

LESBIANS TALK

Detonating
the
nuclear
family

Julia Brosnan



LESBIANS TALK DETONATING THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

About the Author

For several years Julia Brosnan produced religious programmes like 'Sunday Half Hour' and 'Prayer for the Day' at the BBC before slipping into something a little more comfortable. She is now a freelance journalist and writer. Her publications include *Red Pepper*, *The New Statesman*, *The Guardian*, *Diva*, *Everywoman* and *The Pink Paper*. She has had short stories published by *The Big Issue*, *Panurge*, *Writing Women*, *Queer Words*, *Pulp Faction* and has written scripts for radio and TV. She was a producer on BBC Radio's first queer programme 'A Sunday Outing' but now lives quietly with her pretend family in Manchester, trying to win the national lottery.

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Preface

The nuclear family is the breeding ground for the homophobia that permeates society. Over and over again the 'traditional' family set-up has shown itself to be bad for the health of queers in general and lesbians in particular: painful, isolated teenage years; traumatic coming out; alienated adult relationships and bucket loads of anger, longing and regret are among the familiar symptoms. And the bad news is that in spite (or perhaps because) of a surge of energy into new family forms, the 'traditional' nuclear family is back on the straight agenda. In Britain and the US, as the worn-out mainstream politics of left and right move towards the conservative centre, the battle for the family and its famous values is on. As each side strives to 'out family' each other, so lesbians and gays are marginalised. The current struggle for equal rights in society is crucial, but as long as the traditional nuclear family holds a special place, it will not happen. The other struggle – for equal rights within the family and for all families – becomes ever more pressing: whatever, whoever and however those families may be.

Note

The term 'queer' is used as an alternative to 'lesbian and gay'. It is a shorthand, rather than a political usage.

To avoid the constant use of inverted commas the term 'traditional family' is used as it is popularly understood. However, it is only really traditional to the twentieth century.

Contributors

Alice is a mother of three, previously married, and the partner of Sarah **Angela**, a single lesbian, is 28 and not a member of any family, 'pretend or otherwise'

Inge Blackman is a film director and writer. Her films include *B.D. Women* for Channel 4's *Out* and *Dyke TV* and *Gospel Posse* for Tribe Time TV

Gill Butler is a solicitor from the Lesbian and Gay Lawyers Association

Michael Crompton is a playwright, the author of *The Natural Parent* about a gay male custody case

David is a gay man with children, separated from his wife. He is active in work with lesbian and gay youth

Della Grace is a drag king, hermaphrodyke, photographer and cultural activist. She is currently weaving a web and crossing over into new family formations and spaces

Helen is the mother of a gay son and a member of Fflag – Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Her life took a 'wonderful' turn when her son came out

Irene, a mother of two, was previously married. She is now enjoying a much more delightful existence with her new partner

Charles Irvine is an HIV/Aids worker with Body Positive, North West

Kerry is the partner of Traci and sociological mother of three

Mandy, a member of the Disabled Lesbian Group in Manchester, lives with her partner. They each have one daughter

Mary, was very active in the women's movement; now 'almost burned out', she is 45 years old and in the process of divorcing her birth family, 'not in law but in spirit'

Miranda, a newly emerged lesbian, is 23

Robertine Romeny is a single lesbian, journalist, feminist and publisher of lesbian and gay non-fiction. She is a one-day-a-week mother to a small boy and is based in Amsterdam

Lisa Saffron is a lesbian writer and mother of a young daughter. They live together with Lisa's partner

Sarah is a mother of two and partner of Alice

Sarah Schulman, journalist, novelist, activist, thinker and founder of the Lesbian Avengers US, is based in New York

Sherry is the dyke daughter of lesbian and gay parents and is in her mid-twenties

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Sue is a single lesbian, aged 25. She had to go into therapy following the extremely negative reaction of her parents to her coming out

Lynn Sutcliffe is an actor, writer, teacher and founder member of Lesbian Avengers UK. She lives with her partner Sarah but considers herself to be part of an extended non-pretend queer family

Peter Tatchell is a writer, journalist and OutRage! activist

Sarah Timewell is a founder member of the Polari Housing Association for older lesbians and gay men.

Traci is the biological mother of three and partner of Kerry. The couple got married in the Metropolitan Community Church. 'We are not an "alternative" family. Families are however people define them'

Dr Stephen Whittle was a lesbian and feminist activist in the 1970s and is now a law lecturer, transsexual man and father of two. He is founder of the FTM (Female to Male) Network and Press for Change activist.

Extra comments come from people involved with the **Albert Kennedy Trust**, **Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester** and the **'Families of Choice' project at the South Bank University**. (Names have been changed where requested.)

Introduction: why the family?

“The family is the building block of homophobia. It’s the first place gay people confront it and where straight people get hold of it and use it as currency.” Sarah Schulman

“After I came out my brother called me queer – he hit me and bullied me in front of everyone, but no one in the family did anything. They agreed with him.” Young lesbian from the Albert Kennedy Trust

“The family is the place where the stuff of a free society is moulded.”
Charles Murray as quoted in the Independent on Sunday, 9 January 1994

Lesbians and gay men are a very disparate group. From politicisation, party politics and assimilationist arguments to sexual practice, activism and shopping, there are many shades of opinion. Add to this the varieties of perspective which span race, age and class and you could be forgiven for thinking that the only thing we have in common is our sexual orientation. But transgenderists, pansexuals and sex radicals would have something to say about that. Yet with some cultural variations, there is one significant experience that the overwhelming majority of lesbians and gay men in the West have in common: we were brought up in a nuclear-style family.

Our counselling and support work tells us that the family is the place where anti-gay prejudice is learned and passed on. Helen

There is a very real sense in which the nuclear family mirrors society. Indeed, as right-wing American economist Charles Murray, greatly admired on both sides of the Atlantic, indicates above: this is its function. In political, social and economic terms the family is designed to perpetuate and regulate society’s existing order and institutions. Thus the nuclear family (like society) is essentially patriarchal, heterosexual and exclusive. As such it is by nature mean – pulling up its drawbridge and looking after its own, policing and regulating them as it goes. In the words of the others cited here, from a leading American lesbian activist to a straight wife and mother of a vulnerable teenager, the family is perceived as being homophobic at root. As it is designed to serve men it is also anti-feminist. So when it comes to talking about the nuclear family, lesbians have twice as much to say.

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Although the family appears to be a private unit, its function is essentially public. Marx and Engels theorised about this more than a century ago, talking about the family as the mainstay of capitalist society, but this has had little impact on the Western style nuclear structure. Since Marx and Engels wrote about the family's oppressive nature, the franchise has been extended, civil rights have been won, workers have organised and ethnic groups have made headway in the battle against discrimination. But the revolutionary sweep of these movements has not cleaned up the family. As Shere Hite points out in her recent *Report on the Family*, it is the last major enclave untouched by democracy.

This is not to ignore the enormous strides made by feminism, which has done much in terms of establishing independence for women, rethinking traditional gender roles and shining light in the dark places of hearthside violence and abuse. Yet feminism has largely looked at the family from the inside. Many leading feminist thinkers are straight; some are wives and mothers. Although growing numbers no longer feel the need to actually get married, the nuclear-style pattern of relationships, in which women still do 70–80 per cent of the domestic chores and well over half the childcare, continues (Central Statistical Office, *Social Trends* 25, 1995). Although there have been important changes, it remains true that for the majority of young lesbians and gays growing up today, coming out to their parents is a negative experience. Important and challenging though the feminist critique of the family has been, it has not brought the sharp smack in the face of the outsider.

But for lesbians and gays, the real outsiders, the family remains largely in the closet.

Every gay person I've ever met has faced familial homophobia, yet we've hardly ever discussed it ... they may be willing to do very dramatic things in public, but not discuss this. I think it's because we haven't tried to approach it politically, if we've done it, it's as individuals. We have political demands like housing protection, why don't we demand a cultural agreement that homophobia, especially within the family, is wrong? Sarah Schulman

For many queers the nuclear experience is too close and personal to bring out into the open. But as Schulman indicates, putting the family under review does not entail telling the world what you think of your mother. The social, economic and political forces which drive families to make their queer members feel second- and third-rate are universal. Not only are they the same forces which discriminate against us in law, they are also what drives one in five lesbian and gay teenagers to attempt suicide (Trenchard and Warren, *Something to Tell You*). Yet we continue to think of the family, the universal breeding ground for homophobia, as a private unit. This is something which undoubtedly contributes to its continuing success.

