

# Learning difference: Representations of diversity in storybooks for children of lesbian and gay parents

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper explores some of the relationships between the ways in which (white) dominant group children learn about racial differences, and the ways in which difference is represented within lesbian and gay families. Research in the latter area has typically provided two dominant (though contrasting) accounts of difference within lesbian or gay families: 1) that children of lesbian or gay parents will have a better understanding of difference, and 2) that there are no significant differences between heterosexual and lesbian or gay families. In order to explore the implications of this current research in regards to constructions of difference within predominantly white lesbian and gay families, an analysis of storybooks aimed at children with lesbian or gay parents was conducted. The findings suggest that representations of difference within such books often reinforce a white heterosexual norm for parenting. To counter this it is proposed that a shift is required in research focusing on lesbian and gay families, the intent being both to examine the *simultaneous* ways in which race privilege and sexuality-based discrimination shape the lives of white lesbian or gay parents, and to broaden the scope of research in this area to more adequately reflect the diverse communities it seeks to represent.

**KEYWORDS.** Racial categories; lesbian and gay parenting; children; diversity; difference

As research in the area of critical psychology has long demonstrated, what is often considered to be ‘commonsense’ within the field of psychology is more precisely that which is normalised, or that which persists as the dominant framework for understanding a particular social practice. This dominance of one particular form of ‘commonsense’ over others is evident in the literature on child development and parenting, where an account of children that sees them largely as passive recipients of a development trajectory continues to hold sway (Bradley, 1989; Burman, 1994). As a result, research on children and their parents often fails to critically explore the ways in which this normative framework impacts upon both how we understand the experiences of children, and how we develop research questions to address the changing needs of children and their parents within a broad range of cultural contexts.

These limitations in regards to the study of children and their parents are evident in many areas of the psychological study of ‘development’, two of which will be the focus of this paper. First, we are interested to examine how it is that academic research accounts for the ways in which children learn about categories of racial difference. We will propose, following van Ausdale and Feagin (2002), that the depiction of children as ‘naïve adults’ results to a large degree in a certain ignorance on the part of researchers to the very complex ways in which very young children learn about race, and in particular how this shapes the lives of dominant group (white) children.

We follow this brief examination of the implications of how we understand children’s negotiations of racial categories by exploring a second area where normative assumptions shape psychological research, namely in the area of lesbian parenting. In so doing we outline some of the concerns that we (amongst others, e.g., Clarke, 2001; Hicks, 2005; Riggs, 2004) have in regards to the ways in which lesbian families are depicted within psychological research, and specifically, how constructions of difference function within such research. By focusing on this literature we use our examination of research on how children learn racial categories to explore what some of the claims made about children in lesbian families achieve, namely how categories of difference often serve to reinforce a particular normative framework for understanding children and their parents.

In order to elaborate these points we then move on to an analysis of three children’s storybooks that depict lesbian or gay families. Through this analysis we examine how difference is depicted in such books, and we elaborate how certain constructions of difference may serve to reinforce white, heterosexual norms around families. More specifically, we look at how the category of

'diversity' is primarily reserved for non-white and/or non-heterosexual families. This often results in these families being expected to 'prove their value' in order to be accepted, or alternately, to represent themselves as being 'no different' to white heterosexual families (Riggs, 2005).

We conclude by drawing on work in the area of queer theory which, whilst often being accused of providing little in the way of 'real' opportunities for challenging social inequities, can actually produce very concrete opportunities not only for challenging discrimination, but for the creation of radically alternate ways of understanding identities, families and the meaning of 'difference' itself. The implications of this will be explored specifically within the context of queer families, with broader suggestions made about some of the potential shifts that may be required within research agendas seeking to examine the experiences of such families.

## LITERATURE OVERVIEW

### *Learning about racial difference*

Psychological research on children and prejudice during the last 30 years has demonstrated that children's awareness of 'racial' difference manifests early in life, at least by 3 years of age. This body of work has consistently found that dominant group children not only display a preference for other dominant group members, but that they also assign them more positive and favourable traits compared to racial and ethnic minorities (Aboud, 1988; Augoustinos & Rosewarne, 2001). Although this research has been central in emphasising the pervasive and insidious nature of racialised systems of understanding, it has primarily been interpreted as demonstrating how negative representations of the 'other' are learned early in life and thus how 'racism' comes to be learned and reproduced.

There is relatively little emphasis, in contrast, as to how 'race' itself is constitutive of the identity of dominant group (white) children. In other words, by demonstrating awareness of racial difference, white children are not only positioning the other negatively, but at the same time in the process they are shoring up their own identities as members of a privileged majority. A notable exception to this trend within research on young children and prejudice has been the work of van Ausdale and Feagin (2002), who have demonstrated that white children as young as three years of age consistently and knowingly deploy racial categories to bolster their own position amongst their peers, and that they do so through awareness of their own racialisation as white people. Similarly, our own work (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2005) has sought to contribute to this much neglected issue – on what it means to be a white racial subject and how racism functions in the service of dominant group members' identities. We have suggested not that racism is something that is necessarily intentionally chosen or sought out by the dominant majority (though that is not to deny that racist acts are often highly motivated, nor is it to suggest that white people are somehow free of accountability for their race privilege), but rather that racism *as a set of social practices that are productive of the category race* is formative of white identities. In other words, we suggest that racism is usefully conceptualised not as something that is learnt 'down the track', but rather that it is one of the modes of being that are productive of white subjects *from the very beginning*. To be recognised as a white person means that *from birth* those of us who are identified as white are afforded a range of privileges, and as such we are always already racialised. Much like Butler's (1990) incisive analysis of how gender norms precede the formation of 'individual identity', racism *as an organising principle of Western societies* shapes the ways in which white people are able to claim an identity that is founded upon the concept of race.

