

AUTHENTICATING FAMILY: RE/CLAIMING LEGITIMACY BY THE LESBIAN
HEADED STEPFAMILY

by

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DEDICATION PAGE

*I dedicate this work to my lesbian headed stepfamily
who remind me every day just how lucky I am
to be a part of their lives.*

*To G.U.N. and Carlo who did not live to see this day, you are
missed.*

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ABSTRACT

Family is an integral part of the fabric of society with diverse configurations of people living together, related through blood or kinship. Changes to the Canadian political and legal structures granting access to marriage have affirmed the rights of gays and lesbians, yet many remain positioned on the margins of society. This grounded theory study illuminates the experiences of women with children who meet and fall in love with another woman. An intricate series of events is set in motion towards development, and ultimately, affirmation of a new lesbian headed stepfamily that addresses the central problem of family legitimacy.

The theory of authenticating family demonstrates how women and their children incorporate another woman into their lives, maintaining and protecting the legitimacy of the new family structure. Transitions from being a heterosexual and/or single parented family to a lesbian headed stepfamily create multiple opportunities for challenges to their sense of legitimacy. The new stepfamily faces marginalization, stigmatization and heteronormative assumptions that contest the sense of legitimacy for all family members. Lesbian headed stepfamilies have few role models to provide guidance for behavioural expectations. These families learn from multiple interactions among themselves and with outsiders about how to negotiate a new understanding of family. They develop the ability to demonstrate pride to a society that has marginalized in the past, even as society is evolving in acceptance of multiple and diverse family configurations.

There are three stages in authenticating family: (a) *accepting the challenge*, a process of realizing an intimate attraction to another woman, coming to terms with the significance of pursuing a relationship, and finding balance between many potential obstacles; (b) *building the bonds*, takes families through the process of getting to know each other, creating relationships, and understanding how dynamics among the family have shifted. While the process of authenticating family remains primarily within the confines of the family home, members begin to look beyond their family in anticipating interactions with outsiders; and (c) *thriving*, the final process includes solidifying and reclaiming legitimacy while juggling relationships within the home and countering the impact of continuous interactions with society at large.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer
GSA	Gay Straight Alliance
ICN	International Council of Nurses
SNAF	Standard North American Family
REB	Research Ethics Board
USA	United States of America
CNA	Canadian Nurses Association

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I am grateful to anyone who had anything to do with supporting me in some way.
I remain,

Tracey Suzan Selby Rickards, BN PhD QW!

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Family is an integral part of the fabric of society. It is the foundation upon which societies are built. Family is “the principal sociocultural system in which behaviour patterns are learned, adapted or altered” (Novilla, Barnes, De La Cruz, Williams, & Rogers, 2006, p.31). The traditional family, two heterosexual parents and their children, is gradually becoming the minority status form in Canada (Weber, 2008). Diverse configurations of people living together, related through blood or kinship, are evolving as family. The changing family reflects the reality that family as a unit is not stagnant but rather evolves in response “to social, political, economic, legal and historical pressures” (Wilde, 2007, p. 4). While there is an abundance of literature regarding ‘families’, little has been written about an ever proliferating family configuration, the lesbian headed stepfamily.

Changes to the political and legal structures of Canada have affirmed the rights of gays and lesbians, although many remain positioned on the margins. Gays and lesbians can marry, adopt, and are eligible for spousal benefits (Shapiro, Peterson, & Stewart, 2009). “Lesbian intimate relationships and lesbian-parented families have a long history; however the public acknowledgment of, and research into, lesbian families is a late 20th century development” (Lindsay, Peresz, Brown, McNair, deVaus, & Pitts, 2006, p. 1059). Despite this movement forward there is still a misunderstanding and lack of acknowledgement within society of same-sex families. However, relatively recent

attention has been given to research examining the lives of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)¹ communities - narrowing the gap in the knowledge and understanding.

While various family configurations are becoming common, little has been written about families that deviate from the dominant Western understanding of family, such as the lesbian headed stepfamily. This study addresses this gap and explores the perceptions of lesbian headed stepfamily members of the process they engage in while becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily in the 21st century. It is shaped by my previous research where, in my master's thesis, I investigated the coming-out process for women at mid-life to understand how this process affected women's health and health care relationships. An intricate connection between support, credibility, and perpetual coming-out experiences, emerged providing new insights into the complexity for women coming-out as lesbian at midlife (Rickards, 2005). Furthermore, over half of the participants had children from their previous heterosexual relationship. They revealed challenges of incorporating their children into a new same-sex relationship, challenges that were not dissimilar to those identified within heterosexual stepfamilies. However, given the findings of my research that women experience a loss of credibility when coming out at midlife I wondered if this loss, along with other social stressors and heterosexual influences, were contributing to their challenges in creating new family structures.

¹ The terms LGBT and LGBTQ are commonly used as a catch phrase to identify people of diverse sexual identity and/or orientation. The focus of this study was on the experience of lesbians.

Credibility is the sense of having the ability to be an effective mother both from her perspective and in the eyes of outsiders. While lesbian headed family structures were not the focus of my master's thesis, completing it led me to more questions that I felt should be pursued. This grounded theory study addresses the dearth of literature about lesbian headed stepfamilies by developing an understanding of the basic social process (BSP) of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

There are generally two ways to think about LGBT families. First, there is an assimilationist argument that says "We (LGBT community) are the same as you". This argument has been used to compare lesbian and heterosexual parenting, masking the differences between the two (Patterson, 2006). The second major approach is the resistance argument that offers that "We are absolutely different because of the context in which we live", thereby asserting that there are important differences between heterosexual and same-sex families (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2007). While one argument seeks total integration of same-sex families into society, the other seeks to destabilize our conventional understanding of family by resisting assimilation (Weeks et al., 2007). Goss and Strongheart (1997) suggest that from a queer perspective,

the appropriation of the term family is not an assimilationist strategy of finding respectability in general society In fact, we are Queering the notion of family and creating families reflective of our life choices. Our expanded pluralist uses of family are politically destructive of the ethic of traditional family values (p. 12).

Of note, arguments continue to be made by comparing one family to the other and more importantly comparing the lesbian family against the backdrop of the heterosexual

family seen as being the model of family to which everyone aspires (Clarke, 2002; Hequembourg, 2007). Little is known about the complex interactions between the members of lesbian headed stepfamilies and the environment in which they interact on a day-to-day basis. The context in which women are raising children together needs to be considered as it has historically been heterosexist, hegemonic, and oppressive for those who do not fit what Smith (1993) called the Standard North American Family (SNAF) of a heterosexual man, his wife and their biologically related children. The very concept of family has been socially constructed and as such is influenced by societal views of what is acceptable (Harris, 2008). Despite the presence of multiple sources of societal influences that continue to extol the SNAF as the only acceptable understanding of family to aspire to, many lesbians indicate that life as a lesbian mother can be positive. Unfortunately, others share stories of homophobia, violence, prejudice, isolation, oppression, and discrimination (Brown, 2008; Fingerhut, Peplau, & Gable, 2012; Harris, 2008; McNair, Hegarty, & Taft, 2012; Short, 2007).

For heterosexual parents, parenting differs among families as a result of influences of culture, background, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, and ethnicity. Parenting by lesbians also varies for these same reasons. However, the lesbian headed family must additionally contend with issues of heterosexism, oppression, homophobia, and marginalization. Doane and Varcoe (2005), using a post-structural perspective of family, suggest that this perspective can help us better understand how “family is spoken into existence by the everyday discourse in which each of us participates” (p. 75). Listening to the specific ways language is used by families as they describe their

experience is important in fostering a better understanding of that experience. How nurses use language can either open the discourse or continue to perpetuate stereotypical heteronormative views of family (Doane & Varcoe, 2005). The challenges for same-sex families are going about the day-to-day work of parenting while countering an often stigmatizing and marginalizing environment (Short, 2007). Learning to be an effective parent can be stymied by a lack of support both within the extended and nuclear family and within the community in which they live (Rickards & Wuest, 2006).

The normative understanding of family is that the standard North American heterosexual family occupies a central and dominant position in society, while same-sex families and families of racial and ethnic diversity are placed on the margins. Research aimed at uncovering experiences of same-sex parenting must be critical of prevailing heteronormative outlooks. With the onset of greater rights and freedoms many lesbians are now able to live publicly as families with fewer fears of repercussion (Short, 2007). Race, context, and other specific identifiers such as Black lesbians, lesbian elementary school teachers, and lesbian new immigrants have as yet not been explored in this body of research. However, absent from the growing body of research is an understanding of the challenges in creating cohesive, healthy, lesbian headed stepfamilies.

Families with children spend a considerable amount of time interacting with people outside the family. Having children requires interaction with daycare providers, teachers and others within the school system, members of the health care team, parents of their children's friends, and with others in clubs, sporting activities, and hobbies to name a few. Where heterosexual parents do not think twice about any inherent dangers in

participating in these interactions, lesbian parents are always on the alert for signs of potentially difficult interactions (Lindsay et al., 2006; McNair, Dempsey, Wise, & Perlesz, 2002). For lesbian parents, every day interactions always have the potential for being judgmental, discriminatory, marginalizing or unwelcoming.

Lesbian parents experience the added burden of constantly explaining their sexual orientation (Lewis, Kholodkov, & Derlega, 2012), “enduring perpetual outing” (Rickards, 2005, p. 54) on a daily basis. Enduring perpetual outing is a process whereby lesbians assess the safety and necessity of disclosing their sexual orientation. They do so within three stages: “gauging”, in which they assess the environment and potential dangers; “bracing”, in which they wait for the response to their disclosure; and “moving on”, in which they learn from the experience and pick up where they left off in the original interaction (Rickards, 2005, p. 39). For the lesbian headed stepfamily problems are associated both within their families and outside social institutions such as legal, educational, and health care systems.

The majority of the research about lesbian headed families has focused on those families that have had or adopted children while in the relationship. However, less is known about the more common scenario where lesbian women have had their children within a heterosexual relationship and later form a stepfamily with another woman. Many sectors of society could benefit from an increased understanding of the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. Such knowledge will provide health care providers, teachers, daycare providers, and other helping professionals with understanding that has the potential to improve service provision.

This thesis is organized in six parts. In chapter one, I delineate the topic under investigation, define the boundaries, and explain the purpose of this study. The second chapter of the thesis situates the study within the extant literature. In this review of the literature, I provide insight into the need to study lesbian headed stepfamilies. In the third chapter, I address the methodological issues, including a description of how I proceeded with the research. In chapters four and five I discuss the findings. In chapter four, I provide an overview of the theory, the conditions that influence how lesbians navigate the process of becoming a stepfamily, and a discussion of the problem. In chapter five, I expand upon the explanation of the BSP as encountered by members of lesbian headed stepfamily households and used to address the basic social problem. This chapter will include a discussion of how the families in this research varied from the theory. Finally, in chapter six, I elaborate on why this particular study is important to nursing theory, research, and practice. A discussion of the implications will highlight the potential benefits of this study to the scholarship of family nursing, in particular when working with lesbian headed stepfamilies and possible implications for other disciplines.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to develop a grounded theory through exploring the perceptions of lesbians and their children of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. There are a multitude of reasons why this research is important and will contribute to a growing body of knowledge. Many more women are raising children in lesbian headed relationships than ever before (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2010). Lesbian parenting within families is not well understood, nor are the ways that these families

negotiate societal norms related to family. Nurses have the opportunity, and responsibility, to foster development of harmonious family interactions ultimately supporting the needs of children and their parents within stable loving households. Nurses and other allied health care providers have had limited knowledge about LGBT issues and consistently admit that they felt ill equipped to care for a member of a gay or lesbian family (Dean et al., 2000; Røndahl, 2009; Shearer, 2010). In general, the existing family theory research has focused on family from a heteronormative perspective, attempting to compare how lesbians and their families measure up against the heterosexual family. There is sufficient comparative research highlighting the ability of lesbian families to meet and in many cases rise above the heterosexual family in terms of relationship satisfaction, division of labour within the home, emotional development of the children, and relationships with extended family (Berkowitz, 2009; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Breshears, 2011; Gabb, 2004; Golberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2008; Johnston, Moore, & Judd, 2010; Litovich & Langhout, 2004). Little is known about how being a lesbian headed stepfamily in a predominantly heterosexist society affects the lives of the family members. Research about lesbian headed stepfamilies should focus on the specific experiences, societal influences and contexts that influence the way becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily is experienced.

With grounded theory as a methodology and marginalization as a theoretical lens, the theory and associated concepts generated in this study will advance our understanding of the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily and thus “help us to avoid universalizing empirical and clinical approaches and impress on us the need to approach

members of marginalized groups with an ear to their experiences and an eye to their struggles” (Hall, Stevens, & Meleis, 1994, p. 35).

Grounded theory was chosen as the methodology for conducting this research because it is useful when seeking to better understand areas that have not been previously examined (Stern, 1980). Grounded theory draws on the data from human interactions. As a result of constant human interaction, meaning is given to the behaviour, and associated symbolism develops (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992). In the analysis process the researcher seeks to uncover this associated symbolism in an effort to generate a theory that contributes to understanding human behaviour as people experience a specific phenomenon. Grounded theory has been used as a methodology in a number of previous research studies focused on the lives of lesbian headed families; this thesis therefore builds on this body of knowledge and demonstrates the value of grounded theory to illuminate the processes for lesbians living in diverse family configurations.

Marginalization is a process whereby people who do not fit the dominant cultural norm and are not welcomed to be a part of it find themselves positioned outside the group, essentially placed on the margins of society. Marginalization includes concepts of differentiation, power, and voice. Differentiation refers to the establishment of identities by means of creating boundaries. An example of this is “mainstream” society being represented as all that is good, normal, and the center of the community. Those in positions of power can continue to build and fortify the boundaries, keeping the “good” in and the “bad” out. Diversity threatens the norms at the center and so is often unwelcomed. The power of those in the center also serves to silence the voices of those

on the margins by adhering to a dominant language that is expressed as the majority language. Dominant discourse has the ability to influence the social construction and understanding of such things as family. However as this dominant language does not include or describe many families on the outside it further ensures their continued presence on the margins. Oppression has similar properties and outcomes as marginalization and is a part of the experience of being marginalized (Hall et al., 1994)

In this time of social change such knowledge will provide a base for policy that supports families of varying configurations. The development of this theory and associated concepts will provide guidance for nurses and other helping professionals in the development of interventions to support lesbian parents and their children. Being on the frontline of health care delivery, and with the growing trend towards more community based health care, nurses are well situated to support, act as advocates, and provide care to this burgeoning demographic among Canadian families, recognizing, acknowledging and respecting all family configurations. The gap in knowledge perpetuates family heteronormativity, creating obstacles to the provision of competent care among all configurations of family.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

In this chapter I review the literature as it pertains to issues of family, stepfamily, lesbian family, and lesbian stepparenting, societal influences on lesbian stepfamilies, and family health nursing. I chose these areas, because they are pertinent to better understanding the context in which lesbian women parent with another woman. While I do not compare lesbian headed families to heterosexual ones, I felt that it was vital to review both in order to familiarize myself and the reader with potential common issues experienced while parenting in multiple family configurations.

I chose grounded theory with a constructivist perspective as a methodology for this research understanding that a detailed review of the literature was not recommended (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Morse & Field, 1995). Glaser (1978) applies a caveat allowing for a cursory review of the literature in order to sensitize the researcher to the topic under investigation, to gain a beginning understanding of the phenomenon, and to determine that grounded theory is the best method suited to answering the research question (Stern, 1980). Charmaz (2006) describes the sensitizing concepts found within a first look into the literature as tentative tools intended to help with the development of ideas about the emergent constructed theory, as defined by the data. The literature was further explored during the process of theoretical sampling which will be explained in chapters four and five.

Family

Multiple and diverse configurations of people have come to call themselves family. This pluralism creates a challenge for succinctly defining “family”. Wright, Watson, and Bell (2009) include in their definition the presence of emotional ties, sense of belonging, and a strong desire to be involved in each other’s lives. The International Council of Nurses (ICN) (2002) developed a definition that approaches inclusivity of differing realities. They define family as “an assemblage of human beings seen as a social unit or collective whole composed of members connected through blood, kinship, emotional or legal relationships” (p. 5). Novilla et al. (2006) include in their definition the concept of time, suggesting that families can be temporary, as little as a few weeks or long-term. Wright and Leahy (2009) chose this definition: “family is who they say they are” (p. 50). In a similar vein, Harris (2008) suggested that an objective family diversity perspective would suggest that “family is in the eye of the beholder” (p.1410). New forms of family units are also identified in the literature and include stepfamily, blended family, reconstituted family, birth family, and family of choice.

The definition of stepfamily implies that one or both spouses are separated or widowed and may or may not bring with them children from the previous relationship. Newer stepfamilies may result from blending two families with children from one or both families and possibly the children of the new couple. Another family configuration is being recognized, the “gay family” defined as a same-sex couple living together or married, with or without children (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2010). Same-sex couples have been raising children together without the benefits of access to legal

marriage that confers a level of legitimacy. Two women and their children should also be considered a family despite not having the public and legal recognition that marriage provides.

Stepfamily. Over time family has come to be a recognized unit within society. As the world has changed through wars, depression, recessions, and globalization the family has kept pace, changing to accommodate the times. According to Cherlin (1978), family is one of the foundational forms of social organization. Social institutions shape the ways that humans behave within the social organizations. The institution of family shapes the way that family conducts itself. Socially agreed upon patterns of behaviour are created (Cherlin, 1978) and communicated by those who play a prominent role within the family, eventually becoming taken for granted behavioural expectations. An established, accepted, and expected pattern of behaviour creates fewer available choices; this narrowing of choices gives family fewer things to disagree upon, thereby creating a sense of family unity.

Over the past several hundred years in Western society, traditional and institutional family formation has placed the male at the top of the hierarchy, giving him the rights and responsibilities of making the majority of family related decisions. This imbalance of power has slowly evolved into a slightly more equitable dynamic between partners. Sociologists believe that the institutional family now represents the minority (Fox & Murry, 2000). Some of the changes are related to urbanization and the decline of patriarchal authority (Cherlin, 1978). In modern Western society, an accepted pattern of behaviour by families results in “institutional support for family unity . . . through the

routinization of everyday behaviour even though the husband is no longer the unchallenged agent of social control.” (Cherlin, 1978, p. 636).

New family configurations reflect greater companionship in such forms as the equalitarian family (Blood & Wolfe, 1960) and symmetrical family (Young & Wilmott, 1973) for example. The equalitarian family is one in which harmony is found as the marital partners work together to determine their role definitions. The symmetrical family formation includes in the role definition decisions, understanding and acknowledgement that both marital partners have significant roles both within the household and in their paid work. Through this evolution, despite changes to positions of power and importance of individual family members, the understanding of what is expected from ‘family’ remains socially, culturally, politically, and economically influenced.

While the institution as the gold standard provides an understanding of the roles of each member and helps guide social comportment for family members, those living within a stepfamily arrangement are left with less guidance (Hequembourg, 2004). Re-marriage in the past occurred most frequently as the result of the death of a spouse. In this situation, a widow and her children would create a new family with re-marriage; the new husband took on the role of father to her children. The increasing incidence of divorce and re-marriage in Western society has resulted in an increased number of non-custodial and stepparents (Sweeney, 2010). Stepfamilies find themselves struggling to establish roles and responsibilities that can be further complicated by taking into consideration the role of the other nuclear parents (Hequembourg, 2004; King, 2009; Stern, 1978; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Stepfamilies deal with far more complex relationship configurations

than other families, requiring innovative problem solving techniques and establishment of new definitions for roles taken up within the family (Oswald, 2002). Social institutions shape families by contributing to the organization and delineation of roles for individual members. The organizing roles reflect both what is observed from outside the family and behaviours exhibited within the family (Hequembourg, 2004).

Stern (1978) conducted ground-breaking research that investigated the integration of stepfathers into family. In this qualitative study, Stern found that the greatest challenge for stepfamilies, and in particular, stepfathers, was the smooth integration into the family. Issues of discipline were identified as the greatest challenge for stepfathers (Stern, 1978). Stepfathers felt that they were not given the authority to discipline the children of their new wife because the wives stepped in to mediate. Birth mothers felt that they needed to be the guardian or protector against disciplinary efforts by the stepfather. Similar findings were found in Weaver and Coleman's (2010) study investigating birth mothers in stepfamilies. Birth mothers felt torn between their loyalties to their children and their new spouse.

Family composition itself, whether nuclear, single parent, grandparents as primary caregivers, or step appears to have less to do with child development and well-being (Amato, 2005; Demo & Cox, 2000; King, 2009) than multiple transitions in family make-up. Constant alterations in family make-up have a greater negative effect on the wellbeing of the children than do multiple configurations of family found in society today that do not adhere to the dominant understanding of family. With the divorce rate holding steady at 38% (The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2010), families are often transitioning

to various stepfamily configurations. King (2009) and Weaver and Coleman (2010) found that most nonresident fathers continued to play a part in their children's lives. The nonresident father and the stepfather can become pitted against each other for the affection of the children (King, 2009). In Weaver and Coleman's grounded theory study of mothers in stepfamily configurations, birth mothers created a conundrum for the new husbands when they wanted the emotional support in parenting but were reticent in sharing the role of parent.

There are a number of differences between the nuclear family and the stepfamily. These differences stem from the way in which families come into being. Stepfamilies experience some degree of loss by virtue of experiencing divorce or death of a spouse and parent. Stepfamilies are often challenged as two sets of traditions, family rules, and expectations come together under one roof. Being a member of a traditional or heterosexual family, whether nuclear or stepfamily, conveys a socially constructed pattern for behaviour, expectations of hierarchical systems within the family, and guidance for resolution of conflict (Hequembourg, 2004).

Scholars studying family have by-and-large worked from a heterosexual perspective. Lesbian stepfamilies face both similar as well as varying challenges in their efforts to navigate a society that does not fully understand them, and furthermore often ignores or denies their existence. The lesbian and gay stepfamily, one that comes together following dissolution of a previous nuclear family configuration, is at an even greater disadvantage because of the lack of guidance related to expected behaviours (Eliason, 1996; Vickers, 2008). The stepparent has neither legal nor blood ties to the children

(Weaver & Coleman, 2010). This concept is likely important to the study of lesbian stepfamilies but remains unknown.

Lesbian headed family. There is a growing and reasonably established body of research addressing the subject of lesbian families whose children were conceived or adopted while in relationship (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Jacob, Klock, & Maier, 1999; McNair et al., 2002; Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2008; van Dam, 2004; Wilton & Kaufmann, 2000). McNair et al. (2002) referred to these families as *de novo* families. Many of the issues discussed in these studies are concerned with access to known and anonymous donor insemination, access to adoption both domestic and international, ability for the non-birth mother to adopt, and parental and extended family support for both the birth and non-birth mother. Research focused on the ways that lesbian families conduct themselves and demonstrate doing family to outsiders has helped illuminate how these families navigate a predominantly heterosexist environment (Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, de Vaus, and Pitts, 2006a)

Arguments against lesbian parenting have centered on the lack of a male role model (Golombok, 2004), challenges to the sexual orientation of children (Fulcher, Suftin, & Patterson, 2008; Telingator & Patterson, 2008), and stressors involved with being the child of a marginalized and discriminated member of society (Clarke, 2002; Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005; 2006; Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009).

Lesbian relationships have been found to have higher relationship satisfaction and more positive parenting when compared with heterosexual couples (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2004; 2007). Parents in lesbian relationships are also found to spend

greater amounts of time with their children than their heterosexual counterparts (Bos, van Balen, Sandfort, & van den Boom, 2006). Goldberg (2007) found that adult children of lesbians were more tolerant and open minded than children brought up in heterosexual families. The research has tended to focus on the differences between lesbian and heterosexual parent experiences. Very little reported research explores the dynamics within the relationship of a lesbian parenting couple without making comparison to heterosexual counterparts.

As a result of changes to the Canadian legal system regarding the lives of LGBTQ people culminating in same-sex marriage becoming legal in 2005, there has been a slowly evolving understanding of what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ). While being LGBTQ has not been positioned in a place of normalcy, it has in many jurisdictions become more acceptable and acknowledged. “Midlife lesbians have lived a portion of their lives when being lesbian was legally, medically, and socially censored” (Rickards & Wuest, 2006, p. 531). The experiences of women living in Canada differ considerably from those of women living in the United States. Canadians are experiencing a more supportive environment for same-sex couples, while American women in US jurisdictions where same-sex marriage is not yet legal have not had the same level of support (Shapiro, et al., 2009). While two women may choose to get married in order to legitimize their family, those who choose not to should be considered equally legitimate in their configuration as a family.

The support of governmental changes to the laws has positively influenced how the public feels about same-sex families. Public opinion polls conducted in 2006 in the

USA found only 39% of Americans support legal recognition of same-sex unions, while in Canada in 1996, Canadians enjoyed 49% support and by 2002 support had reached 53% (Shapiro et al., 2009). The Vanier Institute of the Family (2010) identified in 2009 that 61% of Canadians surveyed felt that same sex couples should continue to have the legal right to marriage. The qualitative study by Shapiro, Peterson, and Stewart (2009) found that lesbian mothers living in the USA may face obstacles, both social and legal, that Canadian lesbian mothers would not.

The encouraging and supportive changes within the judicial system, with respect to being lesbian, have positively impacted among other things, child custody, job security, and spousal benefits, affording some women an increased sense of safety. Weber (2008) cited a reduction in the social stigma associated with being gay or lesbian in a society whose government has recognized and accommodated multiple family configurations. While there remains societally ingrained homophobia, a shift is occurring that shows less tolerance for such discrimination. For this reason, I believe that Canadian women have fewer fears when coming-out at midlife.

Statistics Canada Census (2012), for the year 2011, identified close to 9.4 million families living in Canada, 6.3 million of these families were married. The Census uncovered almost 3.7 million couples living with children, including common-law and stepfamilies. The number of same-sex married couples has almost tripled since 2006. This increase reflects the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2005. The 2006 Statistics Canada Census identified over 45,345 same-sex couples living common-law, of which 46% were female couples. In 2011 over 58,000 female same-sex couples made up 45%

of the 129,000 same-sex couples identifying themselves in the Statistics Canada Census. The number of female couples raising children accounted for over 5000 families. In the three Maritime Provinces, there were 2675 female same-sex couples, 285 of which identified as families with children (Statistics Canada, 2012). There are likely many more lesbian headed families who did not identify themselves on the Census forms. The 2010 Census conducted in the United States of America stated that there were 646,000 same-sex households in which 115,000 children aged 18 years and younger are being raised (Seigel & Perrin, 2013). Based on these statistics lesbians make a significant contribution to the raising of children in the Maritimes specifically and in Canada and the USA.

Most LGBT people embrace the right to marriage and as a result same-sex couples are counted amongst other married couples by Statistics Canada. The most recent information suggests that there are an estimated 4,000,000 lesbians living in the USA (O'Hanlan, 2006). The USA Census of 2006 indicates that the number of same-sex couples identifying themselves has quintupled since 1990 from 145,000 to nearly 780,000 representing an increase of 437 %, 21 times faster than the population growth (Gates, 2007).

For many women, coming-out is not a solitary act but involves the lives of their children, extended family and friends. While some women continue to wait until their children are full grown and have left home before publicly declaring their love for another woman, many are coming-out with children in tow (Ambert, 2005). Interestingly, much of the research generated outside of Canada, for example Australia, the USA and

Britain indicates that fear over custody battles and loss of children is one of the reasons most responsible for delaying coming-out (Clarke, 2002; Eliason, 1996; Hequembourg, 2004; Hicks, 2005; Naples, 2004; Patterson, 2000; Weber, 2008). Loss of credibility, both personal and public, resulted in lesbian mothers questioning their ability to be effective parents (Rickards, 2005). Women, whose own parents and siblings supported them, identified less insecurity about parenting than those who did not have support (Johnston et al., 2010; Rickards, 2005). Parenting is challenging; parenting with no support poses even greater difficulty.

The changes in the political arena creating a social softening to the attitudes towards the LGBT community may give women the impression that coming out as lesbians is easier than in the past. The social and judicial changes have lifted the threat for women of losing their children as a result of their declaration of a new identity. In my master's thesis, many of the women interviewed had children from their previous heterosexual relationships (Rickards, 2005). Bringing children into a new relationship creates a new family configuration that is in many ways similar to heterosexual stepfamilies. It is likely that lesbian headed stepfamilies experience similar issues as heterosexual stepfamilies with the presence of a biological or other nuclear father figure. For women who have been in a previous lesbian relationship, the presence and continued involvement of the other nuclear mother may also present issues that will need to be addressed.

The prevailing understanding of families is the hegemonic binary relationship of mother and father. Families headed by two mothers have few role models, fewer, if any,

sources of support, and marginal representation in popular culture. The marginalization of lesbian families, that is “the process through which persons are peripheralized on the basis of their identities, associations, experiences, and environments” (Hall et al., 1994, p. 25) disenfranchises them by denying them a respected place in society (Calhoun, 2000).

Many lesbians have lived in a world where being a lesbian mother was understood as difficult, if not impossible (Perlesz, et al., 2006a/b). In the past lesbians have experienced a world in which their likelihood of having children was fraught with risking disclosure of their sexual orientation. Divulgence of their identity would have resulted in discrimination putting them in jeopardy of being accused of immoral behaviour (O’Hanlan, 2006). Researchers have examined the roles of both biological and non-biological mothers and determined that in most cases these families take up roles similar to those found in heterosexual families (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998). This is likely due in part to an effort to pattern or model their childhood experiences of family. Wright and Leahey (2009) point out that while key family functions found in lesbian families are similar to those found in heterosexual families, lesbian families may not fit within the traditional family life cycle model.

The foundational writings of feminists (Lewin, 1990; Young, 1990a; 1990b) highlight the continued struggle women have with issues of agency, autonomy, freedom, respect, and equality. While these are valid and important issues to fight for, it must be understood that most of these feminists are writing from a heterosexual perspective. Lesbian feminists also fight for agency, autonomy, freedom, respect, and equality but from a very distinct position of multiple layers of oppression (Calhoun, 2000; Gilmore &

Kaminski, 2007; hooks, 2005; Levy, 2007; Zimmerman, 2007). Calhoun (2000) asserts that “lesbians and gay men experience a distinctive form of oppression” (p. 160) that is hugely different from the oppression experienced by heterosexual women. This differentiation in the type of oppression, marginalizing and rendering lesbians invisible must be considered when trying to come to a better understanding of the experiences of lesbian parents.

Much has been written about the ability and fitness of gays and lesbians to parent, about the effect that this might have on the children, and about the gender identity issues of children living in a family headed by gays and lesbians (Massey, 2007; Patterson, 2006; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009; Short, 2007; Welsh, 2011). As previously mentioned, there is a small yet growing body of research discussing issues faced by lesbians as they become parents within a relationship. Little however has been written about women who bring children into relationships, forming same-sex stepfamilies (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Erera, 2003; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Lorah, 2007; Lynch, 2004; Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009).

Lesbian headed stepfamily. A lesbian stepfamily is created when a woman with children begins a relationship with another woman. While many lesbian headed families with children occur as a result of a parent and stepparent combination, there are a growing number of lesbian-headed families that pattern more accurately into the traditional family make-up, whereby two women are partnered first, then choose to bring children into their family unit. While the latter face their own struggles in terms of social visibility and acceptance, additionally step-families face similar issues that stepparenting

brings into a stepfamily dynamic, whether heterosexual or lesbian headed (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Tasker, 2005).

Dealing with social stigma was a key issue for the children of lesbian and gay stepparents in a Canadian study by Robitaille and Saint-Jacques (2009). In this qualitative study the authors interviewed adolescents and young adults, an often-neglected viewpoint, finding that having to deal with social stigmatization had repercussions at personal, family and interpersonal levels. At a personal level, some of the children in Robitaille and Saint-Jacques' study chose to avoid repercussions by not inviting friends into their home. Some of the children realized they were internalizing the feelings of stigma and discrimination. As a result, they started to consider themselves and their families to be less than normal having been told multiple times that same-sex parents were 'unnatural and weird'. Many same-sex stepfamilies may choose to remain reclusive in an effort to protect themselves and their children from derision, homophobia or stigma connected with being gay or lesbian (Lindsay et al., 2006).

Hall and Kitson (2000) compared the experiences of lesbian and heterosexual stepfamilies using Cherlin's model of re-marriage. They found that lesbian stepfamilies' experiences were similar in some regards and different in others from those of heterosexual families. Heterosexism and homophobia played a significant role in marginalizing lesbian stepfamilies. Hall and Kitson encourage further research to include the perspectives of the partner or stepmother as they found that this was often neglected in the research.

Stepparenting in lesbian families presents many challenges most of which are connected to outsider opinions and the need to protect against this negativity. Whiteside and Campbell (1993) explain that children are often faced with the need to balance the new lesbian headed stepfamily with managing information aimed at their family from outside the home. Decisions for parents about coming-out to outsiders are cause for considerable stress that requires much negotiation both with each other but also as individuals (Whiteside & Campbell, 1993). These types of negotiations occur because of the fear of reprisal from outsiders.

Using data from the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health*, King (2007) found that contact with the non-residential father was more likely to increase opportunities for closeness between the father and his children. The involvement of a father in the lesbian headed stepfamily has not been studied to any great degree. King (2007) however, found that lesbian stepmothers rather than non-resident fathers take over more household and parenting responsibilities. Maintaining the relationship with the non-resident parent, regardless of whether they are male or female seems to be key to supporting healthy growth and emotional development for the children in lesbian headed stepfamilies (King, 2007).

An ethnographic study conducted by Wright (1998) found that there are a number of tensions that exist in the lesbian headed stepfamily. Many of the tensions are related to relationship issues similar to those found in heterosexual stepfamilies, such as competing for mother's attention, disagreement over discipline issues with children, and intrusions of the non-resident father into the family's functioning. Wright (1998) found that tensions

unique to the lesbian headed stepfamily included having to deal with disapproving outsiders, teachers, health care providers, and extended family. Wright (1998) identified the most insidious issue to challenge lesbian mothers and stepmothers was not their desire to work together at the parenting that occurred within the home but not having 'male privilege' when navigating outside the home. The lack of male privilege posed a significant barrier in accessing services for the family.

In a qualitative study that explored the coming-out experiences of biological parents Lynch (2004) found that overall older parents were emotionally better prepared to deal with the sequelae of coming out than were younger parents. The most significant issue for the biological parents was loss of heterosexual privilege enjoyed and taken for granted prior to coming out. For many of the participants in Lynch's study, becoming a stepfamily was often negatively judged by outsiders, divulging an LGBT identity; becoming an LGBT stepfamily resulted in a two-fold level of negative judgment. In a somewhat dated article, Rohrbaugh (1992) discussed clinical issues of lesbian families from an intra-psychic perspective. At the time that the article was written one quarter of lesbian families had children from previous heterosexual relationships. Common issues faced by these lesbian stepfamilies included conflict between children and stepmothers, jealousy of stepmother for the affection birth mothers demonstrated towards the children, and feelings of rejection when children tended to gravitate towards the birth mother. Lesbian stepfamilies struggle with negotiating the role and parenting rights of the non-birthmother, experiences not dissimilar to those of heterosexual stepfamilies.

Research focused on the lives of lesbian stepfamilies is limited. Rarely do researchers consider the viewpoint of the non-biological parent or the children. Johnson and O'Connor (2001) include one chapter at the end of their self-help book about lesbian parenting focused on the specific needs of the lesbian stepfamily. Traditionally people in a family are related either by law or biology. The non-birth mother has neither connection. Not having these connections is further complicated by the Western notion of parental ownership of children (Wright, 1998). Suter et al. (2008) suggest that this phenomenon makes it problematic for the non-birth mother to make any claims to the title 'mother'. Further research is needed to better understand the experiences of all members of lesbian headed stepfamilies.

Societal Influences on the Lesbian Headed Stepfamily: Marginalization, Heterosexism, and Homophobia

Marginalization is a process whereby people of minority status are pushed out of the center of society to the edges. Marginalization is often based on the identity, ethnicity, class, associations, and experiences of the people being marginalized (Hall et al., 1994). A qualitative study by Lynam and Cowley (2007) investigating marginalization as a determinant of health for ethnic minorities identified that the effects of being marginalized have a cumulative effect on youth, who show signs of stress and poor mental health, negatively influencing health. The participants in Lynam and Cowley's study identified having a "sense of being overlooked, categorized or misrepresented" (p. 146). Similarly, Epstein (2007) identifies themes of silence and invisibility in his book *Inclusion: The Politics of Difference in Medical Research*. In Young's (1990b) essay on

the five faces of oppression, the term 'cultural imperialism' is used to describe how the dominant culture of a society renders the identities, concerns and voices of non-dominant members invisible. Additionally, Young asserts that the dominant culture stereotypes the behaviours and beliefs of the non-dominant group, positioning them as 'other'. Neisen (1993) paralleled the effects of heterosexism on the LGBT community to that of the devastating effects of being sexually abused. The outcomes, Neisen asserts, are similar in that they produce shame and internal loathing. Shame arises from the internalization of the external and often public messages given by the larger community that being gay is equal to being less than, unworthy or sick (Neisen, 1993).

Despite the volumes of research regarding homophobia and heterosexism as experienced by gay and lesbian people in the health care system, the slow progress towards a more inclusive health care environment continues to be identified as problematic (Dinkel, Patzel, McGuire, Rolfs, & Purcell, 2007; Mathieson, Bailey, & Gurevich, 2001; O'Hanlan, 2006; Pettinato, 2012; Risdon, 1998). Wilde (2007) states that one of the greatest challenges for same-sex parents is stress relating to discrimination and stigma. Although there is an increased awareness of the existence of same-sex couples (Walsh, 2002), they continue to face challenges of stigma and discrimination within schools (McNair et al., 2002) and society (Lindsay et al., 2006). The stress of living within such a negative environment can work to undermine their ability to maintain personal and intimate relationships (Lindsay et al., 2006).

Within the health care system, research findings are similar. Acquisition of health care by lesbians has been negatively influenced by both homophobia and heterosexism

(O’Hanlan, 2001, 2006). Heterosexism is the tendency to see the world in exclusively heterosexual terms, as the only valid and acceptable form of sexual identity and to dismiss, devalue, or render invisible homosexuality (Short, 2007). Homophobia refers to an irrational fear and hatred of LGBT people. O’Hanlan et al. (2001), in a review of the literature on the health concerns of LGBT persons, identified homophobia as pervasive in health care and called it a health hazard. In fact, O’Hanlan (2006) and O’Hanlan et al. (2001) stated that this hazard results in lesbians frequently delaying treatment for fear of discrimination. The health care system needs to be responsive to, and inclusive of, everyone regardless of ethnic background, social status, class, or sexual orientation (Hudspith, 2001).

A mixed method study delving into the lives of lesbians living in urban Atlantic Canada found that both finding and accessing health care was a concern (Mathieson et al., 2001). However, nearly half of the respondents indicated that while they value access to health care if it means exposing themselves to personally destructive interactions with health care providers they will forgo access to avoid putting themselves at risk.

Hoffman, Freeman, and Swann (2009) echo the findings that health care for sexual minorities continues to be intimidating, unwelcoming, and at times disrespectful of their unique needs. In caring for their children, lesbian parents come in contact with the health care system. While lesbians can choose to avoid health care for themselves, they are not likely to jeopardize the health of their children. In an effort to cope when their children are ill, they develop strategies to deal with discrimination (McNair et al., 2002). Making decisions about whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation to health care

providers as well as schools, children's friends and parents, and the community in which they live were some of the strategies identified.

Research into the education of nurses has been conducted in an effort to understand why health care is so negative an experience for lesbians. In a dated quantitative exploratory study, nursing educators were found to be "personally fearful of sexual advances from lesbians" (Randall, 1989, p. 302). In the past, the curriculum, instructors, and students were found to have varying degrees of heterosexism and/or homophobia (Eliason, 1998; Eliason & Randall, 1991; Gray, Kramer, Minick, McGehee, Thomas, & Greiner, 1996; Røndahl, 2009; Røndahl, Innala, & Carlsson, 2006; Tate & Longo, 2004). More recent research indicates that the level of homophobia in nurse education has decreased somewhat (Dinkel et al., 2007). However, the concern of these researchers is that homophobia may have been replaced with heterosexism, resulting in equally negative health care experiences. A study by Røndahl (2009) found that students, both nursing and medical, failed to display adequate knowledge about the health care needs of the LGBT population. The study also found that as a result of having inadequate knowledge the students did not feel prepared to provide care that recognized the impact of marginalization for their clients'/patients' care.

