Responses to representational invisibility

Abstract

The heterogeneity of family: Responses to representational invisibility by LGBTQ parents

This article draws on qualitative research data collected in semi-structured interviews conducted during 2013 and 2014 with 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) parents living in England and Scotland. It explores how LGBTQ parents respond to media representations of families like theirs, and build narratives of family identity from limited cultural resources. Media, encompassing a range of cultural representational resources, including advertisements, television, books and films, produces specific knowledges about LGBTQ families. Participants argued that popular entertainment media (including Modern Family) offered a limited range of representations of LGBTQ parents and concretizes knowledge about the shape of families. I argue that available representations fail to acknowledge the diversity of non-heterosexual family forms and that this representational gap results in socio-cultural invisibility. I explore the responses LGBTQ parents had to such gaps and how they negotiated, or rejected representational meanings in order to consolidate new narratives of family.

Keywords:

LGBTQ parents, parenting, media representation, culture, identity, family diversity, qualitative, queer reading, LGBTQ issues.
Introduction

The role of representation

Media is a core constituent of identity (Kellner, 2011). It is through a complex and ongoing process of refusals, re-articulations and identifications with representation, that we can craft a sense of self (Driver, 2007). Cultural representations, their restriction, availability, and circulation “have real consequences for real people” (Dyer, 2002a, p.3) as they try to craft stable lives and access socio-cultural legitimation. It is in this context that this research is located: focusing as it does on the interaction between available media representations and the experiences of ordinary people in building social and family lives.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people have been historically marginalised through the censorship of representation and the use of legislation to restrict the circulation of images and narratives of the legitimacy of non-heterosexual identity. In the UK for example, until 2003 Section 28 prohibited local authorities from “intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality or publish[ing] material with the intention of promoting homosexuality” and from “teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship” (Local Government Act 1988: chapter 9, section 28). A book for children which represented a child with two gay fathers, Jenny lives with Eric and Martin (1983), was decried as the tipping point of increasing circulation of media which both represented and legitimated lesbian and gay relationships and was a key prompt for the introduction of this legislation (Robinson, 2007, p.171). Both LGBTQ people and their families were deemed an unsuitable topic for children to encounter. The availability of media representations remains strongly tied to the politicised project of constituting and publicly articulating stable identities for LGBTQ people (Dyer, 1990, p.286; Gross, 2001; Muñoz, 1999). Examining LGBTQ people’s relationships to and use of media, therefore offers a productive way to make sense of their experiences of constituting, sharing, and
transforming family identities in a socio-political context which recently refused the legitimacy of such work. This project of transformation and narrative making is strongly tied to cultural representation (Driver, 2007; Hall, 1996; Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011).

In a media-saturated culture, representation offers a way to locate ourselves in the social world (Silverstone, 2007) and a route by which we might stake a claim in social discourses and the process meaning-making. Representation, whether through restriction or diversification, generates different possibilities in people’s lives. This article asks what possibilities of identity-narrative production and recognition in culture are created or foreclosed for LGBTQ parents and their families.

The representation of LGBTQ-parented families

Visibility for LGBTQ parents’ identities and families has been increasing for more than two decades (Clark, 1995; Doty and Gove, 1997; Gross, 1994; Shugart, 2003), however, the meanings and uses of the available representations are less clear-cut (Phelan, 1993; Walters, 2012). Walters (2012) has described the current trend in LGBTQ representation as one of “banal inclusion normalisation, assimilation, everyday unremarkable queerness but also, of course, continued abjection” (p.918). Whilst LGBTQ people may be able to find increasing number of images which ostensibly represent them, the diversity of lives and identities which are depicted is limited. Further, representational visibility has increased unevenly for the different identities under the LGBTQ banner (Barker et al, 2008; Dyer, 2002b; Clark, 1995; Gross, 1994; Halberstam, 2005; Weeks, 1977).

In this context of changing visibility and representational prominence, the experiences of LGBTQ people who parent and collaboratively produce narratives of family identity out of available cultural resources, remain underexamined. In particular, existing research does not indicate how LGBTQ parents locate their families within a media culture which does not
equally represent the identities of those people involved in parenting, or routinely acknowledge the validity of non-heterosexual family arrangements.

This article offers a way to understand the ongoing work of LGBTQ parents, who are embedded in a media culture, as they shape and stabilise non-heterosexual family narratives. This research aims to illuminate how the heterogeneous experience of family is revealed and validated within what participants described in 2013/2014 as a narrow representational context. To achieve this, I explore the available meanings and narratives offered in the contemporary media productions which directly address, or allow scope for storytelling by, LGBTQ parents. Using data from qualitative interviews, I detail the experiences of LGBTQ parents in finding themselves in media, and report their work to produce and stabilise narratives which affirm family validity, and recognise their family diversity.