Although the family is not on the queer agenda, it is back in fashion and this is cause for concern. The backlash which has been raging in the US for a

number of years has now come to Britain. The backlash says that society has swung too far in favour of feminists, ethnic minorities, disabled people, queers and other minority groups demanding equal rights – who have had it too good for too long. Thus militant men's groups are springing up and 'fighting back'. These are backed by the powerful Moral Majority in the US, many of whose members now hold public office. In the US, as in Britain, a vociferous lobby is pushing the view that the demise of the traditional family is the cause of rising crime, drug-taking, violence, feckless youth and many other societal problems. Thus the traditional family must be reinstated over and above claims for individual rights. Yet instead of challenging this, the left has apparently abandoned its historical struggle for equality and actually joined in. In Britain Tony Blair's ethical socialism is teaming up very nicely with the US import of communitarianism. This crucially and firmly pulls the balance away from individual *rights* in favour of communal *duties* – with the family at the centre.

The claims of the backlash, and to some extent of New Labour in Britain and of communitarianism in the US, with its attack on the 'culture of rights', are ridiculous. Lesbians and gay men in particular do not enjoy full civil rights, so to suggest that the pendulum has swung too far in our favour is nonsense. As a black US civil rights activist said recently when asked when the current 'whitelash' began: 'They started "fighting back" as soon as we opened our mouths.'

As the family breaks down there are ever more desperate attempts to shore it up, and jumping on this popular bandwagon is increasingly attractive to all political parties. The myth of the perfect nuclear family, ever more unreal, looks ever more appealing. Its lure is especially powerful when times are hard and uncertain, and Western democracies are currently facing enormous monetary challenges in a rapidly changing world.

As economic conditions here [in the US] get worse people begin to look towards 'traditional values' to provide a feeling of security and safety. It becomes much harder for women to survive economically outside the family or to criticise it.

Pat Califia, *Public Sex*

The appeal of the cosy 'traditional nuclear family' is essentially backward looking. Although it may at first appear comforting, what a tired and tepid comfort it really is. On both sides of the Atlantic the pro-family lobby is increasing the pressure for their worn-out agenda: tax breaks for married men, bonuses for stay-at-home mums, penalties for single mums, the slashing of services and provisions for queers, blacks and the disabled. On the eve of the third millennium, the great solution to the critical new challenges is a backward dive into a dream that never was.

But the fantasies of old white men and the deliberations of politicians are not where it's at. The family may not have come out of the closet, but lesbians and gays certainly have. While the bigots and homophobes pontificate about where we can and can't go and what we can and can't do, we've already been there and done it. They tie themselves in knots over whether or not we should

be allowed into the army, the church and the schools, but who do they think has been defending their country, swinging their incense and teaching their children all these years? And when it comes to the family, we are also the daughters, sons, mothers and fathers that they seek to 'protect'. This posturing and pronouncing may be a long way from the reality of many of our lives, but lesbians and gays are also way off target when we ignore the impact of the family. It is central to all the civil demands and rights that are on the current queer agenda.

This truth was acknowledged by the original Gay Liberation Front (GLF). When it emerged in the early 1970s, rooted in the radical left tradition, one of its central aims was to 'smash the nuclear family'. This was tied to a Marxist analysis of capitalism and a revolutionary zeal which now seems naively idealistic. The intervening 25 years have seen many queers assimilate into heteronuclear society, but it doesn't mean that their familial wounds have healed. That original insight, since buried beneath the pink pound, lipstick lesbians and media chic, still holds within it an important truth. And if anyone knows the truth about the family, it is the lesbians and gay men who have lived it at the sharpest end.

That early activism was rooted in two pivotal events: the 1967 Sexual Offences Act in Britain, which decriminalised male homosexual acts in private between consenting adults over the age of 21; and the 1969 US Stonewall riots, which were sparked off by a violent police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City. Both were tremendously important in terms of raising consciousness and establishing a sense of community. Before this, straight society confidently claimed that it had all the answers and dykes and fags were forced to shiver and watch on the sidelines. Today that claim is looking increasingly untenable. It is abundantly clear that old lifestyles and patterns of behaviour handed down to us through our families are not the best: we don't have to marry for appearance's sake and have children because it's expected; our homes do not have to become battlegrounds of power struggles; women do not have to live a life of sacrifice; and men do not have to be feared and worshipped (unless they happen to be faggots who find the idea appealing). Twenty-five years on, the game is up. There is now documentary and living proof that queers can do all the things that straight society claimed belonged to it alone; and sometimes we can do them better.

This is not to deny the many aspects of assimilation which have considerably improved lesbian and gay lives, but there is still a fundamental anger which unites many of us. If there is a single common thread running through the comments of the lesbians and gay men interviewed for this project, it is contempt at the hypocrisy which underlies straight homophobia. That it persists in its ridiculous bans and discriminations, while its own scandals and sleazes are revealed daily, is as breathtaking as it is shocking. Meanwhile, lesbians and gays are doing it and reclaiming it for themselves.

I think the friendships I have are family. I think you make your family, because I've never felt like I belonged anywhere ... you don't get a family on a plate. You have to create your own. So far as I'm concerned, that's how important friends are. Ruth, in Families of Choice 'Programme Project Report'

Lots of lesbians feel like they don't belong in their families; they feel like an outsider. So they look for other communities, for acceptance there. Lynn Sutcliffe

The family experience is particularly significant for queers, and this is especially true for lesbians. One of the first lessons the family teaches women is the bad news that we are not boys. As daughters and sisters, we are not nearly as important as sons and brothers. This turns into something of a double whammy for lesbians, who won't be acquiring a 'male partner' to help make up the shortfall either. Women's booby prize has been to be the 'keepers' of the family and of family relationships, but things are changing in two important respects. First, the current pro-family fever was partly set in motion in reaction to a real shift in the power balance – what American feminist Naomi Wolf calls the 'genderquake'. This is the new political and public clout of women as a class. In the Western world it is women who are passing the exams, filling the job vacancies, and moving and shaking in the public arena. It is this that has been partly responsible for throwing men's roles into such confusion. Secondly, the insight that what women's 'family work' provides has suddenly become really useful. Massive economic changes have swept away the old fixed certainties surrounding roles, rules, jobs and positions. No longer is a dogged determination to carry on as usual a virtue. Flexibility, insight, relationship building and the ability to do numerous things at once are what is needed now, and women have it by the truckload. Girls are moving centre stage, particularly girls without men. This is something dykes know plenty about.

In the meantime the nuclear family looks like it has detonated itself. In the end it didn't need a Marxist revolution. In the 25 years since the first GLF pledges to smash it, a series of profound social changes have conspired to undermine its foundations. Now the 'traditional' nuclear unit seems hopelessly inappropriate and inadequate, and as the new millennium creeps up it is time to spill the beans once more. Just as feminists revealed what the family has done to women and children, now is the time to hear what it has done to lesbians and gays, and to transform private, personal experience by putting it firmly on the political agenda.

For me it's been a constant struggle to feel good about myself and now after all these years I finally do, and for me that's what family is about – it's about building and supporting each other. And yet I find so much of the nuclear family is about conformity and about tearing each other apart. My chosen family consists mostly of women and a few men. It's given me so much – more than I ever imagined. Della Grace

I always thought that 'home' and 'family' were dirty words, nothing to do with me. They represented all the smugness and privilege of the straight world. Then I started meeting dykes who were making their own – giving themselves all those warm, supportive things that everyone else takes for granted. And it was wonderful, a complete revelation. Mary

Myth and reality

“Plenty of evidence exists to show that the nuclear family is not a particularly nice place to grow up ... yet the nostalgia for this ideal, safe, loving, nurturing, patriarchal family persists.” Pat Califia, *Public Sex*

“I don't think people live by the models and roles of the nuclear family – that's a myth itself.” Lisa Saffron

“I think that many lesbian and gay people who don't have children of their own tend to have a very idealised view of parents. They expect an awful lot, more than they are ever going to get, but parents are just human and most of them have never read a book on parenting.” Helen

The family is complex. It pulls in many directions and operates on a number of levels. It is a socioeconomic unit which is also experienced in deeply emotional and personal terms. Because of this, individual families share common characteristics while also operating in highly idiosyncratic ways. Thus the family confuses observers and participants alike, blurring issues and contradicting itself as it goes. It is also idealised. ‘Family’ is a loaded word which tends to evoke a cosy, romantic ideal rather than anything resembling the way people actually live. These strands come together in a number of homogeneous myths and sprawling realities, and it is worth clearing the decks of a few of them before looking at how the family is made up.