Eliason and Raheim (2000) found that nursing students stated they had little discomfort providing care to diverse racial and ethnic populations; however they continued to report feeling ill equipped and having a lack of knowledge to provide adequate and appropriate care to lesbian and gay clients. Both Giddings (2005) and Vickers (2008), suggest that increasing content about social justice in nursing curricula

might help nursing students better understand the deleterious effects of marginalization and discrimination. Furthermore, Abrums and Leppa (2001) proposed that what was needed was increasing nursing students' awareness of cultural competence as a way to sensitize them to the needs of clients as related to culture, race, gender, and sexual orientation. In order for nurses and nursing students to embrace diversity, Hall et al. (1994) suggested the use of marginalization as a guiding concept for schools of nursing to consider when developing curricula. "Nurses need skills to deconstruct the marginalizing social processes that sustain inequalities in nursing and healthcare" (Giddings, 2005, p. 304).

Family Health Nursing

Family nursing theorists Wright and Leahey (2009) signify their dedication and understanding of the inclusion of family in the health and well-being of individuals. They assert, "nurses have a commitment and an ethical and moral obligation to involve families in health care" (p. 9). Multiple disciplines have undertaken to define family, each with their focus on different aspects of functioning (Wright & Leahy, 2009). Doane and Varcoe (2005) present a relational view of family nursing to highlight the interconnectedness between people, families, sociopolitical influences, experience, and the natural world. Working within this interconnectedness of family, we become more aware of the importance "for families to disrupt dominant discourses that are constraining them" (Doane & Varcoe, p. 75). This view provides a lens through which to view a similar interconnectedness of both the individual members of the family and the family within society.

Multiple studies have investigated the relationship between nursing education and nurses' feelings about caring for LGBTQ clients (Beagan, Fredericks, & Goldberg, 2012; Dorsen, 2012; Eliason, 1998; Eliason, Dibble, & DeJoseph, 2010; Eliason & Raheim, 2000; Eliason & Randall, 1991; Røndahl, 2009). Earlier studies note that schools of nursing have lacked sufficient LGBT content in the nursing courses (Dinkel et al., 2007). Unfortunately, this has not improved sufficiently and continues to be a source of much concern for many faculty members. Much of the nursing education literature indicates that most nursing students do not feel equipped to care for a member of the LGBT community (Røndahl et al., 2004). They do not feel they have adequate language and comfort to interact with clients without somehow insulting them. Recognizing that they do not have language nor comfort provides an opportunity for nursing students to increase the knowledge and comfort levels in terms of the care of this unique population.

Nurses working with families are concerned about the well-being of individual family members and as an entity of familial relationships. Braun, Hyndman and Foster (2010) discuss the relational factors within families and the importance of nurses understanding that they themselves become part of the relationships within the family. Family nursing guided by relational inquiry uses the ideals of compassion, respect, equity, social justice, and respect for life (Doane & Varcoe, 2005). These ideals should guide nurses in providing the kind of care needed by lesbian stepfamilies. Understanding the circumstances of families' lives, the diverse ways in which lesbians create family, the context in which they live, and the elements of oppression that they may face is fundamental to best practices in family nursing.

Nurses are at the front line of health care and as a result have multiple opportunities to observe and work with families. The nurse-patient relationship (Peplau, 1997) is primary to care deliver. In the absence of this relationship the needs of the client are not identified and therefore remain unmet. Improving interpersonal relationships through increasing awareness and understanding of the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily may change the way that nurses interact with lesbians and their families. Responding to the needs of lesbian parents, acknowledging the experiences they face within a heterosexist society, and including them as an important cohort in the raising of socially conscious and strong children is one way that nurses can support the efforts of lesbian stepparents, thereby contributing to the building of stronger, more diverse, and healthier communities.

Conclusion

Much of the research on LGBT families has focused on differences and similarities in the functioning of gay families. A starting point for future research should focus on understanding lesbian stepfamilies contextually rather than dwelling on the differences and similarities as a way to point out parenting deficits (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). Throughout the research there is evidence to support the dynamic nature of today's family. We can no longer foster an understanding of family as static. Families in the 21st century are diverse and fluid reflecting the variation in definitions of family (Perlesz et al., 2006a). For the purpose of this study I define family as a collection of people, related either by blood or as chosen, who love and can rely on each other for support. My definition of family does not refer to or focus on a heteronormative

framework rather upon the “variable, fluid forms that are structured by and around the individuals within them” (Gabb, 2005, p. 587).

Stigma and marginalization play a significant role in the functioning of all diverse families. Stigma is compounded for lesbian stepparents because they experience it first from being a divorced family and additionally from being lesbian (Lynch, 2004). Lesbian parents with children born during heterosexual relationships, face a peculiar conundrum in which they have been conferred legitimacy by society as mothers then criticized, discredited, and stigmatized as lesbians (Perlesz et al., 2006b). Children living in lesbian families experience incidences of stigmatization resulting in the use of learned strategies involving decision making about whether or not to disclose parental sexual orientation and often have lower self-esteem (Tasker, 2005; Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009).

In examining the literature describing the lives of lesbian headed stepfamilies very little has been written about how they experience the process of assimilating another mother into their families. Very little research has captured the experiences of both the non-birth mother and the children (Hall & Kitson, 2000). It is time to include them in understanding the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. Furthermore, Biblarz and Savci (2010) recommend that future research should include the sociopolitical and historical contexts of the families being researched.

We know that influences from outside the family can influence the ability to access health care, to interact with others, and to find support and acknowledgement for unique family structures (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004; Conron, Mimiaga, & Landers, 2010). Nurses have a moral and ethical responsibility to involve families in health care

(Wright & Leahy, 2009) and to care for diverse families without discrimination (CNA, 2008). Knowledge gained from this study will enhance the care and understanding of lesbian stepfamilies for nurses and other health care providers working within a family focus. The development of a grounded theory will help to close the knowledge gap related to lesbian headed stepfamilies to provide a base for policy priorities, theory, research, and practice in supporting diverse families.

CHAPTER III

Methodology: Grounded Theory

In this chapter I discuss grounded theory, the philosophical underpinnings, and multiple perspectives that can influence how grounded theory research is conducted. I will discuss how this study was conducted including: sampling and sample size, recruitment, participants, the interview process, data gathering, management, and analysis, and ethical considerations.

Grounded theory is a methodology for guiding research, and a method for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. “Stated simply, grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing . . . to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). The purpose of grounded theory is to generate middle-range theories or models that contribute to understanding human behaviour in a given context that is grounded in the data. As a collection of strategies to guide the researcher through the research process many would argue that it is better understood as a particular way of thinking about data (Morse, 2009).

One of the most pronounced strengths of grounded theory is the requirement that the researcher have the ability to move data from a purely descriptive level to a conceptual level. Glaser and Strauss (1967) understood that through constant human interactions meaning is given to behaviour, the symbolism used in interaction aids in conveying meaning to others without having to describe it specifically. While grounded theory is grounded in the data, it is not merely a descriptive accounting of symbolism in

human interaction. As such, Glaser (2002) argues that the middle-range theory that emerges from conducting a grounded theory study should be abstract of time, place, and person. That is, the theory should not become dated, be limited to any one geographical area or be specifically about any one person.

Grounded theory was ‘discovered’ by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the late 1960’s. Both trained as sociologists, Glaser’s focus was working in quantitative methods and middle range theories, while Strauss was schooled in the areas of symbolic interaction, pragmatism, and ethnography (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Glaser and Strauss worked together to develop a research method that would combine the empirical strength of quantitative methods yet capture the richness of qualitative methods. What they wanted to show the empiricists was that the decisions, theorizing, and directions the researcher chose were sufficiently robust and grounded in the data, to create greater transparency, ultimately giving validity to the grounded theory method (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). While they both claim to have been seeking a qualitative method that was systematic and had clear steps, where they now differ is in the prescriptiveness and rigidity of adhering to those steps in completing ‘good’ grounded theory.

Grounded theory has been used widely in nursing research and is an “empirical approach to the study of social life through qualitative research and analysis” (Clarke, 2003, p. 557). The strength of grounded theory is in its transparency. It should be clear when reading a grounded theory study how steps are completed, decisions arrived at, and ultimately how outcomes presented demonstrate being firmly grounded in the data. The art of conducting quality grounded theory rests in the researcher’s ability to acknowledge

and work within the relationship between themselves, the participants, the data, and analysis. A challenge with grounded theory is that it is not a linear process but rather frequently requires recursive movement in order to gain a solid grasp of the emergent theory. The researcher must be prepared to review data, write memos as hunches occur, continue asking questions of the data while comparing one category to another checking for similarities or variations. The researcher must be prepared to go back over the same data in search of more information (Morse & Field, 1995).

In a grounded theory study, the main concern of the study participants is not specified prior to the commencement of data analysis nor is the BSP that will address the concern. As Beck (1993) states “the research problem is discovered, as is the process that resolves it” (p. 208). The problem and the BSP become known to the researcher as the theory is constructed through their analysis of, and interaction with the data gathered during interviews, field notes, and memos. The emergent theory is multi-phased, accounts for behavioural variations, and addresses the identified problem.

Glaser (1978) suggests beginning the research by being as open-minded as possible. Cone and Artinian (2009) in addressing Glaserian directives, one of which is “don’t do a review of the literature” (p. 37), recommend adherence to this directive prior to conducting the research as reviewing the extant literature may influence or prejudice the researcher. The concern is that having prior knowledge may cause the researcher to force the data into categories that might not otherwise be a fit. However, Dey (2007) suggests that while one can have an open mind it does not mean an empty head! A

literature review helps to situate and describe the relevant concepts and justify the need for conducting the specific research.

Over the years, since the *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), many scholars have used the foundational guidelines adding their own philosophical and methodological assumptions. Clarke (2003) included situational mapping in her approach to grounded theory in an effort to recognize the discursive process of human interaction and the possibility of having more than one BSP. Originally, Charmaz (2006) felt that purist grounded theory did not allow for the influence of the researcher on the research process. However, Charmaz softened this stance recognizing that constructivists would be mindful and reflexive about the relationship between the researcher, the participants and the context in which they lived while relying upon the original grounded theory framework (Charmaz, 2009). “In brief, constructivist grounded theory is a contemporary revision of Glaser and Strauss’s classic grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2009, p. 129).

Philosophical and Theoretical Considerations

The theoretical underpinnings of grounded theory are based on pragmatism and symbolic interaction. Epistemologically grounded theory is driven by the need for theory development to account for behaviour within a given social, historical, and cultural context (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). A robust grounded theory advances understanding of behaviour in multiple social, historical and cultural contexts and illustrates variations in the process reflecting these divergent social, historical and cultural influences. Variations between grounded theories are often a result of the differing perspectives guiding the methodology and how true the researcher is to the

methodology. The basic steps of grounded theory remain the same whether it is being conducted within a post-positivist (one reality, one knower), post-modernist orientation (an ongoing array of possibilities of interrelatedness, with an understanding of the limitlessness of these possibilities), or constructivist (multiple social realities and knowledge as constructed and influenced by both the viewer and the viewed) (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2003; Wuest, 2007).

There is debate about the paradigm grounded theory falls in. Considering grounded theory and the paradigm debate that continues to occupy the minds of many scholars Wuest (2012), shared her perspective of how she uses grounded theory as a methodology. Wuest “now understands that the way I do grounded theory is influenced greatly by my paradigm orientation” (p. 263). In this research study I bring a feminist perspective; I believe that there are multiple ways of knowing that must be respected, and that we create meaning in the relationships and interactions with others and the world around us. As a result of the years of scholarly thinking I realize that I have built upon a foundational understanding of grounded theory by first adhering to Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory and bringing my evolving philosophical stance or “paradigm orientation” to the methodology.

Pragmatism is based on the belief that there are multiple truths and interpretations and that knowing is relational in nature, in that the knower is central to the knowing and what is known is shaped by who is doing the knowing. Early philosophers Mead (1913) and James (1907) found that there could be no single belief or understanding of reality. James (1907) stated that because reality was constantly being created in the relationships

between the knower and the known that it was always in the making. Mead (1913) suggested that the interplay between the “actor” and the “environment” contributed to determining each other. In claiming a pragmatist perspective one would understand all knowledge to be socially constructed by the people who are interacting with each other (Doane & Varcoe, 1995).

Star (2007), in her discussion of varying forms of pragmatism, noted Dewey’s suggestion that pragmatism, from the Greek work for action, was a chain of events, experience-interruption- reflecting-object. In conducting this research the “experience” was captured in the interview process, then “interrupted” by the process of coding as a way of “reflecting” on the connections, comparisons, contradictions, and contexts of the codes that continue until the “object” of the research is realized. Using this “chain” I was able to interpret the meaning of the action in becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Three important features of pragmatism help to further define how this perspective shapes grounded theory methodology and contributes to a paradigm from which to practice. First, pragmatism asserts that there is no such thing as objective knowledge or what is often referred to as “truth” because it is impossible to separate the person from what they know. Knowledge is never certain because it is always changing according to how the knower comes to know. This kind of thinking can limit the scope of the knowledge as knowledge becomes based on the interests and experiences of the knower. In other words, knowing is understood as being different for each knower based on the specific and unique set of circumstances in which the knowing occurs (Doane & Varcoe, 1995).

The second feature of pragmatism reflects the understanding that knowledge is linked to experience and practice. Knowing is active in that it is relational and experiential and as a result is constantly changing. Knowledge is not static but active and fluid. Knowing is affected by the interactions that the knower has with others. In this situation truth becomes a verb rather than a fixed and knowable reality (Doane & Varcoe, 1995). Each and every person's reality is different based on their experiences, what they learn and who they interact with (Charmaz, 2009). Doane and Varcoe (1995) posit that this feature of pragmatism is how we, as nurses, come to better understand family because we are constantly learning and re-learning through our relational experiences with them in practice. In this study family members witnessed a shift in people's understanding of what a lesbian headed stepfamily is as a result of interactions between the two. People often became more accepting, open to diversity and demonstrated an expanded appreciation for the lesbian headed stepfamily.

Finally, the third feature is that the value of knowledge lies in its usefulness (Doane & Varcoe, 1995). Knowledge from a pragmatic perspective demands that we are constantly asking more questions and seeking more 'truths'. Doing so allows us to be more effective in the world as we strive to increase our responsiveness to those with whom we are interacting and building knowledge. The pragmatist informed researcher asks to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and habits of knowledge by urging us to ask more questions, and be open to more possible definitions and meanings. In terms of family nursing, we should "challenge the normative truths that currently govern our understanding of family" (Doane & Varcoe, 1995, p. 15).

I was challenged in the knowledge I had and was gaining about becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily by reflecting on pragmatism. As the researcher I asked questions about the participants' experiences in order to ensure that I was not assuming an understanding based on my own experience as a lesbian mother in a stepfamily configuration. My ability to relate to the participants and their knowing that I had experience with being in a lesbian headed stepfamily allowed the participants to speak without having to be guarded or to explain our shared understandings. However, the shared understandings could not be thought of as truth, it was simply the knowledge that we had of our experiences at this point in time. I had to be conscious of interrogating the data further to see if there were indeed areas of knowledge outside our shared experiences. Together, the participants, their experiences and I were becoming a part of reality in the making. I was aware of the data, my relationship as a researcher with the participants and my conceptual perspective; that it was an ongoing act of reflecting on the experiences between, and of, me and the participants (Houghton, Hunter, & Meskell, 2012).

Symbolic interactionism is “a theoretical perspective derived from pragmatism which assumes that people construct selves, society, and reality through interaction” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 189). It is a perspective important to grounded theory about how people make meaning of their everyday lives. The dialectic action that is the basis of symbolic interactionism and used in human interaction is the medium whereby meaning is given to actions and knowledge is constructed (Charmaz, 2006). Blumer (1969) identified three basic premises that embody symbolic interaction: 1. That humans act on

the basis of things and the meanings that these things have for them. 2. The meaning of things is derived through social interaction with others, and 3. The meanings are developed and modified because of an interpretive process in which people engage.

Individuals in interaction with one another create and mediate meaning, this is known as symbolic interaction (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). For example, I was aware that the meaning of disclosing that they were a part of a lesbian headed stepfamily arose from the interactions the participants had with those they were disclosing to and in turn would influence future disclosing interactions. Participants were frequently aware of the potential of these interactions to convey a message that they were not a part of the normative and dominant Western understanding of family. Experiences such as these had the power to make lesbian headed stepfamilies feel that they could not be a part of society at large but rather were going to be relegated to living on the peripheral margins.

Marginalization focuses on the affect and meaning that living on the margins has on people. "Margins are defined as the peripheral, boundary-determining aspects of persons, social networks, communities, and environments" (Hall et al., 1994, p. 24). Marginalization is therefore the process by which people are made to be peripheralized because of their identities, associations, and experiences. As a guiding concept in research, marginalization can sensitize nurses to better understanding the impact that being forced to live on the margins has on the health of diverse populations. It forces nurses to ensure that they ask about the experiences of marginalization and to acknowledge the specific struggles (Hall et al., 1994). In an effort to be respectful of the experiences and struggles of lesbian headed stepfamilies I was diligent in ensuring that

the language used reflected their understanding of the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

In this study I began with a solid understanding of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory methodology adding a constructivist perspective informed by pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and feminism. The development of the study design, data collection, analysis, and theory construction were informed by my knowledge of Glaser and Strauss's original grounded theory and Charmaz's constructivist perspective. This blending of research paradigms caused me to be more thoughtful about how and where I situated myself within the research. This study was also guided by my beliefs about knowledge, epistemology - my relationship with what can be known - and the way in which I conducted the research such that it respected the participants and guided the question and context (Houghton et al., 2012). In keeping with constructivist grounded theory methodology I was alert to ways in which meaning was created through behaviour and how meanings varied as a result of social interactions.

The goal of conducting grounded theory is to discern a framework or theory that furthers understanding of human behaviour in context (Glaser, 1978; Wuest, 2007). Grounded theory is used when wanting to better understand the experiences of a population for which little is known, or a new perspective of a familiar setting is needed (Stern, 1980). While Glaser encourages the researcher to allow the BSP and grounded theory to emerge from the data as a result of careful interpretation, Charmaz (2006) suggests that as researchers we cannot bracket or ignore our previous understandings and knowledge of a subject. Researchers are not passive participants in the relationship

between the data and past experiences, rather they play an active role as they influence and work with the data in the development of a grounded theory that helps us better understand human behaviour in a given situation. Pragmatism, symbolic interaction and constructivism informed the diligent use of constant comparison allowing me to trust in the process of grounded theory and that my influence as a researcher would be accounted for in doing ‘good’ grounded theory.

It was essential that I recognize and take into account my position within the research and process of working with the data. Furthermore I was aware of how my interactions with participants might affect the way participants told their story. Data thus must be understood as being influenced by the interaction between the participant, the researcher AND their relationship (Finlay, 2002).

I position myself in a constructivist orientation as I believe that every experience has multiple interpretations that are valid and contribute to a richer understanding of lesbian headed stepparenting. My primary concern with the research process was the way in which the interview itself was a means of constructing reality. I remained observant of my position within the research and the relationship between myself and the participants. I acknowledged that my life experiences as a member of a lesbian headed stepfamily influenced how I interacted with the participants, data, and analysis and subsequent development of a grounded theory. I felt that as a birth mother in a lesbian headed stepfamily I had unique knowledge of the process and could relate to what the participants were telling me. My position enabled me to identify specific areas requiring further probing. I explained to the participants that while I was familiar with the basic

situation I wanted them to tell their stories as if I did not have specific insight into their lives, I was cautious to continue in such a manner that details were not lost in our common understanding.

Gender imbalance, oppression, and heterosexism are important forces that shape the lives of lesbians. Feminism provides one foundation for understanding these influences, as well as offering principles that inform how I designed this project. As a principle I adhere to the tenets of feminism and so by virtue of those principles anticipated this research would be conducted for rather than on women. The findings connected their personal experiences with the social context in which they lived, captured issues of oppression, and embraced diversity found in families and across culture, race, and age (Thompson, 1992). I sought to challenge established assumptions about the predominantly Western understanding of family, being cognizant of the tendency to essentialize lesbian existence within a predominantly patriarchal society. Paramount for the outcomes of this research was its usefulness in helping lesbian mothers, children, nurses, and other health care professionals better understand the lives of lesbian headed stepfamilies. Emancipating lesbians from trying to fit into a heteronormative mold that cannot and should not include them was an outcome of this research. Finally, I am hopeful that outcomes from my study will help educate and inform policy direction for allied health care providers in general and nursing specifically.

Family Issues within Grounded Theory

Decision making about whether to interview individual family members or the family as a whole has plagued family researchers (Astedt-Kurki, Paavilainen, & Lethi, 2001). Researchers grapple with questions of whether to interview one parent or both parents, together or individually, and whether or not to include the children. Historically, family research has been based on interviews with mothers alone as they were both more accessible and felt to be able to represent the entire family (Bell, Paul, Tribble, & Goulet, 2000; Marcellus, 2006). Many qualitative family researchers believe that data should be gathered from at least two members of a family in order to capture the variations and nuances in understanding family events. Uphold and Strickland (1993) argue that one respondent gives only one perception and does not exhaust the perceptions of the family as a whole. In recognizing these conditions researchers have accepted children as generally reliable and valued informants (Deatrick, Faux, & Moore, 1993).

While individuals remember specific experiences with degrees of difference the data collected for this study was an assortment of contextually influenced constructions of those experiences. For this reason when asking the question “Tell me about the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily” I felt it was important that all members of the family be given an opportunity to contribute to a better understanding of the process. However, I fully understood that there are challenges with interviewing adults and children concurrently. Children may be hesitant to relay contentious situations. Parents can influence how or what their children say by interjecting, interrupting, or correcting the child’s contributions. The benefits however, are addressed by Lindsay et al. (2006):

“our research method [grounded theory] has allowed us to collect more complex and nuanced data through family interviews which simultaneously include the views of parent, children and other family members” (p. 1062). Ultimately the decisions regarding interviewing should be driven by the research question and are congruent with the method (Marcellus, 2006).

I sought to understand the experiences of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The children and stepmother are important parts of the process therefore I sought to interview as many stepmothers and children as possible. In doing so, I feel confident that I gave voice to each member of the family, thus enriching the data collected and the emergent theory.

Method

Initially, participants are chosen because they are felt to have some understanding or experience of the human behaviour or phenomenon in question. Sample size is not fixed in grounded theory rather it is determined by theoretical saturation of the data (Artinian, Giske, & Cone, 2009; Glaser, 1978). Theoretical saturation occurs when there are no new variations in emergent concepts (Wuest, 2007). Artinian (2009) states that it is not possible to identify a sample size prior to commencement of a grounded theory study as the emergent problem will not be known until analysis has begun. However, it is helpful to identify an estimated number of participants, especially when seeking funding or in order to get ethical approval for the study. Sample size is often suggested between 10 to 40 participants, depending upon the focus of the research (Morse, 1994, 2007;

Wuest, 2007). Sandelowski (1995a) offers a basic principle to help guide sample size decisions:

An adequate sample size in qualitative research is one that permits – by virtue of not being too large – the deep, case-oriented analysis that is a hallmark of all qualitative inquiry, and that results in – by virtue of not being too small – a new and richly textured understanding of experience (p. 183). Grounded theory is an iterative process of back and forth reviews of the data.

Line-by-line substantive and theoretical coding are steps used in dissecting interviews to further understand how participants process the phenomenon being studied. Substantive codes are keywords assigned by the researcher to capture action and the interactions within the interview. In assigning a code, as a label, to a piece of data the researcher can continue constant comparison with pieces of data that have the same codes (Charmaz, 2006). Using a constant comparison method of analysis in reflecting on the codes assigned by the researcher, data sets are compared both within and against other data sets; codes are refined, reduced, and eventually clustered into categories. Substantive codes fragment the data, providing the researcher with pieces of a puzzle. Sandelowski (1995b) cautions that too intense line-by-line coding prior to having a grasp of the interview as a whole can result in word overload.

A balance between over coding and under coding is imperative, as is being familiar with the interview data in general. However, by adhering to the process of coding and theorizing, irrelevant codes will be replaced by codes that better represent the conceptual indicators of the phenomenon under scrutiny. There is no right or wrong

number of codes or ways of coding. Simply reading through the interview transcript and applying codes that capture what the data are telling you is the best approach to start with. While it may at first seem impossible to capture everything, as subsequent interviews are gathered codes, categories, and concepts are identified and begin to cluster. It is initially important to stay ‘data near’ (Sandelowski, 1995b) meaning to stay close to what the data are saying; conceptualization will follow. The use of invivo codes, words used by the participants themselves, helped with staying data near (Wuest, 2007). (See Figure 1 for a diagram demonstrating the iterative nature of the process of analysis in grounded theory)

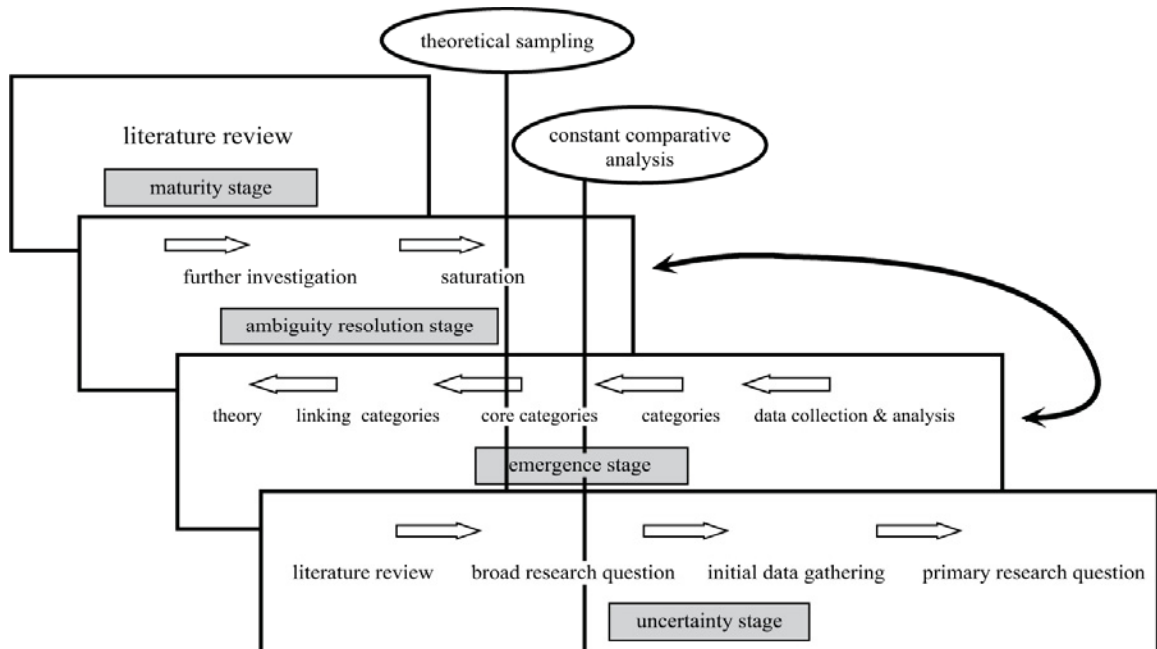


FIGURE 1: Grounded theory analysis (Idrees, Vasconcelos, & Cox, 2011)

Theoretical coding relates the concepts of the theory with each other and assists the researcher in conceptualizing the evolving theory. During theoretical coding the researcher seeks information from multiple sources, aside from the interview data, to increase the richness of the emergent theory. Glaser’s coding families can be used as a

guide to elevating the categories to a theoretical level. The first and most commonly used family is known as “the six Cs” and includes “causes, context, contingencies, consequences, co-variances and conditions” (Glaser, 1978, p. 74). Some codes will become conceptual indicators of conditions while others will become consequences of other codes. Categories are then compared to other categories in order to further refine and reduce them, pulling the pieces of the puzzle together. Memos are written in an effort to work through hunches and ideas and to define the categories. Eventually the categories are elevated through the use of theoretical coding illuminating patterns of human behaviour. Theoretical sampling is a process of selecting further participants or literature to elaborate or refine concepts and categories (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data collection ends when theoretical saturation is reached.

Throughout the process of coding the researcher should be aware of theoretical sensitivity, which means being attentive to emergent ideas and concepts within the data. By being open to multiple theoretical codes or directions, as dictated by the data, the researcher is more likely to avoid premature adherence to what Glaser has often referred to as ‘pet theories’. Theoretical sensitivity ensures that the researcher takes stock of how perspectives impact the research problem and might shape or direct future development (Daly, 2007). What emerges from this effort is a theory explaining a behavioural response to a specific basic social problem.

The theory describes the behaviour found within the BSP that addresses the central problem identified during analysis. A core variable with two or more stages that changes over time is variable and pervasive, and a dimension of the problem has the

criteria to be considered a BSP. According to Glaser (1978) core categories must be related to as many other categories as is possible, in other words it should be central to the developing theory. The core category accounts for much of the variation in behaviour. It must reoccur frequently in the process of analysis and be linked to other categories.

The challenge with grounded theory is being able to present the theory by providing a conceptual rather than descriptive explanation of the process (Glaser & Holton, 2005). In writing the theory the core category, and associated processes that address the problem I started at the beginning and worked my way along through the categories, explaining the variations and consequences. In the same way that grounded theory is not a straight forward step-by-step method, we know that life itself does not follow a prescriptive trajectory. Each participant has a unique way of responding to the phenomenon of interest. Participants often move iteratively back and forth through a basic social process. In an effort to be clear and to present the theory in as conceptual a manner as possible I have presented the theory of *authenticating family*, beginning at the first sub-process of *accepting the challenge*, followed by *building the bonds*, and ending with the final sub-process of *thriving*. The discussion of the variations of how the participants themselves responded to becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily will help to show the “messiness” that life often is and the fact that as a result of various influences people are more likely to “proceed” in the least straight line. The diagram of the basic social process captures some of the movement, chaos, and ever changing nature of *authenticating family*. (See page 99)

The process of conceptualization within grounded theory begins with the first assigning of codes and does not end until the final write up of the research.

Conceptualization allows grounded theory to go beyond descriptive methods. Glaser (2002) simplifies the process when he states, “all that GT is, is the generation of emergent conceptualizations into integrated patterns, which are denoted by categories and their properties” (p. 2). Charmaz (2006) interrogates the many perspectives of grounded theory suggesting that its power lies in the consistent need for the researcher to ask questions both of the data and the concepts that are being constructed as a result of constant comparison. Theorizing is an activity that the researcher engages in while working within the data (Charmaz, 2006). Categories, the research problem, and the researcher’s role in working with the data contribute to the construction of a theory that is sufficiently theoretical to further our understanding of the specific phenomenon of interest.

Glaser identifies the two most important properties of a grounded theory as being abstract of time, place, and person and having “enduring grab” (p.3). In essence, methodologically robust grounded theory should help guide the researcher in the construction of concepts at a theoretical level that are abstract enough to be applied to any relevant temporal and spatial context as well as additional participants within the boundaries of the phenomenon of interest. Glaser’s enduring grab means that when the theory is explained people can see themselves within it and can clearly understand the dimensions of the theory. As I continued to apply conceptual thinking to the process of analyzing the data within this grounded theory project I was able to illuminate the construction of a theory grounded in the data.

It is vitally important that researchers using grounded theory capture both what is said within the data and what Clarke (2003) calls “sites of silence” (p. 561) in the data. Sites of silence are those places when little is said but much is inferred by body language, changing the topic, and/or digressing away from the question posed. To capture the sites of silence, field notes are suggested. Field notes become data and are used during analysis. Field notes and memos are started with the first interview, continue throughout the process, and are especially important during the writing of the research study.

While for many research methodologies analysis is completed prior to writing the final report, for the grounded theorist the final writing is an important part of analysis; some might say the most important part (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory reports should be written conceptually, as a theoretical accounting of the phenomenon under focus (Wuest, 2007). It is a difficult thing to do and many researchers fall back on descriptive accounting of the concepts and their variations rather than staying true to the conceptual representation of the theory.

Trustworthiness

The interplay between the researcher and the research data is explained as reflexivity (Townsend, Cox, & Li, 2010). Hall and Callery (2001) suggest that reflexivity and relationality can provide criteria for trustworthiness, otherwise known as rigor in quantitative studies. Glaser’s direction on theoretical sensitivity reminds the researcher to be aware of their position within the research. Charmaz (2006) asserts that while we need to attend to issues of theoretical sensitivity we must realize the influence of our

experiences. Researcher influence accounts for ideas that the researcher, in the process of working with the data, uses in the construction of the emergent theory.

I ensured that the findings were grounded in the data as I constructed the theory based on experiences of the families interviewed and on the way in which I interacted with the families and the data during analysis. Marcellus (2006) discussed how theory that is grounded in data is essentially inherently self-verifying. Activities such as, theoretical sampling and constant comparison are built into grounded theory and enhance trustworthiness. Beck (1993) offered credibility, auditability, and fittingness as standards of trustworthiness in qualitative methods. Chiovotti and Piran (2003) built upon Beck's original three criteria to develop a list of eight methods to enhance the standards of trustworthiness. They include: allowing participants to guide the process, check theoretical construction against participant meanings, use in vivo codes, explain the researcher's position and insights, specify criteria built into the researcher's thinking, specify why and how participants were chosen, define terms such as sample, setting, level of the theory generated, and finally incorporate and compare extant literature to the emergent categories (Chiovotti & Piran, 2003).

Charmaz (2006) suggests research that is grounded in "reasoned reflections and principled convictions" (p. 183), and that conceptualizes the heart of a substantive area has the power to make valuable contributions. The evaluation of research depends on who is doing the evaluating and what the purpose of the evaluation is. Criteria to consider in the guidance of evaluation are credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness

(Charmaz, 2006). These criteria are similar to those created by Glaser (1978): fit, work, grab/relevance, and modifiability.

Evaluation of the grounded theory should match the paradigm that guides the research. In this study I was acutely aware of my position within the research and so attended to ensuring that I remained alert to the relationship between myself, the data, and the participants. Charmaz (2006) verifies the trustworthiness of constructivist grounded theory by posing questions of the research. She begins with credibility by asking if the research and data are robust enough to support the claims made. In other words, has the researcher explored a wide range of observations and made systematic comparisons between those observations and the categories. Charmaz suggests that if the reader agrees with the claims then the final product has been conducted with sufficient credibility. Originality is the next criterion for evaluation of the grounded theory project. Once again, posing questions helps the researcher to ensure validity of the study. Does the analysis of the data offer new understandings of the phenomenon, are they fresh? Can the grounded theory be used to demonstrate that there is social and theoretical significance? In this criterion the originality of the work, the findings and its ability to provide new knowledge are key (Charmaz, 2006).

In the third criterion the most important factor is that the participants can see themselves in the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). It must make sense to them and help to explain the process they have gone through offering greater insight into their experiences, lives and the world in which they live. The categories must be robust,

revealing as many facets as possible and demonstrating the variations in response to the problem.

Finally, usefulness ensures that the constructed middle-range theory is helpful in guiding practice, further research, and contributing to the knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. Much like the feature of pragmatism, it is important that what is discovered can be used by practitioners to gain a better and more holistic view of the world around them.

Charmaz (2006) suggests that originality and credibility that are robust will in turn increase the resonance and usefulness of the theory and its contributions to knowledge. The process of writing grounded theory is not simply the conveying of facts about the categories and variations but rather requires a certain amount of creativity, reflexivity and interpretation. However, this is not a work of fiction but rather a process that “when born from reasoned reflections and principled convictions...conceptualizes and conveys what is meaningful about a substantive area, [and makes] a valuable contribution to knowledge” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 183).

Glaser (2002) refers to the power of the words and the excitement of working within the data as a ‘drugless’ high when the theory is finally developed. Data analysis done well has concepts, categories, and a theory that fits the data. It is important to be aware that data cannot be forced to fit a wishful theory; rather the theory must reflect and be grounded in the data, constructed as a result of the relationship between the researcher, the participants and their stories.

While Glaser (2002) contends that using constant comparative analysis will expose and account for any effects that the researcher has on data analysis, I believe that attending to issues of reflexivity is equally important. Reflexivity and reflection are terms that are often used interchangeably however, upon further investigation there is indeed a significant divide between the two. “Reflexivity is an awareness of the ways in which the researcher as an individual with a particular social identity and background has an impact on the research process” (Robson, 2002, p. 22). Reflection is ‘thinking about’ something while reflexivity is a more active ‘self-awareness’ (Neill, 2006), and is understood as an activity rather than a state of being. Being reflexive I asked questions about how my relationship with the participants and the research had influenced outcomes. Analyzing data from this perspective meant that I maintained a heightened awareness “taking a reflexive stance throughout the research and writing processes.” (Neill, 2006, p. 132).

To protect the trustworthiness of the research I attended to my influence on the development of the theory. In order to do so I read and reread the data being alert to areas of tension (Corbin, 2009) always endeavoring to remain grounded in the data. “Rigor is less about adherence to the letter of rules and procedures than it is about fidelity to the spirit of qualitative work” (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 2). Following constructivist grounded theory methods I used my memos and field notes to explore initial hunches and thoughts asking questions about how I was influencing the process and then trying to ensure that my influences did not force the data.

Key issues in qualitative research generally and grounded theory specifically, are to stay true to the data, allow the data to guide the emergence of results, and resist the

temptation to force the data where it is not easily going (Glaser, 1978). While trustworthiness speaks to the validity of the research, ethical consideration attends to ensuring that the research is conducted in a manner that is respectful of all concerned parties and protective of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

I attended to the safety of, and respect for, participants by conducting a research project that adhered to an ethical code of conduct. As a student at Dalhousie University I received ethical approval from the Health Sciences Research Ethics Board (REB: 2011-2390). The research did not begin until ethical approval was granted.

As a way to attend to the participant's safety I explained the expectations for participation followed by providing the participants with consent form (Appendix A) rated at a Fleischman-Kincaid readability scale of 8.0. Once the participants had read it and were offered clarification to any questions they were asked to sign it indicating both their understanding of what was being asked of them and their willingness to participate. Birth mothers were asked to sign a consent form for children under 16 years of age who were willing to participate. The mothers were asked if it was necessary or appropriate for the other nuclear parent to provide consent, in the event of specific separation agreement guidelines. These children were asked to indicate their willingness to participate by signing an assent form that had been previously explained. Children over 16 years of age were able to sign their own consent forms. Participants were given a copy of the signed consent form. The consent contained contact information for both my doctoral supervisor and me.

Understanding that talking about family and their experiences of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily might trigger strong emotions, I ensured that participants knew they could stop at any time, refuse to answer any question, and were offered contact information for an appropriate mental health professional or counselor as needed.

Wright (1998) has written extensively about the therapeutic benefits of participation in qualitative research interviews. Being able to talk about issues that have been problematic gives the participants an opportunity to work through their experience. There is a therapeutic benefit to being able to hear the experience and share it with an objective outsider, talking is viewed as being potentially healing (Wright, 2005). In one study giving children the opportunity to talk about their lesbian and gay parents confirmed the legitimacy of their family (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004). Following a number of interviews, participants commented that this was the first time they had been able to discuss the details of their lives in becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily with someone who was able to affirm that what they were doing and going through was “normal” and could relate to the story.

The identities of the participants were carefully protected. In quotes and the discussion identifying details have been removed or altered. Protecting the identities of the participants was particularly important because of the rural nature of the Maritimes, the size of the lesbian communities and the number of lesbian families who participated in this study. It was very possible that the lesbian headed stepfamilies who participated in this study might know each other; without alteration of the details lesbian headed stepfamilies might be identifiable in general and to each other.