**Methods**

**Participants**

This article draws on qualitative data collected during in-person, semi-structured interviews with 30 LGBTQ parents, which were conducted during 2013 and 2014. The participant criteria sought the following: people who were over 18, self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, intersex, trans, genderqueer, non-binary, or queer, and a parent living in the UK. Participant recruitment was restricted to those living in the UK given the culturally specific nature of media representation and reception (Silverstone, 2007). Participants were recruited through LGBTQ studies mailing lists, community organisations, community radio, personal networks, and Twitter.

Despite a flexible approach to recruitment, with a combination of snowball and purposive sampling, the sample referred to here is largely homogenous. Only eight participants described their class in another way than middle-class and all participants, except one, described themselves as white. Participant ages ranged from 26-56 years and included
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British, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, European and American people, all of whom were living in Scotland or England at the time of our interview. Children of participants ranged in age from 5 months to 27 years old. Six participants identified as gay, 7 as bisexual, 12 as lesbian, 1 used the terms both lesbian and queer, and 4 identified as queer, non-heterosexual, or “heterosexual with a bisexual past” (Sarah). The sample included 4 participants who described themselves as poly (or ‘polyamorous’, see Sheff, 2014), and 4 participants who identified themselves as trans.

The sample was not representative, nor was it intended to be. There is sparse data on the number of people in the UK with non-heterosexual identities and even less on how many of those people parent. This study, therefore does not represent all LGBTQ people, or even all LGBTQ parents; achieving this, Weston (1997) has explained, is impossible for a “population [which] is not only partially hidden or closeted but also lacks consensus as to the criteria for membership” (p.9). Rather, this study is a glimpse at the lives, experiences, and media interactions of a given group of people who are diverse in some respects (age, location, nationality, life experience) and homogenous in others (race, class).

The interview and analysis

Interviews were conducted in person and there were no restrictions on how many people could take part in each interview; a number of participants chose to be interviewed with their partner. In total I conducted 7 ‘couple’ interviews with 14 people (including one participant’s non-parent heterosexual partner, whose responses are not included here), and 17 individual interviews. Conducting interviews with two people present provided an opportunity for “insights into the practice of knowledge production” within these families (Cameron, 2005, p.117) as participants jointly explored their perspectives on their family and its place in a wider social context.
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Participants were interviewed in a range of locations. Sin (2003) has noted that being able to receive researchers in one’s home indicates a degree of economic and social capital and insisting on this location may therefore exclude some from participation. Participants were therefore invited to select a space which they felt most comfortable in. Those participants with young children most frequently chose to be interviewed at home as they could attend to childcare whilst we spoke. In all, 12 interviews were conducted in participant’s homes, 7 in café-bars or coffee shops, 3 in workplaces, 1 in a hotel, and 1 in a community centre. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes, and 2 hours 30 minutes.

Interviews were semi-structured with a small set of core questions regarding family narrative (who is in your family? What story about your family do you invite your children to tell?), media usage (what media do you like and dislike? What media represents families like yours?), and how decisions about family narratives were made (have you used any parenting guides or resources? How did you make decisions about what to call the adults who parent in your family?). Participants were briefed that ‘media’ could encompass a broad range of sources from broadcast, to community and online productions; television; film; radio; books; magazines; blogs; music; or anything else they felt constituted ‘media’. Demographic data was collected verbally, at the end of interviews.

Interviews were audio recorded on a digital Dictaphone, stored electronically on a secure hard drive under randomly assigned pseudonyms, and later transcribed verbatim. At the point of transcription identifying information, such as detail on workplaces and schools were removed, and names of family members and pets were replaced with pseudonyms.

All interviews were coded in Nvivo. Nvivo allows data to be coded at multiple top-level ‘nodes’ representing key themes and further coded to sub-category ‘nodes’ within each theme. Informed by a discourse analysis approach to identifying significant content, those topics or issues which were repeatedly commented on, or those which were discussed at
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length in multiple interviews were designated as having “worth and validity” (Waitt, 2005, p.182) and formed ‘top level’ nodes. Repetitions of prominent phrases, ideas, and meanings in the data were noted and used to establish which themes were most significant within the data (Hannam, 2002; Smith, 1995). This article deals with the two most prominent themes: lack of representation and feelings of invisibility.