Society has had to invest marriage and the family with all the ceremonial sanctity of religion and law. This did not happen as a way to promote intimacy and companionship. It happened to ensure a civilised society. George Gilder, *Sexual Suicide*

The first and most prominent myth about the family is that it is designed to foster love and support, and that it is the best, if not the only environment in which to do this. But as the American commentator George Gilder makes clear, this is not its real purpose. Although the family claims to be about intimacy and companionship, it is really about organisation and control. Gilder is a prominent pro-family right-winger and there is every reason to believe him. Far from wishing to debunk the family, he is a strong supporter, particularly because he favours its role as societal regulator.

But the popular view of the family is far removed from Gilder's position. It believes the family *really is* about intimacy and companionship, and is thus invested with a moral dimension which is intrinsic to itself. The family is therefore thought to be inherently better than its alternatives; indeed the Catholic church considers its cornerstone of marriage to be a sacrament. Thus the family's values, so opposed to alternative sexualities, claim to have a superior status. Order and morality have become confused. Although some (like Gilder) may argue that morality is largely about order, the claims of the family and its values go far beyond that – asserting that it is good in itself and is therefore the only way to live.

They say the family is in crisis, disintegrating and so on, but I don't see it. It looks like it's everywhere to me. Miranda

Only a small proportion of the population actually live in traditional nuclear families ... but people are constantly trying to conform to the idea of what a nuclear family is, because you have to conform in order to get the benefits of a capitalist society. Stephen Whittle

The second generally held family myth is to do with its existence and the curious way that it, and its roles and models, appear to have broken down while continuing to appear all-pervasive. The popular representation of the ideal unit is everywhere – plastered on billboards, staring out from magazines and TV screens. Many of society's operations (concerning benefits, housing, social welfare, etc.) are based on the assumption that the majority live in a 'traditional' family, when in fact this only applies to a small proportion of the population.

The UK's General Household Survey (Central Statistical Office, *Social Trends* 25, 1995) defines a traditional family as a heterosexual couple with children under the age of 16. The figures for 1991 show that this accounts for only 25 per cent of households. However, this figure includes cohabiting partners, so the number who are really traditional (i.e. married) is rather less. In fact only 7 per cent fit the tightest definition of a stay-at-home wife/mother, a working husband/father and their kids. These figures reflect the fact that more than one in three marriages in Britain now end in divorce, along with lower marriage rates and later marriage; as well as increases in cohabitation, single parents and stepfamilies. This represents a massive shift away from the traditional model and has been much hyped as part of the 'breakdown of the family'.

On the one hand, the nuclear family of the popular imagination is very much alive and embedded in our culture, while on the other people are voting with their feet and getting out. Over the past 30 years a massive economic and social revolution has taken place in terms of the relationships between men and women. Many of the traditional male jobs in heavy industry have disappeared, as has the traditional male idea of work as a job for life. Work has been casualised and many of the newly created jobs are geared towards women. This, along with increased welfare benefits and an accompanying shift

in social attitudes, has given large numbers of women independence from men. Yet it is further complicated by the fact that out and about on the streets, in shops and public facilities, the real-life traditional family still appears (particularly to those on the outside) to be as popular as ever. This is because although large numbers have abandoned the formal traditional set-up, informal nuclear-style relationships often take their place.

Because of the changes that have occurred, some argue that the family and its mores and values are no longer relevant. Yet, as has been seen, the unit itself still has a strong presence, and the fact that progressively fewer people actually live in one hasn't diminished its appeal. If anything the reverse has happened, and the fact that people often experience family life as disparate and fragmented has made the traditional model, particularly in its idealised form, look more inviting.

When I came out my parents told me it was a mental illness and a great sin. I had to have treatment and when it didn't work they threw me out. Young lesbian from the Albert Kennedy Trust

The third significant myth concerns the family as a place of shelter. This is considered in relation to lesbians and gays in greater detail in the section on 'The nuclear shelter' below, but it is worth referring to the pioneering work of feminists here, as it is they who have done much to expose the darker side of family life as experienced by women and children. Because of their work, child sexual abuse and domestic violence are now considered to be both serious and far more common than was previously acknowledged. Feminists did not generally do this work to attack the family, but to clean it up and strengthen it so that it would actually become a place of shelter. Ironically, *they* are now being attacked by the pro-family movement, who accuse them of undermining the traditional unit.

This puts things into perspective. If the family is a place of shelter then it should protect its most vulnerable members – in this case women, children and those who suffer discrimination in the outside world. Instead it is precisely those members who have been shown to suffer. As the largely male pro-family movement reveals in its campaign to claw back the recognition (in terms of rights and legal redress) that women and children have won, the traditional family is not about shelter but about male control. The next two quotes are from speakers at the 'Restoring Marriage by Recognising Men' conference organised by the Cheltenham Group (a national coalition for pro-family group members) in London in November 1994.

The family was much better placed in the nineteenth century when women were moral minors ... Today they just want to be 'true to themselves.' Daniel Amneus, US Men's Movement.

We strongly reject the principle that the child's needs should be paramount. It's ridiculous – a father has every right to control his children. John Campion, the Cheltenham Group

In terms of the pro-family movement queers are barely worth a mention. This lobby sets itself in *opposition* to individual rights, firmly *against* arguments for equality. It sees the family unit as more important than any of its members and thus, instead of seeking to shelter those who are marginalised or made vulnerable by the family, it actually attacks them.

Finally, given that these contradictions, beliefs and myths are very powerful, it would be surprising if they didn't affect lesbians and gays as well. It is not uncommon to hear queers extol the virtues of the family in one breath, while in the next they reveal how relations with their own have broken down because of disapproval of their sexuality. Vicky is an example. I met her at a conference on lesbian and gay youth. Vociferous and powerful at work and active in the women's movement and various lesbian groups, she began by telling me that her parents were 'fine'. She went on to relate a recent visit home:

I was taking my partner to meet them for the first time and before we went they sent a list of do's and don'ts. We weren't allowed to be physically affectionate, to mention any lesbian clubs or friends, and when any other relations or neighbours visited we were to refer to each other as flatmates.

That women who are sassy, strong and forthright in all other areas of their lives accept this sort of treatment says something about the peculiarly powerful place the family occupies. Even more striking is the experience of Lynn Sutcliffe, founder member of the UK Lesbian Avengers, who recently wrote a book on coming out.

I've spoken to lots of lesbians, some of whom are activists, who will do all sorts of things in public, making very bold demands for change, but who can't come out to their families. It was the same for me. When I was first involved with OutRage! I was doing some really wild zaps and actions. I even wrote a play about being a lesbian which went on national tour – and that was before I was actually able to come out to my own mother. Lynn Sutcliffe

In my own experience in the lesbian and gay media I have known a number of high-profile queers who are not out to their families. They are in the extraordinary position of being fearlessly out in the gay world but not to their folks. This means they are extremely well known within a very small sector of society, but this major part of their lives is unknown to their families. That this is little spoken about is indicative of the mixed feelings and desires many of us have. Like everyone else, lesbians and gays would like to believe in the ideal family, and sometimes the risk of losing it is too much.

The fact is that 'the family' strikes all sorts of emotional chords. It has a hospice-like quality, it is an unquestionably 'good' thing which continues to evoke warm associations for many people whatever their actual experience. A further complicating factor is that this is something the pro-family movement

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exploits. As illustrated above by George Gilder's comments about civilised society, its agenda is quite different from the popular one which really is to do with intimacy, shelter and love. The pro-family lobby, which is itself tiny, picks up on this popular sentiment and hides its notion of the family as an exclusive, controlling, instrument of social order behind it. Thus this lobby appears to have much more support than is actually the case.

The other side of the equation is that the family is currently facing enormous pressures. Massive expectations are generated which leave many disappointed. It is also true that lesbians and gays sometimes expect too much from parents, who have their own problems and hangups and who suffer from myths and delusions as well. At the same time many of them, as Helen from Fflag says, have never read a book on parenting in their lives. And while straight family members undoubtedly get more benefits from the family than queer ones, they too can find its narrow confines oppressive.

