brother is not particularly paternal, as we have seen previously, and thus not a good bet to have children either. Although Patrick feels somewhat embarrassed to consider becoming a parent for this reason ('it sounds silly'), the awareness of his family tree nevertheless, as he says later, is the 'trigger' that makes him think about parenthood in the first place.

Sometimes having siblings brought a relief in that interviewees did not feel solely responsible for ensuring that their families had further generations – and, by extension, they did not feel 'guilty' about their sexual orientation:

I think sometimes people can get pressured to sort of have children because they wanna continue the family name or want their parents to have grandchildren. So in a way I feel quite, I don't feel bad about being gay in a way. Well, I've got the other two who can have children, so mum and dad will be grandparents one day. (Thom, 23, single)

Having biological children, however, was not necessarily seen as a way of 'making up' for being in a same-sex relationship or minimizing the 'threat' that being gay posed to the wider family. In fact, nonheterosexual reproduction could also be regarded as preferable precisely because of its potential to 'disrupt' the family tree.

In the earlier quotation from our interview, Gemma observes that her mother does not expect her to become a parent in a same-sex relationship. Since Gemma is bisexual, having children with a man appears to be an 'easier option' and thus the 'default assumption'. In contrast, for Gemma, who is currently single, it is more likely, if she is ever going to be a parent in the future, that it will be with a woman. The main reason for this is bad experiences from her previous relationships with men, and relatively good experiences of dating women. But there is another issue that Gemma bears in mind. Being with a woman gives a more obvious opportunity for her *not*

to be biogenetically related to her child. Gemma's brother has a form of autism that severely affects his social interaction with people – symptoms that seem to run through the rest of the family. Although hesitantly, Gemma admits that, for this reason, she would rather not continue the family line:

I get on very badly with my brother, so as shitty and as ableist as it sounds, I'm *terrified* of having a kid with my brother's set of special needs. And the possibility that I could have a kid without my own DNA ... actually made me a lot less scared of having children ... Beyond being freed from the gender roles, there is some element of, yeah ... being freed from my own ... genetics, [if I have a child] with a girl, um. Which appeals a lot to me. I *don't* think my mother wants to hear that because she doesn't really want to hear her own son described as something that I would not want to have. (Gemma, 27, single)

Gemma feels bad about approaching the prospect of parenthood in this way, noting that she would not share her view on this issue with her mother. In Gemma's case, the topic of biology and genes is particularly sensitive, but there is a similarity between her story and the accounts of the gay men quoted earlier. With the exception of Nathan who has actually talked with his mother about biological parenthood, the notions of family lines, family names and family trees are rarely discussed between generations – even though they often appear to occupy young people's minds. These concepts seem especially difficult to talk about 'prospectively', when men and women are in the early stages of family planning, and when whether they will have children – and, if so, how – often remains unknown, not only to their parents but also to themselves.

Of course, heterosexual people may face very similar dilemmas, especially if they do not desire or intend to parent, if they face infertility issues, or like Gemma, if they are aware that having biological children comes with an unknown genetic baggage. In these cases, talking with one's parents about a potential disruption of the family tree is unlikely to be any easier. Conversations may be filtered by similar 'biological silences', where little is said and a lot assumed about each other's attitudes towards biogenetic reproduction. Nevertheless, there seems to be a particular sense of 'awkwardness' when these conversations happen between heterosexual parents and nonheterosexual children. This becomes clearer when we consider the biggest elephant in the room – the method of becoming a biological gay parent.

Not Going into Detail: Outcome vs. Process

In their book *Relative Strangers*, Petra Nordqvist and Carol Smart report their findings from a comparative study about the experiences of heterosexual and lesbian couples who have had children through donor conception. They observe that, in many ways, ‘the process of going for donor conception in lesbian-based families was the complete anti-thesis of what it meant for heterosexual-based families’ (Nordqvist and Smart 2014: 53–54). While for straight couples the decision to use donor gametes was ‘shrouded in the despair of infertility’, for lesbian couples it was ‘simply a positive step on the road to having children’ (2014: 54). The authors note that the lesbian mothers’ parents often knew little about the procedures involved. This was partly because their daughters, unlike heterosexual women (who often turned to donor conception after years of unsuccessful IVF treatment), usually did not require the same level of support. However, lesbian couples also ‘did not always explain the process anyway, probably because with home conceptions it could appear to breach cultural rules of privacy too much’ (2014: 54–55).

Although speculative about the reasons why lesbians in their study were unwilling to tell their parents how (exactly) they were becoming parents themselves, Nordqvist and Smart draw attention to an important element of nonheterosexual reproduction – the unfamiliarity and cultural novelty of the *process* through which gay people have babies (even if some of the methods used are not really ‘new’). While most interviewees in this study were not ‘advanced’ enough in their family planning to seriously ponder these details themselves, some had a clear vision of how they wanted to become parents. In these cases, conversations with families of origin had also moved beyond the ‘whether or not’ question. However, talking about *how* the young people were going to add children to their own families was certainly no more straightforward.