The media examples discussed here were all identified by participants. These named texts were given both in response to questions which directed participants to list their favourite and least favourite media, and in more wide ranging discussions on the type of representation which participants found useful or valuable. Once identified from the interview data, each text was viewed multiple times to identify particularly salient features of the content, with reference to the key characteristics which participants suggested it contained. In subsequent viewings, I reflected on how these features contributed to the overall narrative or discursive meaning of the text (Riggs, 2014, p.160). Analysis of the meanings and discourses available in the media texts is offered here in order to situate participant responses to representation, and to facilitate reflection on the role these texts played in shaping and supporting the narratives participants offered of their families (Kress, 1996; Thompson, 1988, pp.12-13).

Language

This work aims to acknowledge and represent the complex and multi-faceted experiences of LGBTQ parents in the UK today. With this in mind, I note that the available language to describe relationships tends toward a division of couples into either ‘heterosexual’ or ‘same-sex’ pairings. These terms both collapse gender and sex, and allow no room to acknowledge non-heterosexual identities of individuals in different gender couples. Additionally, same-sex is increasingly used interchangeably with ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’ (see Bingham, 2014, for example) and this risks erasing the non-binary,
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multiple, and non-homosexual attractions of bisexual, queer, and non-heterosexual parents
who are in same-sex or same-gender relationships. In the interests of clarity, I chose to refer
to couples who are in relationships with someone who describes their gender in the same way
as them, as being a ‘homogendered’ couple; and to describe couples whose gender identities
are different as a ‘heterogendered’ couple.

Finally, I note that I did not ask participants if they were cisgender but I did actively
recruit trans participants. Cisgender describes people whose gender identity is the same as the
one they were assigned at birth. It forms a counterpoint to transgender, which describes
people whose gender identity differs from the one they were assigned at birth. In order to
most accurately represent individuals’ identities, I use trans and cisgender only in relation to
participants who explicitly described themselves with reference to those terms.

Findings

The two key themes which I will explore mirror the findings of previous research on LGBTQ
people’s responses to media representation (Barker et al, 2008; Halberstam, 2005; Pallotta-
Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003). Namely that certain identities remain proportionally
underrepresented in mainstream cultural images (theme 1) and that this representational
homogeneity results in feelings of cultural and social invisibility (theme 2). These two
themes offer an insight into the prompts and challenges LGBTQ parents experience in
producing culturally intelligible family narratives in the media landscape of 2013/2014.

Theme 1: Limited representations in mainstream media sources

Participants felt strongly that there was a limited scope of representation for LGBTQ-
headed families in the contemporary media landscape. They had forceful criticism for the
different ways they felt representations which ostensibly addressed people like them, failed to
equally validate or represent their experiences.
The ‘anti-lesbian thing’: Good gay men and the refusal to acknowledge the value of lesbian parenting. In response to prompts to tell me about the media they enjoyed as a family and media which they felt represented families like theirs, over half of all the participants I spoke with identified American sitcom, *Modern Family*. *Modern Family*, which first aired in 2009, follows the lives of 3 generations of the Pritchett family living across three households. Presented in a ‘mocumentary’ style, it includes a gay couple – Mitchell and Cameron – who parent their adopted daughter Lily.

*Modern Family* was commonly watched collectively by a participant’s whole family and was deemed by participants to contain broadly positive representations of non-heterosexual parents. However, participants were not uncritical of the way in which this representation was constructed. Darren, a father to two children, whom he co-parented with his ex-partner and two lesbian women said:

> there’s an anti-lesbian thing sometimes [in *Modern Family*], which I think is uncomfortable for me, when I’m watching with the kids. Sometimes it feels like – their Mums are lesbians – so I think interestingly in a supposedly inclusive [show], actually what gets marginalised is lesbian parenthood and lesbians as a group.”

(Darren, gay man)

To understand the context of Darren’s stated discomfort, it is useful to examine the themes present in the sole *Modern Family* episode to prominently feature lesbian characters: ‘Schooled’ (Levitan and O’Shannon, 2012). In the episode, gay couple Cam and Mitchell are called into their daughter Lily’s school to meet with the principal after Lily fought with Connor, the son of lesbian couple, Pam and Susan. The moment Cam and Mitchell discover that Connor’s parents are lesbians their demeanour immediately changes; they exclaim in horror “lesbians!” Pam and Susan are portrayed as aggressive through their explosive entrance, their confrontational introduction (Pam exclaims: “whoever made our son cry has
messed with the wrong Moms!”) and signalled as non-feminine by their utilitarian style of dress. In their antagonistic exchange with these women, Cam and Mitchell go on to imply that Pam and Susan, like all lesbians, are incapable of maintaining a welcoming home (Levitan and O’Shannon, 2012).