Charmaz (2006) recommends that her research students allow for time at the end of the interview to sit and have tea or coffee with the participants. It is the responsibility of the researcher to help transition the family from interview mode back to their usual style and level of conversation. I spent some time with the families to address any immediate concerns as I agreed with Charmaz that “leaving the person in a vulnerable place is simply unacceptable” (p. 85). I followed up by contacting each participant family a week after their interview to ‘check-in’, asking if there were any additional thoughts that had come to mind following the interview. At that time I inquired about their emotional status, in the unlikely event that participating in this study had caused distress.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research is important to nursing practice, education and theory development. I believe this research has uncovered important issues previously missed as a result of not including the experiences of the non-birthmother and the children. It is essential to understand the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily from the viewpoint of all the members of the family. With the knowledge generated by this project, we will need to reconsider our previous understanding of the lives of lesbian women who are building new stepfamilies. I believe this research has implications for other disciplines and will benefit the scholarship of nursing. Better understanding the lives of lesbian headed stepfamilies will help nurses, nurse practitioners, nurse educators and nursing students in the provision of care that better reflects the needs of lesbian headed stepfamilies. Nurses however, are not the only health care professionals interacting with families. Disciplines involved with the health, education, and social endeavors of children and family have an

opportunity to learn from this study. If nothing else, professionals might consider that families come in different configurations and need to be treated with understanding and respect, rather than making heterosexist assumptions that often result in silencing the lesbian headed stepfamily.

Study Procedure

Research Question

In starting this research project, rather than having a finite and specific research question, I used a grounded theory approach allowing me to remain open to what study participants would deem their main concerns. I began with the intent of better understanding a domain of human behaviour, of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily, as opposed to a specific problem (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 2001). The opening question, “Can you tell me about your experience of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily?” was posed to the birthmother, the stepmother, and older children. Younger children were asked “Tell me about your family?” I anticipated that this would begin the process of discovering what it means to become a lesbian headed stepfamily. I was interested in constructing a grounded theory that captured the experiences of the birth mothers, stepmothers and children as a means of better understanding family in this context.

Inclusion Criteria

Initially, in this study I sought women who self-identified as lesbian, who had children from a previous heterosexual or same-sex relationship, and were in or had been in a relationship with another woman, living within the provinces of New Brunswick,

Nova Scotia, or Prince Edward Island and were English speaking. During theoretical sampling, the inclusion criteria changed slightly to allow me to broaden my recruitment and to seek more and different data providing potentially new insight into the categories. For example, after the seventh interview I noted that I had interviewed a stepfamily in which the children were born during a previous lesbian relationship. I wondered if their experiences were in keeping with those of previously heterosexual women forming new lesbian headed stepfamilies and so theoretically sampled to specifically interview women whose previous relationship was with another woman and whose children were from that lesbian relationship. I interviewed three more families whose previous family relationships were with a woman and who considered each other to be equally the mothers of the children. Interviewing four previously lesbian families was sufficient to tease out additional details and saturate categories that had not yet been saturated.

Sampling

For the purpose of this research and using purposive sampling I sought to interview English-speaking women living or having lived in a lesbian stepfamily. As the concepts, categories and theory were identified I was able to isolate areas that needed further clarification or investigation. Theoretical sampling guided my recruitment of additional participants and to the building of robust categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Following the eighth or ninth interview the data was consistently rich and robust. I interviewed 12 families in which women had children from a previous heterosexual relationship prior to entering the lesbian relationship, and four families in which the

nuclear family had been a lesbian headed family whose children were born within the relationship.

In the process of writing this thesis I went to the extant literature as a way of supporting the categories and seeking further clarification. I wanted to ensure that the properties of the categories were being captured and that I was not missing aspects of development of the lesbian headed stepfamily. Theoretically sampling the family development literature I was able to find sufficient additional information to tease out further variations and conditions, in an effort to ensure saturation of the categories.

While seeking new participants was an important part of theoretical sampling I also felt that the original participants had more information that had not been captured in the first interviews. New ideas, concepts and variation within categories led me to re-interviewing select participants to further saturate categories. I contacted three of the original families requesting a shorter second interview. Speaking with them a second time served two purposes, I was able to gather more data pertinent to areas that needed further clarification and was able to ensure that the theory resonated with the participants. I was able to achieve saturation in more categories and to validate the findings as they had emerged up to that point.

Sample size. The research is based on 20 interviews accounting for 16 families. I interviewed 14 children, 15 birth mothers, 13 stepmothers, and 1 grandmother and step-grandmother pair. While coding the first few interviews I was alert to the impact that I as a member of a lesbian headed stepfamily may have on analysis and the coding process. I was concerned to avoid imposing my own experiences on the data of my participants.

Following a conversation with a committee member, whose expertise is in grounded theory, I was guided to interview myself and include my story in the research to allay concerns that my experiences as a birth mother in a lesbian headed stepfamily might influence the analysis process.

Recruitment

Having lived experience as a lesbian and in a lesbian headed stepfamily I have some familiarity with the social situations of women living in lesbian headed households in the Maritimes. As a result, I had a number of ideas of where and how to recruit. I recruited participants from all three of the Maritime Provinces: New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. I placed posters (Appendix B) at common meeting places for lesbians, advertisements in community bulletins or newspapers (Appendix C) such as *Wayves* and *The Coast*, monthly newsletters for the New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island nurses' and teachers' regulatory bodies, contacted LGBT networks and organizations, placed posters on community bulletin boards and in libraries, by asking friends and colleagues if they knew of families who fit my criteria and if they would be willing to forward a letter of introduction/information (see Appendix D), and/or through practitioners who may come in contact with potential participants. I gave interested women a letter of introduction further explaining the nature of the research and participation responsibility.

Many of the participants contacted me after hearing about the study from acquaintances. My plan was to interview as many members of the families possible, to capture the richest data. I asked the families if they preferred to be interviewed together

or individually. I interviewed 16 participant families, with the intent of stopping when I reached theoretical saturation. I asked mothers about the feasibility of interviewing their children. I asked the mothers to give consent for children under 16 years of age (Appendix E), asking the children to assent to participation (Appendix F). Children over 16 were asked to read and sign a consent form (Appendix G). I anticipated that mothers of older children would give their children some freedom when being interviewed by casually leaving and returning when the children were finished which is exactly what happened. The children, regardless of age were given permission to stay or leave as their interest dictated. When conducting the check-in a week after the interview I once again offered the mothers the opportunity to speak to me separately. These families varied in size, age, background, socio-economic status and education. They were however, similar in that they all identified as being members of the dominant Anglo-Saxon demographic.

Participants

In total the sample consisted of 16 lesbian headed stepfamilies. Four of the families were each represented by a single member; an adult child, a stepmother and two birth mothers, 12 of the families included more than one member during the interview process. Three families chose to be interviewed as a group; all of the children who were under 10 years of age eventually drifted away as their attention was no longer being held by the interview process, leaving me to continue the interview with the mother and/or stepmother. Other families preferred to be interviewed separately. The interviews were conducted in their own home with the exception of three women interviewed in a coffee shop, the participant's office and the researcher's office.

Eleven of the 16 families had legally married in Canada, while the remaining five families either dissolved their relationships or chose not to marry for various reasons. For seven of the birth mothers this was their first intimate and romantic relationship with another woman, all but one of these birth mothers were married to a man at the time they met their same-sex partner. In only one family, both the mother and stepmother were coming-out for the first time. It is significant because of the additional stressors for both women of learning to manage both personal and public credibility (Rickards, 2005). For the other families, the novice lesbian was supported by her partner who had been out for much longer. Four of the families were previously living in lesbian relationships with the other nuclear mother to their children. In the situation with the grandmothers, the mother of their grandson was a daughter raised by the birth grandmother and same-sex partner in the nuclear family.

The ages of the mothers and stepmothers at the time of the interviews ranged from 28 to 63 years old. The children ranged in age from 5-45 years old. The relationships averaged 8.9 years long and ranged from six months to 25 years in duration. Three relationships did not survive. Data about these three families were obtained from the perspective of the daughter of a lesbian mother, another from the voice of a stepmother, and the third from the birth mothers' perspective. The families were divided throughout the Maritimes: 12 in New Brunswick, two in Nova Scotia, and two in Prince Edward Island.

The educational background of the women was varied; two were high school graduates, one participant had completed trade school, 10 had achieved a university

degree, and 14 had completed graduate level education. They worked in professional careers, the service industry, non-profit resource based organizations, and in retail. Six participants were social workers, five worked in the health care field, two were accountants, five worked in an academic capacity, either in teaching or administration, two were lawyers in their own practice, two women worked in retail, and four worked in non-profit service organizations.

Of the 16 participant families, four participated in organized religion weekly, and six families said that they attended church only on the high holidays. The other six families did not report any religious affiliations. Two families disclosed that they had experienced some degree of family violence prior to their present families. The demographic data were collected throughout the interviews; I took notes to assist in remembering the details and to ensure accuracy.

Thirteen participant families in this study divulged that they were happier now than they had been prior to forming their lesbian headed stepfamilies. Two regretted that their family relations had dissolved, but felt that the relationships had not been strong and likely would not have survived with or without the added responsibility of raising children. All of the participant families lived in communities in which they had a significant support network of friends and/or extended family.

As with most stepfamilies, the participant families included the existence and contribution of the other nuclear parent. Of the 16 families, 11 had the father engaged in varying degrees of effort to continue parenting his children. For some families the father played an active role initially then seemed to drift off, eventually having very little to do

with the children, especially once they themselves had re-married. While for other families the father lived a significant distance away, causing planning and travel to facilitate his spending time with his children. Three of the families did not have the father in their lives, two of whom had experienced significant violence and abuse and so chose not to continue the relationship with the father as a protective factor for the children. Finally, four of the families had an ‘other mother’ rather than a father. For various reasons that are not pertinent to this research the other mothers played a lesser role in the lives of the children. In general, and in order to maintain confidentiality of the participants, the fathers for these lesbian families played varying amounts of importance in the lives of the children, from not knowing who the sperm donor was to having regular visitation with the children.

Data Collection

I began data collection in June of 2011, following ethics approval. Glaser (1978) suggests that an interview guide can stifle exploration of a topic rather than allow participants to take the interview where it needs to go. Artinian (2009) points out that while Glaser frowns upon the use of interview guides she feels that they can help the less experienced researcher get started. While I am not new to grounded theory, I preferred the initial focus that an interview guide offered (Appendix H and I). The guide, a series of questions beginning with a “grand tour question” followed by more specific probes helped me to address key concepts and beginning hunches. The initial question “Can you tell me about your experience of becoming a lesbian stepfamily?” opened the way for a beginning understanding of the participants’ experiences. I kept in mind that the

interview guide could be as restrictive as it could be helpful if I became controlled by the guide and not attentive to what the informants were telling me. Initial interviews tended to be broad while subsequent interviews became more focused as the exploration of key concepts and probes began to identify patterns during analysis. Analysis provided clues to what concepts required further investigation.

Data collection occurred through face-to-face interviews. I asked my participants to identify a place of their choice where the interview could be conducted. Qualitative family research often takes place in the home. Home is seen as a safe and private environment in which family members are free to speak about potentially sensitive topics (Bell et al., 2000). Being able to enter the homes of the participants I was able to get a better feeling for their experiences. To ensure we were not interrupted I suggested that participants turn down the phone ringer and refrain from answering the door, unless of course there was a reason they preferred not to. It was anticipated that the interviews would take between one to two hours to complete. However, I did not end the interview if the participants had more to say after two hours had elapsed. I made it clear to the participants that we could take a break at any time.

The interviews were digitally recorded and saved to a password protected hard drive. A professional transcriptionist was used. This person signed a confidentiality agreement. Following transcription of the first two interviews I met with the transcriptionist to discuss style and format issues, how to insert pseudonyms or terms to maintain confidentiality of the participants, and any changes needed to the format.

Having listened to the transcribed interviews and reviewed the transcriptions I was able to clarify any areas that were not being captured in the transcriptions.

The transcribed and printed interviews were kept in a secure place. Upon completion of analysis I offered participants a copy of their recorded interview. If participants wanted to have a copy of their interview I offered to burn it to CD, however, none of the participant families made the request.

Analysis

Analysis of the data began with the first interview. I listened to the interviews a second time while reviewing the transcribed data to familiarize myself with the interview and catch any discrepancies between what was said and what had been transcribed. I kept a clean unmarked copy of the transcription of each interview while working on a second copy. I became immersed in the data by sitting down with pencil in hand making a first sweep of open or substantive coding of each interview.

There are a number of computerized software programs that can be used to sort, organize and group the data. Glaser resists the use of computerized software programs as he feels that the human brain is by far superior in the analysis of data (Artinian, 2009). However, when dealing with the volume of data that was produced as a result of conducting 20 interviews, the use of qualitative software helped me to retrieve, sort, and organize all data that had been identified by a specific code, concept or variable. I used a student version of NVivo 7© as a tool in the analysis of the data.

In the beginning analysis phase, while embarking on line-by-line substantive coding (Glaser, 1978) I asked a number of questions of the data: For example, “what is

this data a study of? What category does this incident indicate? What is actually happening in the data?" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57). While asking these questions, substantive codes began to amass. I was attentive to staying as close to the participants' words as possible. Examples of some of the substantive codes were sticking together, getting all Mama Bear, being the go-to parent, making history, and bringing gay to their attention. As codes recurred, and by comparing one code to another, similarities and differences were identified. Codes similar in concept grouped together to eventually become categories. Categories were also compared with other categories and codes; categories that fit together became titles for the sub-processes, ultimately contributing to the construction of *authenticating family*, the basic social process.

An audit trail is often used to illustrate how the researcher is able to move the data from the substantive codes through to the emergence of core categories (Glaser, 1978). *Thriving*, the final stage of the theory included two sub processes: *confronting the three-headed monster* and *see our family the way we created it*. The titles of these two sub-processes are in vivo codes best representing the action within. Initially the codes contributing to the emergence of *confronting the three-headed monster* were related to codes that explained how family members were experiencing homophobia, having language, and bringing gay to their attention. These codes represented the work that family members were doing as they dealt with outsiders and grew more comfortable with being able to defend the legitimacy of their lesbian headed stepfamily.

What follows is a detailed explanation of the categories identified in Figure 2.

Protecting. Protecting came out of the data as a result of looking at the codes that were naturally grouping together. It describes how family members dealt with the intrusions from others with regards to their family. At times it was the mother doing what she needed to do to protect her children from potential stigma; sometimes it was how the children dealt with experiencing stigma prior to divulging their identity as part of a lesbian headed stepfamily. Children also protected their mothers by not sharing incidents of derision, stigma, heterosexism they had experienced. Mothers made an attempt to provide the children with tools or strategies that would help with situations in which the children encountered questions or non-acceptance of their families. Protecting also occurred in other contexts but they were not included in this specific category. The women protected their time with each other, which is seen in *making history*, the second sub-process of building the bonds.

Facing homophobia. In this category, members of the family identify that at some point they have faced homophobia whether it was obvious at the time or they noted it upon reflecting on the event. They also commented about the acts of heterosexism that sometimes went unnoticed as they were so much a part of the landscape in which they lived. Examples of this were people asking about the whereabouts of the father, or having to complete a form that had designation for father and mother, not accommodating the unique configuration of the lesbian headed stepfamily, assuming that the stepmother was a friend, sister, or acquaintance. Regardless, having to deal with homophobia was challenging and required strategies to counter the message that their family was not acceptable.

Outward and overt acts of homophobia were almost easier to identify and counter than those that were more subversive and insidious. These incidents had much greater power to undermine the family members' sense of legitimacy. However, when they recognized the homophobia and heterosexism they were better able to confront it as a result of having experienced it before, discussed it as a family and learned from previous encounters. The codes that led to the development of this category also led to the development of gaining strength. In constantly comparing the codes to each other, the categories to each other and reflecting upon the action within the data it became clear that these codes were representing two differing categories. Theoretical sampling further confirmed this when I went back to the extant literature for clarification and when I asked several participants to provide me with more details about how they dealt with homophobia and heterosexism.

Gaining strength. This category illustrates the outcome of having dealt with challenging situations as a result of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. With repeated interactions with each other and then with outsiders that challenged the sense of legitimacy family members gathered new tools, skills, and strategies that helped in protecting themselves from further eroding feelings of legitimacy. Being able to claim language that was clear and conveyed a message of deserving to be treated with respect was one way that family members gained strength.

Normalcy. This category reflects how members of the lesbian headed stepfamily feel about their family. They recognized that what is happening in their home is basically the same as would happen in any busy household. They yearned for outsiders to see that

theirs was a normal life and sought opportunities to show outsiders just how normal their family really was. A positive outcome to demonstrating normalcy was the understanding that they had the opportunity to help educate others about what it means to live in a lesbian headed stepfamily and what it means to be gay in society today. Many family members stated that when they were able to show others that their family differed from others only as a result of having to deal with the intrusion of homophobia, heterosexism, and discrimination it helped their friends, acquaintances and others to think about what being gay meant.

Confronting the three-headed monster. This category includes how members of the lesbian headed stepfamily were able to talk to others and in doing so break down the myths and misconceptions that had coloured opinions of others that lesbians lived strange and bohemian lives. Members of the family found that more often than not when they identified themselves and explained the nature of their families to others people were intrigued and accepting, rather than disgusted. The image of the three headed monster is one that represents an unknown that is feared, until it is known and better understood. The negative image of the three-headed monster dissolved by virtue of becoming aware of and familiar with the lesbian headed stepfamily.

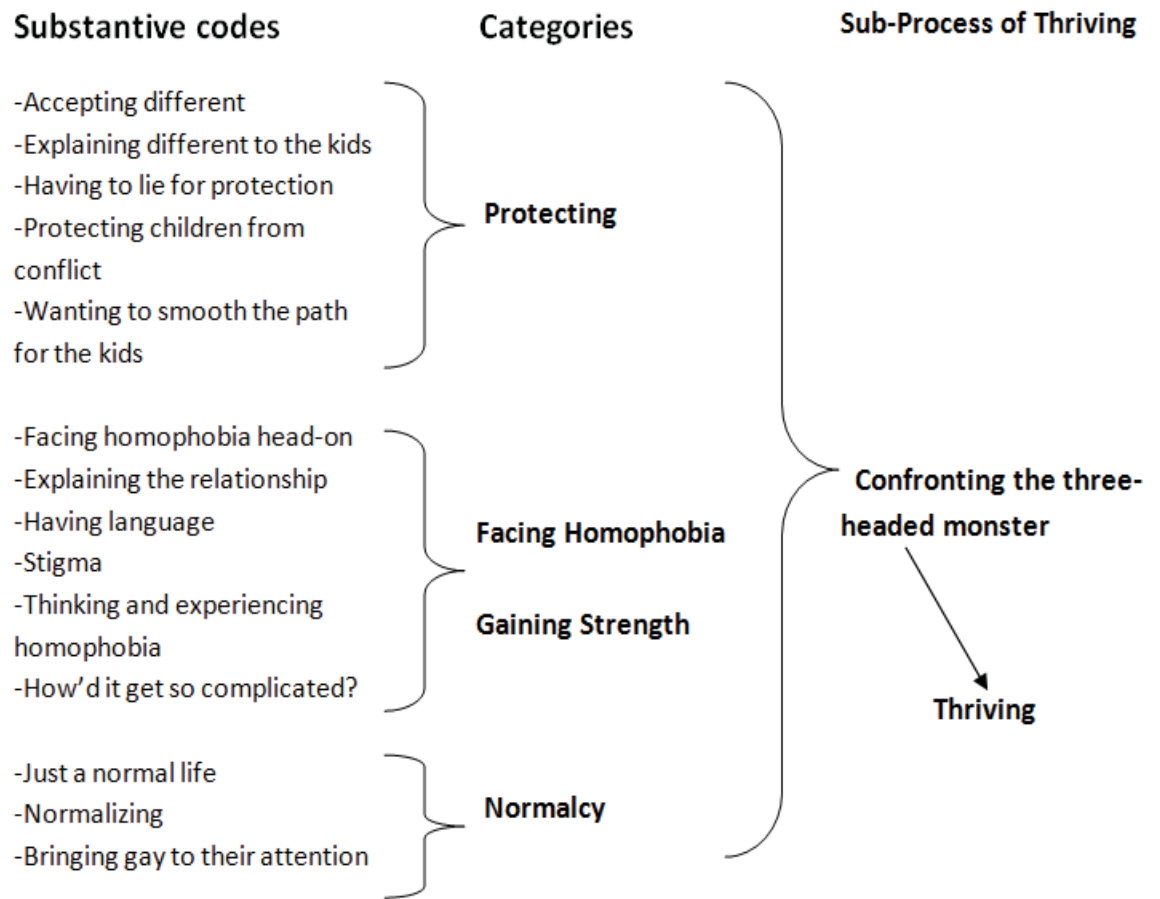


FIGURE 2. Example of data/audit trail for confronting the three-headed monster

Using constant comparison I compared ideas and concepts with other pieces of data. I continuously asked if the concept was similar or different, and in what way, or if one concept was a variation of another concept. In going back and forth between data sets I began to discover codes, categories and concepts. Codes were eventually clustered as a result of similar properties often becoming categories. At this point it was important that I began “memoing” (Glaser 1978, p. 83).

Writing memos allowed me to begin thinking conceptually about the relationships and variations between codes, categories, and concepts while exploring hunches about

what the data represented. Memos became part of the final write up as yet another element of data. One of the participants in my first interview said something that stood out and caused me to take note. In response to asking about the relationship with her step-daughter a stepmother stated "...she sure could use some parenting!" I made note of this statement and recalled it later during the third interview.

At that time I decided to begin writing a memo that reflected some of the comments being made by stepmothers about the children's behaviour. I explored areas of similarity, connections to other codes, relationships between other codes capturing similar concepts, and conditions in which the comments were being made. I made note of the ages of the children, how long the families had been together, and whether the other nuclear parent was an active member of the family. In response to coding subsequent interviews I returned to this memo frequently adding to it as data emerged including additional pertinent information and hunches about the nature and properties of the category. Eventually this memo became part of another category that ultimately became *negotiating expectations*. In the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily women and children with different backgrounds, histories, philosophies on life, and expectations of behaviour, noted that there was a distinct need to find a way to merge or blend the differing philosophies, parenting styles, and expectations for acceptable behaviour.

In contrast to open coding, theoretical coding required a great deal more conceptual thinking. Glaser's (1978) 18 coding families were useful as a basis for reviewing codes already generated and thinking conceptually. I began to see the relationships between categories, concepts, and variations associated with each (Wuest,

2007). It was important that I continue the process of writing memos as I became aware of new ideas, insights, and interrelationships within the data.

Theoretical codes are flimsy and empty without adequate substantive codes to support them. As with substantive codes and categories, theoretical codes must emerge from the data. They earn their place in the theory by having substantive codes that have fit and relevance, are grounded in the data, and are supportive of the theory (Glaser, 1978).

As variables are identified from the process of coding and constant comparison, core variables will eventually emerge. Core variables are pivotal points or main themes within the basic social process that often make up the core category and illustrate the emergent phases of the basic social process (Artinian, 2009).

Field notes should be taken either during or preferably immediately following the interview. I made notes of the environment in which the interview took place, the time and circumstances of the interview. Making note of the non-verbal communication was significant to being able to understand what the silences were saying when reviewing the taped interviews. The field notes became part of the data.

An important similarity between Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory and many other scholars using ground theory is both the reasons for and the value of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke 2003). The decisions about who to interview next are based upon the emerging concepts and theory (Glaser, 1978). Using theoretical sampling I anticipated that finding new data would be based on the need to explicate or flesh out, or saturate categories that were intriguing and yet thin (Charmaz,

2006) or “focuses on finding new data sources that can best explicitly address specific theoretically interesting facets of the emergent analysis” (Clarke, 2003, p. 557).

Theoretical sampling directed the choice of new participants and/or provided an opportunity to guide me back through the literature. Revisiting of the literature as theoretical data took me well beyond the preliminary review of the literature undertaken at the beginning of this study to ensure a deeper understanding of the concepts and categories emerging from the data.

I used theoretical sampling throughout data collection and analysis. I used the codes generated and the beginning categories to identify where to go next to collect data. At that point data collection was controlled by the emerging theory and ended with saturation (Glaser, 1978). When I saw that the categories and theory had credibility and originality, I was assured that I was moving in the right direction.

During theoretical sampling, I went back to three of the participant families to ask whether the developing theory fit with their experiences of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. By going back to the participants I was ensuring originality, credibility, resonance and usefulness (Charmaz, 2006). Doing so is yet another way of ensuring that the research is sound as the findings resonate with the participants’ experiences.

Writing the Final Report

In the report I identified the basic problem of perceived family legitimacy and explained why and how the core categories within the basic social process of authenticating family addressed this problem. The writing of the report has been the culmination of the analytical work that lifted the data from a descriptive format to a

theoretical and usable theory constructed within this qualitative research study. Further analysis was done while writing the final report. I followed the suggestions of many researchers writing conceptually during the first draft outlining in detail the action and leaving out any of the conceptual indicators or exemplars from the data (Sandelowski, 1998; Wuest, 2007).

A second draft was written once my committee and I were satisfied that the theory was presented conceptually. At that time I included minimal exemplars in the form of data bits and conceptual indicators to illuminate and illustrate the connections among the variables. I chose data judiciously as a way to explain the theory, the basic problem, and the social process that addressed the problem. Third and subsequent drafts included literature that I had sampled theoretically. This literature helped to support the data or show how it differed from the current state of the knowledge. It is important that the literature be used to support the emergent theory and not the other way around.

During the addition of the participant data in the form of quotes or data bits I noted that there were some quotes that included a great deal of extra words and filler noises (ums, likes, and you knows) that did not contribute to the richness of the data but rather created bulky somewhat disjointed data bits. Glaser (1978) argues that data should not be added to the written research study as a way of aggrandizing the theory, rather the data bits, used judiciously should further illustrate conceptual representations. In grounded theory, data is meant to be used to help the reader understand how the theory has been built (Sandelowski, 1998). However, very few people talk in the same way that we would want the written report to sound.

There is “messiness” to the spoken language that can be quite distracting and not at all helpful in representing the concepts being introduced (Daly, 2007; Morse, 1994; Poland, 2001; Sandelowski, 1994). A balance needs to be struck between writing a research report that is overburdened by description and participant data and one that is concise, clear, and conceptual while also being an interesting read. People tend to be incredibly interested in the private lives of others, as has been witnessed by the explosion of reality television. Wanting to read and have a glimpse into the lives of research participants is no different. The maxim that must be used is that the data bits are additive and should not distract and that they help to illuminate the theory and not weigh the study report down in description (Daly, 2007; Glaser, 1978; Macnaughten & Myers, 2004; Poland, 2001).

Morse (2004) cautions, data must not be edited to such a point that the essence of the quote is removed. Editing some of the superfluous “ums”, “likes’ and “you knows” can result in maintaining the essence and contributing to “writing a good read” (Sandelowski, 1998, p. 375). Being consistent in the process of editing will ensure that all data is treated with equal respect, that the personality of the participant is maintained, and that the researcher’s ideas concerning the use of the quote are conveyed (Daly, 2007; Sandelowski, 1994).

I have made every effort to use quotes cautiously in an attempt to demonstrate conceptual validity of the research while infusing the research report with sufficient information that the experiences of the participants and their behavioural responses to becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily are clearly understood. Of utmost importance is

that I demonstrate respect for the voices of the participants without misrepresenting them. As a result some of the transcription details have been omitted in the interest of readability. I have used pseudonyms for the participants, inserting them into the quotes in order to make them easier to read. I have removed any details that do not contribute to the essence of the quote and could lead to being able to identify the participants.

A final step in the writing of the report was identifying how this new knowledge could be used. Identifying and explaining the implications that the research results will have on practice, policy, and further research became an important part of the process. Without this the research would not be helpful in fostering change in practice or policy. I identified implications and explained the ramifications of this new knowledge. The implications are the ‘so what’ of the research project, an opportunity to provide the audience with reasons why this research is important and how it will be useful to others. Morse, Penrod, and Hupcey (2000) suggest that the use of qualitative data analysis can be broadened to include clinical application in the identification of points of intervention and enhance the utility of findings. How the information will be disseminated is important and will be respectful of the participants and their stories. Ensuring that the research is useful will demonstrate respect for the women’s voices and the time they gave in participating.

Language and labeling. Language is a vitally important tool used to present research findings within qualitative research that is both steeped in trustworthiness and significance (Ceci, Limacher, & McLeod, 2002). Language is imbued in symbolism and is central to the development of understanding experiences, actions, and communication.

I attended to the language used in explaining this grounded theory project, ensuring that it was gender neutral when relevant and that it represented the stories shared by the participants in a respectful manner.

In this study, not all families began as heterosexual mother/father couples. Four of the families started as planned lesbian families, women who while in relationship conceived or adopted a child. The four families had separated from or divorced a female partner and were now beginning the process of constructing a new lesbian headed stepfamily with a woman who has been with the children since they were born and a woman who was being introduced to the children after beginning a relationship with the birth mother. In this study I refer to the ‘other nuclear parent’ as the parent who is the non-resident parent from the nuclear families, regardless of being a man or woman. The use of “non-custodial” parent was rejected by participants because it suggested a custody agreement between the parents for the care of the children that may not always be the reality. They felt it was punitive in nature and not fairly or respectfully representative of the relationship the other nuclear parent had with the children.

Throughout the document I have used “stepmother” as the term to represent the woman who is joining the birth mother and children in the new family configuration. When the word stepmother is uttered it is understood by most to represent the person joining the family; however it also suggests that they are in a relationship with a father and traditionally have a somewhat adversarial relationship with the children. Many women in this study rejected the terminology for a number of reasons. Many women felt the term suggested an immediate role as parent and were clear to defend their non-

parenting position in the family. Most women did not feel they had yet earned the right to be called by a name suggestive of a parenting role. They felt that doing so was not respectful of the relationship they were trying to foster with the children who were in many cases grieving the loss of the primary family. Most women felt they would take on a parenting role eventually but knew it was going to take some time before the children were ready to accept this role.

Some women refused the title because they were adamant about not playing a parenting role of any type. They wanted to be in a relationship with the mother and interact with the children in such a way that they were not responsible for the upbringing of the children but would limit their role to one of a mentor. The challenge with all of this is that having language is what makes communication simpler and clearer. Society understands who a mother is and who a stepmother is, but for the child in a lesbian headed stepfamily the term does not adequately capture the description of the mother's partner to outsiders. To explain how the other woman fits in the family I had to clarify and qualify her position. I chose to refer to those women who refused a parenting role as "the partner" or "the other adult" rather than force the label stepmother on women who did not see themselves in a parenting role.

More often than not children fell back on calling the stepmother by her given name, giving both the children and the stepmother freedom to develop a relationship suiting their needs and situation. Children who grew up with two women as head of household and were younger when becoming a stepfamily were more likely to refer to their mother's partner as the "other mother". While using "other" has all manner of

challenges, at the very least it explicitly announces to outsiders that this was a lesbian family. In many situations nothing more was needed to be said. Less frequently, further explanations were required when communicating with people who were blinded by heterosexism.

Conclusion

Choosing a research methodology requires that the researcher become familiar with the procedures involved in performing this particular project with skill, finesse, precision, and grace. Having conducted a previous grounded theory research study I was comfortable with the steps involved. Glaser (1978) asserts that his version of the method and multiple subsequent publications are only a guideline to conducting what he considers “good” grounded theory; however, without so much as the guidelines the novice researcher would be lost before they even began. Clarke (2003) added situational mapping and analysis to her grounded theory methodology to incorporate issues of situatedness within the experience of the participants. Wuest (1995) added feminist theory to her grounded theory because it fit with the exploration of women leaving intimate partner abuse as a way to respect the lives of these particular women. Charmaz (2006; 2009) feels strongly that constructivism is key to acknowledging the impact the researcher will have on the collection and interpretation of data because of the relationships formed between the researcher, the participant, and the research itself. These are but a few examples of the modifications researchers can apply to a well-established and respected research methodology without changing the integrity of the research.

I have been committed to following Glaser & Strauss's (1967) original guidelines for conducting grounded theory using symbolic interaction and pragmatism while including a constructivist perspective as espoused by Charmaz (2006). I have, however, considered the perspectives of other well respected grounded theorists. Layering paradigms on grounded theory allows the researcher to tailor the methodology to reflect the nature of the research, the particular needs of the participants, and the overarching goal of the research. "Using grounded theory from different worldviews does not violate the intellectual roots of the method" (Wuest, 2012, p. 267), rather it influences how the researcher thinks and interacts with the participants. Conducting research that was concerned with the lives of an already vulnerable group, I added marginalization to help guide and ensure that the lives of the lesbian headed stepfamily members were respected and captured with honesty and veracity.

CHAPTER IV

Conditions that Influence *Authenticating Family*

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the experiences of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. While the emergent theory furthers understanding of the experience of the family rather than isolated experiences of individuals within the family, on occasion it was necessary to illuminate individual experiences in order to understand the behaviour of the whole family. In this chapter I provide an overview of the basic social process of *authenticating family*, discuss the influencing conditions of age of the children and support, and provide an explanation of *legitimacy*, the basic social problem.

Overview of the Substantive Theory

In *authenticating family*, the basic social problem is the perceived legitimacy of the family unit. Legitimacy is the sense of feeling valued, accepted as normal, and being measured by the same standards as other families in society. Individuals within the family hold perceptions of themselves as legitimate members of the family, as well as perceptions about the legitimacy of the family unit. Legitimacy is threatened when the existence of their family and the relationships among family members are called into question either by family members or individuals and social systems external to the family.

The basic social process addressing perceived legitimacy is *authenticating family*. When a woman meets and falls in love with another woman who has children, an intricate series of events is set in motion towards development, and ultimately, confirmation of the new family identity. *Authenticating family* is a process of beginning a lesbian relationship, shifting from the previous heterosexual identity while transitioning to a new lesbian headed stepfamily identity, working to affirm strong and healthy relationships among members of the family, and learning to settle for nothing less than acknowledgment and inclusion as a legitimate family among themselves and those external to the family. The journey towards establishment of the new family identity is experienced on multiple levels. These levels include the individual family members within family relationships and when members of the family are involved in events and are coming into contact with their extended families, community, and society at large. Internal threats to legitimacy occur when tensions surface among family members, often initially between stepmothers and children. Later, external threats occur when outsiders, including extended family members, do not recognize, acknowledge, or include family as legitimate. *Authenticating family* includes three stages: *accepting the challenge*, *building the bonds*, and *thriving*.

Accepting the challenge is a process of moving a relationship that includes children forward despite recognizing the complexity of doing so and lacking lesbian-headed stepfamily role models to draw from for guidance. In some cases, the process of *accepting the challenge* is complicated by the identity transition from heterosexual to lesbian on the part of the mother. The coming-out process influences the extent and pace

of the mother to fully engage in the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily as the amount of energy expended during the transition from heterosexual to lesbian is relative to the course of the family transition. *Building the bonds* is a process of creating new relationships among members of the family. In the multiple interactions experienced while ‘doing family’ positions are established, members learn what this ‘new’ family will look like as they work to create their own traditions, and how to begin taking the first tentative steps towards interacting with outsiders. *Thriving*, the final stage of *authenticating family* is a process of gaining and/or solidifying family legitimacy while coping with interactions that continue to inform the development of coping skills and strategies. This final stage is identified by the need to educate and demystify identity as a lesbian headed stepfamily. These strategies are used to counter negativity experienced when disclosing lesbian stepfamily identity. They are developed as a result of both positive and negative interactions and occur simultaneously with the development and assimilation of revised family traditions, ideals, and expectations. Further detail and discussion of the sub-processes within each stage are explained, followed by the discussion of the variations and conditions that influence the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Accepting the Challenge

Accepting the challenge includes three sub-processes: *jumping in*, *negotiating expectations* and *refocusing*. *Jumping in* is a process of taking a chance that the euphoria present in the early relationship will support the magnitude of the commitment made between the women and ultimately the children. For the birth mother it is often a

conscious, deliberate, and intentional decision to become a family. The significance of contemplating a relationship with a woman who they know as a heterosexual is often experienced as a potential and significant barrier. Assumptions about lesbians “converting” heterosexual women and the fear that the intimate relationship will be treated as a phase cause the lesbian to pause and consider her options. “My first emotional response was to do with the relationship with Nadia because she was, she was heterosexual in my mind, and my experience with that had more to do with this being an experiment” (Nicole).

In this sub-process the children are not actively included in the establishment of the intimate relationship that will ultimately initiate a series of changes in their lives. The initial understanding of birth mothers and their children as a package deal plays a significant role in the development of the relationship between the two women. Once the relationship begins and children perceive their mothers to be happy, as compared to the previous relationship, any trepidation the children may have about upcoming changes in their lives seems to be forgotten.

Negotiating expectations, a sub-process of *accepting the challenge*, illustrates how working together family members identify what to expect during the transition and begin to establish acceptable parameters for relationships among family members. In this sub-process the new partner quickly identifies the desire to become a parent or not. Felicia reflected on her thoughts of becoming part of a family with children. “I don’t think that you can be in that situation and not become a parent even though you’re not a parent.” Sybil, in the position of both birth and stepmother had differing thoughts, “the

steparent to me is like a supportive role. It's a secondary role and I don't really want to live with that. I want to live with parenting and so that's the way I took on Eric (stepson)". Delia, the birth mother recognized that the children were dealing with issues of divorce which caused some hesitations on the part of the children. "At one level they really accepted this person immediately into their life in a fairly full way and at another, they were dealing with the issues of [divorce]".

Variations in this decision, along with the age of the children, significantly alter the path for the families. Stepmothers, who begin to actively parent in the very early life of the new family, especially those with older children, can inadvertently set up an adversarial situation between themselves and the children whereby the children feel the need to protect the other nuclear parent against being replaced by the lesbian stepmother. Helping to smooth the transition, Jean capitalized on a golden opportunity to lay the foundation for the relationship with her 18-year-old stepson.

I said to Otis, 'Look I just want you to know what you can expect from me and what I expect from you. . . . you know I'm not your mother and I'm not going to be your mother'. And he was relieved, you know, particularly when I said I'm not going to be a parent to you; he was like 'good'. (Jean)

Choosing to take up a mentoring or 'other responsible adult' role displays respect for the parenting that has already occurred and recognition that being able to parent actively may never happen fully, may look completely different to their expectations, or may take some time before materializing. Women who refuse to have anything to do with the children create a situation that ultimately jeopardizes their relationship with the

children's mother because, when forced to choose between her children or the new partner, children will most often maintain a position of priority.

Finally, *refocusing* is a process of coming to terms with the new family configuration and assimilating many changing realities in the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The multiple transitions for family members include: the change from being single to being in a relationship, the change from being independent to being responsible for more than just themselves, the change from existing in a heterosexual identity to a lesbian one, the change of being a single parent to sharing parenting responsibilities with another woman, the change of grieving the loss of the nuclear family to focusing on the new family, and the change of learning to maintain bonds with the nuclear family while building new bonds within the lesbian headed stepfamily. Birth mothers recognize that the role as parent has not changed however, the environment and circumstances in which they continue to parent has changed significantly. Birth mothers assess safety and potential stability for the children while stepmothers consider the magnitude of a decision placing them squarely in a position of responsibility within the lesbian stepfamily. Equally significant, some stepmothers acknowledge the inability to quietly omit sexual orientation while going about their lives, as they have become accustomed to.

Refocusing, for the children, has an added layer of complexity as they struggle to maintain relationships with the other nuclear parent and their extended family while building new bonds in the lesbian headed stepfamily. For children, this creates a sense of living with one foot in two worlds and experiencing varying degrees of competing

loyalties between the families. Lesbian headed stepfamilies who manage to negotiate the initial strangeness of the relationship, alter established familial patterns, and those who accept each other as family members are able to move forward to *building the bonds* of family.

Building the Bonds

Building the bonds, the second stage of *authenticating family* includes three sub-processes: *getting acquainted*, *making history*, and *trialing recognition*. The focus of this stage remains primarily within the family. *Getting acquainted* is a process of assessing each other's strengths and limitations, personalities and habits and beginning to explore how relationships may develop and grow. Members of the family work to find a balance in the respective roles taken up within the family. In this sub-process, it becomes abundantly clear to the stepmothers that the relationship between the mother and her children is sacrosanct. Stepmothers must assess and learn about the dynamics of that relationship to determine how and where they will fit into the family. Delia explained some of the reservations about giving the stepmother space to parent: "It's hard and I think it's critical but . . . the reality is you have someone who is just learning parenting skills". Nicole recognized early in the relationship how she was going to fit in to the family, "It became clear to me that . . . she didn't want another parent, if she wanted another parent she'd go to the kids' father . . .". In many instances stepmothers must also learn to accept both the existence and influence, both positive and negative, of the role of the other nuclear parent essentially becoming a third parent to the children.