These points about how white people are always already located within a range of power relations forms a point of enquiry for a related area of research – one on how children understand their relations to other people within social contexts. Such research has suggested that rather than seeing children (and in particular young children) as waiting to be shaped and moulded by their parents and other significant people in their lives, it is important to recognise the ways in which children interact with one another from a very early age, and how these interactions are often shaped by their highly developed knowledge of racial categories. Similarly, critical research on children's sense of self continues to demonstrate not that children are passive recipients of adults' teachings, but rather that they actively negotiate the world around them and that they engage in a wide range of social interactions with one another that adults are not necessarily always privy to (Bradley & Selby, 2005; Selby & Bradley, 2003).

There continues to be a great need to revisit how psychological research typically represents children and their parents, and what this tells us about the particular norms that circulate around families within Western societies. How such research conceptualises both racial categories themselves, and the ways in which they are learnt, modelled, formative or otherwise of children's ways of being in

the world, will largely shape the means we employ for challenging racism (van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002). If racism is seen solely as something that is learnt or even taught, then we will fail to examine how racism starts long before children are explicitly or intentionally 'taught' anything, and thus commonplace examples of race privilege or racism that demonstrate the formative nature of racism will go unnoticed. It is important that any approach to combating racism take into account the implicit ways in which very small children come to 'see' race and their own racial identities through the subtleties of language use and the institutional forms that racism and race privilege take.

Of course speaking about racism, and in particular the race privilege of dominant group members, is not *per se* a new approach to the psychological study of race. What is, however, relatively novel about our approach here is that we seek not to investigate our claims in regards to the identities of the 'usual suspects' – white heterosexual individuals. Rather, our interest is to look at how it is that race privilege functions amongst white people who are typically considered to be marginalised (i.e., white lesbian and gay parents). Our interest is of course not to contribute to the marginalisation of this group of people, but rather to explore some of the very complex ways in which claims to 'positive difference' within lesbian or gay families may represent a failure on the part of those who research such families to examine how white lesbian or gay families both experience discrimination on the basis of sexuality, but also privilege on the basis of race. We are thus concerned to extend our contentions about how the norm of white heterosexuality often informs research on children and their parents, by looking at how white hegemony may also function through research on, and literature for, white lesbians and gay men and their children (see also Riggs, in-press a).

#### *Difference and lesbian and gay families*

Our interest in looking first at recent critical research on children and racial difference was to highlight the importance of understanding how categories of difference function in very concrete ways in the lives of children, and how this impacts upon families. Moreover, we are concerned to suggest that issues of racial identity formation are as equally central to the lives of white children as they are to the lives of non-white children. Failing to understand that white children's awareness of racial identity and the operations of white privilege are often central to their ways of being in the world is, in our opinion, one of the root problems associated with research on children that largely conceptualises issues of race and racism as pertaining to non-white people. Our interest in this section is to explore how these points relate to research on lesbian families, and in particular to draw out how certain constructions of lesbian families within psychological research, whilst demonstrating an important intervention into how lesbian families have been represented historically, may nonetheless fail to critically challenge conceptualisations of difference and the experiences of children in white lesbian families. In this sense, this section of the paper will provide an elaboration of why it is that such research may at times serve to reinforce a particularly normative understanding of lesbian families, and, as we will elaborate in the analysis that follows, how this may limit the ways in which racism and race privilege are understood to function *in conjunction with* sexuality-based discrimination (Riggs, 2006a).

In what is widely considered to be a key text in the field of lesbian parenting research, Tasker and Golombok (1997) provide an important account of what it means to grow up in a lesbian family. Reporting on a longitudinal study of children raised by lesbian mothers, Tasker and Golombok devote considerable space to exploring how it is that 'difference' functions within lesbian families. One of their main findings in this respect relates to the sexual orientation of children of lesbian mothers, and states that

Where there has been an openness about and acceptance of lesbian relationships in the family environment, the young person growing up in a lesbian mother family is able to consider lesbian or gay relationships as a viable option whereas the dominant heterosexual culture ignored or denigrates (sic) homosexual relationships (p. 152).

This finding is one that has been promoted widely by lesbian and gay parents themselves, and has been used as evidence of the 'positive' benefits of growing up with lesbian parents. Our intention here is not to question whether this is true or not, and certainly not to deny the opinions of lesbian or gay parents themselves. Rather our interest is in how a particular form of difference is made possible through accounts such as these, and what this may ultimately achieve in regards to the sanctioning of particular non-heterosexual families.