Whilst *Modern Family* is a comedy, and Cam and Mitchell’s disdain for lesbians is dramatized as an opportunity for comedic conflict, the meanings of such representation which insists on an antagonistic and oppositional relationship between lesbians and gay men exceeds the boundaries of the show, as Darren’s uneasiness attested. Although *Modern Family* broadly offers celebration and legitimation of gay men parenting (Cavalcante, 2015), it does this by marginalising and abjecting lesbians and gay women who take on the same roles. In the confessional-style segment to camera in the 'Schooled' episode, Cam and Mitchell explain their aversion to lesbians; characterising them as fundamentally estranged from gay men because of both their gender, and their sexual desire for women. As gay men (or sexual outsiders) parenting, Cam and Mitchell are potentially threatening to the dominant order but, through the resignification of lesbians as the “constitutive outside”, the show consolidates the mainstream inclusion of, and the (presumed heterosexual) audience’s identification with, gay men (Hall, 1996). Cam and Mitchell’s description of their ‘natural’ solidarities with heterosexual women and straight men offers the audience an assurance that accepting gay male parents does not mean all the structures of hetero-patriarchal power must be undone (Rothmann, 2013, p. 68. Rich, 1980). Indeed, through the assurance of their fraternity with straight men and women, Cam and Mitchell’s non-heterosexuality is constituted as benign and their style of parenting is ‘normalised’ by their expression of distance from the “uncontainable” lesbian mothers (Riggs, 2011, p.298). Gay men are positioned as allies of patriarchy, champions of heteronormativity (Shugart, 2003), whilst lesbians’ capacity to parent well is dismissed off-hand. This representation therefore offered
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an implicit denial of the parenting arrangement which Darren had with his children’s mothers and rendered his family unimaginable within the representational language of the show.

**Femmes only: Invisibility of gender non-conforming women.** In addition to participants arguing that gay men parenting are preferentially represented (as in *Modern Family*), a number of the lesbian, bi and queer women interviewed also suggested there were further gendered inequalities in the media representations they referred to.

Ivy spoke passionately about the type of femininity on show when women were represented in the media. Speaking about the advertising choices made by a buggy manufacturer, she expressed her frustration at what she felt was an implicit denial by the company that their advertised products could appeal to her, a non-heterosexual women with little interest in traditional femininity:

I was quite irritated by Phil and Teds […] because Phil and Ted’s pushchairs actually appeal to lesbians, they are off-road pushchairs, you can go hiking, and they’re missing a fucking trick! […] they’ve marketed to gay men. Gay men parenting are much more of a minority than lesbian parents and I think lesbian parents still get marginalised in that way and they get kind of forgotten about […] I don’t know if I feel represented myself […] if they’d done an ad with a lesbian couple going hiking, with a Phil and Ted’s pushchair, I’d have been like ‘hey! That’s me!’ because that’s why I got that fucking pushchair, not because I want to go hiking, but because it appeals to me. I’m not prissy and I like functional. (Ivy, lesbian woman)

Ivy described a desire to see both lesbians, and non-traditional femininities represented in buggy advertising, and for the buggy to be sold for the qualities she valued in it; that it is a functional, robust tool to fit her active and practical lifestyle.

In the advertising for Phil and Teds which Ivy referred to, immaculately turned out, femme women in urban environments jump for joy, with lipsticked-smiles, as they push their
buggies in colour-coordinated outfits. Similarly slick, groomed men in fashionable outfits
dote on children sitting in buggies dubbed ‘travel systems’ which come in colours such as
‘noir’ and ‘graphite’ (see Phil and Teds, 2017). These glamorous bodies engage with stylish
products which promise effortless, luxury childcare; offering a link from “off-road” and
“functional” buggies to a lifestyle which “transcends the banalities of femininity” (Skeggs,
1997, p.111) and the mundane tasks associated with childcare and motherhood. By contrast,
the practical and ‘functional’ marketing Ivy wished for, would serve to reinforce bodily
labour. Butch or non-femme bodies that may visually indicate lesbian subjectivity (in a way
these images of hyper-femme women and metrosexual men do not) are thus associated with
toil and cannot be deployed to signal aspirational lifestyles and products. Ivy was explicit in
arguing that this representational inequality in images of women and lesbians parenting
needed to change: “there’s an awful lot of butch lesbians having kids and they are beautiful
people too, I think that [representational invisibility] needs to be redressed really.” (Ivy,
lesbian woman).

Other women also commented on the way in which they felt media only offered
representations of women who conformed to traditional femininities. Talking about what she
felt this meant for trans women’s cultural visibility, Sarah said:

Paris [Lees – a trans woman, activist, and journalist] is young and beautiful and
consequently he [sic] can get on to television whereas I couldn’t, and there are many
far more prominent trans women than me in Britain who also would never be on
television because they’re not good looking enough. (Sarah, trans woman)

Available representations of both trans and cis women in mainstream media are
defined by narratives and images which affirm traditional femininity as ideal, and restrict the
possibility of increasing cultural visibility of and knowledge about women who do not fit this
model. This has particular significance for non-heterosexual women who parent, who may
only find mainstream representation if their gender performance conforms to these narrow possibilities; something both Ivy and Sarah expressed in their comments.