Making history is a sub-process vital to the success of the family. It is a process of working together in various configurations to nurture and strengthen relationships within the family, cementing legitimacy as a family. Over time, and in order to build history among the members of the family, they must foster growth of relationships by engaging in both individual and group activities that demonstrate a growing commitment to each other and the family. Stepmothers who take the opportunity to spend one-on-one time with a child get to know that child and build a relationship that is unique to them. Nadia felt that handing over the 'job' helped foster the relationship between her children and the stepmother, "when the girls needed help with something they'd call Nicole, they could always get ahold of her. I would leave my cell phone for her; they became used to touching base with Nicole." The demonstration of positive relationship behaviours confirms the legitimacy of the relationship for members of the family.

Finally, *trialing recognition* is a process of realizing the strength of the bonds created and nurtured in *building the bonds* and beginning to settle into family life while making the first efforts at interacting with those outside the family. Mothers and stepmothers learn to work together in parenting, negotiating mutually acceptable outcomes to contentious issues. Children assimilate into the new family dynamics, coming to terms with how the mothers react to their behaviour. During this sub-process families make the first attempts at disclosing their lesbian headed stepfamily identity to those outside the immediate family. Children develop strategies that help them to transition more smoothly between their birth-family and stepfamily. Children old enough to understand, remember their mother's initial happiness, recognizing and taking comfort

in knowing that the new lesbian relationship is healthier and stronger than the relationship in the previous nuclear family.

As a result of successfully navigating the process of *authenticating family* thus far, family members' efforts are contributing to building and accepting legitimacy as a family. While family members demonstrate how they are connected and communicate love and respect for each other, they begin to step outside the house in fledgling efforts at displaying and confirming legitimacy. Women who had been out for a period of time realized that having children was going to force them out more frequently. Linda explained her concerns: "I was out but I wasn't as comfortably out as I am now. And it is about really owning who you are and identifying with that identity". Mothers respond to the questions, behaviours, and/or anxieties of their children in order to provide them with an understanding that the relationships among them are valid and legitimate despite what they might hear about their family outside the home.

The middle stage of *authenticating family* by *building the bonds* generally requires the greatest amount of time and effort before being able to successfully move to the final stage of *thriving*. The lesbian headed stepfamily members must feel strong enough to begin to live proudly 'out' when they move outside the confines of the family home, seeking acknowledgement as a family from multiple outside sources.

Thriving

Thriving is the final stage of *authenticating family* and includes two sub-processes: *confronting the three-headed monster* and '*see our family the way we created it*'. *Confronting the three-headed monster* is a process of dispelling myths, educating, and

facing and protecting against stigma, homophobia, and heterosexism. Linda became prepared to explain the similarities between her life and anyone else's. "This is what one [lesbian] looks like when we go to work: I drive a truck, and I teach math and I pay my taxes and I don't go to orgies and I'm just like a normal person". The issue for members of the family is that they frequently find when entering into an interaction with an outsider that the sexual orientation of the mothers becomes situated in the forefront rather than the actual reason for engaging in the interaction (for instance, speaking with a teacher, introducing a friend to your lesbian parents, negotiating play time with the parents of your child's friends, signing a child up for boy scouts or girl guides, picking a child up from school, seeking health care). A daughter explained that in the end, there was nothing exotic about her family: "It was every day for life. . . . okay, there are people out there with two dads or two moms. We had two women that loved each other . . . so it became just another way of life". Family members' experiences of being acknowledged as legitimate, valued, and included in the community as a normal family, contribute to their growing sense of legitimacy and becoming better equipped to *confront the three-headed monster* identity.

In the process of unpacking the multiple positive and negative interactions with each other and outsiders, members of the family, both individually and collectively, develop effective coping mechanisms. An example of one of the many strategies used by family members is being able to gauge the atmosphere—hostile, friendly, or unknown, in which they are about to interact with someone. Being able to gauge the atmosphere

allows the family member to prepare themselves for the reaction of outsiders when they disclose the lesbian headed stepfamily identity.

'See our family the way we created it' is a process of explaining the family to outsiders such that the family configuration is acknowledged as legitimate. Members of the family take an active role in informing, educating, and generally normalizing the family to outsiders. In this final stage of *authenticating family*, families have developed the strength, tools, and skills to identify themselves as a legitimate family now seeking to be included within their community and society at large. No longer prepared to remain marginalized and dismissed, rather, they state emphatically that as a family, as legitimate as any other, they will contribute to the diversity of the community and society as a whole and accept nothing less than inclusion.

As families move about within their community and society at large, they come to realize that divulging family make-up will happen over and over again. While frequent disclosures have the potential to challenge legitimacy, repeated exposure allows families to create a toolbox of strategies and skills to assist in negotiating and identifying future possibly contentious situations. Recurring disclosure experiences inform the process like a feedback loop. The development of multiple skills and strategies, by this point in the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily, contributes to being less susceptible to having their legitimacy called into question. A birth mother explains the strategy she used for her children, "I guess one thing I've done as a lesbian parent is to make sure that I make it clear when they start a new class and year that this is what their family looks like and (for the teachers) not to assume otherwise." (Rayna)

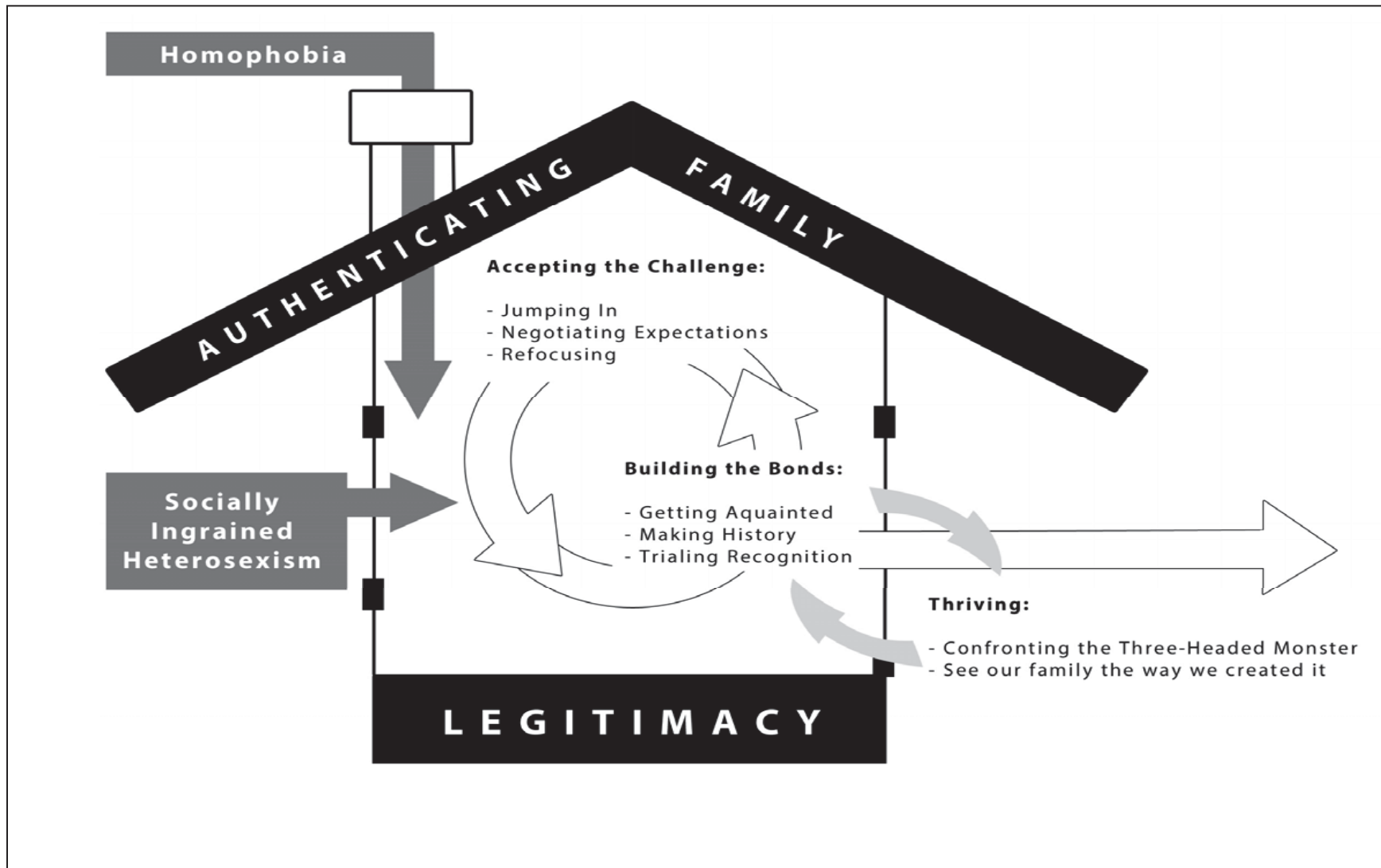


FIGURE 3: Diagram of *Authenticating Family*

Conditions Influencing the Basic Social Process

The basic social process of *authenticating family* is influenced by the age of the children at the time that the family comes together and the support received from each other, their extended families, the community and society at large. These conditions influence how well the lesbian headed stepfamily is able to move through the process of becoming a family and how they experience interactions that both challenge and build legitimacy. Figure 3 provides visual representation of the process of *authenticating family*. It represents the chaos and movement of the process for the lesbian headed stepfamily while representing the idea that the majority of the process happens within the home and is influenced by multiple internal and external forces.

Age of the Children

In the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily the age of the children was an important factor in how well the families became integrated. While multiple other factors may influence the process, none is quite as telling as the age of the children. Timing when to come-out to children is a critical issue to consider however, there are some situations in which women cannot control when they disclose to their children. Women may be better prepared to disclose to their children if they know how age becomes a factor in their acceptance. Breshears (2011) and Vyncke, Julien, Jodoin, and Jouvin (2011) noted that the most challenging time for children to accept their mother's coming out is during early adolescence, while younger children adjusted to having a lesbian mother more quickly.

Birth mothers and stepmothers alert to the potential significance of the ages of children made a special effort to respect the needs of the children during the early stages of the transition. Special circumstances explain families who have been able to develop a cohesive sense of family despite the children being older than 10 years of age when they began the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily including: the family whose father or other mother is no longer involved, the family who experiences a traumatic event or illness resulting in bringing members closer together, or the family whose stepmother supports a child through a difficult personal situation.

Children less than 10 years of age. In general, lesbian headed stepfamilies who have children less than 10 years of age at the time they get together engage in the day-to-day nurturing and protective responsibilities of having young children. Stepmothers are more likely to play an active parenting role in the children's upbringing. As a result of the need to provide younger children with the basic necessities of life, ensuring meals are provided, reading bedtime stories, helping with homework, and engaging in "teachable" moments, they experience successful bonding as a family. Families with children less than 10 years of age may find it easier to become a cohesive unit with collective identities as legitimate families both within and outside the home. Relationships between stepmothers and children have time to grow due to the increased amount of time spent together before children leave home, while children enjoy the continued nurturing care of the mother. Foundational research about children and divorce supports the idea that children who are younger at the time of the new family development fair better over time (Schmeekle, Giarrusso, Feng & Bengston, 2006;

Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Jade explains the development of her relationship with step-daughters she began to parent when they were very young.

When I'm not with Rayna (birth mother) and I'm not working, I'm with these two little babes all the time. So for the first five years of their lives I'm used to scheduling and structuring my day around them. I'm in love with my family and I just want to be with them all the time (Jade).

Children over 10 years of age. Children who are older than 10 years of age spend far less time with their lesbian headed stepfamily before moving onto adolescence and adulthood. They have established their personalities and bonds within the nuclear family. Accepting another adult into their lives is problematic because of the reluctance to tolerate a parenting role from another adult let alone a mothering role from a second woman who has taken a position beside the mother as head of the family. Bray and Berger (1993) also found that young adolescents have increased challenges with acceptance of stepfamily status. However, in contrast, Anyan and Pryor (2002) state that the findings of their research indicate older children are less conservative in their description of what and who constitutes family. Older children are more likely to develop less conventional descriptions of family. Women, who choose to be a "responsible adult" for the children, rather than taking on an active parenting role, minimizing the amount of discipline they provide, find relationships with older children develop more easily. By being a mentor to the children, stepmothers support the bonds of the children's birth family to be maintained. At the same time, they are able to establish some degree of a nurturing relationship with the children.

For the teenage children of one participant family, being included in the wedding planning and ceremony was crucial to supporting the budding relationships between the stepmother and children. Including the children communicates how important it is for the stepmother to “marry” both the birthmother and her children. The birthmother explained:

I finally realized that they really want to be in this [wedding ceremony], so “of course, yes you can stand with NAME and NAME [witnesses].” And so then we decided to do this whole ceremony within the ceremony for them and anyway, I think in the end they felt very close and it worked out well. (Nadia)

Schmeeckle et al. (2006) found that most children in stepfamilies eventually recognize the stepparent as being a family member. Ensuring that children feel they have some control over the situation and can make decisions about the nature of the relationship with the stepmother fosters a sense of comfort maintaining their growing sense of independence. Stepmothers who feel it is important to be a third parent and pursue an active role in the disciplining of the older children run the risk of alienating older children. Women who decide not to participate in any form of parenting or nurturing relationship with the children fail to develop bonds with the children that results in the family having a fragmented sense of cohesion and the stepmother not being able to establish long-lasting connections with the children.

Support

Support is an important factor in the development of a strong sense of family for lesbian headed stepfamilies. Support is emotional in nature and generally manifests in the acknowledgment of the family as authentic, valued, and having a sense of belonging in

their community. Communicating to each other and extended family members that they are a family and that their value to the community is acknowledged and affirmed in the same way as any other family are examples of positive interactions that foster a growing sense of legitimacy.

Family. Within the family, birth mother, stepmother, and children give each other support while *authenticating family*. Women who are coming-out as well as forming a new family are sensitive to the support provided for the relationship from the intimate partner. A woman coming-out is likely to be dealing with developing a new understanding of self as lesbian. While feeling certain about her identity as lesbian she is less certain of how the lesbian headed stepfamily will be accepted by her children, extended family and outsiders in general. Women coming-out at mid-life, experience a loss of personal and public credibility (Rickards, 2005). Significant changes during the transition from being heterosexual to lesbian cause women to question their ability to make sound judgments, understand their shifting sense of self in a new context, and continue to function in society when, in their experience, the only change in themselves is their sexual orientation. Rickards (2005) found that a challenge to personal and public credibility compounded with a threat to legitimacy as a parent and a family causes women to actively seek positive and nurturing interactions that will foster growth in the mother's sense of legitimacy prior to having the confidence to confront outsiders.

The role of the non-resident father or other mother plays a significant role in supporting the new lesbian headed stepfamily. For families who originated in lesbian relationships, there are two key factors that help to decrease adjustment barriers. First, the

gender of the new partner is not significant in the same way that it is for women who were in heterosexual relationships. The children are used to having two women as head of household; dealing with outsider stigma has already been addressed. The second factor has to do with the new partner finding 'room' for herself in the relationship with the children and their other mother (Johnson & O'Connor, 2001). In terms of the non-resident father, maintaining contact with his children is important. Families that include the non-resident father in parenting issues fair better than those who do not however, the stepmother is often challenged by the ongoing presence of the father in the lives of her new family (Biblarz & Savci, 2010).

In the past, when fear of loss of custody was a real threat for the newly lesbian mother, providing the father with unlimited access and encouraging contact may have been a strategy to appease the father thereby decreasing the risk of custody battles (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983). In Canada, fear of custody battles is no longer as much of an issue. Lesbian headed stepfamilies in this study found that fathers tended to want to continue having a relationship with their children, however some of the fathers' attention shifted to the new family upon re-marrying. This phenomenon has been documented in multiple studies (Aquilano, 2006; Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007; Sweeney, 2010). The new stepmother can increase the ease of adjustment by recognizing the efforts of the other nuclear parent, refraining from criticizing them in front of the children and not getting involved in conflicts between her partner and their ex-spouse (Johnson & O'Connor, 2001).

When nuclear families were abusive and the lesbian headed stepfamily was not, both birth mothers and children readily recognized the stability that respect and safety provided in their lesbian headed stepfamily. A qualitative study (Edwards, 2002) investigating the role that stability plays in the lives of children in stepfamilies supports the findings of this research. Edwards (2002) found that many women distanced themselves and their children from families of origin who were disruptive or non-supportive in an attempt to bring about greater stability in the home. Key concepts that contributed to “stability” were safety and freedom to play, taking the time to play with their children, creating a more positive atmosphere in the home, and limiting the amount of alcohol and recklessness experienced in the home (Edwards, 2002). Conversely, Edwards also found that extended families who were supportive and maintained strong relationships with the stepfamilies contributed to a greater sense of stability within the home by facilitating the maintenance of routines and traditions. Families with older children use the glaring differences between the birth family and stepfamily experience to help form bonds of commitment among themselves and the stepmother. The older children are more likely to accept the lesbian stepmother into the family when they witness their mother in a loving and respectful relationship.

When members of the family display commitment and caring towards each other, the transition to a cohesive family is supported as legitimate. Having a sense of legitimacy within the intra-familial relationships provides each of the members with skills and conviction to counter challenges about the family from outsiders. Outsiders vary in

significance, with extended family having a far greater importance to the lesbian headed stepfamily's development as legitimate than those outside the family.

Extended Family. Support comes from extended family when sisters, brothers and parents include the lesbian daughter and her partner in family events. Welcoming the stepmother into the family and recognizing her as someone who is contributing to the lives of their grandchildren is an important step contributing to a sense of legitimacy. Further, support is conferred when extended family does not hesitate to introduce the lesbian headed stepfamily to family, friends, and acquaintances.

Both the birth mother and stepmother who are out to their extended family, and accepted as a lesbian often gain much strength and support from the biological family. Lewis et al. (2012) reviewed lesbians' and bisexual women's minority stress identifying that family support was found to be a buffer for the distal stressors experienced, that is the "chronic stress resulting from stigmatization in a heterosexist society" (p. 33). van Dam (2004) found that support from mother and stepmother's families of origin was very important in fostering identity as legitimate for lesbian stepfamilies; as well women whose families arose within the lesbian relationship were more frequently afforded support from the family of origin. van Dam suggests that the lesbian stepfamilies may have had less time in their present intimate relationships and that families of origin need that time to accommodate the changes in the identity of their daughters before being comfortable with supporting the lesbian headed stepfamilies. An example of this phenomenon is seen in the story that Janelle tells regarding her previous relationship with

her partner, the birth of their son and the relationship they had with her partner's family of origin.

I was her first relationship and yet they embraced me more once I had Eric, once I had that to offer them, you know. It kind of, in their minds, normalized the relationship. It was one of her mom's fears, 'if you're involved with a woman you'll never have a child, your life will be incomplete'.

Extended family of either woman, who fail to acknowledge the presence of the birth mother/stepmother, her role in the children's lives, and the commitment the women have to each other significantly damage biological family relationships.

Outsiders. During the early stages lesbian headed stepfamilies interact cautiously with outsiders, child oriented organizations, and the health care and education systems. A positive interaction such as acknowledging both women as parents or body language that does not display revulsion or rejection contributes to the sense of legitimacy. Negative interactions in the form of obvious disdain for the lesbian stepfamily, ignoring the stepmother, or asking where the father is serve to challenge legitimacy resulting in the need to maintain a heightened vigilance in future interactions.

Children are particularly sensitive to support, especially when it is experienced within their social networks. When friends are accepting of their diverse family dynamic, children's sense of themselves as being a member of a legitimate family is bolstered. When peers make disparaging comments about any issue referring to the LGBT community, legitimacy is challenged creating a tendency to avoid further divulging of the specific make-up of their lesbian headed stepfamily. Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, and

Banks (2005) found that 43% of children had experienced homophobia as a result of their mothers identifying with a sexual minority. More importantly, they noted that homophobia negatively impacts the self-worth of girls more than boys, which can decrease their feelings of legitimacy and increase the likelihood of not disclosing the families' identity as a lesbian headed stepfamily. In a qualitative study investigating the connection between perceived heterosexism and disclosure of mother's sexual orientation, Vyncke et al. (2011) found that while homosexuality is tolerated more now than in the past, the effects of heterosexism originating with peers was particularly worrisome for the children of lesbian mothers. By the age of 10, children can easily recognize both direct and indirect forms of heterosexism (Spears-Brown & Bigler, 2005; Vyncke et al., 2011). Heterosexism is a real threat regardless of how open a social environment might be (Vyncke et al., 2011).

Support within the school system is vital for children from lesbian headed stepfamilies. Children cannot avoid interacting with their peers in an educational setting unless they are home schooled. Martino (2000) found that homophobia is a tool frequently used to police the behaviours of boys in the high school setting. This phenomenon may help to explain why experiences of heterosexism and homophobia are different for girls than for boys and that exposure to this type of discrimination contributes to varying amounts of internalized fear and symptoms of escalating stress responses based on fear of disclosure for children of lesbian mothers (Vyncke et al., 2011). The experiences of homophobia and heterosexism had an untoward impact on the sense of legitimacy of the family for the children of lesbian headed stepfamilies.

The Basic Social Problem

Legitimacy

The basic social problem for families when they become a lesbian headed stepfamily is the perceived legitimacy of the family. The sense of legitimacy is experienced in two ways by these new families – by the individual members and for the family as a whole. Legitimacy was alluded to and described in various ways; however, from the data legitimacy refers to feeling valued, feeling real, being acknowledged as real, and being measured by the same standards as other families, such as being included in social events as a recognized family, and being given the “family rate” without having to fight for it. Stigmatization and marginalization occur when people are “disqualified from full social acceptance for anyone seen as ‘other’ in a negative way” (Litovich & Langhout, 2004, p. 412). Stigmatization is a negative label placed on a marginalized group (Hall et al., 1994; Litovich & Langhout, 2004).

Lesbian and gay men have long fought for recognition of the legitimacy of their same-sex relationships; in fact part of the battle for the right to marry is that gaining the right will automatically legitimize lesbian and gay family existence (McGleughlin, 2008; Rose, 2012). However, supporting the findings of this study, many have stated marriage in and of itself cannot legitimize the relationship; it is something that ultimately comes from within the family (McGleughlin, 2008). For many, being a member of a family is one way to find kinship and connection, for others it helps them to define who they are. Weber (2008) stated that “family life is a critical way to enhance the authenticity of the self and achieve full social citizenship” (p. 613). Further to this, marriage is still the

measure aspired to and that has had legitimacy conferred upon it by society over the past several centuries. In Canada, same-sex marriage has been legal since 2005; some provinces had legalized same-sex marriage before that. Marriage falls under Canadian family policy and is in place to govern legislation and governmental programs that support the raising of children (Rose, 2012). Same-sex marriage benefits women and men raising children by providing increasing recognition and legitimization of their families in society (MacIntosh, Reissing, & Andruff, 2010), and yet the families in this study are an example of families that continue to struggle with access to legitimacy.

For the individual members of the family, especially the children, relationships with the new person in the family can be contentious and fraught with tensions. Children struggle to maintain loyalty and recognition of the other nuclear parent while beginning to build a relationship with the person who has taken that position in the family. Fredriksen-Goldsen and Erera (2003) noted similar findings for children who are trying to maintain relationships with both the resident and non-resident parent. While children want to nurture the new relationship, they are torn with ensuring that the other nuclear parent does not lose status as a recognized parent. Similarly, stepmothers question their ability to make a connection with the children especially when the other nuclear parent continues to play a major role in their lives. In families with older children the stepmother may find she is competing with the children for the attention of the mother. Developing a sense of legitimacy occurs during opportunities when the lesbian headed stepfamily can spend some time together, begin to get to know each other, demonstrate some degree of

commitment to the each other and the family unit, and display an effort to nurture the family's identity as legitimate.

The concept of family holds a reified position in society. The standard North American family (SNAF) of two heterosexual married people and their biologically related children has long held a position of supremacy in terms of its recognition as being 'family' without question. However, SNAF is hegemonic, discriminatory, prescriptive and unrealistic. Families that deviate from the SNAF are then labeled as somehow deficient, inadequate or not meeting the socially constructed and desired understanding of family (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). The family becomes more susceptible to being questioned about their family configuration when they do not adhere to the ideological blueprint of the SNAF, in this case because the family is part of a sexual minority population (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). Being questioned about family configuration because it does not comply with the dominant ideological understanding of family contributes to challenging the legitimacy of the lesbian headed stepfamily.

Past experiences as children in their own families help to identify what legitimacy has felt like in a family setting. As a result of never having to question legitimacy in the heterosexual family, the stark contrast of experiences highlight for the lesbian headed stepfamily the role of socially constructed norms and values in calling into question the legitimacy of their family. For many of the birth mothers, the experiences as a mother in a heterosexual family are compared to and inform the experiences of parenting in the new lesbian headed stepfamily. Seeking legitimacy is particularly fraught with challenges for many of the lesbians assuming the stepmother role. She has neither legal nor blood

relationship to the children and therefore has no tangible status. Stepmothers compete for legitimacy against the nuclear father, being pushed aside by society's insistence on ignoring the lesbian family configuration. While she may accept her own position as a stepmother, and may also receive some affirmation of that role from the birth mother, it is the children who ultimately hold the power. When the children refer to the stepmother as 'my other mom' or acknowledge her as a parent, either within the home or with outsiders, legitimacy is ascribed and family cohesion is solidified.

Legitimacy is solidified by the members of the family as they build a toolbox of family values, skills, and ideals that additionally serve to strengthen the ability to protect family identity when legitimacy is called into question. Some of the values and actions important to lesbian headed stepfamilies are carving out specific family time together such as having supper together, creating memories and traditions that demonstrate and celebrate the connections to each other, and supporting each other as parents (Arnup, 1997; Johnson & O'Connor, 2001; Wright, 1998). Of greatest importance for all family members is the sense of being connected to people whom they love and can rely on to be supportive and protective from the intrusions of outsider opinions that challenge the legitimacy of their family.

Conclusion

The preceding conditions of *age of the children* and *support* emerged during data analysis as being significant to *authenticating family*, the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. Both of these conditions impact on the intensity of the basic social problem and the way that families *authenticate family*. The in-depth discussion of the

three stages of the basic social process in the following chapter will show how the processes outlined in these findings influenced perceptions of legitimacy through the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

CHAPTER V

The Theory of Authenticating Family

In this chapter I continue the explanation of *authenticating family*, building in the many behavioural variations identified in the theory, as introduced in Chapter IV. The theory will be further explained, using exemplars from the data and extant literature to illustrate the complexities of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. While the conditions that influence the theory were explored in Chapter IV, this chapter will include the presentation and discussion of the theory and the consequences of the three stages in this theory.

Authenticating family is the basic social process of incorporating another woman, as a romantic partner, into the lives of a woman and her children. The process includes maintaining and protecting the legitimacy of relationships both among members of the family and with those outside the family and establishing an identity as an authentic family that is acknowledged and included in society. The transition from being a single parented, heterosexual, or lesbian nuclear family to being a lesbian headed stepfamily creates multiple opportunities to question the legitimacy of the relationships. Lesbian headed stepfamilies experience the coming-out process both as individuals and as a family unit. Facing the stigmatization of being from a sexual minority family and having few role models to provide guidance in the process of becoming a family, they learn to develop a new understanding of family and an ability to demonstrate pride in a society that continues to slowly evolve in accepting multiple and diverse families.

There are three stages in *authenticating family*. *Accepting the challenge*, the first stage, is a process of realizing an intimate attraction to another woman, coming to terms with the significance of pursuing a relationship, and finding balance among the many potential challenges. For some birth mothers and their families this stage is complicated by coming to understand the ramifications of the mother's identity shift from heterosexual to lesbian. A grounded theory study by Rickards (2005) found that women coming out at mid-life were faced with losing both personal and public credibility. These women had to work through the process of confronting heterosexism to regain credibility and to establish themselves within their community as capable and effective mothers. Birth mothers who had come out previously and acknowledged the identity shift are not dealing with the coming out process simultaneously. However, they are working to envision their family in a context of being outside the dominant cultural understanding of family.

Building the bonds, the second stage, finds families moving through the process of getting to know each other and the emerging relationships among the members, and understanding the meaning of these changes. While the early stages of the process of *authenticating family* remain primarily within the confines of the family home, members are beginning to look beyond their family to the ensuing interactions with outsiders. The final stage of the process, *thriving*, begins as an overlapping stage with the final sub-process of *building the bonds* and is a process of reclaiming and solidifying lost legitimacy while dealing with the impact of continuous interactions with the world beyond their front door. Lesbian headed stepfamilies acknowledge, accept, and celebrate

the legitimacy of familial relationships using a revised family identity to counter interactions that have the potential to marginalize and stigmatize. They expect inclusion within their community and society at large.

In the following discussion the processes for acknowledging, maintaining and reclaiming a sense of legitimacy as a family are explored within the three stages of *authenticating family*. While the description of the process appears linear, the reality of *authenticating family* is that families move back and forth within the basic social process as they progress towards the end goal of achieving a sense of themselves as legitimate and included in the fabric of society. Variations in movement are caused by influences both from within and outside the family. Particularly difficult or traumatic events may cause some families to stall in any one of the sub-processes or retreat to a previous sub-process in an effort to regain a sense of comfort, control, and agency over their lives. In this study, fourteen of the sixteen families were successful in becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily and achieving a sense of themselves as legitimate while two of the participating families managed to navigate partially through the basic social process.

Accepting the Challenge

Accepting the challenge is a process of meeting and choosing to build a life with another woman. The process begins as an intimate exchange between two women. The children, while maintaining a position of utmost importance to the birth mother, do not play a significant role in the progress of the relationship at this point. However, in becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily, all of the members work to understand the implications of becoming a family in a society that does not always celebrate diversity.

Members of the family work within the turmoil of change with relationship dissolutions, moving house, and introduction of new members to the family. Lesbian headed stepfamilies search for clues in order to find equilibrium between past and present experiences of family in hopes of being able to identify and enact salient strategies for overcoming the requisite turmoil that happens with changes in family make-up.

For many birth mothers this may be the first time they have fallen in love with another woman. The added challenges of dealing with transitioning from heterosexual to lesbian occur concurrently with inviting another woman to play a role in the lives of her children. In retrospect, one birth mother identified just how difficult a process this was for her, “Well, like for me, I was at midlife coming out, it was very disorienting, and a little destabilizing” (Delia). The resultant challenge, for the newly transitioned or transitioning woman, is complicated by her loss of personal and public credibility as she struggles to come to know who she is in this shifted identity.

The process of creating a new lesbian headed stepfamily can create unique challenges for the mother who is also transitioning from heterosexual to lesbian. The birth mothers transitioning in this study were able to identify the point at which they realized the ramifications of losing the heterosexual privilege previously taken-for-granted and then lost when identifying as a lesbian. A mother’s credibility is challenged as her belief in herself and understanding of who she is, and more importantly her ability to perform in her role as a mother is called into question. The excitement, euphoria of the new relationship, and feelings of authenticity carry her through the coming-out experience as lesbian to herself, her children, family, and others. In this study many

women found that moving from a heterosexual identity and coming to learn, understand, and accept themselves as lesbian was experienced as a time of chaos.

Birth mothers who have previously identified as lesbian may still contend with a loss of credibility as they now include children in the process of embarking upon a new relationship and wanting to build a life with another woman. The ramifications of the glaring difference between transitioning to a lesbian identity as a single person and doing so with children creates a sense of impending havoc, causing the birth mother to carefully consider the decision about whether to become part of a lesbian headed stepfamily.

In the situation where the original family was lesbian headed, the challenges become incorporating another “mother” figure into the family unit. Families originally headed by two women and who had their children within that relationship do not deal with the angst of transitioning from heterosexual to lesbian; however, they still experience destabilization of the family unit with the introduction of an outsider. Transition is key in this stage of the process as families who are becoming lesbian headed stepfamilies work to amalgamate and come to terms with a revised configuration and image of the family. Within *accepting the challenge* the three sub-processes are: *jumping in*, *negotiating expectations*, and *refocusing*.

Jumping In

Realizing a desire to embark on a relationship with another woman, a birth mother considers the options available to her and her children. Falling in love with another woman is both exciting and disruptive because of the ramifications it may have on her public and personal persona. As a result of falling in love with another woman and

regardless of the ramifications of doing so, most women assuming the stepmother role along with the birth mothers felt they had little choice but to “jump in with both feet” once the decision had been made to continue in the romantic relationship. Regardless of the presence of children, women’s sense of self is significantly challenged when faced with the potential loss of credibility associated with deciding to build a life in a romantic relationship with a person of the same sex. At the same time, for women with children the experience of becoming romantically involved with another person is a catalyst for the possibility of having a second chance at building an effective and cohesive family. When asked about her expectations for the family as they became a lesbian headed stepfamily this birth mother said:

I wasn’t always the best parent in terms of giving them the consistency that they needed and so in that way, did my parenting improve with Charlene [stepmother] at my side, I would have to say ‘yes absolutely’, because I finally had somebody there to have my back. (Talia)

Lesbians, realizing their unconventional family configuration, take time to reflect and ensure that becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily is the best thing for the children. For a birth mother, overwhelming feelings of euphoria in the early relationship and awareness of the sense of authenticity found in identifying as lesbian are balanced with a deliberate, conscious, and intentional decision to provide her children with an new opportunity for potential stability. Women whose previous families were experienced as being full of discord find the promise of a more stable environment in which to raise her children enticing and propel the birth mother forward in pursuing greater commitment

with her new lesbian partner. Charlene, a stepmother, noted that while the decision was significant to the birth mother in her family, as a stepmother, she also experienced it as significant.

Well I think that we can agree that I felt that I had met the person that I wanted to be with after having sort of gone through the horoscope signs and so I was very committed, also I think because of Talia's [birth mother] children, and at the time they were definitely her children, I don't think that Talia really wanted to, you know, disrupt them again in two or three or five years and have to have them move again and into another home with another woman and so Talia was super committed. (Charlene)

For many families, birth mothers were comforted by the opportunity of having a second adult in the house to co-parent. Birth mothers were sometimes overwhelmed by the willingness of another woman to choose to take on the responsibility of becoming a parent. Talia expressed her amazement:

Heather was going to turn AGE and Travis would then have been AGE and Justin was AGE, no AGE, and Kacie was AGE. So yeah, they were youngish, so it was to me miraculous I guess, that somebody was willing to take on this responsibility and to take me and these four young kids. And they really were young at the time, AGE to AGE, it was impressive . . . (Talia)

From the birth mother's perspective, the stepmother was clearly a different and preferred partner than the previous partner had been. Stepmothers were excited and anxious by the thought of being able to be a parent, something that as lesbians they had previously

assumed might never be an option. Women approaching the end of, or who were beyond childbearing years, associated even more significance with the prospect of becoming a stepmother. Most stepmothers, either chose not to parent or jumped in with enthusiasm and did not have to contend with the transition from heterosexual to lesbian but did have to adjust to becoming part of a stepfamily configuration. The stepmothers experienced feelings of illegitimacy in becoming a stepfamily and recognized that doing so would include having to make decisions about coming-out all over again. Finally, stepmothers grappled with having to deal with derision as a result of the negative and discriminatory opinions of outsiders. A stepmother explains how becoming involved with another woman with children meant that she was going to have to negotiate new situations that required disclosure of her sexual orientation.

Part of the process for me was suddenly I was instantly in these new social situations that I would never have been in before – parent teacher meetings at about two or three different schools. So it was like there were other identities that I suddenly, you know going to the store to do groceries with the family of kids around me! I was outed all over the place and it's not that I was secretive about who I was I was just suddenly, I was fully exposed. (Charlene)

In some families, the birth mother's partner had a strong sense of their desire not to parent. However, rejection of the parenting role led to difficulties with bonding with the children. Debbie, the middle child of a woman who came out at mid-life, provided a perspective of her mother's many relationships: "Her lovers came into the house without the label 'another adult', let alone the label 'another parent'. They were not granted

authority over the children, or given any kind of responsibility for them.” In this case, the women who were Debbie’s mother’s lovers were never incorporated into the family, nor did the children ever bond with the lovers or develop a sense of legitimacy as a family.

Hesitation to commit to the responsibility was associated with fear of the unknown. Never having parented before, or been part of a lesbian headed stepfamily, birth mothers and stepmothers identified the lack of lesbian headed family role models as cause for trepidation. Fear of the unknown, in terms of what to expect from trying to raise children with another woman, the reaction from outsiders to becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily, and the reaction of the children to being raised by a woman who was not related to them by blood or legal means are recurrent themes voiced by most families in this study as they embarked on what they felt amounted to an unmarked path. Both birth mother and stepmother often voiced an overwhelming sense of stumbling forward in the dark, being fully prepared and expecting to make mistakes along the way.

Women in this study experienced social stigmatization, communicating to them that their family was “less than” others and this sentiment frequently resulted in women identifying that there was a visible lack of positive role models for their families. Without the role models they did not always know how to conduct themselves in the family. Nicole explains that she was feeling very much out of her comfort zone early on when she discussed her relationship with the children.

But I didn’t know where I was going to fit or how I was going to fit and I wanted them to guide me and maybe they needed me to guide them and maybe that’s what didn’t happen. Because I didn’t know how to be what they needed at the

time other than the physical, you know make sure they were fed and take them to and from and do whatever and that seemed to work okay and not get involved in their lives too much. (Nicole)

The process of introducing the children to the woman, who could potentially become their stepmother and play a role in their upbringing, is considered carefully by the birth mother and her partner. Finding opportunities to introduce the new partner in a way that is both positive and demonstrates respect for the children contributed to a smoother transition. Children expected the birth mothers to be honest and forth coming with information; those who try to skirt the identity of the partner risk creating feelings of distrust between the children and themselves. Hiding lesbian identity has the potential to raise the question of shame and the concept of shame conveys a message that a lesbian identity is something that is not acceptable to society.

Children are not directly part of the decision making process of becoming a family. While one might expect that they would experience significant upheaval during the transition, young children were often oblivious to the changes. Travis explained that things did not seem to change for him and his siblings:

Well, for me, it wasn't really that different because I didn't really notice or realize a difference really. It was just that Mom was seeing somebody else and that was just the way it was, I was five. (Travis)

A strategy operationalized by the mother and stepmother for dealing with the concern of introduction to the children is looking to each other for support. Mothers who feel assured by the new partner's commitment to the relationship anticipate that the

commitment and euphoria of the new relationship will carry them through most challenges. Once introductions are made and the decision to become a family accepted, the next sub-process is to *negotiate expectations* for all of the members of the new family.

Negotiating Expectations

Establishment of the new relationship launches the family forward to engaging in creating family. The children become involved in the processes that unfold when the decision to become a family is made by the birth mother and her new partner. In these early stages of the family's development there are basic concrete needs as well as emotional needs yet to be recognized. Each member of the "new" family express needs, expectations, and hopes about what they anticipate and are willing to accept. An example of not being prepared for the chaos that children can sometimes create, nor just how much discord was going to occur in the house, Jean, a stepmother, stated how different her expectations of the children were compared to those of the birth mother.

But I think that's where her [birth-mother] and I butted heads, probably because if (Abbie) blew up, Anna [birth mother] was used to Abbie's [daughter] blowing up and you know this created chaos, Abbie going downstairs and slamming her door, right? And then a half an hour later, coming out of her room, coming upstairs as if nothing happened and nobody is supposed to say anything. (Jean)

While it is difficult to determine where to start the negotiations, most families address issues as they arise. Families with young children become immersed in the day-to-day work of parenting, ensuring that the children have a place to live, are safe, have

food, get homework done, have a bath at night and are then tucked into bed. There is often little time to contemplate or discuss the finer details of becoming a family as accomplishing all of these tasks requires a significant amount of energy. The lives of the new couple are essentially structured around the needs of the children. Lesbian mothers experience multi-layered stress in the transition to parenting as a result of both the normative stress of becoming a parent while doing so in a heterosexist society. For the families in this study, the issues most frequently requiring negotiation included behaviour and discipline, involvement of the other nuclear parent, the type and amount of involvement of the stepmothers, and their eventual relationships with extended family. There is a distinct need for flexibility in accommodating the anxiety and hesitance of children who want things to remain as they were before the establishment of the new family. Being conscious of the needs of the children, and the benefit of parenting together, a stepmother stated:

We routinely discuss how will we maneuver: How do we react? How do you [birth mother] react to this situation versus how do I react? . . . what . . . and how our different styles will work and we, I think we are always talking and tweaking. It's not, there are arguments, it's not an argument, it [the opportunity for discussion] is such a relief. (Sybil)

The birth mother's needs include finding balance between being focused on the new intimate relationship and making every effort to maintain stability for the children. The new partner may not know what to expect from parenthood and so looks to the birth mother for guidance. Interactions with the children help to inform the stepmother of her

role and relationship with the children in a lesbian headed stepfamily. Because of the lack of representation in popular culture of “healthy” lesbian headed families, birth mothers and stepmothers have very little guidance on how to present themselves and how to interact with each other or those outside the home. In many situations the stepmother is also learning to negotiate the relationship with the other nuclear parent.