The big four

Although individual families and their relationship to the nuclear ideal differ greatly, it is possible to talk about 'the family' as it is generally understood. To a greater or lesser degree, the majority share in or aspire to the four basic elements of the traditional model: patriarchy, heterosexuality, nuclearisation (centring on core members) and normality. Each of these elements is subject to the myths, realities, falsehoods and desires referred to in the previous section, and each goes to make up the family's homophobic nature. Of the four main elements that comprise the basic unit, single mothers, feminists, free lovers and pro-abortionists may not measure up on one or two counts – but queers are the only group that fails on all four.

Patriarchy: Daddy Knows Best

I come from a long line of broken homes and I have two families. I've lived with both. In the two years I was living with my father I found that being the child of the father rather than the mother gave you a great deal more respect and power. Della Grace

In terms of the nuclear family, patriarchy, the system of male control, is the central point from which all the other characteristics – marriage, role identification, structure and purpose – are determined. The origins and perpetuation of the powerful Daddy Knows Best figure, master over weak women and children, has nothing to do with the popular notions of romance, protection or the perfect balance of the earth's forces. It represents a political solution to a biological fact.

We tend to forget that the family was created in its current form in early patriarchy for political and not religious reasons: the new political order, which would allow lineage and inheritance to pass through men, and not women (as it had previously), had to create a special family. Why? Because it had to solve a specific problem, i.e. how could lineage or inheritance flow through men if men do not bear children?' Shere Hite, The Hite Report on the Family

In patriarchy the connections between family and society are clear. Securing the centrality of the male within the family is about securing his centrality in society as well. Several thousand years after the early patriarchs ensconced themselves they are still there, as Della Grace's comment illustrates. Having

lived in two households – with her mother, stepfather and their various children, and then with her father, stepmother and their various children – she saw how each family member's position was determined by her/his relationship to the husband/father. All things flowed from him.

I don't think it's at all true that you need a male role model and a female role model. If you've got half a mind of your own you should be able to find them; you don't have to have them with you all your life. Son of a lesbian in My Mother is an Alien, Dyke TV, 23 September 1995

The pro-family movement argues that a family is not a family without a man, and that the man it needs is a 'father figure': a proposition which enjoys a good deal of popular support. This father figure is seen as essential for raising children and providing a masculine role model. The problem is that this hardly squares with reality. Research conducted by U. Bronfenbrenner in the 1970s showed that the average father spent 37 seconds a day speaking to his children ('The Origins of Alienation', *Scientific American*, August 1974). This is currently reckoned to have risen to three minutes.

A real, active male presence is not what the traditionalists want, although it is often what they pretend. In Britain this is shown by their opposition to the work of feminists like Anna Coote, Lynne Segal and Susie Orbach, who have spent years advocating more family involvement from men, particularly in the areas of childcare and domestic duties. The traditionalists rather see the male figure in terms of the largely absent, authoritarian breadwinner, whose participation in daily family life is more symbolic than actual. The 'father figure' argument is really about control.

Although patriarchy is not about actual male participation in family life, some of its alternatives are. Professor Susan Golombok of the City University in London has done extensive long-term research into lesbian mothers and their children. In her recent work she demonstrates that lesbian mothers are in fact more concerned that their children should have contact with men than is the case with the lone straight mothers of comparative studies ('Adults Raised as Children in Lesbian Families', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, April 1995).

While patriarchy obviously works to male advantage, it has not encouraged good relations between the sexes – for either women or men. Indeed it has often fostered hostility, and if a lesbian expresses a lack of interest in men, many straight women can sympathise.

Since my divorce my mother sees me as a single mother (I'm not out to her), but there's no question in her mind that I should be looking for another man. I think she saw a lot of her own marriage in terms of duty. So when it comes to me, as I've been married once her attitude is that I've done my 'stint'. Alice

Patriarchy is still firmly in place, although some of the changes referred to mean that inter-sex relations and the balance of power have shifted and familial male control has weakened. This has happened either by necessity (where economic conditions dictate that men are no longer the main breadwinners), or by choice

(men who want to become more involved in domestic/childcare duties). Yet despite this all the evidence demonstrates that marriage and the family continue to serve men best. Survey after survey shows that single women and married men are the happiest members of the population, while the overwhelming majority of divorces are initiated by women. The family remains male-centred and because of this it is fundamentally unequal. However, it does bring advantages, even for women. Although disadvantaged, they are at least operating within a given framework, and one that affords them recognition in society.

Lesbian relationships are more vulnerable because they aren't supported. People think if there isn't a man involved it can't be important. Angela

I think it can be very exciting for two women to start out by saying 'We have no roles and we can create whatever we like' but it can also create a lot of anxiety and uncertainty about how to proceed. Lisa Saffron

While stepping outside patriarchy presents difficulties for lesbians and gays, the fact that they do so also poses a threat to straight society. Gay men relinquish their power and go off on their own, dangerously undomesticated and uncivilised by women. However, they are still men and although they experience homophobia, they also have a stake in patriarchy. Although some gay men are seen as feminine and may occasionally experience similar treatment to women, there are many who pass as straight (walking down the street, applying for jobs, etc), whether consciously or unconsciously. Either way they enjoy the privilege it entails. There is also a strand of heavily male-identified gay men, who although they don't play the patriarchy game in terms of their relationships with women, do participate in most other respects.

It is dykes, both as women and as women without men, who present the most serious challenge. Women as a whole have often been oppressed by the family structure, but lesbians call the very idea of womanhood into question. According to the traditional understanding of gender roles, women gain their identity from the family – through serving a man and caring for his children. Once they opt out, they are no longer women in that sense. It is interesting that for women seeking their own identity, getting to where they want to be generally involves some separation from men, while patriarchs *need* women as their position rests on controlling them. Patriarchs survive on the lie that women and children are dependent on them, but in fact the opposite is true. Lesbians threaten both the family and patriarchy. No wonder there is such a deep cultural belief, expressed in literature and the popular media, of the lesbian – manless, childless and heartless – as sinister and evil.

Heterosexuality: the straight gene

The idea of romance [in relation to marriage] did not catch on until some time after the twelfth century. There was a very strong suspicion and dislike of

passionate love between the sexes in the Ancient world, which was shared by the mediaeval Church. Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800

The amount of times I've spoken to groups and discussed heterosexuality and homosexuality, only to have people ask what heterosexuals are. This happens all the time, from straight people of course. They see themselves as so normal – they don't even know that there's a word to describe them. Charles Irvine

Heterosexuality, a crucial ingredient in the patriarchal family dynamic, is often seen as an irrefutable given. It shares with the family a monolithic and eternal status. Indeed until recently little or no research had been done into heterosexuality as a pattern of behaviour, because it was seen as *the* pattern of behaviour.

There are some who consider such research and discussion to be ridiculous, given that it is apparently thanks to heterosexuality that the human race has survived this long. However, this is to make the leap from sexual intercourse to heterosexuality. Heterosexuality as currently understood is a range of behaviours and responses, an entire lifestyle. Many lesbians have had straight sex and some have children – this doesn't make them straight. And neither is straight sex the only way to make babies. While there is disagreement among lesbians about sex with men, few if any would say that it's possible both to be a lesbian and to buy into the whole straight package.

Both Sarah and I are very secure in our lesbian identity. Neither of us would ever have sex with a man. If Sarah did – I'd think she never really was a lesbian. Alice

I see myself very much as a dyke, but I'm not saying that's where I'm going to be in five year's time. I haven't had a relationship with a man for a very long time. I'm not willing to say how I'm going to feel in the future, but I definitely see myself as a dyke. Sherry

As historian Lawrence Stone shows above, the understanding of heterosexuality in terms of relationships between women and men was very different in earlier times. The notion of romantic love between the sexes was not established until the twelfth century, and it was not considered to be a respectable motive for marriage until the seventeenth or eighteenth century. In fact the idea of normal sexual behaviour involving desire and attraction between women and men is very recent. In the nineteenth century it was considered natural for women to have no sexual feelings at all, hence the advice to 'suffer and be still'.

In terms of how people actually behave, as early as 1955 D.J. West's classic study of homosexuality chronicled the various sexual orientations of people in different times and in other lands. In fact at the time he wrote homosexual activity was considered normal and acceptable in 65 per cent of developing societies for which information was available.