The two-parent model: The disappearing of co-parents and lone-parents. Moving beyond evaluation of the differences in the way in which lesbians are represented compared to gay men parenting, participants also offered reflections on which models of family arrangement were privileged in representations. A lack of representations of families beyond the two-parent model, which acknowledge co-parenting arrangements, was a frequent point of discussion.

Seb was a step-parent to two children and was in a homogendered relationship with the children’s father, who in turn co-parented with a lesbian couple. He reflected on the images and narratives of LGBTQ family which had dominated news media during the campaign for civil partnerships:

to gain that equality there almost had to be a lot of [representation about] the significance of a civil partnerships […] but I think one of the secondary effects of that is that it’s almost narrowed the idea of family down to couples. Which in a way kind of, it can be about, but then you try to expand on that or do something that’s leftfield of that, or a bit different and there isn’t any visibility of that […] it’s quite deterministic now whereas if you go back before that, the idea of LGBT families […] felt like it could be a bit more creative.” (Seb, gay man)

Seb lamented how these dominant narratives on the arrangement of LGBTQ families limited the possibility to imagine different ways to arrange parenting and queer relationships. But he also went on, in common with other parents I spoke with, to highlight how such representations prevented him from achieving recognition and comprehension for the non-dyadic parenting arrangements of his family:
People really struggle to understand the set up because there isn’t any point of reference for it. [I have to tell them that] co-parenting isn’t to do with sexual relationships, that it isn’t to do with previous relationships, isn’t to do with people being infertile, isn’t to do with adopting, there isn’t much representation of that or any points of reference for that. (Seb, gay man)

Lynne was a lone parent who had conceived through self-insemination and initially co-parented with a male heterosexual friend. Like Seb, Lynne reported that disbelief and misunderstanding were common when her daughter, Zoë, attempted to tell people the story of her family: “She sometimes finds it difficult when people don’t quite get it – I think their assumption is ‘have you got this quite right Zoë?” (Lynne, bisexual woman).

Lynne described how she had put a great deal of energy into seeking out media which represented parents and families like hers, in order to make herself and her family “recognizable” subjects (Butler, 2004). Despite this undertaking, she found that the majority of resources for LGBTQ parented families presented parenting dyads. Books including King and King (2002), If I Had 100 Mummies (2007), And Tango Makes Three (2005), and Mommy, Mama and Me (2009) were widely cited by participants as offering representations of ‘families like ours’ for their children, but these texts continued to privilege a two parent model. Such dyadic images offered little help for parents like Seb and Lynne who sought material to support their narratives of family, and make the arrangement of their families comprehensible to the people they and their children encountered.

Theme 2: Feeling invisible in culture and society

Participants were united in their belief that the various representational restrictions and narrow range of cultural narratives available resulted in feelings of invisibility. In addition to a lack of diversity in media images, they detailed how their individual circumstances and identities complicated the potential to be identified as non-heterosexual,
and limited the possibility of finding representations to identify with. Mary and Paul, a heterogendered couple, spoke about how their poly identities inflected their sense of invisibility. Paul described his perception of how his family was misread: "when we're just out and about with just [son] James [it] looks like a straight, monogamous, het[erosexual] relationship, you know?" (Paul, bisexual man). Similarly, Charlie, a bisexual woman in a heterogendered, poly relationship, lamented that “pregnancy and childbirth and so on are horribly heteronormative” and concluded that such ‘heteronormative’ associations compounded “the normal bisexual problem, which is of invisibility” (Charlie, bisexual woman). Participants suggested that their apparent conformity to heterosexual models of parenting and families meant their non-heterosexual identities were “invisibilised” (Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003 p.56). The parents I spoke to said that a lack of cultural supports by which they might be known and recognised made this invisibility difficult to challenge or change.

Julia, a lone parent to one daughter, suggested that for her such cultural support would transform her interactions with other, heterosexual, parents at her daughter’s playgroup:

I feel like [having] someone to identify with – [being able to say:] ‘yeah that’s pretty much how it is for me’ – you know, would make me feel a bit less ‘the only one’ at the playgroup, as the only person that doesn’t fit into the norm. (Julia, queer woman)

Julia’s wish for people “to identify with” echoes Valentine’s (1993) summary of the strategies employed by lesbians in heterosexual environments, who “consciously seek out other gay people…to affirm their own identity and right to be there” (p. 244).