During this point in the new family’s evolution, the stepmother comes to some understanding about whether or not she wants to fully engage in a parenting role. The decision to parent is influenced by a multitude of factors such as age of the children, past experiences with family, acceptance by the children, openness of the mother to “allowing” a parenting role, and the degree to which the other nuclear parent continues to be involved in the children’s lives. Stepmothers often recognize the precarious position they put themselves in, becoming caught between the needs of the birth mother and her parenting philosophy and the willingness of the children to let the stepmother provide them with any amount of parenting. The stepmother makes choices about how involved she will become in the children’s lives. By virtue of living in the house with them and their mother, she interacts with the children building familiarity and, with some effort, eventually relationships. The birth mother plays a role in allowing the stepmother to engage in parenting the children. In many instances, deciding not to become a parent but rather to be “another responsible adult” in the house was assessed by many stepmothers in this study as the most reasonable option, especially when children are older and the other nuclear parent is actively engaged in maintaining a role as a parent. Stepmothers who assume the role of responsible adult while letting go of a mothering role do so by

making sure that the children are fed, that they get to bed on time, complete homework, and pick the children up from school, friends' houses, or other activities. While they refer to this as not being a parent but being the other responsible adult in the house, there is no doubt in the minds of the birth mother and some children that this person is being a parent to her children.

Families with children who are older than 10 years at the time of becoming a family are less likely to allow the stepmother to assume an active parenting role, especially if she takes on a disciplinary role during the early phase of the family evolution. Many children object to having a third adult tell them what to do and when to do it. When considering the developmental needs of the adolescent, it is easier to understand how and why these children in lesbian headed stepfamilies are reticent to accept active parenting from the stepmother. Adolescents are trying to fit into their peer group in an attempt to discover and establish their own identities. It becomes important for the mother and stepmother to agree on what is acceptable behaviour for all members of the family in order to achieve harmony in the relationship and the household. A strategy that seemed to provide support to the stepmother was being given permission or guidance by the birth mother in addressing unacceptable behaviour. Belle stated:

She [stepmother] and I [birth mother] sat down and I said I know that a stepmom is not supposed to do the correcting but I also know that three people can't live together and you not voice your opinion and I said if something that Maureen [daughter] does angers you, tell her. If she disrespects you, tell her, because you can't just sit back and take it all. (Belle)

The greatest amount of strife and conflict between the women often stems from the needs of the children. Birth mothers often feel a need to be the buffer between the children and her intimate partner. The need to protect her children and/or partner causes an unusual amount of negative energy conflicting with the positive spirit of the new relationship. Being open and honest with each other was one way that the women in this study dealt with episodes of incongruence between each other's parenting styles. Talia explained how she reacted when the stepmother spoke harshly to the children.

I just said, "look, honey, I am dancing between the two of you just as fast as I freakin can and I don't know that I can keep this up, so we need to sort something out, some better situation than this one. We need to talk about what our expectations are for both us and for them and they need to hear what our expectations of them are so that they have some place to go, something to go by, otherwise they are playing the game and not knowing what the rules are." (Talia)

On occasion the new partner of the birth mother quickly recognizes her own reluctance to parent, especially with children who are well on their way to becoming young adults. In this situation, the birth mother's new partner often chooses to "tolerate" the children until they became old enough to leave home, essentially biding her time until she would have the undivided attention of the birth mother. Unfortunately the decision not to parent contributes to the tenuousness of relationships that develop between the children and the "stepmother". These relationships are often lacking in depth of emotional connection, a cornerstone of family cohesiveness. In this study, the decision

not to parent had a detrimental effect on one woman's relationship with her partner's son.

What follows is the 'stepmother's' feelings about becoming a parent.

I never wanted kids. I wouldn't consider myself or call myself a stepmom, or other mother, or parent even. I am a responsible adult in his life. I am used to peace and tranquility in my life, but I like James's [stepson] spirit, and recognize that there is limited time that he will be here before going off to university. (Jill)

What this participant may not appreciate is how her behaviour has been received by her partner's 16 year old son. He explains, when asked how moving in to the "stepmother's" house has impacted him.

Umm, I'm not allowed friends over anymore, not really, umm I'm allowed friends over in the summer, because . . . we would camp out in the back yard, and not be in the house, . . . because I have always been allowed to have friends over, whenever I wanted. (John)

He goes on to explain, with some frustration the restrictions placed upon his life since moving into the home of his 'stepmother'.

We have always lived in our own house; it has always been mom's house, so it has always been my house, my room, my space. So now it is Jill's [stepmother] phone, Jill's house, Jill's room . . . , I am not living in my own house. (John)

Previous positive experiences with being parented contribute to stepmothers feeling that they have something to offer the new family. However, women whose birth families and past experiences are less than positive feel strongly that they will need to develop a tool box of parenting techniques to enable them to have some degree of

influence on the children they will be living with. Knowing that they want to improve upon their own childhood experiences and having ideas about how they will parent differently; an opportunity to parent is often a catalyst for enthusiastically contributing to the lives of younger children for the lesbian stepmother.

When points of disagreement are identified and ignored by the women, the intimate relationship is more likely to suffer in the future. One strategy, cited as being helpful in avoiding discord, is to discuss ground rules in the early days of the relationship, communicating them to all of the family members in an effort to build a common understanding and expectation of family life. Due to the fact that lesbian stepfamilies are outside the mainstream and have few role models to look to for guidance in raising children, they are charged with having to reinvent themselves in a way that feels right to them. The somewhat controlled environment of eating supper together is often identified as an ideal venue for establishing and sharing ground rules. Supper time becomes a frequent point of convergence among all of the members of the family and an important opportunity to share thoughts, expectations, desires, and dreams. Having dinner together is a strategy that provides a daily opportunity for the family to address points of conflict and foster everyone's sense of their responsibilities, legitimacy, and value within the family. Having dinner together is also seen as something that families "do"; in doing so, the performative act of dining together contributes to their sense of legitimacy as a family. "Doing family" is an important process for lesbian headed stepfamilies. Rituals such as eating dinner together helped in developing the relationships, roles, and positions within the family.

Children are more likely to accept the stepmother when she displays commitment to both the mother and the family itself. Demonstrating her desire to become a part of the family, to participate in family events, and to care for the mother helps the children to accept, or at least to consider accepting, what the stepmother has to offer. Children from nuclear families who have experienced any amount of strife, abuse, or violence are encouraged by the stepmother's care and attention of their mother. Many older children recognize the stark contrast in the emotional quality of the mother's present romantic relationship versus the previous relationship. Following a discussion about her childhood marked by a violent and alcoholic father, Maureen became very emotional and commented about the lives of her two mothers as their relationship transitioned from a friendship to an intimate relationship: "I have never seen either one of them as happy as they are now" (Maureen).

Birth mothers work to encourage positive changes within their families. Stepmothers make decisions about their level of involvement in the new family. Children come to terms with the changes to their families. Mothers and children are now faced with developing an understanding of themselves as being a part of two different families – birth family and stepfamily. Members of the family realize that their identity is slowly changing as they begin to understand what being in a lesbian headed stepfamily will mean to them. For the children in this study, there was a slowly dawning understanding of the struggles in transitioning between being members of mainstream society as part of a heterosexual headed family and being marginalized as members of a lesbian headed family. Lesbian headed stepfamilies live within the dominant western discourse that

defines a “gold standard’ of family composition and functioning. As a result of working to build a family identity within an environment that defines the family as a man, woman and children, lesbian headed stepfamilies find it challenging to develop a family identity in a landscape dominated by heterosexism. The sense of legitimacy of the relationships being developed by the lesbian headed stepfamily changes despite the significant challenges, as the actions and interactions of family members begin to bring greater focus to their image of family and how they fit into their community.

Refocusing

Coming to terms with the multiple changes to their lives is much of the work addressed during *refocusing*. In this sub-process, family members re-formulated their vision of their life trajectory. Lesbian headed stepfamilies often experience multiple changes to their identity as a family. Rarely do heterosexual families consider that the relationships within the family are anything but legitimate. Lesbian stepfamilies have to contend with heterosexual assumptions about the relationships among members of the family and with being able to deal with any heterosexist or homophobic comments about the nature of their families. While they may not have consciously considered the definition of family, this process of *refocusing* often results in a readjustment of how they come to understand the new family.

Refocusing occurs during the process of transitioning. Within the chaos of change, children and mothers begin to recognize the magnitude of the work and challenges that lies ahead of them in creating new relationships. The legitimacy of the relationships of the nuclear family is clearly accepted but is frequently unappreciated or is somewhat

unconscious or implicit. Children are learning to accept their mother as a lesbian encompassed in the new relationship. Children want to know how they fit in the new family, while being apprehensive of the potential losses of nuclear family relationships, especially those with the other nuclear parent, usually their father. Children, younger or older, require some time to grieve the loss of the previous nuclear family. Much of the difficulty experienced by the children is related to the competing loyalties felt when transitioning from nuclear family to the new lesbian headed stepfamily. The children's difficulties with establishing relationships with the stepmother stem from feeling that doing so would be perceived as being disloyal to the non-resident father. Maintaining stability within the family for the children provides a safe platform from which children are free to explore the new relationships.

For the couple, the transition is from one of identity as a couple to one of a family. The stepmother is acutely aware of the fact that she has fallen in love with a mother and now has to figure out how she will develop a relationship with the children and what that relationship might look like. She is also acutely aware that, at the very least, an amicable relationship with the children may be crucial to the success of the intimate relationship. She is moving from the freedom of being responsible for herself to the responsibility of being accountable for her partner's children. While the stepmother may have difficulty finding a place for herself within the family, one important strategy that contributed to successful assimilation was the discussions of parenting philosophies between the birth mother and stepmother. A stepmother in this study commented about being in a position of parenting by virtue of being in close proximity to younger children for a considerable

amount of time, however, she makes a distinction between the emotional and the practical parent that speaks to not yet having a sense of legitimacy as a stepmother.

I don't think that you can be in that situation and not become a parent even though you're not a parent, you know what I mean? Because you assume the responsibility, you start, become that driver that's picking them up and dropping them off, . . . and those are all the things that parents do. So you distinguish it by, you distinguish it from that of the emotional parent. So it's like [you are] the practical parent that does all the stuff, you know? (Felicia)

The birth mother is also experiencing a transition in adjusting to parenting with another woman. She is learning that being involved with another woman may mean allowing and accepting another woman's contributions to parenting. While she is accustomed to sharing the parenting role with the other nuclear parent, sharing it with yet another adult has the potential to complicate how she views her role as the children's mother. Birth mothers were hesitant to share the role of mother with another woman. In this study, when the stepmother shows an interest in parenting, birth mothers refocused their view of parenting to include the possibility of support from another adult in raising her children. Here she is juggling two very important relationships, one with her children and the other with her new romantic partner. Both relationships require a significant amount of energy and effort to continue fostering connections among everyone. A birth mother recalls coming to understand just how significant both relationships were to her.

I guess I was a bit worried about that in the beginning because I did, I remember, . . . I had this memory of I don't want them to feel that I don't love, that I love Page

[stepmother] more and I don't want Page to feel that I love them more. I really didn't want any of that to be there but I thought sometimes I really don't know if I love one more or not. (Pam)

A woman, her lesbian partner, and children have embarked upon a journey towards building a family. The children begin to accept the new partner in their mother's life and in some cases the new lesbian identity of their mother, and have begun to find comfort in negotiating family members' various expectations. Despite the birth mother and stepmother usually being at differing stages of the coming out process they work to understand the differences in legitimacy between previous nuclear family relationships and the new lesbian headed stepfamily relationships. While the relationships among members of the family may be somewhat tenuous, they are achieving a new and solidifying image of themselves as a family and they are now able to move forward to doing the hard work in relationships, *building the bonds*.

Throughout the stage of *accepting the challenge*, the most significant change that occurs is the way that the family thinks of itself. The change is in the understanding of, and identity as, a family. The changes in family configuration can be sufficient enough to call into question the legitimacy of the new family's identity in comparison to the legitimacy experienced in the previous nuclear family. Relationships within the previous nuclear family were acknowledged as legitimate by the members of that family as a result of the multiple interactions they had with the outside world. A family is immediately recognized by outsiders when a grouping of a man, woman and children engage in interactions with churches, schools, daycares, social organizations, and at doctors'

offices. This family configuration is the dominant social understanding of what constitutes a legitimate family. The new family, headed by two women, one of whom has neither legal nor blood ties to the children, risks falling short of this dominant understanding of legitimacy. Interactions similar to the following help to illuminate how legitimacy is called into question.

Every time we would go swimming as a family they would ask, you know? It was probably [could we] go for the family rate. “Well, what do you mean you want the family rate?” Well, you know two parents and two kids, that’s a family. “Well are you all from the same family?” Yes, that is what we are trying to say! (Page)

The lesbian headed stepfamily in *refocusing* is beginning to realize the potential loss of legitimacy as they initiate interactions with each other, friends, family, and others outside their family. Positive interactions with those outsiders foster legitimacy, while interactions assessed as negative are felt to challenge legitimacy. Women who have spent any amount of time guarding their sexual identity are a bit more cautious about being out publicly. However, being in a family with children makes maintaining a hidden identity much more stressful. While it is challenging enough to build new relationships in a stepfamily situation, not being recognized as a family by society adds to the obstacles experienced by the lesbian headed stepfamily.

In this study, most of the birth mothers experienced mothering within a heterosexual family, meaning they had experienced being acknowledged by society as mothers of children as a result of being in a heterosexual relationship. In this situation they established a mainstream identity. By rejecting the mainstream position as they

begin a relationship with another woman, they find themselves in a marginalized position. This transition is not easily accomplished and requires a conscious effort to understand and manage the ramifications. In the initial stages of the relationship, some of the birth mothers attempted to maintain both a mainstream and a marginalized identity, despite their incongruence by not correcting those who assumed their status as heterosexual. In realizing how the two opposing positions impact and influence the relationship with their new partner, birth mothers become aware of the struggle to straddle both identities - a struggle that often becomes a source of discord for the couple. When women try to maintain both positions within society the result is often disagreements about when, or when not to disclose. This conflict affects the romantic relationship. Women in their first same-sex relationship more frequently experience crippling minority stress than women who had previous experience of being in a same-sex relationship. For the families in this study, when the birth mother identifies fully with the marginalized position of lesbian mother, the power of heterosexist rhetoric that intrudes is diminished, making it easier for the couple to continue building their family.

Socialization and internalized homophobia impact negatively on the ability of mother and stepmother to experience themselves as legitimate members of a family. It is difficult to grow up hearing and internalizing the dismissive messages that in order to be considered legitimate a family must be headed by a male and female. As a result of having a socially-defined sexual minority identity, dissonance is created within the family as they attempt to construct family outside of dominant family patterns. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the mother and stepmother have heard, seen, and possibly

experienced instances of homophobia or heterosexism. Hearing this repeatedly from multiple sources eventually constructs the understanding that heterosexual families are good and possible, while lesbian families are not possible and clearly not acceptable. Lesbian headed stepfamilies struggling to become a family may be faced with a two-fold challenge. The first is the coming-out of the birth mother and the second is the paucity of lesbian headed stepfamily models.

Families who continue to struggle to move beyond the challenges of stigmatization often remain isolated. They find it very stressful and possibly frightening to move forward in the process of *authenticating family*. Women who have friends in similar situations within the LGBT community are more likely to find the strength and support to move forward. There are conflicting experiences in this study concerning access to support from the lesbian community by the lesbian headed stepfamily. While one family in this study found they were no longer included in lesbian community events and felt that it was directly related to the decision to become a lesbian headed stepfamily, others found that being a part of a lesbian community was supportive. All of the families in this study lived in rural or quasi-urban settings in the Maritimes where access to support as a lesbian stepfamily is limited and exposure to the religious and moral majority influence the environment. Participant families commented that many of the churches they had been affiliated with were less than welcoming of the lesbian headed stepfamily despite being given the right to marry in Canada. Nadia explains the experience of switching from the Anglican to the United Church.

So, I think she [daughter] found it quite different going to a United church, and “is this really? Like is God really here?” because I don’t see all the robes and I don’t see the chanting and I don’t see the prayer, prayer, prayer. So, I felt bad . . . because as a lesbian couple we would not be welcome in our church that the kids grew up in, so I had to change churches and at that point in our life; church was huge. (Nadia)

An interesting and unexpected consequence of *accepting the challenge* is the ability to refocus efforts on parenting. For the families in which the stepmothers accept the role of parenting, the mother recognizes the benefit of having a new set of eyes on parenting and another adult to co-parent the children. One benefit of the dearth of role models for lesbian headed stepfamilies is that the mother and stepmother have the freedom to choose from a variety of parenting styles, often picking and choosing different aspects of parenting philosophies that suit the needs of their unique family. When the mother realizes the benefits of having the second adult to help parent, she often does so as a result of suddenly becoming aware that she has been responsible for doing the majority of the parenting, despite the presence of the other nuclear parent. It is often a significant relief to realize that the work of parenting can now be shared with another adult, one who may be equally invested in the well-being of the children. Having someone to share parenting with provides the birth mother with room to discuss parenting philosophy, negotiate expectations, and develop a renewed perspective or focus on parenting. A birth mother in this study commented on the benefit of having someone else who was seriously

invested in the children and the stark contrast to her experiences of parenting with the other nuclear parent, in this case a father.

Being a parent and raising four kids and having a husband who was fairly useless, I didn't have a lot of energy at the end of the day so you know when I said no, I said no but if they bugged me again I often would buckle and fold. (Talia)

For some of the lesbian headed stepfamilies, when disagreements arose concerning issues of parenting, a positive strategy was to seek outside help. Three couples sought counseling to help make sense of the causes of discord they were experiencing, frequently focused on dealing with the children. Many times unpacking the discord with an objective outsider resulted in greater awareness of the strengths and limitations of each other while helping the women to see each other's perspective and to improve communication between them. Recognizing and being able to acknowledge differing parenting philosophies helped women to understand why their partner may become upset. For the birth mothers, stressors were often caused by attempts to intervene in parenting efforts by stepmothers perceived as being too harsh. For the stepmothers, being able to find a position within the household and to have parenting efforts acknowledged was important to improving the relationship between the two women. Seeking counseling was an important strategy in helping to disarm potentially discordant situations. However, therapists who understand the unique needs of the lesbian headed stepfamily are difficult to find. For some women, the challenge of trying to find a gay positive therapist is daunting and causes them to try to work through their problems without the help of an objective outsider.

Evidence Informing Existing Literature

The theory of *authenticating family* includes three stages. The findings in the first stage of *accepting the challenge* informs the existing literature in a number of ways.

There are five main areas of focus in the proceeding discussion: transitions, parenting, loss of legitimacy, responses of the children, and the influence of the social environment on the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

First, this stage of the theory supports the literature that describes and examines issues of transition. Transition is a key concept in this stage of the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily that requires work to amalgamate and come to terms with the revised configuration and image of family, a finding that is similar to previous research (Anyon & Pryor, 2002; Edwards, 2002; Molinari, Everri, & Fruggeri, 2010; Schmeekle, et al., 2006). In this study, for many of the birth mothers it is often the first time they have had intimate feelings for another woman, initiating the transition from heterosexual to lesbian (Rickards, 2005). Cherlin's (1978) findings that women experiencing divorce face marginalization supports my findings that these women contend with relinquishing the mainstream identity they had as heterosexual mothers and transitioning to a marginalized identity. One stage of Lynch's (2004) transitioning model demonstrates similar findings to this research wherein the movement from heterosexual to lesbian is experienced by women becoming part of a lesbian headed stepfamily despite the fact that they "clearly did not anticipate that by integrating their homosexual status they would also be forced to yield the external recognition and approval conferred by their previous privileged heterosexual status" (p. 101). Wynne echoes my findings when she states that, "I learned

the meaning of heterosexual privilege in the losing of it” (Rounthwaite & Wynne, 1997, p. 91).

Early literature on coming-out focused on gay men (Cass, 1984; Harry, 1993; Kus 1985) and later on youths of both gender (Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Taylor, 2000). The literature has only recently uncovered some of the unique experiences for women transitioning at mid-life that is complicated by the loss of personal and public credibility (Lynch, 2000, 2004; Lynch & Murray, 2000; Rickards & Wuest, 2006). *Accepting the challenge* informs the lesbian stepfamily literature by illuminating the common experiences of women transitioning to lesbian in this study - loss of knowing self and urgency to grasp the new identity. More recently, the focus of LGBT research has shifted from the coming-out process to investigating the lives of gay men and lesbians as they form new families (Anyon & Pryor, 2002; Breshears, 2011; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Erera, 2003; Johnston, Moore, & Judd, 2010; King, 2007; Lee & Meyer, 2010; Litovich & Langhout, 2004; Lynch, 2004; Welsh, 2011; Wright, 1998). Lesbians have often been overshadowed by the lives, health, behaviours, and experiences of gay men as they have “been the public face of sexual diversity” (MacDonnell, 2009, p. 159). This study focuses specifically on lesbians becoming a stepfamily and is additive to the present literature because it captures the voices of all members; stepmother, birth mother and children.

The second major theme informing the existing literature encompasses the important job of parenting. In this study, the identity transition of birth mothers in lesbian headed stepfamilies differed on a number of levels from the experiences of the stepmother, a finding that has also been captured in a study by Lynch (2004). Mothers’ in

this study grapple with several concerns. The primary concern is for their children; others include risk of social stigmatization they may encounter and a need to find balance between the needs of the children and the new intimate relationship. Birth mothers are particularly concerned about being able to divide their time and attention to accommodate the needs of both the children and new lesbian partner. Breshears (2011) discussed similar findings with some exceptions focusing on nuclear rather than stepfamilies. Robitaille and Saint-Jacques (2009) focused only on the children, and Fredriksen-Goldsen and Erera (2003) did not include the influence of the dominant discourse in impacting the trajectory of the lesbian headed stepfamily. For birth mothers in this study, comparing both the nuclear family and the new stepfamily, birth mothers often realized a distinct and positive difference in now being able to provide better parenting to their children; a finding that is not discussed in previous research of lesbian stepfamilies (Lynch, 2000, 2004). Furthermore, my study demonstrates the need for mothers to learn to share the parenting role with the stepmother, a finding that is echoed by previous research (Lynch, 2004; Lynch & Murray, 2000; Wright, 1998).

Much of the research has ignored the role of the stepmother within the family, however, in this study, the stepmothers' experiences reflect the excitement and anxiety of entering into a realm of family life which they previously felt they had little or no access to. Stepmothers are challenged on two levels; they are challenged in being a lesbian in a sometimes stigmatizing society as well as with dealing with the difficult process of becoming a stepparent. These are findings that are similar to those of the few research studies that seek to gain a better understanding of the experiences of the stepmother

(Lorah, 2007; Lynch, 2004). The findings in my study inform the largely unexplored body of knowledge highlighting feelings of invisibility for the stepmother, a phenomenon that is supported by the research of Hall and Kitson (2000) and Lorah (2007) but warrant more exploration. Feelings of invisibility are also found in the *denovo* family in which the non-birthmother or other mother does not experience the same level of legitimacy as the birthmother does (Bennett, 2003; Brown & Perlsez, 2007/2008; Gabb, 2005)

Negotiations between the mother and stepmother in this study demonstrate the tendency for lesbian headed stepfamilies to often adhere to a more child-centered focus. These families spend greater amounts of time with the children, a finding that has been noted in previous research (Foster, 2005; Patterson, 1995). Paradoxically, this focus on the children has the potential to detract from opportunities to increase the level of intimacy in the lesbian couples' relationship. In this study, lesbian parents were frequently aware of needing new skills to be effective parents in light of the influence of dominant discourse and knowledge of stepfamily transition struggles – findings that confirm early research of lesbian headed families (Foster, 2005; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpaqua, & Joseph, 1995). A positive finding in this study informs the existing research describing the ability of the birth mother to refocus on parenting as a result of having another woman willing to support and share in the job of raising children (Erera & Fredriksen, 1999; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Erera, 2003; Hall & Kitson, 2000).

This study reinforces the findings that lesbian headed stepfamilies encounter many of the same experiences identified in previous stepfamily formation research. Edwards' (2002) study of heterosexual stepfamilies found that there was a need for

mothers to create stability within the chaos of stepfamily formation. The mothers and stepmothers in this study, made a concerted effort to provide children with stable, loving homes in light of the understanding that becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily may place them in a position to experience homophobia and stigmatization. Previous studies have also identified that there is intentionality on the part of lesbian mothers and stepmothers to nurture in an environment that is stable and supportive of the needs of children (Johnston et al., 2010; Weeks et al., 2007). The present study highlights that mothers' recognize the amount of work ahead for all members of the new stepfamily, a finding that is similar to what Biblarz and Savci (2010) found in their study of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender families.

An important finding is being able to better understand the ability of children in lesbian stepfamilies to rise above heterosexist attitudes as a result of the amount of time and the quality of the child-centered parenting philosophy that is evident in the lesbian headed stepfamilies in this study. Attending to the new relationships, roles and positions within the family, recognizing the value of limited time they have together, and engaging in parenting contribute to positive perceptions of their family for the children. These are findings that have also been found in previous research (Johnson, Liu, & Cohen, 2011; Perlesz et al., 2006a).

The experiences of the children have been unfortunately overlooked in previous research about lesbian headed stepfamilies. This study demonstrates that adolescents in the lesbian headed stepfamily exhibit developmental needs to distance themselves from their parents while aligning with a peer group in an effort to establish individual

identities, regardless of gender. Findings of this study highlight the importance of being able to disclose parental sexual orientation for the children as it contributes to “avoiding breeding a sense of shame” (McCann & Delmonte, 2005, p. 342). For the children in lesbian headed stepfamilies in this study, the theory of *authenticating family* informs the literature that investigates challenges faced as children struggle to transition between the step and nuclear family, findings that echo those of Lynch (2000) and Erera and Fredriksen (1999).

The third concept of focus in *accepting the challenge* is the perceived loss of legitimacy for members of the lesbian headed stepfamily. The existing literature investigating the role of stigmatization and marginalization will be informed by the findings of my study that found the inability of the women in this study to achieve status in society other than a marginalized position. Being marginalized in this way can be a barrier to the ability to develop a sense of authenticity and legitimacy. This study informs the body of research concerning stepfamilies by highlighting the way that society constructs a secondary or less than position by associating them with the “incomplete institution” of stepfamily formation. Cherlin (1978) in his dated research of heterosexual stepfamily status also found that society struggles with understanding the stepfamily. An important finding in my research is that lesbian stepfamilies noted that having access to marriage decreased the risk of not achieving social validation in the same way that heterosexual stepfamilies do. Research conducted in the USA prior to any of the states legalizing same-sex marriage asserts that access to marriage is an important step in being included in society as legitimate families (Hall & Kitson, 2000). The institutionalized

norms and patterns of behaviour that grant a couple and their children social recognition remain a barrier at times for full recognition of lesbian stepfamilies in society.

The findings of this study illustrate that lesbian headed stepfamilies often feel uncomfortable or unsure about how to behave as a result of the lack of role models in society and popular culture that help pattern functional family dynamics. In this study, lesbian headed stepfamilies struggle to become a family when the birth mother is faced with coming-out, the stepmother is unsure of how to be a parent, and the children do not see their families in popular culture and media. The absence of positive role models for the lesbian family let alone the lesbian headed stepfamily has been noted in a number of previous research studies (Brown & Perlesz, 2008; Chamberland, Jouvin, & Julien, 2003; Foster, 2005; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Lewis et al., 2012; Patterson & Riskind, 2010; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009; Sullivan, 1996; Walters, 2012).

The findings of my study uncovered many stepfamilies relying upon and gaining support from close networks of friends, both heterosexual and LGBT. Literature investigating LGBT communities' ability to provide support to lesbian headed stepfamilies conflicts with the findings of this research. Research has demonstrated that LGBT communities and especially gay communities have traditionally tended to be less than supportive of lesbian or gay friends who choose to become parents (Lynch, 2004; Claxton-Oldfield & O'Neil, 2007).

Finally, this research supports the existing literature that addresses the influence of the social environment on the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily, both negative and positive. It brings to light the impact of heterosexism in the production of

shame and its contribution to the development of internalized homophobia. Previous research has explored the impact of heterosexism in being able to sow a seed of shame that can continue to grow (Neisen, 1993). The findings of my study illuminate that intervention by the mother and stepmother in ensuring that shame of their family does not take hold is important to the ability of the children and other family members to thrive and claim legitimacy in society.

As a result of the overwhelming sense of excitement in beginning a new relationship, in many cases the first time with a woman, birth mothers forge forward on the quest to bring the sense of legitimacy back to the children and ultimately to themselves as well. The stepmother has a slightly different experience during *accepting the challenge*. Lesbian stepmothers are more likely to be able to navigate in society with greater confidence because of comfort with lesbian identity and as a result do not feel or experience loss of legitimacy as acutely as the lesbian birth mothers. The two women feel a significant emotional bond to each other and prepare to create an environment conducive to the development of a sense of legitimacy for their family. Family members within the lesbian headed stepfamily have negotiated some of the expectations for their family and gained a beginning understanding of the new family configuration. Women whose relationship feels real and strong realize that they have the hallmarks of a good and loving relationship deserving of recognition as legitimate. While still tentative about outsider views of their relationship, they are prepared to move to the next stage of the process of *authenticating family, building the bonds* with the hope that doing so will bring about an increasing sense of legitimacy as a family.

Building the Bonds

Building the bonds is the active process of nurturing the relationships begun in *accepting the challenge*. This stage of the process includes three sub-processes: *getting better acquainted*, *making history*, and *trialing recognition*. Despite an imbalance within the relationships, members of the family work towards establishing their positions within it. Stepmothers begin to recognize that mother and children are a “package deal” and often feels as if they are orbiting around the mother and child unit. While occasional inadvertent disclosing interactions may occur early in the family’s existence, they are now better prepared to try venturing outside the home in initial attempts at identifying themselves as a lesbian headed stepfamily using primarily performative displays of family. These interactions inform beginning efforts of protecting themselves and coming to terms with the fact that coming out as a family is not a one-time event.

Getting Acquainted

The family engages in a delicate dance that ultimately determines how the network of relationships is established and defined. Members of the family, children, birth mother, stepmother and often the other nuclear parent are all trying to figure out how they fit together and what roles they will play in each other’s lives. It is very clear that there is now a tenuous family unit that is dominated by the strength of the mother-child relationship. The intimate relationship being nurtured by the two women is not as strong as the mother-child bond and is held together by their desire to stay in each other’s lives. The stepmother and child relationship is new and precarious, lacking strength. The

other nuclear parent often maintains a relationship with both the birth mother and, more importantly, the children, requiring the stepmother to negotiate her relationship with the birth mother and children. Some stepmothers also find themselves interacting with the children's extended family.

Early in the history of the family, children express their fear that the mother-child relationship will be usurped. This threat is evidenced by the children in this study physically positioning themselves between the new couple, or claiming the front seat of the car, thereby putting the stepmother in the back seat. They clearly make the point that mother and child are a team not to be trifled with. This sub-process is one of getting to know each other better, and beginning to determine how they will all fit together under one family roof.

Stepmothers are becoming acquainted with the children and to the idea and reality of the day-to-day responsibilities of parenting. Recognizing the need to develop some parenting skills in order to take on an active parenting role, lesbian stepmothers may look to their own experiences of having been parented or to the parenting behaviours of others that they know such as siblings, extended family, and friends.

But I had great parenting so I think that I thought that I could get into it. And I was prepared to do that we were parented differently, I brought what I knew but what I knew wasn't necessarily what had been done and so my role was to fit into that, and that meant – here's how I can help. (Nicole)

In the end, stepmothers may come to realize that the examples of parenting by a mother and father that they have witnessed or experienced are sufficiently different to the current

family situation and may need to be adapted to accommodate the lesbian headed stepfamily.

Birth mothers and stepmothers engaged in conversations in which they explained each other's parenting philosophies and the feasibility or acceptance of the philosophies. Stepmothers have expectations, both realistic and unrealistic, about themselves and their stepfamily. What birth mothers and stepmothers eventually recognize is that this family is a new one requiring new expectations and an understanding that it will take time to get to know each other and how relationships among the members of the family will develop. In relationships that allow for open dialogue, much negotiating occurs in the discussions about the children's expected and real behaviours, how the stepmother will enact a parenting role, and whether or not she should even try to actively parent the children.

The stepmother and children struggle to get to know each other better despite competing and mutual feelings of rights for the birth mother's attention. In an effort to build a unique relationship with the children, many stepmothers use opportunities that emerge for spending one-on-one time with the children. When stepmothers demonstrate a desire to do so and a commitment to the family, children are more likely to be open to the efforts of parenting by the stepmothers.

Stepmothers who immediately assume a role of parenting older children, especially in situations requiring disciplinary measures, find that children are more likely to oppose, defy, and reject the uninvited intrusions into their lives. In this study, a stepmother took on a disciplinarian role with her partner's children, knowing that it

could, and did, eventually jeopardize her relationship with both the children and ultimately the birth mother:

[Disciplining] was not something I really wanted to do. It was something she asked me to do . . . it's a difficult position to be in and what I used to say to Yvonne [birth mother] is "I don't mind doing it, really I don't, but" . . . I really don't know if it is a fair thing but I don't know if Yvonne really understood the difficult position it put me in. But it creates a dynamic with those children that set me apart from them and they will view me in a very different light. (Felicia)

In the midst of *getting acquainted* with the children and with parenting itself, stepmothers and birth mothers recognize the need for dedicated time for themselves as a new couple. Needing to strengthen the romantic relationship is seen as an important component not to be neglected or ignored. Finding even short amounts of time together before falling asleep at night, in the morning before waking the children for school, or after younger children have gone to bed is vitally important to maintaining a connection with each other. Essentially, checking in with each other and remembering that while the relationship with the children and responsibilities that come with raising children are important, the foundation upon which their new family will be built is the emotional and romantic relationship between the two women.

Lesbian couples recognize the need for dedicated couple time, improved quality of their communication, and in this study, that their relationships seem more cooperative than previously experienced in the heterosexual relationships. The cooperativeness contributes to greater relationship satisfaction and comfort in knowing that each partner is

equally committed to the relationship. Women who ensure that they work to strengthen their relationship are better able to deal with the challenges that come with parenting. Having the platform of a strong relationship provides the birth mother and stepmother with the opportunity to ignore many of the negative messages received about their families and to explore development of new supportive relationships with those outside the immediate family.

Many of the stepmothers begin to decipher how they fit into the family and what role they may assume. Families with younger children become preoccupied with the job of surviving from day to day. Getting children ready for school, making lunches, picking them up after school and transporting them to afterschool activities, then supper, homework, bath, and finally bed; activities that require intensive interactions and communication with each other. Most stepmothers become acutely aware that by virtue of spending this much time with younger children provides them with ample opportunities to nurture budding relationships.

During the flurry of child-related activities, stepmothers and birth mothers begin to assess the reaction of outsiders to the presence of another mother in the family. They may not yet openly identify as a family in some of their encounters. The important encounters, like school or daycare, are seen as being sufficiently significant to overcome any apprehension about disclosing despite potentially negative responses. The importance of “gay friendly” school settings was seen as being vital to lesbian mothers’ comfort in sending their children to school. Both birth mothers and stepmothers anticipate negative reactions on some level and are frequently pleasantly surprised and comforted by

reactions of indifference to the fact that the children have two mothers. The positive reactions inform subsequent interactions with those outside the family, giving birth mothers, and stepmothers greater confidence in addressing issues that challenge their sense of legitimacy.

Both stepmothers and birth mothers enter into a family hoping for the best outcome and the smoothest transition to becoming a cohesive family, however, they are not ignorant to the fact that they will expect some challenges along the way. What they do with the challenges and how they overcome them determines, to a large extent, the ability of the family to merge effectively. In retrospect, stepmothers recognized that the more contentious relationships with children tended to happen with those with similar personality traits to themselves. Having learned more about each other and how members of the family position themselves, the work of growing the burgeoning relationships begins to happen as they move to *making history*.

Making History

A birth mother and stepmother discuss their feelings about how much integration has occurred over the life of their family.

Birth mother: I mean now when I think about it, I think you'll always have a relationship with all three of them [children] and that's just what happens over time.

Stepmother: Yeah, yeah, and it is a neat thing because you are right, the history of my being in their lives is much bigger [than what she had imagined]. (Jean and Anna)

In the course of family life, birth mothers and stepmothers learn to work together within the family. They develop an understanding of how child rearing is going to proceed, despite any disagreements about parenting philosophy. Decisions are made about the division of responsibilities, roles, and work needed to support family functioning. The ability to develop strong working partnerships where each other's skills and desires are respected is evidence of the strength of the lesbian headed stepfamily contributing to the smooth functioning of the household.

During *making history*, children gain a better understanding of their mother as a lesbian and her relationship with this other woman. The children are coming to terms with moving back and forth between the homes of the other nuclear parent and new stepfamily, learning how to manage feelings of disloyalty to either one. Lesbian headed stepfamilies that become comfortable together cautiously begin interacting with their extended families in a novice attempt at seeking legitimacy. Extended family is a key source of support for women with children coming out at midlife.

The lesbian headed stepfamily makes special efforts to do things that demonstrate and communicate the relationships to one another, working to strengthen the evolving relationships among the family members. A strategy used by women to foster growth of the relationships is providing the family with the opportunity to have dedicated family time together. Setting aside time to interact with one another, as a family, provides opportunity for the development of family memories, eventually creating a sense of both legitimacy and cohesiveness.

We have made a point of every year going to a cottage and just hunkering down the six of us and playing, having fun, and reading and eating and being silly and swimming and doing that kind of stuff and playing games. And that's been really fun, that has really nothing to do with being a part of the family with lesbian moms but it has been a really important time or a really important relationship builder. In fact, the kids went ballistic when we mentioned that we didn't think we would get the cottage the following year, they told us in no uncertain terms that this was a really special 'family' time for them. (Charlene)

Making dedicated time for each other is one way that this group of people who have chosen to come together create a sense of family; going on holidays together, having supper together every night, establishing a games night are only a few of the strategies used to continue *building the bonds* of caring among them while confirming the legitimacy of the family against a backdrop of other families they know. Birth mothers note that activities chosen often focus on providing opportunities for active bonding and fostering growth of interpersonal relationships. The conscious act of providing opportunity to do the work of building relationships is often in contrast to what has happened in the previous nuclear family setting. Birth mothers recognize both the effort and the gift of being afforded this special opportunity that having a "stranger" join the family has provided. The work that many of the birth mothers find difficult is letting go of some of the "mothering" so that the stepmothers can engage with the children.

Stepmothers coming into a newly single woman's family work to help both the mother and her children acclimatize to having two women as head of the household.

Realizing the folly and inauthenticity of doing otherwise, they do not try to be “the man” in the family, remaining true to their female identity. The members of the family learn to acknowledge actions and events that communicate a sense of legitimacy as a family. They trial the communications with each other before stepping outside the house and into interactions with others whose responses are less predictable.

A cardinal strategy in *making history* between stepmothers and children is to build trusting relationships. Stepmothers do this by being consistent in their commitment to the family, being open and up front with the children, and in the demonstration of love and admiration for both the birth mother and the children. Younger children have a greater affinity towards the stepmother when she demonstrates support for the birth mother. Older children react more positively to the stepmother who maintains a similar parenting philosophy as the birth mother and who refrains from positioning themselves in the role of sole disciplinarian. Birth mother and stepmother demonstrating a united front is viewed by the children as supportive, stabilizing, and something to be relied upon during times of turmoil and transition.

One of the greatest challenges for birth mothers is to step aside and allow the stepmother to parent her children. Birth mothers find it difficult and unnatural to relinquish the role of mother, however, when they share the role, it communicates to the children that it is safe and that she trusts the stepmother to care for the children. Rather than stepping aside completely, birth mothers often hover close by while the stepmother engages in acts of parenting. Multiple conversations ensue behind closed doors between

birth mothers and stepmothers to clarify expectations, make suggestions, and come to agreement on points of disagreement.