In another more recent, but no less key, report on families with same-sex attracted parents, Charlotte Patterson, under the auspices of the American Psychological Society (APA, 2005), provides a meta-analysis of over twenty years research on lesbian and gay families and parenting. The summary in this analysis in regards to difference and sexual orientation suggests that:

In all studies, the great majority of offspring of both lesbian mothers and gay fathers described themselves as heterosexual. Taken together, the data do not suggest elevated rates of homosexuality among the offspring of lesbian or gay parents. For instance, Huggins (1989) interviewed 36 adolescents, half of whom had lesbian mothers and half of whom had heterosexual mothers. No children of lesbian mothers identified themselves as lesbian or gay, but one child of a heterosexual mother did; this difference was not statistically significant. In another study, Bailey and his colleagues (1995) studied adult sons of gay fathers and found more than 90% of the sons to be heterosexual. (p. 10)

This account of difference within lesbian and gay families contrasts with that provided by Tasker and Golombok (1997), in that it effectively denies any form of significant difference in regards to sexual orientation amongst children of heterosexual and lesbian or gay parents. Such an approach to reporting 'no difference' has been challenged recently (e.g., Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), at the same time as it is acknowledged that in some contexts a claim to no difference may be politically advantageous (e.g., where showing differences may historically have resulted in lesbian or gay parents losing custody of their children). What is problematic about both accounts reported above (i.e., either recognising difference on specific terms, or denying difference) is that they largely accept the terms set for recognising difference within lesbian and gay families by the white heterosexual majority. As such, where we see examples of difference acknowledged, it is a very specific form of difference that is considered intelligible in regards to a white heterosexual norm. This, as we will now outline, is problematic not only for the ways in which it reinforces the whiteness and unexamined race privilege inherent to the vast majority of research on lesbian and gay parents, but also because it constructs difference in very particular, narrow, ways.

Our argument about the limitations of the two approaches to understanding difference follows as such: it is no doubt true that in seeing their parents in same-sex relationships, children may well display an increased willingness to consider such a relationship for themselves should that be the sexual identity they relate to. Alternately, children who are raised in same-sex headed households may not identify as same-sex attracted, but may well display a greater openness or 'acceptance' of same-sex relationships, which, as Tasker and Golombok suggest, is in direct contrast to the discriminatory depictions of such relationships within the 'dominant heterosexual culture'. Whilst these are both important points, however, they nonetheless may function to ascribe a particularly limited understanding of 'difference' to lesbian families. In this sense, lesbian families (for example) are seen as potentially addressing societal discrimination around sexual orientation as a result of 'their' difference – the very fact of being in a lesbian family (one that is 'open and accepting') will lead to what are in a sense seen as 'greater options' in regards to sexual orientation for children of lesbian mothers. As a result, and in our reading, lesbian families are seen as different on very specific terms – they are different from a routinely negative 'dominant heterosexual culture', they are different for the 'fact' of being lesbians (who parent), and they are different because, presumably unlike heterosexual parents, they afford their children the possibility to 'consider lesbian or gay relationships as viable option[s]'. This type of logic is problematic on a number of levels, which we will now elaborate.

First, and as Malone and Cleary (2002) suggest, research on lesbian families that places emphasis upon 'positive' attributes (such as those reported by Tasker and Golombok, 1997), whilst being an important counter to negative representations of lesbian families, can work to silence the very real problems that lesbian mothers face, and the potentially negative experiences that both mothers and their children may have. Having to constantly 'prove the positive' can effectively work to sideline issues that may be of equal importance to lesbian communities, such as family break-ups, domestic violence and child abuse. These are fundamentally difficult topics to discuss precisely because of the (ongoing) opposition to lesbian families, but also because researchers often seem very focused on ignoring problems in order to 'promote the positive'. In this sense, the 'difference' of lesbian families is being 'sold', if you like, to the 'dominant heterosexual culture'. Such difference is thus looked at for what it can bring to family life, rather than the ways in which it may potentially subvert normative understandings of the category 'family'. This is a point we will return to in our analysis, but one that

holds a great deal of import in regards to how lesbian (and gay) families are researched and engaged with (see also Riggs, 2007a, for more on how difference is understood as a 'benefit to others').

In regards to the second representation of difference reported above, that of 'no difference', there is a worrying tendency towards a particularly narrow understanding of lesbian and gay families, one that accepts the norm of white heterosexual parenting as a useful guide against which to measure lesbian or gay parents. This is especially problematic when between-group comparisons are made in research on lesbian and gay parents: when the samples of this research are almost exclusively white, there is a tendency towards leaving the racial homogeneity of these groups unchallenged. This in effect serves to marginalise or ignore the experiences of non-white lesbian or gay parents (and indeed non-white heterosexual parents). It also fails to adequately explore why most samples are racially homogenous, and what this reflects back to us as researchers about the ways in which we go about engaging with particular communities. Finally, a relatively straightforward acceptance of the almost exclusive focus on white lesbian and gay parents fails to actually examine what it means for this group of parents *as white people*. Surely there are many insights to be gained by exploring the *simultaneous* benefits and disadvantages experienced by white lesbians and gay men, rather than ignoring the role that racial identity plays amongst this group of people, simply because the group is racially homogenous (Riggs, 2006; Riggs, 2007b).