There were two key elements which resulted from this sense of needing to resolve feelings of cultural invisibility in order to “affirm their…right to be there” (Valentine, 1993: 244) which are explored in detail below. Firstly, there was a sense of pressure on, and instability in family narratives. Secondly, participants appeared to feel prompted to generate
creative responses to media representation in order to heal or mitigate this sense of pressure or instability.

Pressures of invisibility: Difficulties sustaining non-heterosexual family narratives at home. Jelena and Hannah were a homogendered couple. Hannah had one daughter with a gay male friend, George, when she was single. After beginning her relationship with Jelena, Hannah had a second daughter, again with George as father. Hannah and Jelena co-parented both girls with George. George was also in a homogendered relationship, although his partner was not involved in parenting decisions. Jelena and Hannah told me about the occasionally painful interactions Jelena had with their daughters, Lexi and Becca, who indicated an ambivalence about Jelena’s role in the family:

Jelena: They’ve got the Sylvanians, the little [animal toy] families. When they were playing one day they said ‘oh that’s a Mum, that’s a Dad’ I said ‘where is the Jelena then?’

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

Jelena: But I’ve had that conversation with them both and they try, they say ‘ok, well this is a Jelena’ and sometimes they say ‘we do! Sometimes we do play Mummy and Jelena’ and I say ‘no. Not often enough!’ […] again I got upset sometimes and Lexi had done some drawings ‘there’s Mummy, there’s Daddy, and me and my sister gone on holiday’ I said ‘how often has that been the case? Never. There is either just Mummy and Daddy and Joe [Daddy’s partner], or two of you, or all of us’ […] so again, it’s a bit personal.

Hannah: It doesn’t get much more personal than that. How you are seen by your kids, how you are valued within the family, it’s highly, highly emotive.

(Hannah and Jelena, lesbian women)
The dominance of the nuclear family narrative within mainstream media provided a source of resistance to the narrative of family which Jelena and Hannah offer, and this is indicated in the preferred model the girls reproduced in their play. Lexi and Becca had reshaped their experience to fit a heterosexual mould. In Lexi and Becca’s play, the biological father was reoriented in the centre of their family, replacing the space and role which Jelena would have taken and, as Hannah presented it, generating a highly charged emotional exchange in which Jelena had to push the girls to reinvest her in their family. Whilst parents can offer different family narratives, the narrative of the heterosexual nuclear family was so culturally significant (Nelson, 2006, p.16) that it repeatedly reasserted itself within the homes of these non-heterosexual families.

Talking family through media: Finding ways to locate families in culture. It is notable that parents explicitly stated that feeling invisible, and experiencing significant emotional pressures in narrating family, as above, were not new or unexpected experiences. When I asked if a sense of invisibility weighed heavily upon her and her partner, Ivy said: “I think feeling alienated is just a way of life for most gay people. It’s just something you become very used to, you don’t really even realise it.” (Ivy, lesbian woman). I suggest this expectation or feeling that it is “a way of life” is indicative of a “border existence,” where subjects do not comfortably or neatly fit into existing categories (Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003: 74). Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz (2003) suggested that experiencing such alienation and marginal subjectivity does, however, “open up space for experimentation” (p.74). The parents I spoke to responded to emotional pressure and alienation by experimenting with [re]reading representation, placing their families in dialogue with different types of media images, and attempting to establish a place in the cultural imaginary.
Lynne described how she prompted and pushed her daughter to consider identities which were not visible:

you could have a story book about a single parent and they might be bisexual but it’s not stated. I think I would sometimes say those sort of things to Zoë […] things like ‘that person, who knows? They might be bisexual, they might have a trans history, we don’t know do we?’ It’s not explicit but it might be in there. So sometimes books were – probably it’s not been in the author’s mind – but I would put it in there.

(Lynne, bisexual woman)

In this way, the specific representational needs of Lynne’s family could be drawn from pre-existing representational resources. Her practice of prompting and questioning functioned on two levels, both highlighting to her daughter the invisibility of certain identities, and emphasising the sameness of their family to these narratives by inserting identities like hers into the gaps in the text.

Other parents cited texts including *Lilo and Stitch* (Spencer, 2002) (a film which tells the story of Lilo, her adult sister Nani, and their journey to forming a new family with an alien named Stitch, after their parents die), and *The Gruffalo’s Child* (Donaldson and Scheffler, 2005) (a picture book which narrates the adventures of the apparently lone-parent Gruffalo and his son) as resources which allowed space for this type of reading. These parents sought to draw parallels between these culturally legitimated, but flexible images (see Jenkins, 2006), and their unique family arrangements and values.