In Western society today, however, heterosexuality is seen as the only valid option and sexuality itself is thought of as being fixed and distinct. This is in spite of the fact that it is nearly 50 years since Alfred Kinsey's major American survey demonstrated the fluid nature of sexuality. Using a scale measurement rather than rigid definitions, he found that as little as 4 per cent of the male population and 2 per cent of the female population were at the exclusively heterosexual end of the scale. Respondents' sexual feelings and practice instead moved between different points, with half the men and 28 per cent of the women having erotic feelings for their own sex.

Yet heterosexuality, like the family, is seen as 'right' and as such it has acquired a moral dimension. This is the view of Kath, who works with lesbians and gays who experience problems with their families:

When we were trying to get our lesbian and gay charity registered with the Charities Commission the objection they raised was the make-up of our board – there weren't enough heterosexuals on it. Straight people were needed to 'oversee' the gays.

This idea of the morally authoritative straight having a *legitimising* role is not uncommon, and is often seen to underlie discussions in child custody cases. Straight superiority is apparently inherent, like a straight gene. This probably has its roots in the works of the thirteenth-century Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas. According to him, all human sexuality is linked to procreation. In his recent book, Andrew Sullivan explains the origins of this position, from observation to prescription:

By observing the natural end of the genital act – its potential to create new life – Aquinas infers something normative. Because this can happen with sexual conduct, it should always happen. This is what sexual activity is for. This is what our destiny is. Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal*

The problem with this, as Sullivan goes on to demonstrate, is that it fails to account for the enduring presence of homosexuality throughout human history. This view pretends to begin with an observation of how things are and then to construct a belief system for how things ought to be, but is flawed because the initial observation is partial.

The other point is that not all straight sex is about procreation. In fact given the range and availability of contraceptives, straight sex toys and aids, it would appear that the majority of heterosexual sex has little to do with making babies. Yet in cultural terms heterosexuality is fundamentally linked to life, as homosexuality is fundamentally linked to death. There is a strong belief that homosexuality is wrong because if everyone was queer the human race would die out. Sadly, the emergence of HIV and Aids has fuelled this prejudice.

Deep down there is also a fear of difference or the 'other', and this is particularly strong when sex is involved. The revulsion some people feel towards sex between people who are 'different' extends to a variety of groups, including

black and white, the elderly, people with learning difficulties and the disabled as well as queers.

Being disabled and lesbian is a double-edged thing. You have people who say you're only a lesbian because you're disabled, because you can't get a man. But the other side is that you aren't supposed to have sex anyway, especially not for fun. There's this old argument in disability circles about personal assistance – that is, having an assistant to help someone into a position for having sex. This is hard enough to accept for heterosexuals, and I can't see it being accepted for lesbians and gays – it wouldn't seem *necessary* enough. But there again, when I had sex to reproduce and got pregnant that was another taboo – a disabled person having a child. Mandy

Apparently there can be no adequate 'reason' for a lesbian, particularly a disabled lesbian, to have sex. Allied to this is the fact that lesbian and gay sex is intrinsically recreational, which leads many to characterise queers wholly in terms of sex. Other minority/oppressed groups have also been seen in this way – black men, for example, have historically been mythologised as highly sexed.

The fears and prejudices discussed here do not simply come from individuals; they are institutionalised throughout society. The heterosexual package represents what is acceptable, while sex which falls outside it is thought of as being potentially massively disruptive to the social order. This is why it is so important for society to be straight and contained, with the family tucked up safe and warm.

[there is] ... a social need to protect the appearance of the family as innocent and sex as simple, manageable and useful rather than awesome, ecstatic and risky. Richard Mohr, *Gays/Justice: A Study of Ethics, Society, and Law*

Sex appears as an uncontrollable force that spawns social chaos when its power is let loose. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freeman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*

Yet once again straight attitudes belie an extraordinary hypocrisy. Society itself is overrun with images of recreational heterosexual sex, exploited in the pursuit of profit at every turn. At the same time the heterosexual package is upheld as inherently better. If the patriarchal element of the family is about control, heterosexuality gives it superiority, and both of these are fuelled by the inward looking, hot-house atmosphere created by its nuclear ethos.

Nuclearisation: meltdown

When I came out to my mum she said, 'Why can't you repress yourself like everyone else?' Miranda

I was an only child. At Christmas it was just the three of us. We hardly ever saw any of the extended family or anyone else; it was incredibly claustrophobic. The nuclear family is the most awful, ghastly thing. David

Diverse families have been around for a long time – so have lesbian families, although they weren't out. We tend to forget that there were lots of grandmothers, aunts and cousins to look after children and talk to in the past. Families have never fitted into perfect units. Lynn Sutcliffe

The nuclear family centres around the nucleus of the patriarch and his wife and children. Although this is thought of as 'traditional', the current understanding is rooted in the twentieth century, and today's nuclear unit is focused in on itself as never before.

The modern nuclear family has its beginnings in the mid-sixteenth century, but at that time it sat within a much wider framework. In his work on the subject, historian Edward Shorter shows that the function of the nucleus was to split off for the purposes of production and reproduction, while it was friends, neighbours and extended family members who provided emotional and practical support. Although the nucleus existed as a unit, its purpose was far more limited than it is today.

Families became more self-contained during the industrial revolution. Karl Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels saw the rise of tight and separate family units as being inextricably tied to the growth of capitalism. At the bottom end of society each nucleus produced generations of ready-made workers, while at the top end it ensured the transfer of property and wealth. Later on in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the nuclear trend developed with the creation of the welfare state. The formation of a universal education system, for example, meant that large numbers of children ceased to earn their keep and became family dependants instead.

Although the family's connections to the wider setting have been weakened over several centuries, it is in this one that it has been almost entirely cut adrift. Increased mobility, revised housing policies and economic necessity have dispersed many extended family networks. Added to this is the fact that a great number of the communities in which families live have also broken down. Without these two broad frameworks individual units have become isolated.

Family units have both shrunk and been forced inwards, while at the same time lengthened life expectancy means the possible time families stay together is much longer than ever before. This has considerably increased the pressures on them. The nucleus is expected to provide every sort of support – financial, emotional, social, moral, practical – as well as performing the enormous task of raising children, all on its own. At the same time its enclosed conditions tend to exacerbate the inequalities, tensions and prejudices already inherent in the family structure. In this atmosphere some repress themselves in order to survive, others erupt into violence and sexual abuse, and still more suffer the consequences. No wonder so many get close to meltdown.

Although there is currently a wide variety of family forms, society is geared towards the nuclear structure and the nuclear impulse is strong. And it appears that the stronger it is, the more it tends to feed off its own dysfunction. Traci and Kerry are partners with very different experiences.

My mother was very snobbish and prejudiced. So many people weren't good enough for her and we were very cut off. She had an alcohol problem but it was never mentioned. Lots of things were kept secret and there was never any question of getting outside help. Traci

I was brought up in an extended family without much money. Everyone pulled together, all my relations lived close by and I often spent time with my grandparents or aunts. My uncle taught me to drive and there was always someone on hand to give my mum a break. Kerry

The way that families organise themselves is not necessarily determined by social status, but in this instance the insular, exclusive character of Traci's middle-class home was reflected in its enclosed structure. Problems were suppressed and the effects of this were fed back into the family. As Kerry's experience shows, not everyone is brought up in a nuclear setting. The outward-looking nature of the working-class ethos of her family was also reflected in its structure, which was relaxed and extensive. When distortions and tensions arose there was always someone else to check them out with.

There are two important ways in which this holds significance for lesbians and gays. First, the suppressive/oppressive character of the nuclear structured family often means that it is unable to embrace difference of any kind, particularly from alternative sexualities which it may perceive as a threat to itself. Indeed, while Kerry's family celebrated her sexuality, Traci's parents were extremely negative.

When I was a teenager I went to a girls' club. They weren't all lesbians but some were. A neighbour told my mum and she called the doctor and a social worker. She told them I was sick, and they sectioned me under the Mental Health Act. I was locked up and given aversion therapy for being a lesbian. Traci

Secondly, lesbian and gay families by their nature break the rules. The relationships that emerge are not sheltered under the nuclear umbrella, so they tend to be more inclusive. People are forced to relate on their own initiative, rather than on the basis of the position/role they occupy in the traditional structure.

Traci had three kids when I met her and after we'd been together for a while we decided to act as joint parents. My mum came to the idea of being the kids' grandma on her own, and her boyfriend Bill has really taken to being their grandad. Although he's not my blood relation and I'm not their blood relation, he really loves them. Kerry

Some lesbians, however, do not see their sexuality in terms of opening up new relationship patterns. On the contrary, they may feel that their difference makes it all the more necessary to conform.