To summarise, then, these two points in relation to representations of difference within lesbian and gay families suggests to us that what may well be continuing to happen in research on such families is that a white heterosexual norm for parenting is being privileged. In other words, if lesbian mothers and gay fathers seem to be expected to 'prove the positive' aspects of their parenting, then one implication of this may be that white heterosexual parenting continues to be the 'gold standard' from which all other forms of parenting are measured – if lesbian or gay parenting is not heterosexual parenting, then it must demonstrate why this difference is acceptable (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004; Riggs, 2006b). This is certainly the case in the Tasker and Golombok (1997) study, which used a heterosexual control group against which to measure the experiences of lesbian mothers and their children. This expectation of proving the acceptability of lesbian parenting is problematic not only for the reasons outlined above in regards to what this says about the functioning of difference *within* lesbian families, but also for what it suggests about lesbian families *across* a range of cultural contexts.

It is likely the case that whilst *white* lesbian or gay families may be accorded some degree of recognition for their family forms through presenting an 'acceptable face of difference' in the context of a society that is marginally willing to concede the importance of 'valuing diversity', it is far less likely that other queer identified forms of family (such as those with bisexual or transgendered family members, or families that are configured through polyamorous relationships) will be accorded similar sanction, regardless of their racial identities. If the norms from which research on lesbian and gay parents is primarily derived from parenting research that is typically conducted with dominant group (white) participants, then we may assume with some degree of safety that the account of difference that is being produced in most psychological research on lesbian and gay parents is primarily an account of white sexual difference. This is a point that we will return to following our analysis, but it is important to draw attention to it as we now enter into said analysis, bringing with us the critiques we have presented thus far in regards to how difference is thought to be learnt and experienced in regards to race and sexuality.

## METHOD

The data analysed in the following section are taken from three representative exemplars from a wider corpus of storybooks (n=20) that feature lesbian and gay families. This corpus of storybooks was primarily sourced through online searches (n=16), the remainder (n=4) being suggested by friends of the first author. Websites such as <http://www.pinkbooks.com/> and search engines such as [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) were used to develop a list of storybooks focusing on lesbian and gay families, and information from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) was used to acquire the corpus of books from which the sample was drawn.

Our approach to analysing the books is informed by work in the area of critical psychology, and in particular critical psychological work on lesbian and gay parenting (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Hicks, 2005; Riggs, 2005). In her paper on lesbian parenting in this issue of *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, Clarke outlines the broad parameters of critical psychology, and its utility for researching the lives of lesbian and gay parents (Clarke, this issue). We would reiterate that critical psychological approaches, particularly as they are informed by social constructionism, are useful for the ways in which they provide opportunities for examining taken-for-granted norms, and for the insights they afford us as to

how particular social practices (such as parenting and family making) are constructed in particular ways. Such an approach to analysing the experiences of lesbian and gay parents, or representations of such parents within the media or in children's storybooks, seeks not to first deconstruct the truth claims of these sources, and then posit more accurate truths. Rather, critical psychological approaches seek to examine how truth claims are made, in whose service they operate, and how they often function to exclude or marginalise.

In the analysis that follows we employ a thematic analysis informed by the broader epistemology of critical psychology as outlined above and in the paper by Clarke in this issue. Thematic analysis may be understood as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In referring to themes, we take as important an approach to analysis that not only identifies broad themes across a corpus of data, but which also provides specific examples, and connects those themes with the broader aims of a critical psychological approach to research that prioritises *political analysis*. In other words, a critical psychological analysis, as we see it, is one that examines how particular identities or understandings of identity are made available to people as a result of the political context within which they live. Our analysis of themes in storybooks for children of lesbians or gay men is inherently political, as it does not stop at just identifying the themes and providing examples. Rather, it follows through on this by discussing the implications of the themes by situating them in a social context whereby lesbian and gay parenting, by choice or simply by matter of being located in societies that devalue such parenting, may be understood as inherently political. This is not to ascribe to all lesbian and gay parents a desire for political activism, but rather to acknowledge that politics are very often forced upon lesbian and gay parents as a result of strong and relatively powerful social groups that seek to dismiss both the rights and experiences of such parents (Riggs, in press b).

In the analysis that follows, then, we discuss three broad themes that were identified from across the corpus of storybooks (n=20) and which are exemplified by three particular books. These are 1) the locus of 'diversity' (n=7), 2) the 'benefits' that diversity is depicted as bringing (n=8), and 3) the denial of diversity (what we have termed above a 'no difference' account) (n=4). For each theme we provide examples from a particular storybook, and in so doing outline the broad contours of the book itself (e.g., the narrative, the story-telling style, the imagery), in addition to providing comments on how each theme may be understood as functioning in regards to the construction of particular understandings of lesbian and gay families and lesbian and gay parenting identities.