When stepmothers take on the responsibility of caring for and nurturing her partner's children and have to interact with the other nuclear parent, stepmothers often feel that they are an outsider. Stepmothers feel that they have willingly taken on the responsibility of contributing to the household by making meals, helping with homework, driving the children to and from events, ensuring their safety, and giving both emotionally and financially to raising "good" children. However, being recognized as a parent while carrying out the responsibilities is often woefully unbalanced. In many families, while the stepmothers have taken on the responsibility their voices are rarely heard when it comes to making decisions about the children or the course of the new family. Stepmothers strive to gain a sense of legitimacy in being a member of a lesbian headed stepfamily. Stepmothers in this study voiced feelings of being usurped by the other nuclear parent's contribution to the lives of their children.

I don't have the luxury of feeling like I'm molding the children in the way I would like to because I'm not the one molding them. Cathy [birth mother] always made me feel like my opinion counts a lot, but then Chad [father] plays a role in their lives so my opinion is at the bottom of the priority list. (Daisy)

The dominant discourse that paints a picture of family disallowing two women as head of household can, at times, contribute to perpetuating the feelings of futility expressed by stepmothers. The amount of time and attention the children demand of the birth mother further compounds any sense of marginalization experienced by stepmothers

taking away from the time and energy to focus on the women's intimate and emotional relationship. The degree to which stepmothers feel they are an outsider impacts directly on the family's ability to *make history* with each other, ultimately directly influencing *building the bonds*.

Both stepmothers and birth mothers engage in a continuing and intricate dance centered on the concept of the "package deal". The package deal represents the strength of the bond between mother and child. Birth mothers enter into the lesbian relationship with their children, inseparable, as a package. Conflicting messages are sent when birth mothers hover, ready to jump in to protect the children at any time, while many are anxious for the stepmother to become an equal partner in parenting. Stepmothers assess and negotiate their relationship with the children cognizant of being outside the mother-child dyad. When a stepmother openly explains to older children that she is not planning to replace the other nuclear parent children appreciate the honesty, are more likely to accept her efforts at making a connection, and are more open to building relationships. The oldest child in one family explained how she and her younger sister had differing perspectives about the efforts of their stepmother to parent:

Yeah, and Nicole [stepmother] didn't have children either and so she was coming into a family with two teenage girls which is a little overwhelming. So you could tell at times she was frustrated because she never had to live with teenagers before, so I think it was kind of hard for her at first. Especially because my sister, when she was disciplined, I know she was [thinking] very much "Nicole is not my mother, I don't have to listen to her" blah, blah, you know what I mean? So I

think it was a little bit harder for her but I was old enough I think that I didn't really see the point in arguing. Nicole lives here, it's totally fair that she has her own opinions; you know she's hearing me out, so I should hear her out. (Sue)

Finally, children cautiously begin to explore relationships with the stepmother from the safety and vantage point of knowing that they will always be able to rely on the relationship with the birth mother, and in many situations, the other nuclear parent. The experience of being the "mama bear", while buffering fractious relationships between stepmother and children, can be exhausting for birth mothers. When the need to buffer is more than birth mothers can handle, relationships are often placed under extreme stress. On the other hand, with continuous positive interactions between children and stepmothers, parenting skills are developed, relationships are fostered, and greater comfort is achieved; this in turn contributes to decreasing the need for birth mothers to remain vigilant in watching over her children. A positive and frequently successful strategy used by stepmothers is the attempt to build bonds with the children away from the watchful eye of the mother. A son in a lesbian headed stepfamily describes how he felt about being given the opportunity to build bonds with his stepmother.

I remember we used to, Charlene [stepmother] and I used to play board games sometimes together. She and I would play that together and that was like a good camaraderie. I was pretty under the radar kind of kid so I didn't really get a lot of discipline from Charlene, so I had an admiration for her. (Justin)

Both stepmother and child appear to be able to relax a bit while learning to develop relationships that are unique. When space is created for *making history*, the results are a

greater sense of cohesion, stronger feelings of bonding, and a growing realization of their legitimacy especially in families with older children. Families with younger children, create their history by virtue of spending extended periods of time together and doing the frenetic work of raising young children.

Stepmothers, who criticize the behaviours of the children, interfere with the parenting, or whose parenting efforts are rejected by the children and/or birth mothers experience greater difficulty with *making history*. These challenges are often more evident in families with older children than those with younger children. The luxury of having more time and opportunity to become an influential person in the lives of the younger children does not go unrecognized by stepmothers. Parents in families with older children recognize that many of the relationship challenges stem from simply not having sufficient time to build the relationships.

The lesbian couples in this study often took minimal time between beginning to date and living together which left the family with the potential for limited time to do the work of relationship building. A stepmother reflects on her relationship with a son who remained at home versus the two children who continued to live with the other nuclear parent. “You know, I would have had more history with them, but that’s when I say it’s better with Walden [younger son] because the more history you have the better it gets” (Jean). Following a particularly disruptive argument between birth mother, stepmother and their daughter, a stepmother voices her insight about how things might have been different.

Yeah, and one of the things that I insisted on was that number one, she [daughter] apologized for whatever it was and that we would sit and talk about it and the impact of her throwing things and hollering, how it impacted on us, you know? And she [daughter] didn't like that, didn't like that at all and I think that was, I wish anything and something I regret; I wish that we had had another year or two with her. (Jean)

Families in which stepmothers refuse to parent experience greater difficulties in becoming a cohesive family. These families often do not progress beyond *making history* in the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily but become stalled at the point of attempting to form bonds of caring and commitment with each other. The time and energy drain on the birth mothers by the children becomes a source of strife and resentment for women who refuse to accept any or accept only a minimal parenting role.

For families who have experienced instability, violence, or abuse, creating stability for the children is crucial to establishing an environment that allows them to relax and become comfortable. In doing so, children can shift focus from being protective to being open to the development of new relationships. Recognizing the instability in the nuclear family situation, this stepmother voiced how significant the need for routine was for her step-children.

The thing I think of, when they moved here is that it brought them routine or stability because we were always home . . . and Walden [son] in particular liked that. He likes to take his bath at nine o'clock, not nine-thirty and so that structure really suited him I think. (Jean)

For one family who had experienced spousal abuse in the previous heterosexual relationship, a birth mother had to determine the likelihood of experiencing abuse again for the safety of her children. To do so she initiated conflict by repeatedly slapping her new partner until she was sure that the partner would not retaliate. “I needed to know that I was going to be safe because I went through it before and I sure wasn’t going to do it again. I believe it was a test and you passed!” (Kacie).

New family traditions find space to grow when there is open dialogue and interaction among the members, ultimately contributing to a sense of stability within the lesbian headed stepfamily. Many families, regardless of previous nuclear family experiences, start by having supper together, sitting down to the table, and sharing the day’s events with each other. This small but significant ritual is seen as a demonstration of normalcy and contributes to the sense of legitimacy for all members of the family. It becomes important for the children to be able to rely on certain things happening within their family, dinner together or other dedicated family time are just some of those situations.

And one thing we’ve done since then, we’ve learned that we really like spending time together and we are a close family. So what we’ve done is have game nights and every Sunday night . . . we really look forward to that time together even if we are tired. (Page)

Finally, in *making history*, a greater degree of success in bonding is achieved when the position and existence of the other nuclear parent is recognized and efforts are made to include him/her in family gatherings, school, and athletic events. For some

stepmothers, including the other nuclear parent has the potential to create a situation of uncertainty in terms of her position within the family. On the one hand it is seen as positive by the children and encourages them to accept the stepmother; on the other hand, the stepmother must learn to accept the idea of being the third parent to the children. It is especially challenging when the stepmother and other nuclear parent disagree about important aspects of the children's upbringing. An essential factor in making this situation positive is ensuring that the stepmother, who takes on the responsibility of caring for the children, does not have her contributions dismissed by the other nuclear parent, or more importantly, the birth mother.

Several families in this study had nuclear parents who either moved far enough away to make contact with the children challenging or chose to physically and emotionally back away from the family. In situations such as these, birth mothers and stepmothers found they had increased freedom to create a sense of family for the children. Stepmothers did not feel threatened by the presence of another parent as they established their position both in the family and with the children. Furthermore, in families whose children were very young and whose other nuclear parent was absent, bonding between stepmother and children happened very quickly.

While *making history* continues as a lifelong event for the lesbian headed stepfamily, they soon realize that in becoming a family, making memories, and initiating rituals and traditions, they are gaining a stronger sense of themselves as legitimate. With the improved sense of legitimacy they are better prepared for *trialing recognition*. With the improved sense of legitimacy they are becoming conscious of the ramifications of

intentionally venturing outside the home while demonstrating their existence as a family to others.

Trialing Recognition

In the final sub-process of *building the bonds* families become more comfortable with each other continuing to develop stronger relationships with one another, and integrating a growing sense of themselves as a legitimate family unit. Families settle into day-to-day activities, chores, and acts of family life, demonstrating the relationships between one another, the importance of those relationships, and their legitimacy. The birth mother and her children reflect upon the new lesbian stepfamily comparing it to the previous nuclear family. In doing so, they themselves acknowledge the legitimacy of the family and the right to be acknowledged as such by others. Members of the family begin to be able to experience overt signs and displays of stigmatization without allowing it to influence the growing sense of legitimacy.

Trialing recognition is a process of cementing identity as a family and beginning to forge relationships with those outside the family in a trial and error effort of repeated coming-out experiences. The family has expectations that they should begin to feel a growing recognition of being seen and acknowledged as legitimate. For the families in this study disclosure was often used as a way to seek and gain recognition for the importance of the role and position of the stepmother. They anticipate that as a result of the series of recurrent interactions with others requiring disclosure, they will begin to work towards gaining recognition and acknowledgment as a legitimate family. The

process of *trialing recognition* for lesbian headed stepfamilies begins cautiously and continues carefully.

The work of becoming a family occurs among the members of the immediate family. In most cases, members of the family acknowledge and identify members of the family as being important people in the family configuration. Subsequently, the work of interacting with outsiders and having them see the family as legitimate becomes the focus. While the family prefers to control disclosure experiences there are multiple situations preventing them from maintaining that control. Situations involving sudden and unexpected interactions with the children's friends and family or emergent health care situations are the two most common experiences in which disclosure occurs outside the family's control.

During *building the bonds*, lesbian headed stepfamilies spend a great deal of time establishing and nurturing intra-familial relationships. In doing so, and as a result of the interactions with other family members, they begin to re-assess the legitimacy of family relationships. Once they have a stronger sense of themselves as a family they begin to venture outside the family home in a beginning effort at experimenting with disclosing to extended family, friends, colleagues, teachers, childcare providers, and child related activity leaders. Each of these interactions informs the lesbian headed stepfamily of the safety to proceed and either a decreasing likelihood of experiencing rejection or an increasing ability to counter the rejection. Legitimacy of the family is an important component of being able to establish themselves as a cohesive and stable family unit.

In *trialing recognition*, lesbian headed stepfamilies have initiated a process of disclosure whereby they ensure both safety in hostile or less than accepting communities, and sufficient skills to continue building an identity as a family. Through the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily and establishing the connections and bonds of love between each other, the family realizes and recognizes that they do not fit the SNAF model, finding it challenging yet important to demonstrate the unique familial relationships to outsiders.

Much of the work in this sub-process is completed during interactions with those outside the family. Birth mothers and stepmothers begin by using language that overtly identifies status as a lesbian headed stepfamily by discussing ‘our children’, ‘my wife, partner, lover’ with others; children refer to ‘my mothers’ in interactions with outsiders. A daughter explains:

I remember telling, you guys [siblings], remember his name? It was NAME. Big guy like you know, he was really funny and we were really good friends and I told him about my moms and he laughed at me. He was like “You’re kidding, what? That’s crazy. That’s unreal.” And he laughed at me, he sort of like made fun of me and I was like “Man, I’m not lying, this is how it is” and we became best friends. (Kallie)

While the scenario in the previous quote ended positively, having someone who is trusted and considered a friend question the existence and legitimacy of the lesbian headed stepfamily gives rise to the ongoing back and forth between doubt and assurance about being a legitimate family. Adolescents are particularly sensitive to acceptance from

people within their peer group. However, because it ended positively these types of situations allow children like Kallie to develop communication skills and greater confidence in disclosing in subsequent situations. With every positive experience, members of the family gain increasing comfort and confidence disclosing the lesbian headed stepfamily configuration. In fact, with sufficient positive experiences, a negative experience stands out as being inappropriate in comparison. The relationships within the families in this study were supportive of recognizing that while they understood the family to be different, they also knew that they were similar to others and should not be considered otherwise.

Families whose children have supportive friends appear to achieve comfort in society well before families with children whose friends have not been supportive. Positive experiences of disclosure contributed to a better developed sense of self-esteem for adolescent children while negative experiences often resulted in a lower self-esteem and some internalization of the stigma. Mothers with supportive extended families, co-workers, and friends are also more likely to develop a stronger sense of legitimacy before those who continue to be faced with rejection and derision.

Discrimination in multiple forms challenges each family member's sense of themselves as legitimate. While adults are likely better able to ignore or discount discrimination, children with fewer coping mechanisms may have many more challenges. The lesbian headed stepfamilies in this study who discussed discrimination, heterosexism, and homophobia with their children provided them with the opportunity to develop coping skills and strategies to confront any possible discrimination in diverse

contexts. Children with good decision-making skills developed as a result of conversations with their mother and stepmother were more likely to be able to deal with the impact of stigma.

Families with older children, who struggle to accept the stepmother figure or have a stepmother who refuses any nurturing relationship with the older children, are more likely destined to continue searching for ways to find evidence of legitimacy. In order for family members to feel connected to each other it is best if they can develop some degree of relationship, even if it is strained or adversarial.

Members of lesbian headed stepfamilies who do not support or accept each other's traditions also tend to falter in achieving a sense of legitimacy. It is important that all members of the family feel that their history is accepted, valued, and respected. When the family incorporates traditions into the new family identity they are able to make significant progress towards achieving a sense of cohesiveness. Gathering for Christmas celebrations was identified as a perfect opportunity to make the important kinship connections between children and step-cousins.

So my kids were the same age and so they sat down and played board games all night together and I was just "Oh this is wonderful" thinking to myself now there is going to be a family and so the kids left and they said "Oh that was so much fun, and this is great. We're actually going to have cousins that we can do stuff with." So that was great. (Nadia)

Many families will combine rituals learned from their biological and stepfamilies along with those from the previous nuclear family in the formation of new traditions providing a positive influence on the establishment of both a sense of family and legitimacy.

The very idea of legitimacy becomes important to women, who in the past have not been able to acknowledge their families in public. For many women in this study being able to marry their same-sex partner was an important act of legitimizing the family unit. Legal marriage is an important way that birth mothers communicate legitimacy to the children. They saw the act of marriage as a demonstration of commitment to the family unit.

An undercurrent noted throughout the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily is the effort by all of the members of the family to protect each other. The act of protecting takes many forms and happens at many levels: intra-psychically, interpersonally, within the community and society at large. In the early stages of the process, stepmothers in this study are cautious about accepting the challenge of becoming a part of a family with children. Birth mothers are equally cautious as they consider the fit of the new intimate partner with the children. Women coming out into this new relationship take some time to acknowledge and come to terms with their own sexual orientation. They disclose to others, especially their children once they have become more comfortable with being lesbian. The process of coming out to themselves and then to their children is very intentional, occurring after much reflection about the pros and cons of both living a lesbian life and the manner in which they disclose to the children.

The most overt form of protection is family members speaking out when faced with heterosexism or homophobia. Mothers protect the children from potential stigma by speaking with teachers, coaches, and care providers in an effort to explain the unique family configuration. When feelings of legitimacy are at their lowest, birth and stepmothers will encourage interactions with outsiders they are fairly certain will be positive and affirming. Mothers, recognizing the potential for marginalization, help to smooth the way for children by purposefully having a conversation with them about the reactions they may encounter. In doing so, the women work to explain the unique make-up of the family, educating the children and outsiders about the family and its legitimacy. Families with children entering the school system for the first time make a point of introducing themselves to the kindergarten teacher. Mothers recognize the risk of doing so and hope that by accepting the possibility of derision and rejection they might deflect or reduce the amount of heterosexism and homophobia experienced by their children. Mothers will further attempt to protect the children by explaining to them the possibility that not everyone is as accepting of different family configurations and that their family may look different to other families they come into contact with.

Families encounter many positive experiences during interactions with people and systems that *are* accepting. A parent was pleasantly surprised when she went to pick up her son from school. After asking a teacher how he was doing in school she received an overwhelmingly positive response; she saw this response as a reminder that society is slowly improving in the acceptance of diversity.

“Oh you are Louise [PARENT], he talks about you all the time!” because he has no problem saying that we are part of his life, I just don’t think, it’s not the same. Every generation it gets easier and they don’t have to do so much explaining.
(Louise)

Members of the family find unique ways to protect themselves and each other from experiencing stigma. Mothers are aware that the transition to a lesbian headed stepfamily may have deleterious effects on the lives of her children. While mothers and stepmothers may need to express dismay at any homophobic comments or behaviour of the other nuclear parent, they will continue to protect his status in the eyes of the children by doing so when the children are not present. The challenges experienced by children in transitioning between the nuclear family and the new lesbian stepfamily can be difficult for them to understand. In situations where the other nuclear parent has chosen to withdraw from being an active parent, mothers try to protect the image of a “good parent” for the children. By protecting children from hearing the other nuclear parent being criticized, mothers may decrease feelings of competing loyalty children experience as they move from one house to the other.

In some situations, often in more rural areas, mothers suggest to the children that they not divulge the nature of the family to outsiders. This protective strategy occurs with women whose sense of legitimacy is outweighed by anxiety over discrimination within the community. For the children in this study, strategies of protecting the family are frequently motivated by a strong sense of family loyalty and a desire to overcome or ignore any disapproval from outsiders that often contribute to feelings of guilt and shame.

Further, much of the stress for children comes from finding themselves in conflict with society's heteronormative understanding of family.

Older children who overhear friends, peers, or classmates speak about being gay in a derisive manner may delay disclosing the nature of their family. Building up an arsenal of strategies and skills used to counter the stigma takes some time and happens slowly when faced with multiple negative disclosure interactions. While this experience is a difficult one for older children, who often are desperate to fit in with a peer group, they frequently delay divulging the experiences or concerns to their mothers. Children may have achieved a personal sense of comfort and acceptance for their birth mother's identity, and do not want their mothers to know that becoming lesbian has in any way negatively affected them. In this way, the children protect the birth mothers from worrying about the less than pleasant experiences of stigma.

Younger children are often more open and forthcoming about their lesbian headed stepfamily than adolescents are. Adolescents have greater difficulty with disclosing family identity as a result of being more aware of the general social attitudes towards members of sexual minorities. A participant mother in this study was stunned when one of her children divulged a negative school experience as she had no idea that any of her children had experienced any stigmatization. Due to the somewhat negative and homophobic atmosphere of his school, her son voiced his need to solidify his own identity prior to being able to disclose with comfort to others:

And I remember struggling with that [disclosing] and kind of keeping it to myself until I was okay with my own sexuality and then it didn't really matter at all

anymore. And I remember FRIEND, . . . she was vocal about it [having a lesbian mother] and she had come under criticism about it from other people so I, seeing that I was like “Oh, I shouldn’t tell anyone because it is bad [will incur stigma]”.

(Justin)

Building the bonds is not something that happens only within the immediate family; rather it includes relationship development with extended families of both the mother and stepmother. For the lesbian headed stepfamily, being included in family events in the same way that the mothers’ siblings’ families are included sends a strong message of acceptance, demonstrating legitimacy of the family. *Building the bonds* includes developing stronger relationships within the family, negotiating disclosure interactions with friends and extended family, and developing a better and more robust sense of legitimacy as a family.

Evidence Informing Existing Literature

The second stage of the theory of *authenticating family* is *building the bonds*. This section will focus on transitions, parenting, legitimacy, responses of the children, and the influence of the social environment on the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

The findings of this study suggest that the stage of *building the bonds* supports the existing literature that describes various aspects of transition from nuclear to stepfamily by addressing the challenges experienced by the mother, stepmother and children in parenting as they engage in building new family bonds with each other. While there is a very well established body of literature covering stepfamily formation, it has focused

primarily on the heterosexual stepfamily (Cherlin, 1978; King, 2007; Stern, 1980; Sweeney, 2010; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). This study found that being a lesbian headed stepfamily posed its own unique issues of legitimacy. The influence of heterosexism on the lives of these families was evident, a finding that has not been reported in studies that make up a small but growing body of lesbian headed stepfamily research (Erera & Fredriksen, 1999; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Erera, 2003; Lorah, 2007; Lynch 2004).

The lesbian stepmother struggles to create bonds with the children as they are neither biologically nor legally connected. Her role as a parent becomes one that is contentious and that requires the utmost care and consideration. However, the role of stepmother is one that is fraught with feelings of being invisible and difficulty feeling legitimately associated with the children. This study informs the largely unexplored body of knowledge highlighting invisibility as a factor that impacts the legitimacy of stepmothers in lesbian headed stepfamilies. Lorah (2007) also found that lesbian stepmothers experienced feeling invisible, however, my study identified legitimacy as being a key factor in becoming 'visible' within the lesbian headed stepfamily.

The stage of *building the bonds* informs the literature that discusses the two most important factors contributing to successful lesbian headed stepfamilies, time and quality of parenting, two key components needing attention in step families also found by Edwards (2002) in her study of heterosexual stepfamilies in England. This study found that younger children have a greater affinity towards the stepmother when she demonstrates support for the birth mother, highlighting the importance of stability and commitment to the lesbian headed stepfamily. Similar findings have been found in both

the heterosexual (Edwards, 2002; King, 2007; Seigel & Perrin, 2013; Sweeney, 2010; Weaver & Coleman, 2010) and the lesbian stepfamily research (Bannerman, 2011; Weber, 2008). Establishing a sense of stability provides the family with an environment conducive to the creation of new family traditions. Developing a sense of family in the lesbian headed stepfamily happens as a result of multiple micro-transitions within the family that are similar to the heterosexual stepfamily evolution that is “marked by alternating periods of stability and change . . . and a fundamental experience of sharing the same universe of experience” (Molinari et al., 2010, p. 238).

In *building the bonds* lesbian headed stepfamilies establish more realistic goals that support the foundation of new expectations of each other. With the establishment of this foundation, they are able to form beginning bonds among the members of the family. The findings of this study demonstrate that by using all that has been learned to support the development of growing relationships contributes a solid sense of becoming a family, a finding that is similar in the blended family literature (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001).

The stage of *building the bonds* includes significant contributions to the existing body of parenting knowledge. The birth mothers in this study conveyed hesitation to share parenting with the stepmother that is in part due to the dominant social understanding of motherhood that suggests relinquishing responsibility for her children is historically viewed as being neglectful and positions the mother against the deified position of the “good” mother (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Erera, 2003; Wright, 1998). Birth mothers in stepfamilies often feel caught in the untenable position of being the mediator

as they struggle with the competing demands on their attention from the various members of the family. Birth mothers in this study were sometimes surprised by the fact that including another woman in the family did not alleviate the demands on her time and attention. In studies by Lynch (2004) and Nelson (1996) of lesbian stepfamilies, similar findings support what I found in this study. The birth mother remains the “go-to” parent regardless of the ability of the stepmother to build bonds with the children.

The theory of *authenticating family* informs the literature addressing lesbian stepmother and child relationships, noting that it is not uncommon for disagreements between the stepparent and child to be negotiated through the birth mother and that this can be emotionally taxing for the biological parent. Stepmothers are surprised by the amount of time the children require of the birth mother, a phenomenon that was also found by Nelson (1996). Despite often having little knowledge of how to create ties to the children, stepmothers willing to take on the role of parent are challenged to find unique ways to build relationships with their partner’s children. One strategy was to carve out one-on-one time with each child so that relationships have the opportunity to develop, a finding that is supported by a paper examining the lesbian stepfamily by Fredriksen-Goldsen and Erera (2003). The findings of my study found that lesbian birth mothers and stepmothers were acutely aware of having very few role models to emulate when parenting together for the first time. This finding was alluded to in studies by Hall and Kitson (2000) and Lynch (2004) but the importance of role models was not articulated specifically.

One of the most frequent misconceptions about assimilating into the new family is believing that the present family will follow similar patterns as their own birth families (Church, 2004). Yet, relationships within lesbian headed stepfamilies in this study were identified as tending to be adaptive, flexible, and often more cooperative, allowing for resolution of such issues as role ambiguity, conflict, and the division of responsibilities along aptitude rather than gender lines as was found in other studies (Erera & Fredriksen, 1999; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Erera, 2003; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Lynch, 2004; McCann & Delmonte, 2005; Wright, 1998). The women in this study frequently commented that they recognized the need for dedicated couple time, the challenge with carving out the time, and that the relationship was far more cooperative than the previous heterosexual relationship had been.

The responses of the children vary depending on their age at the time of the formation of the new lesbian headed stepfamily. The process of *building the bonds* contributes to the existing literature investigating the impact that the age of children plays in the transition to the new family. Here, the younger the children are at the time of the inception of the new family, the more likely they are to build relationships and perceive the stepmother as a family member and parent. Schmeekle et al. (2006) in their study of adult children's perceptions of stepparents support the present findings about age of the children despite the fact that their study included only heterosexual family.

The luxury of time and the openness of young children are positive factors highlighted by the lesbian stepfamilies in this study in the evolution of family. While younger children have fewer problems in accepting stepmothers, adolescents have a

better developed sense of themselves, their understanding of family, and who they include in it. What makes this significant is that adolescents had more opportunities to internalize the dominant understanding of family that conflicts with the configuration of their lesbian headed stepfamily. Very few researchers have included the voices of children, making these findings new and additive for the existing lesbian headed stepfamily literature.

Adolescents are concerned about experiencing homophobia. As a result they develop strategies of non-disclosure to enhance chances of achieving in-group acceptance with peers and to protect their birth mothers from discovering the turbulent transitions they may experience. This finding is similar to those of a Canadian study about adolescents' perspectives of living in lesbian headed stepfamilies (Robitaille & Saint Jacques, 2009) and an American study with a similar purpose (Welsh, 2011). Adolescents found that "social prejudices about the family structure represented a major difficulty" but also noted that being older helped them deal with the prejudice and discrimination as they matured and were able to develop and operationalize strategies used to counter the stigma (Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009, p.436). Better understanding of the experiences of discrimination for children of various backgrounds can be achieved using a developmental model cited in a study by Spears-Brown and Bigler (2005). They identified three key components affecting a child's perception of discrimination, which were similar to those experienced by the children in my study: cognitive development, situational context, and individual differences.

The third concept to address is legitimacy. In many cases lesbian headed stepfamilies are dealing with a sense of loss of legitimacy, however, by the end of *building the bonds*, many are regaining it. The theory of *authenticating family* informs the existing literature exploring and describing the efforts of mothers in lesbian headed stepfamilies to protect their children from marginalization. The concept of legitimacy was a significant finding in this study. Although it has been alluded to in other studies (Hall & Kitson, 2000; Lorah, 2007; Lynch, 2000), the connection between legitimacy and the ability to confront disclosing interactions has not been made until now.

Lesbian birth mothers and stepmothers make a special effort to discuss family configuration with teachers as a way of ensuring safety of the children, especially in the early period of family formation before coping skills have been developed , findings that are supported by existing lesbian family literature (Breshears, 2011; Lee, 2010; Welsh, 2011). Many schools in the USA remain fairly non-inclusive of diversity. Openness or attempts to introduce diversity to the classroom are spearheaded by individual teachers with a specific interest in, or previous exposure to, gay family inclusion, understanding that they frequently do not have the support of the administration nor many other parents (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008). The findings of this study showed mothers' need to forewarn the children about outsiders' potentially negative attitudes. Dialogue between lesbian parents and the children supported the development of coping mechanisms as the best defense against discrimination. This finding is consistent with other studies (Breshears, 2011; Litovich & Langhout, 2004). Members of the lesbian

headed stepfamily are better prepared to deal with the negative experiences of disclosing to outsiders when they nurture strength, conviction, and belief in self.

The legitimacy of the family comes into question when family members who have experienced family in a heterosexual context become acutely aware of having legitimacy called into question by virtue of being a member of a lesbian headed stepfamily (Hall & Kitson, 2000). Families use various strategies when beginning to disclose to those outside the immediate family. The process of *trialing recognition* for lesbian headed stepfamilies copies the process of coming-out by individuals; beginning cautiously and continuing carefully (Lynch, 2004; Perlesz et al., 2006b; Rickards & Wuest, 2006).

Trialing recognition informs the existing literature that explores how families disclose sexual orientation to others. Families feel it is important to achieve public acknowledgement of their identity as a family. “Not to have this recognized within the public domain is a form of disqualification of the family, and without this recognition these families cannot be fully authentic” (Perlesz et al., 2006b, p. 61). This study found that the role of the extended family was vital in providing support to the lesbian headed stepfamily and informs the existing literature that describes the importance of support and its part in legitimizing the existence of the lesbian headed stepfamily (Rickards & Wuest, 2006).

Building the bonds informs the literature that describes the role society has in influencing the experiences of being a lesbian headed stepfamily. Access to same sex marriage communicates legitimacy. Women living in countries where same-sex marriage is not yet legal often fear loss of custody resulting in their delaying disclosure until the

children are at the age of majority (Gramling, Carr, & McCain, 2000; Rickards, 2005). A challenge in disclosing for lesbian headed stepfamilies is a lack of language that can be used that fits their lived experiences, something that has been found in previous research (Perlesz et al., 2006b). The findings of this study demonstrate that to counter the lack of language, families begin to “do family” in public settings, engaging in traditional family behaviours as a way of communicating legitimacy to outsiders, a finding that is similar to the research by Ryan and Berkowitz (2009).

For the lesbian headed stepfamilies in this study, *building the bonds* is a crucial stage to achieve, enabling movement forward to enhancing family evolution. Having developed a strong sense of themselves as a family, the family is able to move beyond the safety of the home in demonstrating aptitude for successfully navigating continuous interactions with outsiders. Individual members of the family work to assimilate an identity as a lesbian headed stepfamily, culminating in a global understanding of family because of each person’s understanding first as an individual and second as a result of the many shared experiences. Developing the confidence and a strong sense of legitimacy is the catalyst that propels the family forward to *thriving*, the final stage of *authenticating family*, where they will continue to build on the sense of legitimacy through continued disclosing interactions while helping outsiders to accept and acknowledge the lesbian headed stepfamily.

Thriving

The majority of action in this stage takes place outside the family home. In the process of *authenticating family*, lesbian headed stepfamilies develop an identity as a

family. At this time in the evolution of the family they continue to work towards regaining and solidifying legitimacy through multiple recurrent disclosing interactions with others. Members of the family have established numerous relationships with each other, with extended family, and with people who are outside of the family circle. As a result of the work to regain identity as a legitimate family within the community, families become more confident in the ability to disclose to others the nature of the family despite having been confronted with doubt and misconceptions about whether or not their family is “real”. A participant stepmother, having been out for many years and having developed a strong sense of identity, described her thoughts about the reactions of other people.

I mean, we went on vacation as a family and no one ever batted an eyelash about that and we went a lot of places as a family. I don't, but again, I'm probably oblivious to that because I am a little egotistical and self-assured and if you're not going to accept it, that's not my problem, you need to go home and think about it and I hope you do, but I'm not, I don't really care. (Charlene)

The transitions that the family has experienced now make the work easier and limit the struggles to build new family relationships and develop multiple skills and strategies. Each person within the family copes with the on-going experiences of disclosure that have been important parts of the family's ability to successfully navigate the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The family is stronger now than they were when they began the new lesbian headed stepfamily relationship. They have weathered challenges that have helped them to grow stronger.

As lesbians, the birth mothers and stepmothers have experienced the difference between family of choice and biological family. In most instances the biological families of the birth mothers and stepmothers have fulfilled various physical and emotional needs while growing up; most continue to support the lesbian headed stepfamily while others struggle with acceptance. The make-up of the family of choice is based on the decisions and options of the new lesbian headed stepfamily. As a result there is often an increased sense of value in being included in the family of choice because of the amount of control over who is included. This final stage of *authenticating family* includes two sub-processes: *confronting the three-headed monster* and *'see our family the way we created it'*.

Confronting the Three-Headed Monster

Our daughter had a couple of friends who didn't, whose parents decided they couldn't come to our house any more . . . I asked DAUGHTER, "Do you think part of it is because we're gay?", her response "oh yeah!". However, since we have actually met these parents, I think once they realize you're not three-headed monsters, they sort of go, "Oh, okay then!" (Page)

The three-headed monster represents the image and assumptions those outside the new lesbian headed stepfamily have of what constitutes 'a lesbian'. Families in this sub-process find that as they disclose the nature of their family to outsiders, people are taken aback not by the strangeness, but by the normalcy of the mother, stepmother, and children and of the family functioning. Family members discover that until outsiders become knowingly acquainted with a lesbian they often continue to hold a distorted and

unfounded understanding of what a lesbian and her family might look like. Families find it necessary to dispel these misconceptions as they disclose family identity. However, the perpetual outing that occurs as encounters with outsiders ensue is not always easy for all families. Coming-out experiences as a family feel different for the ‘novice’ lesbian birth mother than for someone who has been out longer. Having been out longer, some women have already gone through losing and regaining credibility and are now able to disclose with less trepidation.

That [perpetual outing] definitely happens, it happens, I don’t know I feel it happens more to Cathy or she feels aggrieved by it more or it happens more. She’s only come out in the last few years where I have been out since I was eighteen so you know just what I see and what I pay attention to, and I’m a lot more brazen about it anyway, you know? My blood pressure doesn’t rise when I randomly throw out “my girlfriend” in a conversation with a stranger. It just doesn’t, but with her it still really does but mostly because she is incredibly shy and newly out and so this rich combination of terror and she notices it a lot and notices that she is coming out again and again and again and I keep having to point out “nothing bad has happened to you, right? You broke out of the conversation and you’re terrified but no one reacts or says anything . . . or pulls their children away.

Nothing happens, you can probably relax”. (Daisy)

Multiple disclosures inform mothers’ sense of self, which in turn influences how they assess and negotiate any and all future situations requiring disclosure. Many mothers and children require time and more experience to become comfortable when disclosing.

The ability to negotiate frequent episodes of coming-out is not yet fully developed. With each subsequent interaction of having to disclose family identity as a lesbian headed stepfamily, members of the family gain additional skills and strategies.

The lack of skills, strategies, and experience with navigating disclosure interactions often creates a situation in which mothers and children tend to expect or anticipate problems that rarely materialize. Being able to use the skills learned from previous disclosure interactions many begin to realize greater comfort in disclosing and being out in public situations. A participant explains:

We take him to camp every year, every summer and it's always us who are camping and that never seems to be an issue where we stand. You know I'm his mother, this is my partner. We are the ones picking him up. Nobody seems to care and we have had him at different camps, not the same one every year, different camps, never have had a problem with that. (Betty)

All members of the family, at one time or another are frequently and pleasantly surprised by the absence of conflict. Not surprisingly, most of the children who engaged in disclosing noted that their friends realized how normal the family was as a result of having spent some time with them.

Prior to developing comfort with being lesbian or being in a lesbian headed stepfamily, birth mother, stepmother and children must deal with intra-personal experiences of internalizing *confronting the three-headed monster*. As a result of living in a society that has in many ways publicly denigrated LGBT communities, family members can fall prey to these influences ultimately incorporating and often internalizing a sense

of shame. Through interactions with each other, they come to terms with some of these misconceptions and find that disclosing to others becomes easier while being able to dispel the misconceptions. In overcoming the socially constructed understanding of LGBT people as inferior to others, they realize that doing so provides them with a stronger sense of personal legitimacy. They are self-aware of who they were prior to becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily and now, as a result of becoming a member of this family, they realize the only change is the mother's sexual orientation, which is insufficient to disallow legitimacy. The families whose mothers were in a lesbian relationship at the time of their birth contend with having to deal with the stigma of being in a stepfamily and less so as part of a sexual minority family.

Continuing positive interactions with extended family serve to bolster feelings of legitimacy for members of the family. Families of birth mothers seem to accept and acknowledge the lesbian headed stepfamily more readily than do families of stepmothers. The fact that the birth mother has provided grandchildren, nieces and nephews may make the process of acceptance easier for them - extended families are hesitant to lose these highly valued familial relationships. Because most stepmothers have lived the greater part of their lives as lesbians without bringing children into their birth family relationship, many of their families have been able to conceal or ignore their daughter's identity as lesbian. In this study, a stepmother explains the disappointment she felt with her family.

So we have to show that, you know, we're a family and, but yet, I think probably the most negative we have gotten was from my family. It was just so totally weird because they knew I was a lesbian a long time ago, . . . I mean she [sister] asked

me once why couldn't I just check it at the door when I came there? "Are you serious? You want me to act like this is not my family just because it makes you uncomfortable?" And that I think is the point where we stopped taking our kids there because it was just, they didn't need to have that. (Jane)

The birth families of the stepmothers are tasked with figuring out what relationship they can have with their family members' partner and children. It can be challenging to decipher exactly how the extended family is related to the children when there are clearly no biological or legal connections. Regardless of the legal aspects of kinship, accepting, welcoming, and acknowledging the lesbian headed stepfamily conveys a strong sense of legitimacy. Families who experienced dramatically different levels of acceptance from each of the extended families found it important to sit down with the children and discuss the situation. A stepmother who had little in the way of extended family explains the positive yet new experience of having an extended family:

...and suddenly because we are living together, I pretty much didn't have family or had been far, far away from family, but suddenly I had a father-in-law and his wife who are absolutely delightful and very supportive but you know every Sunday we would go out to their house and then there was grandma [partner's mother] and her husband and we were going to their house to visit as well.

(Charlene)

Extended families, who may at first be hesitant, eventually want to talk about their 'grandchildren' with outsiders. Being able to define the relationships and becoming

comfortable with disclosing the relationship seems to make the transition to acceptance smoother for the parents of both the birth mothers and stepmothers.

Variations in how people navigate this sub-process are influenced by the interactions they have first with themselves during *building the bonds* and now with those within the extended family circle and with outsiders. Being accepted by extended family is important in being able to feel legitimate. Acceptance by those further outside the extended family is equally important. Finding acceptance in a church can be unexpected, troubling, and comforting when contrasted with having been made to feel unwelcome in a church that lesbian headed stepfamilies were previously affiliated with. The contrast in experiences informs sense of self for the members of the lesbian headed stepfamily by acknowledging that while there may be those who are not ready to accept the lesbian headed stepfamily, other religious institutions are ready and working to make the family feel welcome. Similarly, school systems that do not make it obvious that all family configurations are acceptable can create anxiety for the lesbian headed stepfamily. Using skills learned to protect each other, one participant mother explained the process they went through to ensure that first the daycare and eventually the school system understood from the start the nature of their family.

No, I did it at daycare and when I touch base with the teachers in the beginning I always make very sure on the information form. I cross out 'father', you know, I don't leave anything to chance and if I have to say something a little firmer I will and when they get the message we drop it because it's not, I just don't believe in

drawing more attention. It's just normal. Once you understand, the discrimination should just disappear. (Sybil)

Interactions with outsiders such as those in the education and health care system are equally important in informing the development of a sense of legitimacy for the lesbian headed stepfamily. As previously mentioned, individual teachers working within the school system tend to be welcoming and accepting of diversity in family make-up; however, the education system they work in does not appear to have kept abreast with the acceptance of the teachers.

Birth mothers in this study note that while most of the teachers seem to have little difficulty in acknowledging the lesbian stepfamily configuration, the bigger problem is the education system itself that develops the forms and policies that often do not allow for the option of having two mothers or two fathers. Children spend a third of their day in the school system; having positive and accepting people for them to interact with is vital to the comfort of the mother and the wellbeing of the children. In a deliberate act of protection, mothers ensure the safety of their children by engaging in conversations with specific teachers prior to or during the first few weeks of the school year.

Members of the lesbian headed stepfamily eventually feel a certain amount of responsibility to help bring awareness about being gay to the attention of those with whom they interact. Doing so is seen as an effort to educate people and to normalize the lesbian headed stepfamily identity. A son explained his experiences at school, feeling that he had to bring to other's attention something the school system was failing to do.