Becky, who (as we saw earlier) reassured her mother while coming out that she *was* going to ‘get grandchildren’, was one of the women intending to pursue parenthood via donor insemination. In the following quote, she reflects on the extent to which her mother – who has become very supportive of her daughter’s plans – is aware of the process that Becky and her partner will be going through in order to start a family.

Becky: Mum’s quite ... difficult in that way. Like she can have deep conversations about some things but she kind of shuts down on other

things, and I still think this to her is like [a bit too much]. [laughs] She doesn't want to get into the nitty-hows, so she doesn't say anything. So she would kind of like go, 'Mhm', and she'd listen to what I have to say. She'd contribute a little bit and sort of say, 'Well, I'm sure you'll make great parents', and stuff. And she will have these burning questions – I'm sure she does – but she doesn't wanna know, 'cause I'm her daughter and stuff, and it's all a little bit, 'Uh ...'

Robert: Do you think she doesn't feel confident enough to ask these questions?

Becky: I don't think she would if I was with a guy, to be fair. I think the fact is, like there's the 'how' surrounding being gay as opposed to not – like it's pretty obvious how you do it when you're straight. [laughs] But, um, I think it's just because it's a kind, it's a sex thing, and it's, um, it would need a lot of kind of biological explanation, which I don't think she's prepared to envisage. It's like, 'I don't really want to think about them'. [laughs] Like she doesn't want to think about how my children are coming to being. [laughs] 'But we'll be perfectly happy and supportive when they do.' [laughs]

As she recounts talking with her mother about the couple's plans to have children, Becky keeps on giggling. Trying to make sense of why her mother does not want her to go into detail about how her children 'are coming to being', she suggests that 'it's a sex thing' – even though, clearly, neither she nor her partner will become pregnant through having sex. Becky makes a reference to heterosexual intercourse, but it is unclear whether this analogy serves to emphasize a similarity or difference. On the one hand, it seems that the 'rules of privacy', which Nordqvist and Smart mention, apply to intergenerational contact regardless of sexual orientation ('I don't think she would [ask] if I was with a guy'). On the other hand, though, Becky is sure that her mother has 'burning questions', because while 'it's pretty obvious how you do it when you're straight', it is not so apparent when you are gay.

Sullivan suggests that parents of lesbian daughters contemplating and having children through donor insemination have little, if any, conceptual preparation for the women's pursuit of parenthood. She writes: 'Parents' and other blood relatives' comprehension of the *idea* of gay kinship lagged behind the actual families that were being created. ... [Children] were not only born "out of wedlock" but born outside any context that meaningfully connoted family or kinship' (2004: 140). Becky's mother, like many other parents who are indirectly quoted in this chapter, seems to lack the kind of conceptual

understanding that Sullivan refers to, even though she is supportive of her daughter's parenting intentions. However, rather than trying to improve her 'comprehension of gay kinship', she prefers to focus on the outcome of Becky's family planning (future grandchildren), reassuring her daughter at the same time that she will be a 'great parent'. Thus, the mother gives Becky a vote of confidence to do what she sees as appropriate in her circumstances, while remaining oblivious about the process.

Although one can only speculate, Becky's mother may also avoid asking questions not because it is embarrassing to talk about how one becomes a gay parent, but because doing so could open a 'can of worms'. The decision to have a child through donor insemination, or other forms of assisted conception, brings up a whole new set of issues where prospective parents themselves are likely to have different opinions. Involving families of origin in what is already a complicated and intensive decision-making process may not be the best idea. This seems to be a perspective taken by Scott who, along with his partner, is hoping to have biological children via surrogacy:

Scott: I wouldn't involve – no, I said that badly – obviously they would be involved when they, when the baby is born and everything, but I wouldn't involve them when I was doing it, when we were doing it and organizing it. It's mine and [my partner's] decision. Like mum and dad, they made their decision when they wanted their first child, no one interfere–, you know, they didn't have to go to their mummy and ask her how to do, you know. It's nothing to do with their parents, it was their decision. This is *our* decision, and we'll do it when we want to do it and how we feel right, and they'll have to like it or lump it. And obviously as soon as the kid's born, it'll be lovey-dovey and, you know, very nice.

Robert: You know that, you're quite sure?

Scott: I'm very sure of that. Yeah, *very* sure of that.

Scott uses a different kind of 'heterosexual analogy': if his parents did not consult their parents with their reproductive choices, then neither should he and his partner. He downplays the fact that the way in which he plans to become a parent has no precedence in his family, emphasizing instead what the different generations have in common – they all negotiate a boundary of privacy between the nuclear family and the extended kin.

As we can see from the two cases, the limits on parental knowledge about how their gay offspring plan to start their own families can be imposed by either side: the parents (Becky's mother) or

the adult children (Scott). Both Becky and Scott seem comfortable about their parents' potential lack of involvement in the process of their pursuit to parenthood. But both are also certain that whichever route they take, and whatever decisions they make in the meantime, their parents will eventually accept their families and recognize their children as grandkids.