The three books analysed below were chosen for their representativeness of one particular theme. The purpose of a thematic analysis is not to claim that the themes identified are exhaustive, but rather that they are those most closely related to the topic under examination. The sample analysed in specific detail is thus small because the books that were identified as pertaining to each theme were relatively homogenous: their narratives involve the use of each particular theme in very similar ways. It should be noted that out of the corpus of 20 books, 3 could not be easily coded within the 3 themes. This does not necessarily mean they were not problematic in other ways, but simply that they did not produce another coherent theme that warranted analysis. Thus they may be understood not as deviant cases, but rather as containing narratives that do not directly pertain to the research topic of representations of diversity.

## ANALYSIS

The following analysis takes up the two main points made thus far within this paper – that children are competent cultural members who understand and utilise racial categories, and that constructions of difference within lesbian (and gay) families may at times represent a white, heterosexual agenda around parenting – and applies this to examine some specific examples of how it is that racial and sexual difference is accounted for within children's books written for and about children in lesbian or gay headed households. These are, we believe, important sites to examine as they may offer some insight into how it is not only that racial and sexual difference is represented to children, but also how it is that certain forms of difference are presented as being the most acceptable.

It should be noted that whilst the literature for children on lesbian or gay families is relatively small, it is most certainly an important literature. Nonetheless, it is important to examine how this literature functions to warrant certain understandings of difference, and the implications of this for how children with lesbian or gay parents understand both themselves and the world around them.

*The locus of 'diversity'*

The first book that we examine in detail here is entitled *My House*, and is written within the context of Australia. The book, which is one of a series of four, presents the story of a young girl who lives with her two mums, and it also introduces her friend Jed who lives with his two dads. As a whole the series introduces the story in an easy to follow manner for young children, and is clearly and often humorously illustrated. As the series title 'Learn to Include' suggests, these are books intended for use in primary schools for the promotion and recognition of diversity. Whilst this is an admirable aim, it is important to examine how diversity is understood throughout the series as referring to anything that is not considered 'the norm' – those who are considered part of the norm are not seen to be 'diverse'. This is exemplified by the blurb on the back cover of the first book in the series, *My House*, which states that:

These books provide opportunities for discussions on understanding and celebrating diversity... contribute to an understanding of how families can be different, and provide confirmation for children of same sex parents.

In the first part of this quote, we are instructed that the books create opportunities for 'understanding and celebrating diversity'. This is not in and of itself a problem – acknowledging the diverse forms that families take is an important step towards respect for all family forms. However, this statement is tempered by the second part, which suggests that the books 'contribute to an understanding of how families can be different'. This statement is problematic in that the books are taken to show how only certain families (i.e., lesbian and gay families) are seen as different. This in effect positions lesbian and gay headed families as being what is referred to as 'diversity'. Of course it is true that lesbian and gay families (amongst many queer family forms) are diverse, and that such families are part of the diverse range of family forms within which children live. Where this becomes troublesome is in the implication that somehow lesbian and gay families are what are primarily considered to be 'diverse families' – heterosexual families are not depicted equally as being themselves diverse, and as being a part of the diverse range of current family forms.

The trouble with this understanding of diversity, then, is that heterosexual families remain the norm – as that from which all other families diverge. This understanding of diversity does not encourage heterosexual families to consider their own relationship to diversity other than as a relationship to the other: it instead encourages children who read the books, and who live in heterosexual families, to consider diversity as something outside of their family – as something represented (for example) by lesbian and gay headed families. The problem here is that children of heterosexual parents (and indeed heterosexual parents and teachers themselves) can continue to consider themselves as the norm, and are thus not encouraged to explore what notions of normality achieve, and how they marginalise lesbian or gay families.

Likewise, the framing of the books as 'explorations of diversity' puts lesbian and gay families on display as if in a fish bowl. Whilst it is important that such books raise awareness about the existence of queer families, we believe it is important that they do so by locating such families in a social context, whereby not only do such families experience great joy, but where they also experience discrimination. Similarly, it is important for books on lesbian and gay headed families to represent a diverse range of families. The *Learn to Include* series largely fails to do this. Firstly, and most obviously, all of the main characters are white. Whilst it is indeed true that white people constitute a majority within Australia, it is nonetheless problematic that *queer* diversity is associated with white lesbians and gay men. Diversity in this sense may be seen as represented by a form of sameness that is comfortable to the white heterosexual majority – as we mentioned earlier, the limits set for representations of difference within lesbian or gay families may very well conform to a peculiarly white heterosexual model of difference. In addition to being racially homogenous, both of the lead families appear to live comfortably in their own houses, with two parents, and with what appear to be a reasonable degree of access to material goods. Here again diversity appears to conform to a relatively safe image of non-heterosexual families – there does not appear to be space in the world represented within the books for single lesbian mothers, or gay fathers living in council housing, or queer families who are struggling in general to make ends meet. The challenge that these books represent to the taken for granted assumptions of the heterosexual majority are thus in some ways explained away by their conformity to a particularly normative model of families.