For Mary and Paul, a heterogendered couple who had poly relationships, texts which offered flexible representations of gender, reproduction, and family provided a foundation for building their narrative of family. *The Clangers* was a popular choice for both them and son James. They spoke to me about the episode ‘The Egg’ (Postgate, 1970). In it, the Clangers, a diminutive mouse-like race who live on a small moon, rally around their friend the Soup
Dragon to help create a Baby Soup Dragon and ensure she is “no longer the only Soup Dragon in the universe” (Postgate, 1970). In our interview, Mary spoke about a lesbian friend she had supported through pregnancy and birth, and continued to support as a lone parent. Mary also had another partner, Matthew, who lived with her and Paul. Mary clarified that whilst Matthew did not take on a parenting role towards James, he did support her and Paul in caring for their child. The multiple and flexible relations which constituted Mary and Paul’s family, and their friends’ families, found representation in The Clangers, which cheerfully narrated a community-centred family analogous to the one which James was being raised in. Like Susan Driver’s (2007) ‘queer girls’, Mary and Paul’s reading of this popular text offers the possibility of meaning-making which is “convoluted” and multiple (Driver, 2007, p.13). Engaging with The Clangers in their family-activities therefore helped open space for family identity to be constituted through unclear and obtuse narratives of formation; something which corresponded with Mary and Paul’s stated wish to model expanded notions of family, relationship arrangements, and families of choice.

Some parents I spoke to narrated their similarity to images that relied on more traditional parenting-dyads, I suggest this is a strategy for achieving recognition and stability for their family stories. Martha and Paige, a homogendered couple, who co-parented with a homogendered male couple, described their response to children’s books which limited images to two-parent families:

I realised that anything we read, most books obviously have Mommy and Daddy but she has Mommies and Daddies so it’s actually not a problem, um, I mean the book we’re talking about, the page says ‘some kids have two mommies and some have two daddies’ and I always say to her ‘and you have two mommies and two daddies!’

(Paige, lesbian woman, participant’s emphasis)
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However, for Lynne and some other parents this approach did not fully address their wish for easy recognition of their identities and the intentionally chosen shape of their families. By using images of family which rely on the idea that non-heterosexual family-difference is identifiable exclusively through cues of homogendered relationships (“some kids have two mommies”), parents unwittingly reinforced to their children a notion that families can be easily categorised into ‘heterosexual’ or ‘same-sex’, and that identities do not expand beyond what can be signalled by a romantic-dyadic relationship. Poaching from media which is so heavily tied to dominant binary heterosexual or same-gender couple narratives of family can mean that parents are no closer to making their bisexual or non-monosexual identities visible.

Reflecting on this, Lynne said:

It’s not all about same-sex relationships, it’s not [even] just about relationships, how do you show images of people who are single and bisexual? You take a picture of me, who would know? So I think it’s really hard to find and depict visually. (Lynne, bisexual woman)

Participant’s comments indicated that they felt strategies of representation which visually signal inclusion of non-heterosexual parents would always fail to fully represent some parents. Within this context, the work many participants reported doing to mitigate representational restrictions and invisibility of their family, was of limited success.

Discussion

The LGBTQ parents who participated in this study felt that the scope of media and cultural images which represented non-heterosexual families was severely limited. This lack of representational diversity generated discomfort and frustration for parents. Returning to Darren, who identified *Modern Family*’s portrayal of lesbians as ‘uncomfortable’, it is possible to see how even comedic representations can have wide reaching impacts on the experience of family and the possibility to celebrate and affirm LGBTQ people’s suitability
and desirability as parents. Representation can thus enact a symbolic violence on LGBTQ people denying validation and recognition of life patterns through the use of specific types of characterisation (Gross 1994, p.143). In the case of Modern Family, it was not only lesbians who were marginalised by this representation, but also any GBTQ person who shared a connection with lesbian women.

Similarly, Ivy and Sarah’s comments about their feelings of cultural invisibility as women who perform non-traditional femininities, pointed to a degree of representational invisibility which amounts to symbolic annihilation of butch women in mainstream media (Gross, 1994, p.143). For these women, and the various parents whose families expanded beyond a two-parent model, representational invisibility placed them in “nonplaces [sic] where recognition…proves precarious if not elusive, in spite of one’s best efforts to be a subject in some recognizable sense” (Butler, 2004, p.108).

These findings are in contrast to various studies which cautiously point to an expansion of the “lexicon of legitimation” (Butler, 2004, p.108) and cultural normalisation of families headed by LGBTQ parents (GLAAD, 2015; Schacher, Auerbach & Silverstein, 2005; Walters, 2012; Warner, 1999). This study indicates the importance of continued scrutiny for the emergence of new hierarchies of insider/outsider, preferred/other in cultural representations. As Seb argued in his comments, the debate accompanying the changes in UK law to allow same-sex marriage in 2013 (Marriage [Same Sex Couples] Act 2013) offer one example of the way in which the arrangement of a two-parent non-heterosexual family may be concretized both in the cultural imaginary and in legislation.