I see many lesbian couples having children within the 'old-style' nuclear structures. It seems to me that it's heterosexuals who are more open and confident about exploring alternative forms. Robertine Romeny

Today the nuclear idea is very tied to Western Europe and North America. In Caribbean culture the matrifocal or mother-centred family is common. Women-centred communities and relationship arrangements are also found in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Even where nuclear-style structures do occur, they may be held together by very different ideas about paternity, parenthood and gender roles. Yet the pro-family lobby claims that the nuclear family is universal, has existed in its current form for many centuries and is therefore right. This notion enjoys popular support, but the real motive behind it is that the nuclear structure is what keeps the family exclusive.

This came to a head in 1994, the United Nations International Year of the Family. In an attempt to be as inclusive as possible the UK Association for the Year defined family as 'the people you care for and who care for you'. In November 1994 the British pro-family Cheltenham Group held a conference called 'Restoring Marriage by Recognising Men' where this definition was held up to ridicule. One of the speakers was Norman Dennis of Newcastle University. He said that all definitions of family should include the elements of permanence, reproduction and heterosexuality and should involve a nuclear structure. Another of the participants gave an impassioned account of his daughter who had recently married a divorced man with children. The speaker was completely at a loss as to how he was supposed to act towards these children. Who were they in relation to him? This contrasts sharply with the experience of Kerry, the children she co-parents and her mother's partner. They simply relate as human beings rather than in terms of biology, authority/roles and property/inheritance.

With the pro-family lobby in action, the Year was dogged by disagreements as to whom the term 'family' should extend to.

I thought it was crucial that Fflag [Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] should join the International Year of the Family. I wanted to show that our families and lesbian and gay families are important. But some groups were very, very angry that we were included. Some invited the Chair of the Year as a speaker, specifically so they could attack her for it. Helen

Keeping a tight rein on the family's structure and ensuring the unit's isolation is a good way of regulating who's in and who's out. The nuclear structure thus performs a dual purpose: it excludes queers, while its mean, inward-looking character fosters homophobia.

Normality: deterrence

If you're straight and there's a homosexual person in the family you can redress the balance and reinforce your sense of normalcy through homophobia. The family coalesces around freakishness. Sarah Schulman

Ultimately capitalism needs a scapegoat, it needs a residual workforce. There are always people clamouring at the factory gates for a job, so some can be ousted and others can be brought in on low wages when necessary ... When you talk about the family you have to remind yourself that you're talking about fundamental capitalism. Stephen Whittle

Normality is where all the elements of the family converge: the family is great because it is normal, and the fact that everyone is striving towards it acts as a form of deterrence against dissent. Normality is basically an empty concept, fuelled by its desire to find itself. The family can provide a way for people to feel normal in society, but only if the family itself is normal. This is the incentive for families to police themselves.

Fear of what other people might think lies at the heart of the desire for normality, and this plugs into the powerful human urge to be verified as OK, just like everybody else. Although societies tend to believe that their concept of normality has a reality outside itself, it is almost entirely relative. Human sacrifice was normal for the Aztecs and male passion for beautiful young men was normal for the ancient Greeks – neither of which will get you membership of a 'respectable' golf club today.

The fact that lesbians and gays stand outside the accepted norms means that we often experience extra pressures to conform from the family, society and also from lesbian and gay peers. In many cases society's norms are mirrored in the family, but this is not always true. In any event the impulse and pressures towards normality operate on a number of different and sometimes contradictory levels.

I know a really butch dyke who's very out on the scene, very prominent, who drags up in women's clothes to visit her parents. It's such a big thing and such an enormous change and a complete transformation that she only does it once a year. That's all she sees them.
Lynn Sutcliffe

My family are always bribing me to look acceptable for them. Like they'll buy me a car if I lose 2 stone, buy me something else if I stop smoking. They've even tried to pay me to grow my hair – for £100 an inch. Sue

I can understand what Western feminists say about the family, particularly that it's oppressive to women, but for a lot of black women that poses a problem, because in a way the family is a real means of support, particularly in the West ... The family has always been the

place where we can go back to refuel ourselves to face the outside world. Inge Blackman

I don't experience prejudice in my personal life. It's to do with living in London and being selective about who my friends are. I present as normal. I'm a lesbian, I have a child and that's it. Most people don't really care. Lisa Saffron

For a number of years there has been a debate about assimilation – whether queers move into hetero society on the ‘we’re as normal as you’ ticket, or stay defiantly on the outside, proudly unassimilated or ‘abnormal’. Either way this poses the question of what is normal for lesbians and gays – something there is disagreement about. While some see new departures in alternative families and gender exploration as too radical, others see them as a form of assimilation.

Presenting as a lesbian is still a major thing which provokes a major reaction. In America there's a big trend for female-to-male transsexuals and drag kings, and on the other hand there's the motherhood movement. Both are ways of presenting publicly, either by identifying as male or by being a mother, in a way that's more acceptable. Sarah Schulman

When I was dragging up as a drag queen I was slagged off for looking heterosexual, for looking feminine. Then I became more masculine ... and stopped plucking my facial hair and now I'm slagged off again, especially for my beard. Dykes and feminists find it difficult. Della Grace

Stepping outside the straight nuclear family does not necessarily mean moving away from all notions of normality. On some level most of us have a desire to conform to or be a part of something, yet when the family and society join forces, the pressure is so great that it is no longer about belonging but about excluding. Family and society enforce and reinforce their mutual normality aggressively because it is, as has been seen, built on such flimsy foundations.

Because normality is elusive and insubstantial, it thrives on negation. The nuclear unit determines who is acceptable and who isn't, and society's systems and structures operate on the same principle. Thus prejudice and discrimination of all kinds are fostered. In this way the family, as Sarah Schulman says, ‘coalesces around freakishness’, safe in the knowledge that society is on its side.

My mum, dad and brother all had a major reaction to me coming out. It was really extreme and my mum and my brother wouldn't speak to me for ages. They are terribly ashamed of my sexuality and they can't accept it, but one thing I noticed is the way they all started relating with each other – it certainly brought the three of them closer together. Sue

22 LESBIANS TALK DETONATING THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

The nuclear family survives on the lie that nothing else can match it, nothing else exists. This non-existence, or invisibility, has always been a major issue for lesbians. Traditionally we have not been afforded any official recognition, although the criminalisation of sex between women was once discussed in the British Parliament, in 1921. Interestingly, one of the main reasons nothing got on to the statute book was fear of the news getting out: it was thought that if women in general got to hear about the existence of lesbians, the idea would be so appealing and thus so dangerous that the family, and therefore society, would crumble. In this way it was understood that lesbianism is not simply a sexual preference. In not devoting our lives to husbands and children, lesbians threaten the whole power basis of hetero-patriarchy. So it was thought safer not to mention it. Indeed silence has always been the greatest weapon against lesbians.

Although generalisations are always problematic, it may be argued that the family unit has not deviated much from its original purpose of perpetuating the institutions and standards of society, and that with the rise of capitalism it has taken on an exclusive and prejudiced aspect as well. Certainly the economic and social changes that have occurred in the twentieth century have brought about tight, isolated structures which are unhealthy for everyone – straights and queers alike. However, straights are also endorsed and included by them, and they can relieve their frustrations by asserting themselves where they feel superior – by focusing on misfits and strangers. And in terms of the family, dykes are the strangest misfits of all.

Trial by volume

“The trouble with men, or women for that matter, coming out – is that they cannot resist referring to it thereafter at every opportunity. Few exchanges of conversation can proceed without the self-confessed gay reminding you of their proclivities ... they are tremendous bores.” Observer columnist Richard Ingrams on entertainer Michael Barrymore’s coming out, 3 September 1995

“There is no longer any systematic persecution of gays ... and nobody minds the workaday gays who are content to jog along ... but not those lesbians and gays who languish in extreme self-pity.” Journalist Edward Pearce on BBC Radio 4’s *Moral Maze* programme on outing, 8 December 1994

Given the interaction between the worlds inside and outside the home discussed in the previous section, a look at the current attitude towards lesbians and gays within society provides a helpful framework for examining queer experience within the family. In Britain there has been an undeniable improvement in attitudes since the 1967 Sexual Offences Act and ensuing activism, but homophobia has by no means disappeared. There has instead been a shift in its character, as was revealed in two recent major public debates on homosexuality triggered by the gay male age of consent and the issue of outing. Although the overt homophobia of the past still exists, it is no longer as widely respectable as it was. As with many other ‘contentious’ issues, homosexuality is the subject of a cultural pact which represents the societal consensus of the time. In this case the pact is newly liberal: while quiet ‘workaday gays who are content to jog along’ (to quote Edward Pearce above) are OK, loudmouths coming out all over the place are not. Queer acceptability is thus measured in terms of volume.