Conclusion

As the interview material presented in this chapter shows, the extent to which young nonheterosexuals expect parental support in the case of their own pursuit of parenthood varies widely and relies on different kinds of experiences with families of origin. While Becky and Scott, quoted in the last section, felt reassured that their becoming parents would not create conflicts in the extended family, others had reasons to believe that it could. Similarly, the prospect of not becoming a parent elicited various predictions as to how the lack of grandchildren would affect familial relationships. More often than not, ideas about the relative significance that interviewees' parents attached to their son's or daughter's future families were obscured by limited communication between the two generations. If the form of the 'gay family' (with a same-sex couple at its heart) was deemed unproblematic for one's parents, the way in which this family would form (and whether/how biology would be mobilized in the process) tended to produce an element of tension or discomfort.

The findings of this study present a picture of kinship that moves even further away from the dichotomous understanding of the relationship between homosexuality and family, as outlined by Weston in the chapter's introduction. The young generation of lesbians, gay men and bisexual people are certainly not 'exiles from kinship' in either sense – the ties with their families of origin are important to them and so are the families they hope to create in the future. Even if their visions of family life seem more flexible than those of their parents, and adaptable to various possible scenarios, the young people do not downplay the importance of family continuity – regardless of how likely it is that they see themselves as potential agents of its 'disruption'. This is consistent with recent studies of nonheterosexual parenthood and with those exploring same-sex relationships more broadly (e.g., Heaphy, Smart and Einarsdottir 2013).

This chapter develops our understanding of lesbian motherhood and gay fatherhood by paying close attention to the earliest stages of family planning – when it is not children but rather ideas about family life that are being conceived. These early ‘conceptions’, although sometimes recounted in research about lesbian mothers and gay fathers, are often overshadowed in the literature by current experiences of nonheterosexual people as parents. In many cases, involuntarily, participants in those studies may ‘adjust’ perceptions and interpretations of their position *vis-à-vis* families of origin over time in order to make their ‘parenting narratives’ more coherent. Stories of men and women presented in this study are by no means free from the influence of retrospection (as can be seen most clearly in the relative coherence of the coming-out narratives), but they nonetheless add a new dimension to what we know about parent-child relationships when the parent is heterosexual and the adult child is not. Methodologically, then, this chapter moves beyond the more conventional uses of semi-structured interviews to recollect the past or document the present by showing how the future, notwithstanding predictable difficulties, can be narrated too.

Due to the study’s aim to address, and contribute to, the literature on lesbian mothers and gay fathers, perspectives of young people with strong and moderate parenting desires were given more attention than those of men and women who did not want to become parents. Notably, though, in the interviews with the latter, families of origin featured much less prominently. Nonheterosexual men and women who were not interested in parenthood, and who saw themselves as unlikely to ever consider it in the future, seemed generally less reflective or concerned about their parents’ attitudes. However, due to a small number of relevant cases, it is difficult to say whether this relative lack of reflection was specific to this subgroup. Similarly, because of the small study sample and its limited diversity, making inferences about the role of ethnicity and class in these intergenerational relationships is equally problematic, although the effects of gender and relationship status seem more prominent.

Captured in the thematic sections of this chapter are four main findings. First, assumptions are as important as spoken words in informing the knowledge of parental attitudes. Second, children’s coming out is often followed by parents’ coming to terms with a future without grandchildren (unless children actively dispel this possibility). Third, issues of lineage and generativity are central to thinking about family (even if there is little talking about it). And fourth, culturally intelligible elements of parenthood (i.e., future

children) are brought into discourse in order to avoid talking about what is more complex, namely *how* the nonheterosexual son or daughter plans to become a parent. The overarching theme of the difficulty in communicating about reproduction, with its question marks about the future, points us in directions of further empirical enquiries. For instance, to what extent does it matter that parents and adult children talk about the latter's family planning? Does maintaining a positive dialogue between the two generations require a 'comprehension in gay kinship', to use Sullivan's words? And is the relative lack of 'interference' from parents into young nonheterosexuals' parenting intentions mutually beneficial or potentially alienating?

In the quotation that opened this chapter, Vicky seems untroubled by the rather minimal dialogue she has with her mother. Generally, men and women interviewed for this study did not complain about the low frequency, the short duration or the apparent awkwardness of the conversations they had had with their parents. As we have seen, such conversations are not easy and often neither the parent nor the adult child is particularly willing to initiate the topic of future families. This is not surprising and not necessarily a problem in itself. Nevertheless, considering that parental attitudes were important for many interviewees, how the two generations communicate about reproductive decision making seems to matter. It appears that once the topic comes up, what is and what is not said can have substantial effects. How parental feelings are expressed (or not) seems likely to influence the ways in which the adult child approaches the topic of parenthood. At times, ambiguity in the intergenerational dialogue may facilitate confusion and uncertainty about one's own feelings. In contrast, support and acceptance, even if not openly expressed, create a more comfortable environment for young nonheterosexuals to consider whether parenthood is something they wish to pursue.

Acknowledgements

The Future Intimacies study was completed as part of a PhD studentship funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/J500033/1). In addition to the ESRC, I would like to thank Sarah Franklin for very helpful comments on an early version of this chapter, as well as Siân Pooley and Kaveri Qureshi, for their invaluable editorial support. Finally, thanks to all men and women who

generously shared their thoughts and stories when taking part in this study.

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