Not so much with me, I actually felt that I was educating my friends about being open and being okay with it because you know, we come from the Maritimes, so like I don't know it wasn't really talked about and sex education wasn't a really, like I remember my sex education in middle school and it was a joke. (Travis)

Normalizing family identity acts as an element of protection against experiencing homophobia and/or heterosexism. Members of the family believe that people's opinions about being gay change from one of ignorance to enlightenment, and hopefully, acceptance, when they meet someone from an LGBT community and learn that they are not the 'three-headed monster' assumed to embody lesbian identity.

Confronting the three-headed monster is the last sub-process before '*see our family the way we created it*'. It is experienced as the testing ground for achieving a stronger sense of legitimacy as a family and of educating and dispelling the myths and misconceptions that perpetuate negative understandings of being a member of a lesbian headed stepfamily. In the final sub-process, '*see our family the way we created it*'; families use the toolbox of parenting, communication and coping skills and strategies gained over the course of the process of *authenticating family*. Multiple interactions with family and the community facilitate embarking on being open about being part of a lesbian headed stepfamily and demanding to be recognized as legitimate members of society.

See Our Family the Way We Created It

At the beginning of lesbian headed stepfamily existence, the sense of being a legitimate family may seem far from the minds of the family members. Much work is yet

to be accomplished before being able to both accept themselves as legitimate and to demand acknowledgement from extended family members and outsiders. Movement through the processes of family identity development requires a significant amount of work for all members of the family. Lesbian headed stepfamilies work to build a new understanding of themselves as a family, through self-awareness and repeated interactions that expand with a rippling effect from within, to each other, to other immediate family, extended family, and finally outsiders. How lesbian headed stepfamilies define themselves as family was as diverse as the families themselves, evolving as a result of interactions with each other, family members, friends, and supportive others in their lives. In this study, a stepmother shared her frustration about having to explain how she was connected to her stepchildren: “A lot of it has to do with being out too. Then like, you can’t introduce yourself [a woman] to somebody, as a parent to a child who you didn’t give birth to, without having to explain what that [relationship] was” (Betty). Having to explain how she is connected to the children diminishes the stepmother’s position because the general public typically understands her connection to the children as not having any legitimacy or value. However, most stepmothers who have contributed to the lives of children feel a real connection to the children that is not defined by the heteronormative and socially constructed understanding of family relations.

In this sub-process, when the family explains to outsiders the configuration of the family they are no longer willing to accept negative reactions but rather demand to be acknowledged as legitimate and not regarded as abhorrent. As one mother stated:

“You’re [outsiders] going to be forced to see our family the way we do and I think that was a strong message” (Anna). Many of the parents and children have developed sufficient skills, strategies, and their own internal sense of legitimacy to enable them to stand up to anyone who questions the family’s legitimacy. The lesbian headed stepfamily continues to interact with numerous outsiders during day-to-day family life. By this point, however, they have established a sense of legitimacy as a family recognizing the differences between theirs and other families in society. The family has identified and acknowledged solid relationships among each other, braved the world outside the family home, confronted those individuals who demonstrate disdain and a lack of understanding about the family, and are now able to be in the world, as a family, cohesive, strong and proud. They are no longer willing to hide, lie, conform, or adapt in order to nullify their identity simply to assuage the sensitivities of others. What remains is the fact that being lesbian continues to make them more susceptible to questions about family configuration. In this study, a participant mother explains how her former partner never allowed public opinion to create a situation in which the family could be devalued or ashamed of themselves.

I mean that I think from a political perspective that’s the value of somebody like EX. It’s that she wouldn’t let the children, she wouldn’t let Otis, Walden and Abbie see our family in any way but the way we created it for them or the way she and then me, because it took me a while, but the way we saw it. (Anna)

Expectations for acknowledgment as legitimate from those outside the lesbian headed stepfamily encompass multiple facets of acceptance. Parents notice

acknowledgment of legitimacy when recognized by those within the community. For stepmothers this recognition occurs when accompanying children to sporting or school events, interacting with the parents of their children's friends, or coming into contact with the general public. In explaining her involvement in the children's social activities, a stepmother identifies the ability to blur 'mother' status: "People see us with the kids, so I've coached Gareth's basketball team, I've coached Holly's soccer team and sometimes I take them to their activities and sometimes it is Pam who takes them, we are both their mothers" (Page). The fact that either woman can be misconstrued as the mother by virtue of being a woman with child bearing capacity is not lost.

A mother described the strategy developed by her and the co-mother to counter the need by others to define and label each woman's role: "We would go into the school system and the teachers would say "which one of you is the mother?" our answer was always "we both are!" (Anna). In fact, it was often noted that forcing people to not make assumptions seemed to help outsiders gradually accept the lesbian identity more readily. People who see a woman in the role of nurturer or caregiver naturally assume that she must be the mother. While this assumption may be true, there are a number of occasions when it is not. The fact that the stepmother is seen to nurture and care for the children informs her that members of the community often equate having children with nurturing and being a family, regardless of the fact that both parents are women.

We are in rural Maritimes and I would say that predominantly our neighbors are rural Maritimers and they have been, we're a couple and they invite us to anything that they would invite any other neighbor to. I think in some ways having children

has facilitated that in a way that wouldn't have happened if we weren't [a family].

(Delia)

Children experience acknowledgment of individual and family legitimacy from accepting peers whose reaction is positive or neutral when the identity of the mothers has been explained. Children also feel a sense of legitimacy when they are included in extended family activities. Children with heterosexual nuclear family background and whose fathers acknowledge the lesbian headed stepfamily, experience a special sense of legitimacy by having his approval. It is important for the children to be able to continue the relationship with their father. They find it significantly easier when the father does not object to the legitimacy of the lesbian headed stepfamily. A father is more likely to be accepting when he sees that his children are happy and well-adjusted. Children whose father is not accepting of the lesbian relationship of the mother experience significant challenges in transitioning from one family to the other. The negativity and disparaging words received from the father about the lesbian relationship of the mother creates a schism in parental loyalties resulting in the children either questioning the legitimacy of the lesbian headed stepfamily or beginning to distance themselves from the father.

Families who have arrived at this stage of *authenticating family* have developed a sense of family, establishing and fixing upon a new identity as legitimate. The expectation is that they will be accepted by society at large. Families find it interesting when outsiders assume that the way they live is akin to being hedonistic or bohemian, when in fact they have laundry to do, homework to complete, groceries to buy, joys and sorrows, and checkbooks to balance; as mundane and as normal as any other family.

My mother said something, “I don’t like your lifestyle”. My partner’s response to that, because she did have a great sense of humor was “what friggin’ lifestyle? We’re paying the mortgage and raising kids like everybody else.” (Gilda)

Mothers find that confronting socially constructed heterosexism is easier later in the relationship because they are armed with a tool box of skills and strategies and a solid foundation of having a sense of self as legitimate. They do not hesitate to change the designations on forms that come from the school in order to accommodate the two-mother family that they are. They willingly change the next of kin designation on legal and financial documents so that the same-sex partner is recognized as the person who will be charged with the responsibility of making decisions in the event they are not able. They do not hesitate to include the family in any employment benefits, a participant stepmother was overcome with emotion at the prospect of being able to do so.

When I started my job almost two months ago and I was literally in tears when I was filling out the paper because for the first time in my life I was married and I had dependents. And I signed my daughters up for my health insurance and I have never been able to do that and I was just, I was sitting at the kitchen table and I was filling out these forms and I just started crying might not seem like a big thing to everybody but it was *huge* for me. Because all of a sudden I was legitimate, I was a legitimate parent, right? (Jane)

For many, getting married is the final public announcement of commitment and a very important event for the entire family. Lesbian headed stepfamilies rejoice at being able to stand together before family and friends and commit their love to each other,

declaring for all to see that they are a legitimate family under the eyes of the law. For many families including the children in the ceremony is of the utmost importance. Confirming for each of the members of the family that while they may not be related through blood they are now related through the commitment to each other. Extended families also find that being part of the celebration gives them reason to embrace the stepmother or birth mother in their lives. The act of getting married is viewed as a public declaration of their status as a legitimate family. The legal connection imparts one more layer of normalcy for the lesbian headed stepfamily.

'See our family the way we created it' is the final sub-process of *authenticating family*. Lesbian headed stepfamilies who reach this stage are able to stand proud, to declare themselves a family and to demand that others recognize them as such. They demand that they not be asked to conform, bend, or reshape the family to suit the needs and sensitivities of people who are not prepared to accept that lesbians can and do form families. Anna explained her journey in arriving at this point: "I was struggling through the process, but if nothing else that was the gift that I got from the struggle, to stand up and be proud, "don't let people paint your family in their description, be in control." Demanding a place that is not on the margins but rather part of the community is something they now have come to understand as their right to be a part of. A young man of Arabic descent recently highlighted the impact of discrimination and the joy of getting beyond it in an online blog:

The simple things, the human things. So attainable to so many. While to others it's like . . . they never have that. Why? Are we not worthy of the same rights as

you have? That's the good thing about families— you can create your own. Your friends, gay and straight, become your family. A family that accepts you for who you are. Can't wait for our own Christmas dinners. The dinners you don't have to be something you're not. Dinners where, in all sense of the word, you come as you are (Beirut Boy Blog, 2013).

Achieving a sense of comfort in coming to terms with becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily sometimes requires a great deal of struggle and insight along the journey. Some women, both birth mothers and stepmothers, are able to recognize the journey they and their children are on, and while it has caused the loss of the sense of legitimacy it has contributed to a need to rebuild the feelings of being an authentic family. Arriving has been as much about the journey as it has been about carving out space in society where the family feels they belong. The journey has provided the lesbian headed stepfamily with the opportunity to face adversity and stigmatization and to be able to move beyond that to a stronger and more confident identity. As one birth mother quoted in a collection of lesbian parenting stories stated:

When people ask about my life I describe my family as 'alternative', and, depending on the circumstances, I am apologetic or proud. In my heart I believe that I have done the best that I could to create a situation that allows my children to live, grow and be free, surrounded by the adults who love them most in the world. And I am a lesbian. Jane and I do not live a double life. We share one life of love (Rounthwaite & Wynne, 1997, p. 97).

For the lesbian headed stepfamilies who reach this stage, birth mothers and stepmothers realize the degree of increased honesty, openness and genuineness of the expressed emotions within and among members of the family. As a result of having been responsible for the significant transitions of the family, birth mothers have made a concerted effort throughout the process to improve or maintain the communication between them and the children. She is able to identify improved family dynamics as a result of comparing the present family with the original or nuclear family. Family members enjoy greater amounts and quality of communication, especially with regard to the sharing of emotions.

While children may recognize the potential for discrimination, they prefer to focus on the benefits of being part of a lesbian headed stepfamily because of the opportunity to be more accepting of diversity. Children learn from observing the mothers and stepmothers as they model healthy interactions with each other and those outside the immediate family. All the members of the lesbian headed stepfamily recognize that as a result of the frequent and continuous interactions with those outside the family they have and will continue to gain skills and strategies that contribute to increased comfort in being able to deal with all subsequent disclosing interactions. Children learn to value equality in relationships as well as respect and acceptance for people, regardless of religious, cultural or sexual background.

Lesbian headed stepfamilies identify changes to the family as a result of addressing issues of legitimacy while working through the basic social process of *authenticating family*. They note that the family feels strong, more content, and settled. In

successfully navigating a potentially difficult process they have developed new skills and strategies for dealing with difficult situations. Families respond to the challenges of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily, and in doing so, experience opportunities contributing to change and ultimately growth. The impetus for positive change is the desire to maintain the kinship relationships they are a part of while valuing the support they provide and are provided. Willingness to protect each other, do the work of authenticating and building a more cohesive family unit are rewarded with an overall better sense of themselves as individuals and as a family unit. Each member of the family grows and changes; while maintaining individual and distinct identities they support and protect each other as a whole.

Multiple acts of protecting continue to be evident in lesbian headed stepfamilies. Members of the family remain alert to new situations, assessing for potential negativity. As a part of the skills and strategies generated from the disclosure interactions, members of the lesbian headed stepfamily learn when and how to be alert to and protect each other from stigmatization. While mothers will make a point of conveying the legitimacy of the family through acts of mothering, it is not until they themselves experience positive interactions that the children truly believe and can begin to operationalize the value and rights of the family to be seen as legitimate. Lesbian partners protect each other from the effects of stigmatization when the partner who has been out longer and is more comfortable with being out negotiates untested interactions on behalf of her partner. Having worked to develop and affirm a sense of legitimacy, the lesbian headed

stepfamily settles into their lives, knowing they will continue to encounter situations that will challenge the family's identity as legitimate.

Evidence Informing Existing Literature

The third and final stage of *authenticating family* is *thriving*. This section will address the same focus areas; transitions, parenting, legitimacy, reaction of the children, and the influence of the social environment on the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily demonstrating how the theory of *authenticating family* informs and adds to the existing literature.

The findings from this study support the concept of transition in the final stage of *authenticating family*; *thriving* informs the existing literature that addresses lesbian families who struggle to define themselves as family, finding that with time and negotiation family relationships can be established and strengthened. Swainson and Tasker (2005) demonstrated how a tool originally created for use with heterosexual families in helping them define their family is not fit for use with lesbian families. Illustrating the need to acknowledge and accommodate the unique experiences of lesbian headed stepfamilies. This study found the lesbian headed stepfamily has faced adversity and the possibility of marginalization in dealing with heterosexism. Rather than allow these situations to be a threat to the legitimacy of the family, the skills and strategies developed become the foundation for an opportunity to gain a better understanding of themselves and become better prepared to help others see and acknowledge their legitimacy. This study also found while resilience suggests the ability to return to a prior state of being, thriving goes further by demonstrating growth in becoming stronger than

before the stressful situation as found by Carver (1998) and O’Leary and Ickovics (1995) in some of the foundational writing about thriving.

The findings from this study about the process of *thriving* show that much of the attention for members of the lesbian headed stepfamily is on gaining improved ability to counter heterosexism and stigma. While parenting remains a top priority within the family it is not the primary focus of *thriving*. The focus of parenting in *thriving* informs the existing literature that addresses the importance of protecting children from adverse situations such as experiencing dramatically different levels of acceptance from members of the extended family. This study informs the existing literature that addresses lesbian headed stepfamilies with children who find that having children permits extended family and outsiders to more readily accept the two women and the children as a family - a finding that was similarly found by Swainson and Tasker (2005). In many ways, it seems to normalize their existence, gaining entrance into the community while helping outsiders arrive at a place of acceptance

Whereas many studies have investigated the ways in which LGBT people negotiate heterosexism and homophobia in relationships with extended family (Meezan & Rauch, 2005; Perlesz et al., 2006a; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009; Tasker & Granville, 2011), noting that resilience is a valuable trait (Oswald, 2002), none discussed the outcome in terms of thriving. This study found that encounters with discrimination often precipitated the birth mother and stepmother sitting down with the children to discuss strategies to deal with having family members who were inconsistent in their acceptance, a finding also reported by Hall and Kitson (2000) and Tasker and Granville (2011). By

giving children the opportunity to be critically reflective in teasing out the pieces and coming to their own decisions about being rejected, or accepted they develop a much stronger self-identity and are able to see that their family is neither deviant nor deserving of discrimination. Breshears' (2011) research seeking to better understand the communication patterns between lesbian parents and their children also reported the importance of parents arming their children with skills to counter homophobic interactions. This study adds to the existing literature by uncovering the way in which children in lesbian headed stepfamilies voiced concern about stigma and discrimination, a finding that echoes the research by Robitaille and Saint-Jacques (2009). However, as the children in this study developed increasing comfort with guidance from the mothers they were better able to navigate the ongoing and repetitive nature of disclosure interactions

For the children in lesbian headed stepfamilies having accepting peers made disclosing a much less threatening experience (Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009; Welsh, 2011). The knowledge gained from this theory provides new insight into the literature that seeks to investigate the way that children experience life with lesbian parents (Patterson, 2006; Tasker & Granville, 2011; Vyncke et al., 2011; Welsh, 2011). This study found that children eventually and with time and multiple interactions experience greater acceptance and less discrimination from their peers, need the on-going support of their mothers but frequently hide any negative experiences, and have more positive schooling experiences when they have gay-friendly peers.

Thriving represents the process of reclaiming legitimacy and being unwilling to accept anything less than inclusion from those outside the immediate family. Members of

the lesbian headed stepfamily have been able to develop strategies used in disclosure (Perlesz et al., 2006a; Perlesz et al., 2006b; Welsh, 2011). The findings of this study contribute knowledge about using strategies that exemplify pride as the most effective and easiest to enact. However, the person disclosing has to have a strong sense of self as legitimate in order to be able to counter any and all discrimination. Using “proud” disclosing strategies helps to dismantle the stigma and misconceptions about sexual minority families by demonstrating the “normalness” of the family and its right to being acknowledged. Another strategy used by adolescents is to passively disclose the family’s identity shifting the pressure off themselves and onto their parents and being able to observe how friends react when they figure it out, a finding that is supported by Welsh (2011), one of the few researchers to capture the voice of the adolescent living in lesbian headed families. The findings in my study support research that has investigated how passive disclosure involved ‘doing family’ as an important and performative expression demonstrating to outsiders the status and normalcy of their family (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009).

This study found that adolescents in lesbian headed stepfamilies experience varying amounts of psychological stress as they negotiate decisions around disclosure, expressing “an intense desire to have others understand the benefits of having gay and lesbian parents as they have experienced them” (Welsh, 2011, p. 66). While the study by Welsh (2011) included adolescents from multiple forms of lesbian headed families and not exclusively those from stepfamilies, the findings are similar to those of my study.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing lesbian headed stepfamily literature (Erera & Fredriksen 1999; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Erera, 2003; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Sweeney, 2010). For the mother and stepmother, having to explain who the birth mother is and who the stepmother is, especially when they are committed to parenting together creates stressors often prompting imaginative responses that bring levity to the situation while firmly indicating that details about who is the birth mother and who is the stepmother are irrelevant. In the end, recognizing and accepting that disclosure becomes a part of their lives that will not go away is vitally important to becoming comfortable and being able to decrease some of the stress of being from a lesbian headed stepfamily. The findings of research by Perlesz et al. (2006b) support the findings of my study that found that despite legalization of marriage for lesbians and gay men, lesbian headed stepfamilies in Canada's Maritime Provinces continue to need to find creative ways to navigate intrusive questioning about their families such as avoidance, confrontation, and the use of humour.

This study found that lesbian headed stepfamilies interact with family, friends, outsiders, and multiple service providers. *Thriving* informs existing literature and continues to highlight some of the challenges within society with regards to acceptance and prejudice. Lesbian headed stepfamilies found that they had to dispel misconceptions and deal with heterosexism as a result of health care providers who ignored lesbian headed stepfamily existence. Nursing students, schools of nursing, medical schools and other allied health provider educators have been found to be homophobic or lacking in the provision of sufficient important diversity content in their curricula (Beagan et al.,

2012; Eliason et al., 2010; Eliason, Donelan, & Randall, 1992; Eliason & Randall, 1991; Gray et al., 1992; Tate & Longo, 2004). Knowing someone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered often increases the acceptance and comfort in providing care to or working with an LGBT person (Eliason & Randall, 1991; Eliason et al., 1992). Fear and discomfort of health care providers often stem from being unfamiliar with LGBT communities, having little knowledge of how to provide care without being disrespectful, and believing the dominant discourse about the deviancy of being gay without thinking critically about the situation.

The findings in this study contradict much of the research that finds schools and the school system to be less than accepting of LGBT families. Families with children in the school system in this study expressed a sense of relief when the teachers they interacted with were clearly gay-positive and willing to extend themselves in creating a safe classroom environment for their children. The positive findings in this study may speak to the difference in the social and political landscape of Canada as opposed to education systems in other countries. The education system is equally inconsistent in providing a safe school environment for the children of lesbian parents. A study by Larabee and Kim (2010), reported that teachers in the USA often ignored situations of LGBT-related harassment. Lesbian mothers in New Zealand were acutely aware of the heteronormative nature of early childhood education (Lee, 2010). However, educators were keen to be inclusive of diversity once they knew that one of their students had two mothers. Teacher education programs like health care provider programs find that

teachers are frequently challenged to include gay and lesbian content in the curriculum due to a lack of training (Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008).

Finally, the dominant discourse that promotes heterosexism continues to erode the legitimacy of lesbian headed stepfamilies. The findings of this research inform existing literature that describes the many ways that societal influence impacts what is and is not acceptable. While the family headed by two women with children is not the norm in society, it is a reality and is occurring more frequently and with greater visibility as noted in Canadian studies by Bannerman (2011) and Rose (2012). Many of the mothers in this study recognized that getting married is the final public pronouncement of commitment and a very important event for the entire family, especially for the well-being of the children – findings also reported in many Canadian studies (Bannerman, 2011; Gaspard & Müller, 2013; MacIntosh et al., 2010; Rose, 2012). The understanding of the value of same-sex marriage to the well-being of children has prompted a position statement from the American Pediatric Association in an effort to make similar changes in the USA (Seigel & Perrin, 2013).

New and profound findings from this study are the importance of legitimacy and *authenticating family* in the lives of lesbian headed stepfamilies living in the Maritimes. Members of these families anticipate that by virtue of becoming acquainted with a lesbian family, outsiders will no longer engage in behaviour that is purposefully stigmatizing, or maintain homophobic or discriminatory attitudes. This study demonstrates that members of the lesbian headed stepfamilies who have reached this stage in family evolution are proactive in disclosing identity and open about being a member of a lesbian headed

stepfamily as opposed to passively allowing others to call into question the legitimacy of their family or waiting for the disclosure to surface passively in the process of interactions. Members of the lesbian headed stepfamily are able to confront those who are hesitant or struggling to see the family by guiding them towards acknowledgement and acceptance. They are able to help others in gaining some perspective on what it means to be a member of a lesbian headed stepfamily in today's society. Members of the lesbian headed stepfamily arrive at a sense of comfort and security as a result of the process of *authenticating family*, enforcing the affirmation of their identity as an authentic and legitimate family. They recognize that face a lifetime of negotiating interactions in which they have to make choices about disclosing their sexual minority status.

CHAPTER VI

Implications

In this chapter I discuss the implications of the theory of *authenticating family* for nursing knowledge and practice, health and social policy, nursing education, and nursing research. The contextual issues facing lesbian headed stepfamilies as they work towards becoming a family while re/claiming their sense of legitimacy will be explored.

A Review of the Theory

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to generate a substantive theory to better understand the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. *Authenticating family*, a three stage process, addresses the central problem of legitimacy that is perceived as being threatened, or taken away, in the process of becoming a family headed by two women. The first stage includes three sub-processes that reflect *accepting the challenge* as a woman with children begins a relationship with another woman and engages in *jumping in, negotiating expectations, and refocusing*. In this exciting, yet disruptive stage members of the family begin to experience affronts to their legitimacy as a family.

The second stage, *building the bonds*, is a process of beginning to negotiate the relationships among the members of the family, coming to terms with how the new family formation may influence the legitimacy of the relationships they already have and those they will develop with others outside the family. *Getting acquainted, making history, and trialing recognition* are the three sub-processes that explain the behaviours

that the lesbian headed stepfamily engages in as they work to build a greater sense of family within the walls and safety of the family home. With increasing numbers of disclosures family members come to understand the process as being a life-long one and each and every encounter will inform the strategies used in navigating a marginalizing heteronormative society.

The final stage, *thriving*, is identified by the growing sense of, and right to claim or reclaim legitimacy despite societal messages that would tell them otherwise. Family members use the skills and strategies learned in the early disclosure experiences to acknowledge their own legitimacy and to navigate towards a stronger sense of their family while helping others outside the family acknowledge their identity as a lesbian headed stepfamily. In this final stage the mother, stepmother and children engage in *confronting the three headed monster* and demanding that people '*see our family the way we created it*'. Variations in the process of *authenticating family* are influenced by the age of the children, the differing supports available to the family and the power of dominant discourse to disrupt the family's growing sense of themselves as a legitimate family in their community and society at large.

Implications for Nursing Knowledge and Practice

While nursing as a profession has historically been overshadowed by significant homophobia, progress is being made in an attempt to understand the ramifications of marginalization and stigma on people for whom we are meant to provide care and demonstrate acceptance. Diversity has become an important topic in nursing as research

continues to uncover the importance of understanding the differing social, cultural and religious locations impacting how people experience the world.

Society in general continues to move towards a position of greater acceptance; yet, the conservative and extreme right wing portion of society wields a mighty sword. Whereas same-sex marriage has been legalized in Canada along with ten other countries around the globe despite this positive movement forward, the threat of backlash on the basis of sexual orientation persists. It is important that gay men and lesbians have access to legal marriage in Canada as it communicates a certain level of societal acceptance, legal protection from discrimination, and legitimizes people and their children forming families as a part of a diverse Canadian social landscape. It is also important to recognize that in some instances two women may choose not to get married; their family is equally legitimate.

The 2012 Canadian census counted 29,380 female same-sex married and common-law couples, with 5075 lesbian households living with children; the suggestion is that the actual numbers are much higher as not everyone is comfortable disclosing their status on the census. Further, many families with children may not identify themselves as married or common-law due to the manner in which the information was gathered for the Census. However, the struggle continues for many families as every single day thought and energy go into deciding whether to disclose lesbian identity to family, friends, co-workers, and perfect strangers. Findings from this research demonstrates that families come to recognize disclosing sexual identity is far from a one-time event and describe the

stressors of having to deliberate with each and every interaction whether or not to disclose.

There is a long-standing and heterosexist assumption that women with children must naturally be heterosexual. Heterosexual privilege is not fully understood until one loses it (Rounthwaite & Wynne, 1997), something that women transitioning to a lesbian identity suddenly and abruptly become aware of. Loss of heterosexual privilege in women coming-out for the first time is partially responsible for the loss of a sense of personal and public credibility (Rickards, 2005). Living in a society that supports heterosexual privilege means that women's ability to parent effectively is not challenged based on who they are sexually and emotionally. In this study, women who had experienced both heterosexual privilege and marginalization struggled to make sense of the dichotomy in social status. While two women are able to marry and satisfy the requirements for building a safe and nurturing household, this status is overshadowed by continued experiences of marginalization.

As nurses, it is vital that we better understand how the differences between living as a heterosexual or homosexual person can significantly impact how lives are lived. We need to be aware of the influence of outside forces contributing to the daily decision making for and about being in a lesbian headed stepfamily. By positioning ourselves in a place of greater understanding we will be able to have some sense of how the lives of lesbian headed stepfamilies are managed as a result of their day-to-day, social, and public existence. Nurses must do what they can to decrease heteronormative practices that serve to discriminate and silence by being open to and conveying acceptance of all types of

family formations. In other words, nurses should act as moral agents engaging the power of their profession in enacting transformative practice (MacDonnell, 2009). A simple place to begin is by asking about “the significant person in your life” rather than “your husband” or “the children’s parents” rather than “the children’s mother and father”. Posting health related posters in clinic settings demonstrating diversity in family make-up can let families know they are welcome to be who they are, thereby decreasing anxiety about having to disclose sexual orientation.

The Registered Nurses of Ontario (RNAO) and the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) have developed and published documents that speak to the need for nurses to champion the rights of the LGBT community. RNAO’s position statement *Respecting sexual orientation and gender identity* highlights the ways in which discrimination threatens the physical and mental well-being of LGBT communities and goes far beyond the Canadian Nurses Association’s Code of Ethics that states that “nurses uphold principles of justice . . . when providing care [that does] not discriminate on the basis of a person’s sexual orientation (CNA, 2008, p. 17). MacDonnell (2007) suggests that nurses must act as moral agents in providing care, conducting research, and developing policy.

Defining family. This research supports better understanding of the “deeper cultural meaning of family life in modern society” (Weber, 2010, p. 379). In Chapter two, the review of the literature, I described the differing ways that family has been defined over the years. While we have long relied upon, or perhaps been constrained by, the definition of family as being two adults of opposite sex and their biological or adopted

children, the changes in society and movement away from the stifling, regimented, Victorian, and dominant definition of family is evidence of the shift to more open and creative family configurations. LGBT communities have, perhaps not invited but welcomed openness to discuss the phenomenon of parenting by LGBT adults, however, while the willingness to do so has allowed for multiple perspectives by which to investigate family in a more open and culturally aware manner, it has also subjected lesbians to the sometimes incredibly intrusive tendency to scrutinize parenting abilities, outcomes, and efforts (Weber, 2010).

A major contribution to the substantive theory of *authenticating family* is that it has drawn attention to the continued political and social differences between Canada and the United States of America. The research literature that is generated as a result of studies conducted in Canada has far less emphasis on the lack of access to marriage, the fear of custody battles, and the heightened vigilance of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Biblarz and Stacey (2010) in their USA study comparing parenting formations note that neither the gender nor the sexual orientation matters. In fact, they suggest that two women parent better than a man and a woman because they dedicate more time to the children and divide family chores and responsibilities more cooperatively. I propose that recent research provides added support for the legalization of same-sex marriage across all states within the union, if for no other reason than for the well-being of the children being raised by American lesbian parents (Seigel & Perrin, 2013). The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly endorses the legalization of marriage as being a vital component in providing children with “support and nurturing

from stable, healthy, and well-functioning adults to become resilient and effective adults” (Seigel & Perrin, 2013, p. 827).

As Western society has grown and begun to somewhat awkwardly accept or acknowledge that family configurations are changing and that LGBT people are engaging in the rearing of children in their same-sex relationships, there is an increasing acknowledgment of new understandings about family. However, the need to label the differing family configurations continues to marginalize and stigmatize families that fall short of attaining the ideal traditional family identity. Using words like ‘alternative’, ‘rainbow’, ‘lesbian/gay’, ‘queer’, ‘gender-variant’, ‘non-traditional’, and ‘sexual minority’ minimize their status because despite the effort to identify them as being *special* by including the qualifier they are placed firmly outside the dominant position that ‘family’ has enjoyed for so long. Anything outside the normal has “long been denied legitimacy”; however, as a result of a more accepting atmosphere, they are “becoming more widely accepted” (Weber, 2010, p. 381).

What needs to change is the way we think about and define family. Where in the past we have defined family in terms of blood, marriage, birth, or adoption we should now consider defining family by the function and the quality of relationships (Larrabee & Kim, 2010), which is far more important than by the specific make-up. Wright and Leahy (2009) are close when they suggest that “family is who they say they are” (p. 50), although this is perhaps too broad and could be improved upon by suggesting that family is people connected by their commitment to caring for each other. Children struggle with defining and disclosing their family however, when asked, they prefer to define family in

terms of “bonds of love, support, connection and tolerance” rather than legal or blood connections (Welsh, 2011, p. 64). Family is, and always will be, a social construct amenable to change and alteration by diverse interpretations influenced by the sociocultural norms and practices of the society in which it finds itself.

The family has long been considered a patriarchal institution, especially by radical lesbian feminists (Swainson & Tasker, 2005) because of the refusal to accept a definition of family that does not have a man at the head. In this social and economic environment, families come in a multitude of configurations and should be acknowledged as such. The families in this research were not as much concerned about having a male leader in the family as they were in creating a nurturing, safe, and inclusive environment in which to raise children and care for each other. The findings of this research highlight an understanding that the dominant discourse of family as dismissive of the lesbian headed stepfamilies, families that are as valid, safe, productive, caring, and supportive as any other.

The findings of this study demonstrate the negative impact that long-standing dominant discourse and resultant heterosexism has on the ability of the members of the lesbian headed stepfamily to maintain their sense of legitimacy. Despite feelings of euphoria and the sense of finding the “right” person with whom to raise children, women and their children must learn to deal with homophobic slurs and heterosexist assumptions on a day-to-day basis. The fact that there are very few, if any, role models for this unique family formation to look to for guidance compounds the sense of not quite fitting into the prescriptive code of the SNAF identity. If the lesbian headed stepfamily hears the

derisive comments made about same-sex attraction, fails to see themselves mirrored in other families, and recognizes that they do not fall within the guidelines, or reified SNAF, the only place that they can find themselves is on the margins of society; not normal, not accepted, less than, and alone.

For all of the reasons stated above it is vitally important that we as a society, and as nurses specifically, fully comprehend the impact of stigma on lesbian headed stepfamilies. Continued and pervasive “mixed messages given by media, by peers, and by the larger community about what it means to have gay or lesbian parents” (Welsh, 2011, p. 64) challenge both the children and parents in lesbian headed stepfamilies to continue to strive for attaining the illusive and falsely unobtainable “ideal”. When in fact, the formation that they have is healthy, supportive, loving, and nurturing in its own similar yet different ways and requires encouragement, acknowledgment, and support by health care professionals of all disciplines in order to thrive.

Supporting the children. This study uncovered some of the challenges that children in lesbian headed stepfamilies experience. The challenges often do not present themselves until the children reach adolescence. At this point children who were younger at the time the family was formed have become accustomed to having two mothers and fail to see the problem. Peers, friends, and society manage to convey messages of derision and stigma. Adolescent participants tended to either accept or be ashamed of the sexual orientation of their mothers. Being the victim of homophobic and heterosexist sentiments causes many adolescents, desperate to fit into their peer groups, to suddenly become protective of their family. Hiding who their family is leads to feelings of shame that then

perpetuates socially ingrained heterosexism, and what is created is a dangerous, often subconscious, and invasive feedback loop causing undue stress for the children.

Children who have space and opportunity to interact with other children with same-sex parents are more likely to be empowered and able to put a stop to the destructive feedback loop mentioned above (Welsh, 2011). Knowing the potential stressors for school aged children of lesbian mothers can help guide nurses in the school system to work with administration in supporting gay-straight alliances (GSA). GSAs have been stopped in the past, by religious groups who stated that GSAs should not be allowed in schools as they serve to corrupt otherwise “normal” children and that school systems have no place in supporting sexual deviancy (CBC, 2013). GSAs in schools demonstrate acceptance of diversity, a freedom to be whoever you need or want to be, and the opportunity to meet and interact with gay friendly peers. The mental health of children dealing with the stressors of heterosexism, stigma, and marginalization is at stake and must be paid attention to. School nurses have the opportunity to be creative and to work with students in ensuring that schools become a safer place to be. “The stigmatization experienced by these young people indicates the importance of initiatives to make life in gay or lesbian families a normal part of our society” (Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009, p. 439).

This research provides insight into the experiences for children as they navigate the process of *authenticating family* with their mother and stepmother. Very little is understood about the experiences of the children. As a result, nurses continue to have insufficient information and knowledge to help normalize the lesbian headed stepfamily

and confer acceptance for the children. It is vitally important that nurses lead in better understanding the lives of the children in lesbian headed stepfamilies. Given the knowledge of children's experiences with feeling that their families are not legitimate, nurses can make a point of naming the lesbian headed stepfamily when discussing diverse family formats, thereby normalizing the families of these children.

Language and legitimacy. Legitimacy, identified as the basic social problem, conveys acceptance and participation in society. Loss of legitimacy, because of sexual orientation, clearly states the opposite. Legitimacy is conveyed in the way that members are included in society's bigger picture. In essence, we speak them into existence when they conform to the socially constructed understanding of what is expected. Many of the families in this study sought legitimacy by marrying and yet, marriage did not give them the level of legitimacy anticipated. The pervasive heterosexism experienced in day-to-day life continues to diminish the value of their family configuration.

Language that lacks the capacity to include lesbian headed stepfamilies conveys a strong message of discrimination. The women who take on the role of the second mother in the family identify themselves by uncomfortably forcing the heterosexual parlance in an attempt to capture and define relationships with the children. However, while stepmother suggests that there is a birth mother it also implies that there is, or was, a husband. In this study, many women did not identify with the term stepmother, acknowledging the association with being "wicked", preferring to be referred to by their first name. The stepmother has few if any guidelines for what role they are to enact in the family and is the least understood role in the lesbian headed stepfamily (Lorah, 2007).

Lesbian stepfamilies are further misunderstood as they are not seen as legitimate and tend to be invisible in society today (Lorah, 2007). Caught in a conundrum they do not want people to think they are married to a man but they do want them to know that they have a role in raising the children of their same-sex partner. “Other mother” is often used to identify the non-birth mother in *de novo* families. Language and labels provide us with instant socially constructed understanding of mothering, whether it is about relationships, connections, or responsibilities.

At present, there is a dearth of non-stigmatizing and/or accepting language to satisfy the needs of lesbian headed stepfamilies in such a way that normalizes the family formations, and identifies and captures the relationships by which they can feel a part of society. “Language has the power not only to acknowledge and affirm, but also to negate and render invisible the position and distinctive contribution of lesbian mothers who have not given birth to their children” (Brown & Perlesz, 2008, p. 453).

This research sought to capture the voices of all the members of the lesbian headed stepfamily. Previous research has tended to focus on insight of the birth mother alone. The stepmother plays a very important role in these families as she willingly steps in, offering emotional and financial support, in becoming an adult who will be responsible for the well-being of another woman’s children. Her role is one that is without a script or guidelines and frequently her efforts go unrecognized, becoming the mother who is invisible (Lorah, 2007). This research found that bonds of love and connection were easier to form when the children were younger at the time they formed the family. Having sufficient time to spend with children in building the bonds is an

important luxury cited over and over again in this research. Families with adolescent children struggled with issues of discipline, role identity, recognition, and being valued for her contributions. Potential sources of stressors were not having any legal or biological connection with the children; as a result stepmothers fear loss of the relationships in the event of dissolution of their relationship or death of the birth mother. Stepmothers in this study that wanted to, and did, parent the children recognized the investment they were making. They would have preferred some guarantees or assurances of continued connection with the children and certainly some recognition of the efforts and sacrifices made.

Nurses who understand the journey of *authenticating family* will be better able to support all lesbian headed stepfamily members in ways that are meaningful to the families. Knowledge of the theory provides nurses with sufficient tools to recognize the continued need for the members of lesbian headed stepfamilies to assess and decide whether or not to disclose. Knowing how, in *authenticating family*, they counter the tendency by society to deny family existence offers nurses greater insight into the amount of energy required by members of the lesbian headed stepfamily to carve out a position in the community. The theory illuminates points of intervention for nurses where they can normalize, support and foster the building of effective strategies and skills needed to enable more positive experiences of being in a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Implications for Health and Education Policy

Policies at the federal, provincial and municipal level have the power to decrease social exclusion by increasing awareness (Raphael, 2003). The theory of *authenticating*

family illuminates the vulnerability of the family to have the legitimacy of the family called into question. Systems that do not acknowledge the legitimacy of the lesbian headed stepfamily contribute to making family members feel invisible and less than other families. Policy makers who acknowledge the devastating effect of not recognizing the existence or possibility of the lesbian headed stepfamily convey messages of inclusion and diversity. The theory of *authenticating family* highlights how important it is to provide space on forms that allow for two mothers, two fathers, a mother and father, one mother, one father, or whatever the family configuration may be. Families need to feel that they belong in their community in order to feel authentic and legitimate. The theory demonstrated that families who are acknowledged fare better in navigating health and education systems.

The theory highlighted the positive effect of having teachers acknowledge the family and not treat them with disbelief, derision, or insensitivity. When teachers are willing to '*see our family the way we created it*', they communicate to the lesbian headed stepfamilies that in the classroom there is no threat to family legitimacy. Teachers can help children by incorporating story books that include same-sex families into the curriculum, including the lesbian headed stepfamily in class discussions of family, and allowing children the opportunity and space to make two mother's day cards if they want to. These simple steps illustrate acceptance and acknowledgement that the children of lesbian stepfamilies need to feel legitimate. "When lesbian and gay families are consistently incorporated in classroom discussions on families, more children will have their families validated in a public forum, and more students will gain a more

comprehensive understanding of what a family is, and how each, despite its composition, works to meet common goals to nurture the health and well-being of its constituents” (Larrabee and Kim, 2010, p. 363).

A compelling finding from this research was that none of the participant families with school-aged children experienced any negative reactions from the education system. One must ask the question why teachers and daycare providers seem more open to diversity in families than other sectors of society? It is important that inclusivity be a guiding principle, however, identifying the unique qualities, training, education and philosophies of those working with children would be helpful in creating the same climate in areas such as health care and religion.

Education policy that incorporates a greater awareness of diverse family configurations can decrease the amount of social isolation experienced. When schools are clearly gay-friendly the likelihood of homophobic bullying may be decreased. Children from same-sex families, or who are themselves gay, have a greater potential to thrive in an environment that accepts and acknowledges their family as being a valued member of the school’s community and in which they do not have to hide or protect their family’s identity. Schools who provide long-term support of GSAs demonstrate their commitment to creating and sustaining schools that are inclusive of all families and people.