The distinction between ‘quiet’ and ‘loud’ gays rests on the belief (implicit in the quotations at the beginning of this section) that homophobia no longer exists. Edward Pearce characterises the loudmouths as ‘languish[ing] in extreme self-pity’, when ‘self-pity’ actually refers to speaking out about prejudice, while Ingrams endorses the distinction by characterising those who come out as ‘bores’. They are articulating a widely held belief: nobody cares if you’re gay but why do you have to go on about it?

A friend of mine was saying the usual thing: 'I don't mind what anyone's sexuality is, everyone's equal as far as I'm concerned.' I explained that sadly this is not society's view; for instance, we don't have the same rights as straight people when it comes to fostering and adoption. I think the look of horror that passed over her face took us both by surprise. She clearly finds the notion of us with kids disgusting, but that's her idea of equality. Angela

The reason many of us bring up the subject of our sexuality is because it is the reason we are discriminated against. Our 'acceptability' in society has boundaries. This particularly applies to 'sensitive' areas such as children or religion. In the UK, a good illustration of 'sensitivity' can be found in the 1993 battle over the Law Society's proposed anti-discrimination practice rule. The one sticking point was the inclusion of a sexual orientation clause, which a group of Christian solicitors objected to. Their alternative suggestion read:

Solicitors may only discriminate in their professional dealings on grounds of sexual orientation where they have a genuine religious conviction or reason of conscience for doing so, and where such grounds are expressly stated in their anti-discrimination policies. (quoted in Martin Bowley, 'The Time has Come')

This statement was eventually defeated and sexual orientation was included in the rule, but the proposed amendment shows what is at the heart of the current cultural pact on homosexuality: the difference between toleration and equality. And this, as will be seen later, is sharply reflected in the family.

The key to this is found in the thinking behind the 1967 Sexual Offences Act which partly decriminalised male homosexual acts. At the time it was not seen as a step towards equality but as an 'act of toleration'. The notion of toleration is crucial because it holds within it the superiority of the tolerator, and like the Sexual Offences Act itself this toleration is heavily qualified. Equality, by contrast, does not have qualifications or special clauses. The 1994 parliamentary debates on the lowering of the gay male age of consent perpetuated this distinction. The fact that gay equality remains an outrageous proposition to many (the proposal that the age of consent should be the same for homo- as for heterosexuals was defeated) indicates that a number of old ideas of queers as paedophiles, predatory, subhuman and exhibitionist still lurk in the dusty corners of many minds. Thus the age was lowered to 18 (a sign of the new liberalism) but not equalised with heterosexuals at 16. This means that gays are still dependent on straight patronage. Lesbians, as ever, were completely ignored.

The new liberal appreciation of the 'quiet' gay sounds suspiciously like a previous sweetheart – the closet. It is instructive that it is outing, the public exposure of a few high-profile and hypocritical closet gays, that has caused the fiercest debate in recent years. Outing opens the closet door not only on gay hypocrisy but on straight hypocrisy as well, which is why straight hypocrites are so opposed to it. They will speak for hours on the evils of outing but never mention the reasons behind it. The fact that queers stand a significantly

higher than average likelihood of experiencing violent attack; that there are priests who refuse to conduct queer funerals; that the former Chief Rabbi, Immanuel Jakobovits, advocates the possibility of aborting fetuses carrying the 'gay gene'; and that 'homosexual provocation' is increasingly being used as admissible defence in murder cases, escapes their notice.

Straight hypocrites are also silent on the more covert forms of homophobia. They agree that queers are more of a security risk and worse parents, whose partnerships need not be legally recognised and who should therefore not have the same claim to pensions, benefits and insurance as the rest of society. Although we are bound to pay the same taxes, national insurance etc. as everyone else, it's OK that we do not receive the same benefits from them. The new cultural pact is one of silence, another version of the closet, and it is mirrored within the family. This is the key to why coming out loud is so crucial – queers have never got anywhere without it. The irony is that it was not the 'quiet' gays who got us to this newly improved liberal position, but the hordes of raving dykes and queens who've been screaming the odds for the past quarter of a century.

Homophobia thrives in the closet and, like the family and its component parts, it is often presented as natural and inevitable. But, like all prejudices and phobias, it is very much tied to its time and place. Homophobia is not natural but learned, and as such it can be unlearned, as the many straights and queers who have gone through the process will affirm. It is one of many prejudices which family and society combine together so well to nurture, and the tragedy is that one prejudice tends to foster others. Most people are subjected to some sort of discrimination, and they are encouraged to deal with it by discriminating against others in areas where they feel superior. Yet it can work the other way. Instead of denying one's prejudice, it can be opened up and examined. In this way many people have, for example, come to a better understanding of their own and others' gender, disability and race. The quest for equality is a journey, and confronting prejudice can be an opportunity to move on. Although lesbians and gays are prone to having the same prejudices as everyone else, the fact of the closet, in terms of the choice it presents between denial and affirmation, is something which many other minority/oppressed groups don't have. Many queers can, in some areas, make a positive choice to be themselves. This possibility of conscious affirmation is a distinguishing feature of queer life, and it can open up further opportunities and journeys as well.

Lesbians in particular are forced to be silent when the weight of society and the pressure of the family come together. This happens especially in custody cases. Gill Butler is a solicitor who specialises in this area:

In lesbian custody cases judges often ask 'Are you discreet?', which is never asked of straights – it's as if all the moral boundaries are down. In one celebrated case the judge made what he called a 'categorical distinction' between 'militant' lesbians and 'private' lesbians – the latter were acceptable but the former were not.

This distinction may be a new version of the closet, but there is still a fair amount of the old unreconstructed homophobia about as well.

When my ex-husband found out I was a lesbian he wrote to my boss, the police and the school – simply to tell them. He would shout it out in public places as well – thinking just the fact of saying it was enough to damn me. I’ve since found this is not uncommon. Irene

Every now and then my ex-husband fights custody of my daughter on the grounds of me being a lesbian, so I have to be very careful. My partner and I keep a very low profile, and we aren’t able to be out to our kids (we each have one). I’m also worried because as my disability is getting worse that could go against me as well. It’s got so that if I’m in public with my partner and I need some assistance I’m afraid to take her arm in case it’s seen as a lesbian thing – rather than her simply helping me to walk. Mandy

One of the reasons the closet continues is that the law is on the side of the homophobes rather than those they attack. Although many people assume that queers are included in equal opportunities measures, in the UK there is no legal protection against homophobic discrimination as there is with race and sex. The real efficacy of such laws, especially in terms of winning court cases, may be arguable, but the fact that there is no equality legislation on the grounds of sexuality shows that society does not consider that there should be. Although some employers have extended their equal opportunities policies to include lesbians and gays, these as yet have little legal weight. There is, rather, as the recent gay debates have shown, a very powerful feeling that we should not be equal.

This situation is self-perpetuating. For example, societal prejudice is often cited in child custody cases, with judges stating that children should not be placed with lesbian mothers because they may suffer prejudice. Thus it is not the prejudice that is punished but the lesbian mother. Likewise, it is perfectly legal for queers to be refused accommodation, thrown out of a public space, sacked or refused a job in the first place – all because of homophobia. This is a further expression of society’s cultural pact, which resounds throughout the daily lesbian experience.

I was in complete terror that someone would find out I was a lesbian. I couldn’t even write it in my diary, even though I hid it in a box and wrote it in code. I was so frightened that I really thought I was doomed. The first time I said it to anyone, I felt like they were judging whether I was fit to carry on. Lesbian from Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester

I’m a teacher and when my partner drops me off in the morning she does it a couple of streets away. I wouldn’t like the school to see me with her first thing, and if they did I’d worry about losing my job as it’s an all girls’ school and people have funny ideas. It’s awkward at the weekend as well – a couple of kids from school live nearby and I worry about them seeing us in the garden or having our friends over. Miranda

The nuclear shelter

‘Some dykes never come out to their parents, because they are terrified of the ultimate rejection. It’s a very big thing to cease to have any sort of love and respect from your birth family.’ Lynn Sutcliffe

‘You have to be able to say that some ways of life are better than others. The family is not just another choice.’ Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, BBC *Everyman* programme on the UN Year of the Family, 11 September 1994

The traditional idea of the family is that it is a place of shelter, a cosy nest away from the harsh realities of the outside world. For lesbians and gays this should mean respite from the prejudice outlined in the previous section. Yet this is often not the case. Far from providing a shelter from society’s homophobia, the family – particularly the nuclear family – tends to reinforce it. When this happens the familial unit isn’t about protection: it’s about attack.