*The 'gift' of diversity*

The second theme identified 'the gift of diversity' is nicely illustrated by the book *Jack and Jim*. This book, whilst ostensibly not being about lesbian or gay families, may be considered a useful tool for introducing the concept of same-sex relationships to young children. The book focuses on the narrative of two birds: the first, named Jack, is a blackbird who lives in the forest. The second is Jim, a seagull who, as you would expect, lives near the sea.<sup>1</sup> Jim invites Jack to stay with him for a while, where they sleep in the same bed together, and do many activities together during the day. Whilst living with Jim, Jack is confronted by the negative attitudes of the seagull community to whom Jim belongs, the members of which resent Jack's presence. Jim tells Jack not to leave when the villagers say they do not like him, and suggests that "They'll come around soon". As the story evolves, we are told that unlike Jim (and his seagull community), Jack can read. When the villagers learn of this, they sit outside Jim's house at nighttime and listen to him read. This leads the villagers to decide that "Perhaps this blackbird isn't so bad after all". The story ends with all of the villagers seeking to meet Jack and listen to his stories.

This story, which focuses on narratives of exclusion and inclusion, covers an important topic of relevance to children living in lesbian or gay headed households. The book is problematic, however, in the sense that it does not encourage a respect for diversity *per se*, but rather encourages a respect for what diversity can bring: the (white, seagull) villagers were not interested in being friendly to Jack (the blackbird) until they realised he had something to offer. Whilst this is a relatively accurate metaphor for Western societies, where difference from the norm is most often seen as deviance unless it can be shown to have some utility, the book does not necessarily equip children living in lesbian or gay headed households with the tools to challenge discrimination (see Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004, for more on this). This critique of the book begs questions such as: 'what if a child doesn't feel they have any 'special skills' to offer that may stop people discriminating against them?' and 'what if children feel they have to give things to other people to avoid harassment?' These are important issues for all children, and in that sense the book does not necessarily depict discrimination as wrong *per se*. Rather, it depicts discrimination as a natural response to difference. Such an understanding of discrimination can serve as a tool for justifying discrimination, as it suggests that discrimination (as a negative act) is something that we all do – that it is not something that is the result of differences in power between particular groups (Riggs & Selby, 2003). Yes, we all see things in different ways, and yes we all have preferences for different things. But these preferences and 'ways of seeing' are formed in a social context that privileges certain forms of difference, and which depicts discrimination as *the result of* these differences (e.g., those who differ from the white heterosexual norm). This ignores the cultural specificity of notions of difference, and the ways in which they change over time and place.

*'No difference' accounts of diversity*

In the final example of how difference is represented within children's storybooks that include lesbian or gay families, we can see an illustration of how accounts of lesbian or gay families that suggest they are 'no different' to heterosexual families (such as in the APA, 2005, meta-analysis) are reliant upon a heterosexual norm. In the book *Daddy's Roommate*, we are provided with a narrative in which a child explains how his heterosexual parents separated and his father now lives in a relationship with another man. The child's mother tells him that:

Being gay is just one more kind of love. And love is the best kind of happiness.

Here we can see that the child's (presumably heterosexual) mother normalises what it means to be a gay father by suggesting that gay families are constituted primarily through love, which is suggested to be 'the best kind of happiness'. From this we may read that the 'difference' of gay (or lesbian) families arises primarily from love-object choice, rather than a potentially radically different way of understanding relationality or identity. Obviously for some lesbians and gay men, identifying as same-sex attracted *is* simply about who is taken to be the object of love. But for some lesbians and gay men,

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst we do not examine it in our analysis, we would suggest that the depiction of a 'black' and a 'white' bird requires further analysis for the racial implications of such bodily markings. That it is the white birds (the seagulls) who are the dominant group within the narrative is interesting for what it tells children about differences in colour. Whether this implies a message about *racial* colour and difference is a question for future research on children's storybooks.



identifying as such may constitute a radical political choice that is marginalised through statements such as 'being gay is *just* one more kind of love'. The 'just' here is crucial as it in effect promotes a 'no different' understanding of difference for gay families – they are pretty much 'just like' heterosexual families as they are 'all about love' (Clarke, 2002). There is obviously a great deal of debate within lesbian and gay communities as to notions of sameness or difference, and the potentiality of these varying explanations of identities to work to the benefit or hindrance of rights claims (e.g., see Clarke, 2000; 2002, for an excellent summary of these positions). There will be times when both approaches are beneficial, and other times where they are both limiting (Riggs, 2005). Our suggestions, in the discussions that follow, will focus on some alternate ways of understanding issues surrounding identity and family, the intent being to shift some of these debates in new and productive directions.