There continue to be legal barriers for the stepmother in being allowed access to information about the child from the school board because there is no legal or blood relation to the children. Similarly, in the process of making health care decisions about a child who is ill, providers who work within the health or education system can mitigate

the ramifications of these barriers by addressing them with parents during the first interaction and working together to find acceptable solutions about how to work within the confines of the law while acknowledging the important role that the stepmother is playing.

Implications for Nursing Education

The theory of *authenticating family* is important for nurses to understand as it helps to explain the experiences of lesbian headed stepfamilies as they work to reclaim their sense of legitimacy. Including concepts of diversity, same-sex families, and the power of heterosexism to silence in the curriculum of nursing programs would help student nurses to increase the understanding of challenges faced by lesbian headed stepfamilies and other sexual minority populations.

A significant body of research investigating homophobic tendencies of nursing students and schools of nursing has uncovered an interesting finding that supports this research (Beagan et al., 2012; Eliason et al., 2010; Eliason et al., 1992; Eliason & Randall, 1991; Gray et al., 1996; Tate & Longo, 2004). Eliason and Randall (1991) and Eliason et al. (1992) noted that when nursing students knew someone who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual there was a significant increase in acceptability and comfort in providing care to or working with an LGBT person. The fear and discomfort stemmed from being unfamiliar with LGBT communities and believing what they had heard in the dominant discourse about the unnaturalness and deviancy of being gay without critically thinking about the situation.

Early research investigating the attitudes of nursing students, nurse educators, medical students, and other allied health care providers suggest that there has been a significant amount of prejudice, homophobia, heterosexism and lack of basic knowledge for the provision of competent care to LGBT people (Gray et al., 1996; Randall, 1989). Within the last ten years the evidence is somewhat comforting as there is a noted change in knowledge levels, content in curricula, and attitudes, however, the research is frustratingly contradictory. On the one hand, the research indicates that schools of nursing remain heterosexist in the inability to acknowledge same-sex families in the curriculum. While on the other hand, research suggests that while nursing and medical students are more comfortable with providing care, they are desperate for more knowledge (Chapman, Watkins, Zappia, Nicol, & Shields, 2011; Røndahl, 2009). Other research suggests that attitudes of health care providers is improving and experiences of seeking care are becoming less threatening for the LGBT population (Dinkel et al., 2007; Dorsen, 2012; Shields, Zappia, Blackwood, Watkins, Wardrop, & Chapman, 2012). One disturbing finding within the research literature of nurses' attitudes towards lesbian and gay parents and lesbian parents' experiences point to a generalized strategy of nurses to simply ignore the sexual identity of the client claiming that it should have no bearing in the delivery of competent health care (Beagan et al., 2012; Dinkel et al., 2007).

Health care providers who ignore or disregard the identity of the family make families feel invisible. The need to access health care can be a stressful event; adding to this stress is wondering about how the provider will react when they disclose family identity. Members of the family who have a loved one who are sick need to focus all of

their energy on caring for that person. Having to be vigilant about whether to disclose takes away from that energy. When health care providers ask about family make-up using accepting and inclusive language they demonstrate an understanding of the challenges and stressors experienced by members of the lesbian headed stepfamily. Being made to feel comfortable in what can otherwise be a difficult and frightening situation conveys a message of acceptance and inclusion of the lesbian headed stepfamily relationships thereby decreasing the stress of interacting with the health care system.

This theory demonstrates the importance of acknowledging all members of the lesbian headed stepfamily as valued and legitimate. Using the knowledge of the struggles and challenges that frame the lived experiences of members of the lesbian headed stepfamily will improve the provision of the best possible care by nurses. Ignoring one of the mothers serves to render her invisible and inconsequential, which this research has shown is more often than not far from the truth. Stepmothers engaging in parenting roles invest a great deal of themselves in the parenting relationships and therefore must be acknowledged as having a significant position in the family. Including this knowledge in nursing curricula will educate nurses to provide care that accommodates and acknowledges diversity.

The theory of *authenticating family* highlights the need for lesbian headed stepfamily members to come to terms with the fact, and to develop strategies and skills, in dealing with the continued need to disclose sexual identity throughout their lives. Despite the improvement of health care experiences for lesbians and their families there remains a common thread throughout the most recent research suggesting that having to

constantly come-out is stressful (Breshears, 2011; Perlesz et al., 2006b). Nurse educators who incorporate the findings of this research into their family nursing content have the power to guide the evolving practice of nursing students who will better understand the need to create health care environments that are more welcoming of diversity.

A worrying finding in the research literature is the practice of nurses to simply provide everyone with the same care in an effort to not offend or discriminate against anyone (Beagan et al, 2012). When nurses feel that sexual orientation does not and should not make a difference to care they run the risk of suggesting that any difference between people should be denied and ignored. The findings of this research highlight the importance of acknowledging the lesbian headed stepfamily because providing care that is blind to difference results in sexual orientation and gender identity becoming irrelevant, when in fact they are the very thing that shape the lived experiences of lesbian *de novo* families (Beagan et al., 2012) and lesbian headed stepfamilies. The findings of this research demonstrate how influential socially ingrained heterosexism can be in the development of a healthy family identity for the lesbian headed stepfamily. Family nursing curricula will certainly be improved by becoming far more inclusive and comprehensive if it incorporates the findings of this study.

Nursing educators make a concerted effort to provide sufficient knowledge to the novice nurse in order to learn how to practice effectively. Teaching about the concepts of social inclusion, caring, diversity, discrimination, acceptance, and heterosexism will empower nursing students to consider each of their clients with a mind open to the possibility of difference. Nurses have an ethical duty to provide care that is competent

and does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, as defined in the Canadian Nurses' Association Code of Ethics. Nurse educators therefore should be responsible for ensuring that nursing students have considered the ramifications of what it means to be a member of a lesbian headed stepfamily and other sexual minority families.

Implications for Nursing Research

The theory of *authenticating family* has highlighted the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily and the perceived loss of legitimacy as a result of society's inability to acknowledge these families by providing space for including them. This research was conducted in the Maritime Provinces of Canada and as such is likely a reflection of the unique personality of people living in a predominantly rural and conservative landscape. Research that includes lesbian headed stepfamilies from across Canada would help to identify specific influences common across the country and particular to the Maritimes.

Much of the research that has focused on the lives of sexual minorities has been conducted in Australia, Britain, and the USA; countries that have remained reticent in legalizing same-sex marriage, although in 2013 Britain made the move to providing access to legal marriage and the Supreme Court of the USA struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (Koring, 2013). The findings in this research suggest that being able to marry and have the legal recognition of the government is important to conferring legitimacy for the lesbian headed stepfamily. Children in this research responded positively to the act of commitment by both the mother and stepmother in creating a stable environment for the family allowing it to continue flourishing. Being alert to the

differences in legal landscapes around the globe will continue to contribute to understanding the differences in lived experiences for sexual minority families.

Greater attention is being paid to research practices that risk victimizing and further marginalizing vulnerable populations. An initiative that addresses the way in which research focused on sexual minority populations is conducted is the policy resolution developed by OPHA, *Ethical research and evidence-based practice for lesbian and gay men*. A document such as this contributes to nurses' ability to practice culturally competent care that is informed by evidence respecting the needs of the LGBT community. Nursing governing bodies across Canada would be well advised to incorporate policies, resolutions and position statements that recognize the unique circumstances, and sexual minorities in their specific provinces (MacDonnell, 2007).

The participants in this research study all identified as having Western Christian backgrounds and as such we cannot use the findings to better understand how women of colour or from other ethnic backgrounds make sense of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. Further research is needed that includes diverse populations in the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily in order to understand the impact of additional layers of oppression experienced. Conducting future research in larger urban areas would improve access to families with diverse ethnic backgrounds

In this study, there was a markedly different experience for families who had younger and older children. The findings suggest that women who come together to create a family when the children are young are more likely to make a smoother transition, to build stronger bonds of caring between the children and the stepmother, and

in the children's ability to disclose their family's identity with greater comfort. Children who were older had greater challenges with accepting the parenting efforts of the stepmother, and were less likely to openly discuss their families with peers and outsiders. Research that focuses on the specific age groups will help to illuminate the specific influences of and differences between the two age groups. Knowledge from this research will help nurses and teachers in guiding their practice with children of all ages.

The intention of this research was to include two voices that have traditionally been neglected in the lesbian family research arena: the stepmother and the children. The research highlighted some of the challenges experienced by both, however, the extant research was clearly lacking in capturing the stepmother's experiences. There are very few research studies that have investigated or included the stepmother's perspective in family research. Recent research sought to specifically address the situation of the stepmother in lesbian headed stepfamilies (Lorah, 2007). The findings of Lorah's (2007) research correspond with the findings of this research in uncovering the lack of authority, marginalized position, some of the frustrations around child discipline, and the sense of invisibility for the stepmother. These findings had a significant impact on relationship satisfaction in lesbian headed stepfamilies (Lorah, 2007). Further research is needed to uncover how the stepmother navigates her relationship with the children vis-à-vis the relationship with their non-nuclear parent. While this research suggested that the sex of the non-nuclear parent made little difference in the stepmothers' experiences, the sample of 16 families is insufficient to extrapolate any salient comparative findings.

The findings of this research helped to illuminate the experiences of the children in lesbian headed stepfamilies. Children struggle with the transition from being in a heterosexually privileged family and having to switch back and forth between the nuclear family and the new stepfamily. The creation of a relationship between the stepmother and children is influenced by loyalty to the nuclear parents and age at time of family formation. Children struggled with accepting the parenting efforts of a second mother when there was already another parent in their lives; essentially, a third parent was not welcomed by adolescent children. Again, the paucity of research literature fails to clearly illuminate the lived experiences of the children. In 2009, Robitaille and Saint-Jacques interviewed adolescents and young adults about their experiences of living in Canadian lesbian stepfamilies. Avoiding behaviours were still being observed by the children as they continued to experience sufficient amounts of stigmatization several years after the legislative changes concerning the rights of the LGBT community. The children in this study divulged numerous situations in which they felt the need to protect their mothers from any suggestion that becoming lesbian had made a negative impact on their lives.

Much more research is needed that includes the experiences of younger children, in order to understand what makes their experiences so different from those of adolescents. Additional information is needed to help nurses understand how to support the transition to a lesbian headed stepfamily and assist in improving family development for children of all ages.

The data collected in this research study proved to be rich and fertile contributing to the development of the substantive theory of *authenticating family*. Nurses can now be

better informed about the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily and can identify points of intervention where they can be supportive as new couples embark on becoming family. Understanding the battle for position within the household during *negotiating expectations* and again in *getting acquainted* suggests that we need to be able to identify how members of the family relate to each other, what their roles will be, and how to communicate effectively.

Conclusion

The theory of *authenticating family* will better prepare nurses and other allied health care providers in supporting members of the lesbian headed stepfamily. The complex transitions as they become members of a lesbian headed stepfamily are important concepts to understand. The age of the children, support, and legitimacy are concepts that influence the process and are important additive information for the state of lesbian family knowledge.

Much of the research into the lives of same-sex families has focused on the differences between gay and heterosexual families. At this point the comparative research is no longer uncovering helpful or edifying information for people working with sexual minority families. The time has come to focus on the specific experiences of LGBT families as they navigate a society that continues to place them in a position of being less than other families. Knowing how important legitimacy is to lesbian headed stepfamilies was a significant finding in being able to better understand how continued socially ingrained heterosexism works to whittle away at their sense of themselves as being valued and legitimate.

Health care providers who acknowledge the lesbian headed stepfamily, the relationships within the family, and the challenges that they face communicate the existence of support that recognizes their families. The theory identifies appropriate support and the key times when it is best received in contributing to the development of stable and healthy families, lessening potential stressors, improving outcomes, and conveying an acceptance and acknowledgment of the legitimacy as a family and value in contributing to society at large. Much work has yet to be accomplished in including sexual minority families in society and in changing the dominant understanding of what constitutes a family. When a critical mass of members of our society take up the findings from this research we will approach realizing a social environment that honours diversity, welcomes difference, and begins to close the gap in research that focuses on the lives of lesbian headed stepfamilies and their children.

CHAPTER VII

Conclusion

Authenticating family is a social process that explains becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily as family members address experiences of stigma and heterosexist attitudes. The iterative process of *authenticating family* addresses the basic social problem of the perceived legitimacy of the family unit, a finding that is unique to the lesbian stepfamily literature. Throughout the process of *authenticating family*, women and their lesbian partners adapt to becoming a family, having their sense of legitimacy called into question, building relationships with each other, and becoming closer and more cohesive as a family. The process culminates as lesbian headed stepfamilies, through multiple interactions in which they learn how to deal with the responses of others to their not so normal yet exceptional family, recognize and accept their own legitimacy. Acceptance by family, friends, and others confers the value and validity of their family. Feeling confident in their legitimacy, they are able to command respect from family, acquaintances, education and health care providers, and finally strangers.

The process of *authenticating family* requires that they see the new family configuration as being as valid as the previous nuclear family. Through the stages of *accepting the challenge*, *building the bonds* and *thriving* they grow into, learn about, and adapt to the new family configuration. Progression through the process begins with a mother falling in love with another woman and ends at identifying as a legitimate family and demanding inclusion. Progression is influenced by the conditions of acceptance, age of the children, and support from family, friends and those outside the family. Difficult

encounters can move the family back along the continuum as they retreat to rebuild their identity as legitimate by amassing new skills and enacting skills gained, eventually enabling successful confrontation of those who call into question the legitimacy of the family they are able to authenticate their family to themselves and outsiders.

Legitimacy as a mother, stepmother, and child in a lesbian headed stepfamily is something that takes time to develop. Transitioning from a heterosexual family to a lesbian headed stepfamily can disrupt the sense of legitimacy. As a result of multiple interactions both within the immediate family and with outsiders a sense of legitimacy is renewed and ultimately cemented in the new family. Families who live in an environment less than supportive or inviting experience increased challenges to the sense of legitimacy. These families may require more time and more positive experiences of disclosing family identity before believing in the ability to counter potentially negative interactions. Lesbian headed stepfamilies engage in a variety of behaviours as they get to know each other while developing the relationships among members that enable them to see a growing sense of legitimacy. One important concept for lesbian stepfamilies to remember is that disclosure of lesbian identity is not a one-time event; the family will continue to find themselves in situations requiring decisions about disclosure throughout their lifetimes. Perlesz et al. (2006b) noted that this was an important concept to accept in the process of becoming comfortable with self-disclosure. Many of the strategies and skills developed are protective in nature as members of the lesbian headed stepfamily make the effort to maintain and affirm a sense of legitimacy as a family for themselves, in the eyes of those in their community, and in 21st century Western society.

The theory of *authenticating family* is the basic social process constructed as a result of in-depth interviews with lesbian mothers, stepmothers and children who identified as lesbian headed stepfamilies. This research demonstrates the influence of dominant discourse, heteronormative beliefs, and the influence of social pressures to control what is deemed normal and to exclude from belonging those who do not conform. Lesbian headed stepfamilies fall outside the parameters of the standard North American family and as a result struggle for recognition as a family. Legitimacy is identified as the basic social problem addressed by *authenticating family*. The lesbian headed stepfamilies in this study and many sexual minority individuals identify that being able to parent and to marry are central to legitimization and truly feeling like a valued citizen (Weber, 2008).

The nature of the family is changing with constantly evolving social, political, and economic demands. The seemingly fixed definition of family needs to better reflect how we organize ourselves in early 21st century, rather than relying on the traditional, conservative, and restrictive concept of family as a man, woman and their biological or adopted children. As a society we are slowly becoming more accustomed to families that come in all shapes and sizes: single parented, grand-parents raising their grandchildren, divorced, step, blended . . . and the list continues. Yet, the socially constructed meaning of family has perpetuated the lived reality of lesbian and gay parented families who still have few opportunities for inclusion.

We believe we are being more socially and morally conscious and yet dominant discourse continues to deny diversity in society. Marginalization is the growing pain

when striving for a more inclusive society. While understanding and hoping that the situation will improve, as it already has to some degree over the last two decades, we must not rely on society to change passively; it will require the continued efforts of diverse populations and their supportive allies to raise the consciousness of society. The closet door has been opened; gay marriage is legal along with 11 other countries around the world, adoption of a same-sex partner's child is legal, and people can no longer be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation and other significant legal changes. Canada's landscape is much more inclusive and accepting of the LGBT community as evidenced by the first couple legally married now celebrating their 10th anniversary, the flying of the Pride flag at Canadian Forces Base Edmonton a first in North America, and public figures such as kd Lang (singer/songwriter), Katherine Wynne (Ontario's first lesbian Premier), and Marc Tewksbury (Olympic gold medalist, 100m backstroke, Barcelona 1992) coming-out and demonstrating pride and not shame in who they are. Despite these events, much more work remains to be accomplished before sexual minority families feel that they are identified, acknowledged, affirmed and included in the fabric of Canadian society.

Homophobia continues to exist but is no longer socially tolerated. Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality is the only option and "is a form of oppression that victimizes gays/lesbian/bisexuals in our culture" (Neisen, 1993, p. 50). While heterosexism exists as blatant discrimination, the more subtle and no less damaging form is lack of acknowledgment of the existence of families such as the lesbian headed stepfamily. Heterosexism has the power to silence, render invisible, and negatively

impact the mental, physical, and emotional health of people who are part of a sexual minority.

“Family diversity is created by the social context and social forces that construct families” (Harris, 2008, p. 1413). Understanding the term diversity is a good place to begin in working with lesbian headed stepfamilies. The dictionary points to concepts of difference and states of unlikeness (Bucher, 2010). Diversity when expanded can include all the ways in which people differ, thereby including sexual minority families, culturally and ethnically varied families, families who are because they say they are, and the standard North American family. If families are the building blocks of the fabric of society, then it is time to include all families as contributing members of their communities in whatever capacity and configuration they may manifest.

The idealized and dominant notion of motherhood is equally as problematic as the concept of family. Motherhood is exalted as the ultimate expression of womanhood, fertility, and value in society. Dominant culture has positioned the relationship between mother and child as one that cannot be trifled with. The position of mother as the only person able to love and nurture the child creates an impossible situation for the stepmother. Heterosexism further denies the lesbian stepmother a position in the family and the life of the child by disallowing the possibility of families headed by two women. The stepmothers in this study had to work to earn their position within the family and within the relationships with the children. Stepmothers are frequently made to feel invisible and denied a position that should be defined and described to others by members of the family.

In this study, women recounted experiences of uphill struggles to reclaim a sense of legitimacy challenged as a result of not fitting into socially constructed and dominantly maintained definitions of family. Mothers are challenged to allow another woman to share in the role of parenting as there are few if any role models that may illuminate how to do so. Stepmothers find it exciting yet terrifying to embark on the development of relationships with children with whom they are neither legally nor biologically related. Stepmothers are also vexed by having to adopt a third-parent role when the other nuclear parent continues to contribute to the parenting of the children. Children find that the worst part of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily is needing to explain family configuration to peers and others; while the best part is having the love and nurturing of two mothers. Lesbian headed stepfamilies are authentic families contributing to their communities and want to be seen as such. The theory of *authenticating family* provides nurses and other allied health care providers with a deeper understanding of the power of heterosexism to challenge individual's and family's sense of legitimacy.

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APPENDIX A



Informed Consent for Mother and Stepmother

Project Title: **BECOMING A LESBIAN HEADED STEPFAMILY**

Principal Investigator: Tracey Rickards RN PhD(c) srickar1@unb.ca, 506-471-6401

Supervisor: Dr. Deborah McLeod RN DeborahL.McLeod@cdha.nshealth.ca, 902-473-2964

REB: 2011-2390

We invite you to take part in a research study. It is being done by Tracey Rickards. She is a student at Dalhousie University completing her doctoral degree in Nursing. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is described below. This description tells you about the risks, inconveniences, or discomfort that you might experience. Participating in the study might not benefit you, but we may learn things that will benefit others. You can discuss any questions about this study with Tracey Rickards.

Purpose of the Study

At the present time there is very little research about becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The aim of this study is to learn about becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. Lesbian stepfamilies may experience outside pressures affecting them.

Study Design

This study is a qualitative study. Interviews are used to gather information. The interview will be recorded and then typed. This typed information will be analyzed. From the conversations that Tracey Rickards has with you and/or your family a research report will be written. The report will explain what the process is of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Who can participate in the study?

You may take part if you are a woman who self-identifies as lesbian, have children from a previous heterosexual or same-sex relationship or are a stepmother to your partner's children, and are living in, or recently lived in, a lesbian headed household raising children. You may take part if you are English speaking and living in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, or Prince Edward Island. You are being asked to give consent to include your children, under the age of 16, in the interviews. Children over 16 years of age will sign a separate consent form. Children over 4 years of age will sign assent, with you providing consent. At any time you and/or your children can decide which questions to answer. You and/or your children can decide to end the interview. 15 to 20 families will take part in this study.

Who will be conducting the research?

Tracey Rickards RN PhD (c) will do all of the interviews.

What will you be asked to do?

You are being asked to take part in a maximum of two digitally recorded interviews that will last about 1-2 hours. The interview may take place in your home or wherever you would be comfortable. During the interview you will be asked questions about what it has been like to become a lesbian headed step- family. The researcher will call you a week after the interview to ask if any additional ideas have come to mind. The researcher will ask how you are feeling about the interview.

Analysis begins following the first interview and will require 2-4 months to develop preliminary findings. At that time you will be contacted, given a brief explanation of these findings, and asked if the results reflect your experience.

Your typed interviews may be used for a secondary study. Tracey Rickards may find that the information you gave can be used to look into another topic. In this case, Tracey Rickards will contact you to obtain consent for use of your interview data in a secondary study. If a secondary study is done, the study plan will be reviewed by a research ethics board.

Possible Risks and Discomforts

There are very few known health risks to taking part in this research study. There is a very small risk that you and/or your family may feel upset when talking about your family's experiences. If this happens the researcher will make sure you have the names of counselors in your area. After the family interview the researcher will be available for one-on-one discussion. Taking part is your choice and you can choose not to answer any question(s). You can decide to stop the interview at any time.

Possible Benefits

There are no direct personal benefits to taking part in this study. Your experiences may help others in the same situation. What you share will be used to help nurses and other health care providers better understand what it is like to become a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Compensation / Reimbursement

You and your family will be given a gift card for Empire Theatres. The card will cover the cost of you and your family going to a movie. This card is a thank-you for sharing your experiences of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The gift card for Empire Theatres will be given to you even if you decide to withdraw from the interview.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The researcher will remove any identifiers such as your name or where you live. The researcher will remove any words that might identify you or your family.

A typist, who has agreed to keep everything heard on the recordings private, will type the interviews. The typist has signed a confidentiality agreement. Tracey Rickards will be the only person to read the typed interview. Parts of multiple interviews may be discussed with members of the researcher's PhD committee; however, all identifying information will be removed before it is shared. The members of the committee are university professors and professionals who understand the need for confidentiality. The external hard drive storing the digitally recorded interviews is password protected. The taped interview and the typed copy will be kept in a locked

filing cabinet in the researcher's office. The filing cabinet belongs to Tracey Rickards. At the end of the study you may keep your recorded interviews or agree to have them destroyed. The material will be kept for five years, after that it will be destroyed. The researcher has a legal and moral duty to report any signs of child abuse or neglect.

Questions

You can ask Tracey Rickards or Dr. Deborah McLeod any questions about the study. They can be reached by using the contact information at the top of this consent form. You will be informed of any changes to the study and can decide about taking part in the study.

Problems or Concerns

If you have any problems with, or wish to tell someone about any part of being in this study, you can get in touch with Catherine Connors, Director of Dalhousie University's Office of Human Research Ethics Administration, for help (902) 494-1462, catherine.connors@dal.ca.

The study has been read to me, explained, and I have been given the chance to discuss it with the researcher. My questions have been answered. I give consent to take part in this study. I realize that my taking part in this study is my choice and I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

I am saying yes to:

- taking part in the interview,
- being digitally recorded during the interview,
- having parts of my interview used as quotes in the final research document,
- having parts of my interview used as quotes in professional journals or conference presentations, and
- my child(ren), who are under the age of 16, taking part in the interview.
-

I, _____ agree to take part in this study.

PLEASE PRINT

Participant's Signature: _____, Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____, Date: _____

I agree to being contacted later on to request permission to use my interview data in a secondary study by the same researcher, Tracey Rickards.

Participant's Signature: _____, Date: _____

APPENDIX B



Looking For Lesbian Headed Stepfamilies For Research Study

Are you part of a lesbian headed stepfamily or know anyone who is? I am looking for women who are raising children in a stepparenting situation. At the present time there is very little research that looks at how women with children become lesbian headed stepfamilies. I am a doctoral student with the School of Nursing at Dalhousie University and would like to speak with you and your family about what it has been like to become a lesbian headed stepfamily. I will travel to speak with women in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Please call (call collect if needed) or email Tracey Rickards for more information, or to set up a date to meet at research.lesbian.2011@gmail.com or (506) 471-6401.

REB #: 2011-2390

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APPENDIX C



Faculty of Health Professionals

Participants Needed for Study

Seeking lesbian headed stepfamilies to participate in nursing research study.

Are you part of a lesbian headed stepfamily or know anyone who is? I am looking for women who are raising children in a 'step'-family situation. There is a growing body of research investigating the experiences of birth mothers in lesbian stepfamilies; however the voice of the stepmother and especially the voices of the children are rarely heard. Developing a greater understanding of what it is like to become a lesbian stepfamily will inform practice, policy and health care provider education. I am a doctoral student with the School of Nursing at Dalhousie University and would like to speak to you and your family about the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. I will travel to speak with women in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island or when possible can use Skype. This study has been granted REB approval #: 2011-2390.

If interested, please email me for additional information or to set a date to meet at research.lesbian.2011@gmail.com or call 506-471-6401

APPENDIX D



Letter of introduction/information

My name is Tracey Rickards; I am a PhD student with the Faculty of Health Science, School of Nursing at Dalhousie University.

At the present time there is very little research that looks at women with children becoming lesbian headed stepfamilies. While it may be similar to the process of becoming a heterosexual stepfamily, lesbians may face outside issues that affect the family. The aim of this research is to explore the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

I would like to talk to you and/or your family if: you are a lesbian with children from a previous heterosexual or lesbian relationship and/or you are in or have been in a lesbian headed stepfamily.

You would be asked to participate in a recorded interview lasting about 1-2 hours. If other members of your family are willing to speak with me, I would be glad to have them share their thoughts about becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

This research is being supervised by Dr. Deborah McLeod, School of Nursing, at Dalhousie University. DeborahL.McLeod@cdha.nshealth.ca.

The Health Sciences Research Ethics Board of Dalhousie University has approved this project. They have assigned it REB #: 2011-2390. If you have any ethical concerns about the project or questions about your rights as a participant please contact Dr. Deborah McLeod or Dr. Marilyn Macdonald, the Director of Graduate Students at the School of Nursing.

If you are interested in being part of this study or would like more information please contact Tracey Rickards by calling collect at (506) 471-6401, or email: research.lesbian.2011@gmail.com.

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Tracey Rickards, PhD Student

APPENDIX E



Faculty of Health Professionals

Informed Consent for Minor Children (over 4 years of age and under 16 years of age)

Project Title: **BECOMING A LESBIAN HEADED STEPFAMILY**

Principal Investigator: Tracey Rickards RN PhD(c) srickar1@unb.ca, 506-471-6401

Supervisor: Dr. Deborah McLeod RN DeborahL.McLeod@cdha.nshealth.ca, 902-473-2964

REB #: 2011-2390

We invite your child to take part in a research study. It is being done by Tracey Rickards. She is a student at Dalhousie University completing her Doctoral degree in Nursing. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. They may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is described below. This description tells you about the risks, inconveniences, or discomfort that you might experience. Participating in the study might not benefit you or your family, but we may learn things that will benefit others. You can discuss any questions about this study with Tracey Rickards.

Purpose of the Study

At the present time there is very little research about becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The aim of this study is to learn about becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. Lesbian stepfamilies experience outside pressures that affect the family.

Study Design

This study is a qualitative study. Interviews are used to gather information. The interview will be recorded and then typed. This typed information will be analyzed. From the conversations that Tracey Rickards has with you and/or your family a research report will be written. The report will explain the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Who can participate in the study?

Your child may take part if they are a child in a lesbian headed stepfamily, living in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia or Prince Edward Island, and speak English. You, the mother, are being asked to give consent to include your child, under the age of 16, in the interviews. Children under 16 will sign a separate assent form to indicate assent. In the event that there is a custody agreement affecting this child requiring the consent of the other parent with joint custody, their signature needs to be obtained prior to participation in this study. At any time, you and/or your child can decide which questions to answer. You and/or your child can decide if the interview should end. 15 to 20 families will take part in this study.

Who will be conducting the research?

Tracey Rickards RN PhD (c) will do all of the interviews.

What will your child be asked to do?

Your child is being asked to take part in one digitally recorded interview that will last about 1-2 hours. The interview may take place in your home or wherever you would be comfortable. During the interview your child will be asked questions about what it has been like to become a lesbian headed stepfamily. The researcher will call your family a week after the interview to ask if any additional ideas have come to mind. At that time, the researcher will ask how your family is feeling about the interview.

Analysis begins following the first interview and will require 2-4 months to develop preliminary findings. At that time you will be contacted, given a brief explanation of these findings, and asked if the results reflect your experience.

Your child's typed interviews may be used for a secondary study. Tracey Rickards may find that the information your child gave can be used to look into another topic. In this case, Tracey Rickards will contact you to obtain consent for use of your child's interview data in a secondary study. If a secondary study is done, the study plan will be reviewed by a research ethics board.

Possible Risks and Discomforts

There are very few known health risks to taking part in this research study. There is very small risk that you and/or your family may feel upset when talking about your family's experiences. If this happens the researcher will make sure you have the names of counselors in your area. After the family interview the researcher will be available for one-on-one discussion. Taking part is your choice and you can choose not to answer any question(s). You can decide to stop the interview at any time.

Possible Benefits

There are no direct personal benefits to taking part in this study. Your child's experiences may help others in the same situation. What your child shares will be used to help nurses and other health care providers better understand what it is like to become a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Compensation / Reimbursement

You and your family will be given a gift card for Empire Theatres. The card will cover the cost of you and your family going to a movie. This card is a thank-you for sharing your experiences of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The gift card for Empire Theatres will be given to you even if you decide to withdraw from the interview.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The researcher will remove any identifiers such as your child's name or where you live. The researcher will remove any words that might identify you or your family.

A typist, who has agreed to keep everything heard on the recordings private, will type the interviews. The typist has signed a confidentiality agreement. Tracey Rickards will be the only person to read the typed interview. Parts of multiple interviews may be discussed with members of the PhD committee; however, all identifying information will be removed before it is shared. The members of the committee are university professors and professionals who understand the need for confidentiality. The external hard drive storing the digitally recorded interviews is password protected. The taped interview and the typed copy will be kept in a locked filing cabinet

in the researcher's office. The filing cabinet belongs to Tracey Rickards. At the end of the study you may keep your recorded interviews or agree to have them destroyed. The material will be kept for five years, after that it will be destroyed.

The researcher has a legal and moral duty to report any signs of child abuse or neglect.

Questions

You can ask Tracey Rickards or Dr. Deborah McLeod any questions about the study. They can be reached by using the contact information at the top of this consent form. You will be informed of any changes to the study and can decide about taking part in the study.

Problems or Concerns

If you have any problems with, or wish to tell someone about any part of being in this study, you can get in touch with Catherine Connors, Director of Dalhousie University's Office of Human Research Ethics Administration, for help (902) 494-1462, catherine.connors@dal.ca.

The study has been read to me, explained, and I have been given the chance to discuss it with the researcher. My questions have been answered. I give consent for my child to take part in this study. I realize that my child taking part in this study is my choice and we are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

I, the custodial parent, am saying yes to:

- my child, who is over the age of 4 years and under the age of 16 years, taking part in the interview,
- my child, being digitally recorded during the interview,
- having parts of my child's interview used as quotes in the final research document, and
- having parts of my child's interview used as quotes in professional journals or conference presentations.

I, _____, the custodial parent, give consent for the above named child who is over 4 years of age and under 16 years of age to take part in this study.

I, _____, having joint custody of this child consent for the above named child to take part in this study.

Parent's Signature: _____, Date : _____

Second Parent's Signature: _____, Date: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____, Date: _____

I agree to being contacted later on to request permission to use my child's interview data in a secondary study by the same researcher, Tracey Rickards.

Parent's Signature: _____, Date: _____

APPENDIX F



Faculty of Health Professionals

Assent form for children (over 4 years of age and under 16 years of age)

Project Title: **BECOMING A STEPFAMILY WITH TWO MOTHERS**

Principal Investigator: Tracey Rickards RN PhD(c) srickar1@unb.ca, 506-471-6401

Supervisor: Dr. Deborah McLeod RN DeborahL.McLeod@cdha.nshealth.ca, 902-473-2964

REB #: 2011-2390

We invite you to take part in a research study. It is being done by Tracey Rickards. She is a student at Dalhousie University completing her Doctoral degree in Nursing. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. The study is described below. This description tells you about the risks, inconveniences, or discomfort that you might experience. Participating in the study might not benefit you or your family, but we may learn things that will benefit others. You can discuss any questions about this study with Tracey Rickards.

Why are we doing this study?

Right now we don't know a lot about stepfamilies with two mothers. We will learn about what it is like to become a family with two mothers by talking to you and your mothers.

What will happen during this study?

You will be asked some questions about living with two mothers. Tracey Rickards will record what you say with a recording machine.

Are there any good or bad things about this study?

The good thing about being in this study is being able to share stories about your family. As far as we know there are no bad things about this study.

Who will know about what I did in this study?

No one except the researchers will know you are taking part in this study unless you want to tell them. Your name and information will only be seen by people involved in the study.

Do I have to be in this study?

You do not have to be in this study. No one will be mad at you. If you don't want to be in this study, tell us. Even if you say yes now, you can change your mind later. Being in this study is totally up to you. You do not have to answer any question(s) that bother(s) you or that you don't know the answer to.

What if I have any questions?

You can ask questions about the study any time, now or later. You can talk to your parents about things in the study you don't understand. You can also ask Tracey Rickards. You can call her at 506-471-6401.

Signing this form means I am okay to talk to Tracey Rickards about my family. I know what I am being asked to do.

Child's Name (Printed): _____

Child's Signature: _____, Date: _____

Witness: _____, Date: _____

APPENDIX G



Informed Consent for Child (age 16 years and older)

Project Title: **BECOMING A LESBIAN HEADED STEPFAMILY**

Principal Investigator: Tracey Rickards RN PhD(c) srickar1@unb.ca, 506-471-6401

Supervisor: Dr. Deborah McLeod RN DeborahL.McLeod@cdha.nshealth.ca, 902-473-2964

REB#: 2011-2390

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Purpose of the Study

At the present time there is very little research about becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The aim of this study is to learn about becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. Lesbian stepfamilies may experience pressures affecting them.

Study Design

This study is a qualitative study. Interviews are used to gather information. The interview will be recorded and then typed. This typed information will be analyzed. From the conversations that Tracey Rickards has with you and/or your family a research report will be written. The report will explain the process of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Who can participate in the study?

You may take part if you are a child in a lesbian headed stepfamily, living in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia or Prince Edward Island, and speak English. You are being asked to sign this consent if you are over the age of 16. At any time you can decide whether or not to answer any questions or to end the interview. 15 to 20 families will take part in this study.

Who will be conducting the research?

Tracey Rickards RN PhD (c) will do all of the interviews.

What will you be asked to do?

You are being asked to take part in a maximum of two digitally recorded interviews that will last about 1-2 hours. The interview may take place in your home or wherever you would be

comfortable. During the interview you will be asked questions about what it has been like to become a lesbian headed stepfamily. The researcher will call your family a week after the interview to ask if any additional ideas have come to mind. The researcher will ask how you are feeling about the interview.

Analysis begins following the first interview and will require 2-4 months to develop preliminary findings. At that time your family will be contacted, given a brief explanation of these findings, and asked if the results reflect your experience.

Your typed interviews may be used for a secondary study. Tracey Rickards may find that the information you gave can be used to look into another topic. In this case, Tracey Rickards will contact you to obtain consent for use of your interview data in a secondary study. If a secondary study is done, the study plan will be reviewed by a research ethics board.

Possible Risks and Discomforts

There are very few known health risks to taking part in this research study. There is very small risk that you and/or your family may feel upset when talking about your family's experiences. If this happens the researcher will make sure you have the names of counselors in your area. After the family interview the researcher will be available for one-on-one discussion. Taking part is your choice and you can choose not to answer any question(s). You can decide to stop the interview at any time.

Possible Benefits

There are no direct personal benefits to taking part in this study. Your experiences may help others in the same situation. What you share will be used to help nurses and other health care providers better understand what it is like to become a lesbian headed stepfamily.

Compensation / Reimbursement

You and your family will be given a gift card for Empire Theatres. The card will cover the cost of you and your family going to a movie. This card is a thank-you for sharing your experiences of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily. The gift card for Empire Theatres will be given to you even if you decide to withdraw from the interview.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The researcher will remove any identifiers such as your name or where you live. The researcher will remove any words that might identify you or your family.

A typist, who has agreed to keep everything heard on the recordings private, will type the interviews. The typist has signed a confidentiality agreement. Tracey Rickards will be the only person to read the typed interview. Part of multiple interviews may be discussed with members of the PhD committee; however, all identifying information will be removed before it is shared. The members of the committee are university professors and professionals and understand the need for confidentiality. The external hard drive storing the digitally recorded interviews is password protected. The taped interview and the typed copy will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office. The filing cabinet belongs to Tracey Rickards. At the end of the study you may keep your recorded interviews or agree to have them destroyed. The material will be kept for five years, after that it will be destroyed.

The researcher has a legal and moral duty to report any signs of child abuse or neglect

Questions

You can ask Tracey Rickards or Dr. Deborah McLeod any questions about the study. They can be reached by using the contact information at the top of this consent form. You will be informed of any changes to the study and can decide about taking part in the study.

Problems or Concerns

If you have any problems with, or wish to tell someone about any part of being in this study, you can get in touch with Catherine Connors, Director of Dalhousie University’s Office of Human Research Ethics Administration, for help (902) 494-1462, catherine.connors@dal.ca

The study has been read to me, explained, and I have been given the chance to discuss it with the researcher. My questions have been answered. I give consent to take part in this study. I realize that my taking part in this study is my choice and I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

I am saying yes to:

- taking part in the interview,
- being digitally recorded during the interview,
- having parts of my interview used as quotes in the final research document,
- having parts of my interview used as quotes in professional journals or conference presentations, and
- having my typed interview taken to New Brunswick where the researcher lives and works.

I, _____ agree to take part in this study.

PLEASE PRINT

Participant’s Signature: _____, Date: _____

Researcher’s Signature: _____, Date: _____

I agree to being contacted later on to request permission to use my interview data in a secondary study by the same researcher, Tracey Rickards.

Participant’s Signature: _____, Date: _____

APPENDIX H



Interview Guide for the Mothers

1. Can you tell me about your experience of becoming a lesbian headed stepfamily?
2. What were your expectations for you and your children as you formed this new family with another woman?
 - a. Where and if appropriate:
Probe: Who has played a role in the process of becoming a family?
Probe: What kind of role did they play and what is the significance of these people?
3. Can you tell me about how the relationships between your partner and your children evolved? What roles do you each assume with your children and how did these evolve?
4. Can you tell me about an episode or interaction that you feel was positive in terms of your experience as a lesbian mother?
5. Can you tell me about an episode or interaction that you feel was negative in terms of your experience as a lesbian mother?
6. Can you tell me about how the experiences you have shared have impacted your health and well-being?
7. Can you tell me when or if you have felt exposed to social stigmatization?
 - a. Probe: How does social stigmatization impact parenting and family life?

APPENDIX I



Interview Guide for the Children

1. Can you tell me about your family?
2. Can you tell me about what it is like to have two Mothers? (I will check with the lesbian mothers about the preferred terminology used within their household)
3. Can you tell me how you describe your family to friends?
4. Can you tell me a story about what it was like to have a new another mommy?