Even whilst media “limits what can be said” about any identity, it also “makes saying possible” (Dyer, 1990, p.1). Without mainstream cultural narratives of non-heterosexual families which affirm and represent family heterogeneity, the possibility of speaking about
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these families, and accessing legislative change which recognises and protects different types
of family, is significantly restricted.

The lack of media representations depicting diverse non-heterosexual families
generated emotional stress. Meanings which circulated in media spilled out into homes and
the interactions these parents had with their children, as Jelena and Hannah’s comments
detailed. Participants in this study reported investing an enormous amount of ongoing
emotional energy to help resolve the resulting cultural invisibility and alleviate symbolic
annihilation. This was significant as it was in addition to any work they had done to stabilise
their individual identities as non-heterosexual people. They worked to orientate their children
within their family, and to locate their families within a media culture that did not offer
significant recognition for either multi-parent or non-heterosexual families. Participants’
work illuminates two key elements of contemporary life within a media saturated culture.
Firstly, it points to the impossibility of stepping outside of representation (Abel, 2007).
Instead, LGBTQ parents must commit to transforming representations and finding spaces in
the cultural lexicon, through which they can enable recognition and validation for families
like theirs. Secondly, it evidences the central role of media in producing ourselves as social
and cultural subjects, and the active participation with, and critique of media which subjects
must maintain, and expand, when negotiating new collective identities.

This second point was well illustrated by both Lynne’s, and Mary and Paul’s family
media-engagement and practices of narrative making. They offered their children examples
of how to find alternative, evolving, and open-ended narratives of family within mainstream
and conventional representations, but also modelled how to respond to representation. These
parents employ skills honed as LGBTQ youths in a heteronormative culture – the skills of
queer reading (Driver, 2007; Liming, 2007) – to reclaim and repurpose the content of
representations in support of collective, family identities. Parents’ knowledge of the potential
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of queer[ed] practices of reading to help [re]locate them in a heterosexist culture is leveraged as a strategy which can be used by their whole family to respond to, and redeploy, the narrow media representations which they saw. As families, they worked reflexively and discursively with mainstream media representations to achieve meaningful identification, and to signal to their children the culturally-valided location of their families.

Passing on the skills of critical queer reading is part of the everyday maintenance and production of these families and marks them as a formation distinct from the rigidly structured, authorised, images of family which circulate in culture. Teaching, repeating, and reinforcing these critical responses is an integral part of what these families mean. LGBTQ-headed families are reflexive, participatory, and continuously created and stabilised through discursive practices. The reflexive discourses of LGBTQ-led families contrasts with traditional, dyadic, nuclear family identity-building which, although still involving reflexive narrative practices, draws on a much narrower range of meanings and sources, and can comfortably be legitimated through pre-established discourses.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significant degree to which the representations that circulate through the mainstream media and cultural productions of the UK shape the experiences of non-heterosexual families. Whilst participants agreed there were an increasing number of images and representations of non-heterosexual family, they repeatedly highlighted the lack of diversity in these images. When the messages and meanings of these images were set against participants’ individual family-identity narratives there was a disjuncture between the types of family arrangements which were represented and culturally-known, and their lived experience of forming family as LGBTQ people. In particular, participants repeatedly attributed feelings of cultural invisibility, ongoing social-dislocation or exclusion, and experiences of family conflict to this representational lack.
Attempts by these LGBTQ parents to heal representational invisibility through strategies of queer reading and creative use of mainstream media texts were of limited success. Participants who had co-parenting arrangements, non-dyadic romantic relationships, and non-monosexual identities continued to report feelings of cultural invisibility and lamented the ongoing emotional labour required from them to alleviate the associated pressures.

For future research, this study points to the importance of acknowledging identities beyond gay men and lesbians in research on non-heterosexual lives. Exploring connections between groups under the LGBTQ banner is especially instructive when considering the way representation facilitates different family narratives even as lesbian and gay subjectivities are increasingly represented by mainstream media. Secondly, responses of participants to media representations indicated that media not only contributes to the ordering of everyday life (Silverstone, 2007) but is also central in [dis]allowing the production of [stabilising] family narratives. Media which offers diverse representations of social groups, and represents these various subjectivities as equally valuable and legitimate, are urgently needed. Such representations facilitate LGBTQ people to speak their experiences and families, open dialogue with their children about family identity, and provide a foundation on which narratives of location and connection can be built, ultimately providing families with a sense of fitting or being ‘in place’.

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