To return to the previous quote from *Daddy's Roommate*, then, the statement that 'being gay is just one more kind of love' may also be seen as implying that being gay is a type of love *in addition to* heterosexual love. In other words, it suggests that all non-heterosexual forms of love are supplemental to the norm of heterosexual love. In the narrative, 'Daddy and his roommate' (a far more innocuous term than 'boyfriend' or 'life partner') are presented as doing all the sorts of things that 'any other couple' do – they cook together, clean together, argue together and sleep together. Whilst this book is interesting in that it doesn't attempt to marginalise the men's sexuality (we see them in bed together and engaged in other forms of intimacy), it does explain their sexuality primarily in terms of a loving relationship. This type of account is obviously important in the face of stereotypes that depict gay men as being engaged in forms of 'pathological love', or as being inherently unable to love (where they are often depicted as just after sex and nothing else). However, it still serves to marginalise the reality of two men raising a child together, particularly when the child has come from a previous heterosexual relationship, which can often be fraught with problems (Violi, 2004). Our point then is that whilst it is indeed important that children are presented with these 'positive' representations of gay men and their children (as Aoki, this issue, suggests in reference to *Daddy's Roommate*), it is not necessarily useful to use the notion of 'love' (in terms of a sameness to heterosexual love) in order to justify the relationship that gay fathers (and lesbian mothers) have to the children they care for. The implication of this is that if such parents *do not* love both the children they care for and each other in the ways depicted within these books, this could somehow be dangerous and thus constitute 'bad parenting'. And of course our previous critique of the 'Learning to Include' series stands for the book *Daddy's Roommate*. Almost every person within the book, (and certainly all of the lead characters) are white, and the story is set in what appears to be a context of relative affluence and stability. Whilst it is notable that the book includes representations of families constituted through divorce, and whilst its acknowledgment that some gay fathers have in the past been 'heterosexual husbands' is an important one, there nonetheless appears to be a focus on coupledness that may not square as neatly with many queer families.

So to summarise, our key points about representations of difference and diversity in children's books aimed at, or representative of, lesbian or gay headed families are: 1) Diversity is often taken as referring primarily to people who are seen to be 'outside the norm' – white people and/or heterosexual people are seen as the norm from which all other groups of people diverge, 2) Diversity may only be welcomed at times when something is offered to the dominant group – those people considered to be from 'diverse groups' must be seen to have something valid to offer dominant group members, 3) Discrimination is at times taken as a normal way of being in the world – it is often taken for granted that people will discriminate against people from groups different to their own, 4) Discrimination always operates in conjunction with privilege – certain groups of people benefit from discrimination against other groups, and certain marginalised group members may nonetheless hold considerable privilege, and 5) Difference in the context of lesbian or gay families is largely recognised only through its approximation of heterosexual families

These are points that highlight the problematic nature of the children's storybooks examined here. They are simultaneously however, important resources for a wide range of children and their parents, and potential sites where normative assumptions around difference may be reinforced. As we will suggest in the final section of this paper, what is required is an understanding of difference that fundamentally shifts the terms through which we understand race and sexuality in the context of lesbian and gay families.

## DISCUSSION

Throughout our analysis we have alluded to a number of points that we take as central to the development of a more adequate understanding of difference within what may broadly be referred to as

‘queer families’. We will now reiterate and expand these points, with particular reference to insights gained from queer theory and its critique of normative binaries.

First, is the pressing need to theorise how race and sexuality function *simultaneously* with one another within the lives of queer individuals in order to produce subject positions that represent an always already racialised sexuality. What follows from this, and what we have but alluded to within this paper (though see Riggs, 2006a), is a theorisation not of either the learning of racial categories, or the functions of difference within lesbian families (for example), but rather an approach to understanding such families that theorises multiple identity forms *at the same time*. This will of course not be an easy task, and certainly not one that will necessarily be well received by those wishing to quantify or otherwise measure the lives of queer families. What *is* possible, however, and as theorising in the area of ‘queer race’ has demonstrated (e.g., Barnard, 2003; Nicol, 2001), is a form of ‘reading’ that critically interrogates how racial norms and race privilege function in and through norms of sexuality. This would entail, as we have already suggested, not deconstructing white heterosexuality *per se* (though this may be an important aspect of such an approach), but rather would involve an examination of where and how the identities, experiences and rights claims of primarily white queer individuals display an investment in white hegemony. Such a practice of ‘reading’ queer texts – whether they be books, media articles, stories, campaign documents, movies or otherwise – may enable an examination of queer practices that focuses on their complexities, rather than reducing them to a matter of sexual politics.

Such an approach to research may entail the development of specific research programmes that focus on the forms of difference that may be produced within queer families *in their own right*, rather than as in comparison to heterosexual families. Examples of this would include Foucault’s work on gay relationality, where he attempts to elaborate an account of the possibly radical differences that could shape gay men’s relationships to one another, and we would suggest, to the children they care for (see Halperin, 1995, for an elaboration of Foucault’s work in this area). Such an approach would always be mindful of why it is that gay families (for example) have thus far primarily engendered research that is defensive, but would seek to move beyond this through the setting of agendas that refuse the imposition of a heterosexual lens through which to read queer families. An equally important example of this is the unique configurations of family as informed by lesbian politics. Lesbian modes of caring, particularly in intimate relationships and between parents and children, but equally so within lesbian friendships, often represent a radical rethinking of relationality that, whilst at times being pathologised in terms of ‘merger’ or other such discriminatory classifications (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993), holds the potential for challenging how families are understood, and in particular how it is that adults relate to and understand the needs of children (e.g., Clarke, 2002; Pollack & Vaughn, 1987; Roseneil, 2005). The renegotiation of how children are understood, and how their own practices of sociality are conceptualised and interpreted, will form a central aspect of a queer inquiry that seeks to rethink categories of difference.

Finally, we would suggest that there is a potentially dangerous tendency to think of the category ‘lesbian and gay parents’ as a sufficient catch-all for the very diverse range of forms that queer families take. There is a slowly growing literature on queer families that does not accept lesbian or gay families (and in particular two-parent families) as the be all and end all of research in this area (e.g., Bettinger, 2005; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006). Taking on board a critique of normative binaries, as queer theory so ably demonstrates, would therefore entail examining not simply the problematic status of the hetero-homosexual binary, but of a wide range of binary constructions that shape how queer families are researched and understood. Much like the problematic assumption that there are not ‘gender differences’ within lesbian or gay families (when indeed often there are), the assumption that queer families are always already internally homogeneous represents a failure to interrogate the multiple ways in which queer people identify themselves as individuals, and what this means for the families they create. Examining such multiplicities need not fall back upon analyses of difference as it is typically understood (i.e., ‘passive or dominant’ queer parents; ‘mixed-race’ families etc.), but rather may explore the uniquely queer configurations of difference that exist amongst queer families.

Throughout this paper we have sought to develop what we hope has been an intelligible and accessible account of how constructions of difference function within and through certain understandings of particular queer families. In so doing we have introduced a number of suggestions for potential research programmes that draw upon work in the area of queer theory in order to shift the focus of how we research race and sexuality as simultaneous sites of identification. We have done so by outlining a theoretical framework that we believe is sophisticated enough to tackle these necessarily difficult issues, whilst still being both workable and readable. Obviously there are many points that could be elaborated further, and which could be built upon or possibly broken down further – these are

goals that we set for our own research in the future and ones that we hope other people will take up within their own work.

Overall, our suggestion is that there are unique strengths and weaknesses that inhere to much of the current research that primarily focuses on lesbian parents. Primary among the latter are a theorisation of difference that seems rather more normative than critical, and a failure to interrogate privilege and its operations *at the same time as* examining how oppression functions. Bringing these foci together are what we see to be one of the most pressing areas requires attention within research on queer families more broadly. Representativeness will not be achieved within research on queer families through improved sampling methods, or through merely increasing the amount of research done. Rather what is required is a rethinking of how we conduct research, and the questions that we ask of ourselves and the communities we engage with.

Writing within this paper from across a range of identity positions, we have sought to outline one particular account of how to address the tensions that inhere to psychological research on children and their parents – not so as to provide ‘easy answers’, but rather to acknowledge that such answers are unlikely to be forthcoming so long as we adhere to the research agendas set for queer families by the white heterosexual majority. Examining the limitations of these research agendas, and building upon existing research, will, we hope, take us to new and exciting places in the field of queer family studies.

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Table 1. Summary of corpus of 20 storybooks examined for initial analysis

Title	Author	Publication Details	Age Range	Images	Theme(s)
Heather has Two Mommies	Lesléa Newman	California: Alyson Publishers 1989	5-10	B&W illustrations	2 & 3
Felicia's Favourite Story	Lesléa Newman	Pennsylvania: Two Lives Publishing 2002	5-10	Colour illustrations	-
Saturday is Patty Day	Lesléa Newman	Vermont: New Victoria Publishers	3-8	Simple colour illustrations	2
Daddy's Wedding	Michael Willhoite	California: Alyson Publishers 1996	3-7	Full page colour illustrations	1 & 2
Daddy's Roommate	Michael Willhoite	California: Alyson Publishers 1990	3-8	Full page colour illustrations	3
King & King	Linda de Haan & Stern Nijland	California: Ten Speed Press 2000	4-8	Full page colour illustrations	-
King & King & Family	Linda de Haan & Stern Nijland	California: Ten Speed Press 2004	4-8	Full page colour illustrations	2
The Family Book	Todd Parr	New York: Megan Tingley Books 2001	3-6	Simple colour illustrations	3
The Sissy Duckling	Harvey Fierstein	New York: Simon & Schuster 2002	4-8	Full page illustrations	1
The Rainbow Cubby House	Brenna and Vicki Harding	Sydney: Learn to Include 2005	5-10	Simple colour illustrations	1
My House	Brenna and Vicki Harding	Sydney: Learn to Include 2005	5-10	Simple colour illustrations	1
Going to Fair Day	Brenna and Vicki Harding	Sydney: Learn to Include 2005	5-10	Simple colour illustrations	1
Koalas on Parade	Brenna and Vicki Harding	Sydney: Learn to Include 2005	5-10	Simple colour illustrations	1
Molly's Family	Nancy Garden	New York: Farrar, Strous & Giroux Publishers 2004	4-8	Full page colour illustrations	1 & 2
Jack & Jim	Kitty Crowther	New York: Hyperion Books 2000	4-8	Colour illustrations	2
When Grown-Ups Fall in Love	Barbara Lynn Edmonds	Oregon: Hundredth Munchy Publications 2000	4-8	Full page colour illustrations	3
Mama Eat Ant, Yuck!	Barbara Lynn Edmonds	Oregon: Hundredth Munchy Publications 2000	2-7	Full page colour illustrations	-
One Dad Two Dads Brown Dad Blue Dad	Johnny Valentine	California: Alyson Publishers 1994	3-8	Simple colour illustrations	2
The Daddy Machine	Johnny Valentine	California: Alyson Publishers 2004	4-8	Simple colour illustrations	2
How My Family Came To Be	Andrew Aldrich	California: New Family Press 2003	4-8	Simple colour illustrations	1