Homophobia in the family is made all the more painful because it is not what we expect. The family makes many claims for itself which, as has been seen, foster very high expectations. As the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks indicates above, the traditional family is not simply an arrangement of people, it is the best arrangement of people. Familial homophobia thus takes on an authority which, when delivered by those dearest to us, can create the terror Lynn Sutcliffe refers to.

I had to go into therapy to deal with my family’s reaction to me being a dyke. All the emotions were so huge, I really needed to be calmed down. They blamed me for all sorts of things and I felt tremendous guilt, even though the things that happened weren’t my fault.’ Sue

Confronting societal prejudice is one thing, but it’s far less straightforward at home, where many of us face deeply conflicting feelings. It is hard to give up the comforting idea of the family as a place of shelter. Yet the resentments and disappointments fostered by the tight nuclear structure mean that the reactions encountered there may be more extreme than those found in society.

One recognised test of a caring and humane society is the way it treats its most vulnerable members. Clearly you won’t get much of a measure by looking at the lives of lords and ladies. In the same way, if you really want to know about the family – ask a queer. Straight men, the aristocrats of hetero-

patriarchy, are at the top of the family pecking order, with straight women, children, queers and transgenderists receiving progressively worse treatment. Two events familiar to many lesbians mark out their real position in the family: coming out and facing a big event.

Coming out

The parent, horrified by her son's declaration [of his sexuality], told him he was disgusting, disgraceful and evil. The boy went quietly up to his room and hung himself. The Pink Paper, 9 May 1993

The importance of coming out has been discussed, and coming out to the family is often the most important and traumatic revelation of all. Although reactions and experiences vary considerably, there are some common threads. The most striking of these is the way the news tends to be hijacked by the family, so that it is not about you but about them.

My parents said, 'How dare you do this? What makes you think you have the right to be so selfish? How dare you make us so ill?' They weren't interested in what was happening to me at all. Sue

This sort of reaction is rooted in familial ideas of ownership and inheritance. Offspring are not free individuals in their own right, but are expected to fulfil their parent's ambitions. Less usual is Helen's response. She was unhappy and confused at her son's news, but she did recognise that it was about *him*.

When our son told us he was gay we were very, very upset. I feel ashamed now; we really didn't understand it. But what we could see was how much it had cost him, what he had gone through to tell us, so we hung on to that. Helen, member of Fflag

Another common reaction echoes society's praise for the 'quiet' gay.

When I came out to my parents there was all the usual weeping and wailing, and they didn't speak to me for months. One of their friends said, 'Why on earth did she tell them?' This is the classic straight view: that we should keep our partners, our interests, our friends quiet while the minutia of their existence – from their gas bill to their kids' matching duvet covers – is top of everyone's discussion list. Mary

This 'classic straight view' is one of the most irritating. It is the 'nobody cares if you're gay but why do you have to go on about it?' view discussed in the last section. But they care very much, which is why they don't want to hear about it. And the notion that straight people don't come out, particularly within the family, is clearly untrue. They come out all the time – shouting about their partners and children, draping themselves over each other in public, banging on about the most tedious details of their dismal domestic arrangements. The family's major purpose is to replicate itself and to this end it celebrates various key points in the straight life calendar: conforming to appropriate gender roles,

puberty/dating, marrying, having children, raising them in the appropriate way and so on. While these expressions of sexuality reinforce, affirm and include straights, they have the opposite effect for queers. At each of these critical life stages we are undermined, isolated or ignored. When we are told to be silent about our sexuality it means that we can't mention our living arrangements, friends, partners, upsets, joys, fears and hopes – although some do try.

When I finished with my partner of two years I told my mum. She said it must be like losing a pet rabbit. Nothing about me being a 25-year-old woman in a serious relationship with another adult. Sue

This expresses the root of our inequality: the experiences and expressions of a hetero are worth more than those of a homo. A further common reaction is the tendency to characterise queers solely in terms of sexuality. That society does this is one thing – ignorant and annoying though it may be. However, it is particularly upsetting when it comes from the people who are supposed to know you best. Prejudice and straight superiority can, in the words of one lesbian, 'wipe out' the person you used to be. But not everyone feels the need to come out to their family.

I've never understood people who have to tell their family. My family don't know. The only thing they know is I'm different, but because I speak differently, I dress differently, have different ideas. I don't have my hair straightened, that's what they mean by different, and that's fine, I'm happy with that because they accept me with all my differences. Lesbian of African descent in Valerie Mason-John (ed.), *Talking Black*.

In this case the dynamic surrounding sexuality is quite different. However, the result is that the lesbian may feel a similar invisibility surrounding a sizeable part of her life.

Although coming out is often thought of as being disruptive and anti-family, it is generally done in an attempt to get closer. In very many cases the act of coming out to the family is one of vulnerability and many, particularly the young, are in need of support. Yet straight fears are not without foundation. It may not feel like it when you're saying the words, but lesbians and gays do indeed pose a threat to the status quo, and families may have to undergo a radical shift in attitude before they can come to terms with it. Whether or not we are out or accepted, the fact is that homosexuality in the home is a big issue for both straight and queer. It is not surprising that some parents react badly, and it can be unrealistic to expect total and immediate understanding.

Because of homophobia the relationship with the family is tricky in that they might not accept your sexuality but they do accept you as a person. You have an uneasy relationship with that but it's usually a compromise – because nobody wants their child to grow up gay ... I feel compassion for my family. If they feel homophobia it's due to ignorance. Inge Blackman

It is a big shock for many families, but many of them do come round. You have to give them time. Lynn Sutcliffe

Time indeed is a good measure of acceptance. It may be that several years after coming out things calm down and good relations are established. A number of lesbians find out just how good these are when they come up against a big event.

The big event

My family really can't cope with me being a lesbian; they say it must be a secret that none of the wider family knows. When there was a big gathering of the aunts and uncles my parents sent me the money for a skirt and blouse so that I would look feminine. They said I couldn't go if I didn't look like that. At this point I told them that if they couldn't accept me as I was I didn't want them as my parents. Sue

As everyone who has come out knows, it is not a single action. Queers are continually faced with situations where heterosexuality is presumed, homophobia and discrimination are present or the sexuality of a partner or friend is presumed or in question. Sometimes this happens with people who have already been told. This tends to occur particularly in families: a lesbian comes out, the family apparently comes to terms with it, but a year later they ask about boyfriends. In other cases it transpires that the 'coming to terms' is highly conditional. Either way a big event such as a large family gathering or a crisis is likely to put things into perspective. These events involve other people and/or the weight of societal pressure, and it is the fear of this wider group knowing which leads some families to withdraw their terms. This is the deterrence factor discussed previously, and it is these critical events which tend to illustrate the difference between toleration and equality.

Keeping quiet in the face of 'other people' with regard to the extended family has an unhappy effect, characterised by a gay man who in response to my question about his wider circle of relations, looked astonished at the thought and replied that gay people 'don't have aunts and uncles'. This seems to be true for a number of lesbians and gays. But, sadly, it is precisely the extended family, not tightly bound to the expectations embedded in the nuclear structure, who are in a position to be more relaxed and understanding.

Some close older friends of mine invited me to their 25th wedding anniversary – just me and not my partner, who they'd known for 10 years. I was telling my mum how pissed off I was and she said, 'Well, you can understand how they feel, they might be embarrassed.' Like she was explaining it and I was supposed to say, 'Oh, now I understand'. Mary

Invitations to family parties are often a bone of contention. Here the straight gene is clearly at work and has gone one stage further, so that the lesbian is actually encouraged to agree how embarrassing the presence of her and her partner would be. The fact that Mary considered her mother to be very accepting of her sexuality until this point shows that toleration is sometimes mistaken for equality – until it is put to the test.

Even more critical and divisive than the big family gathering is the big family crisis. Here the choices about who's in and who's out are much sharper. People sometimes feel that a crisis 'allows' them to give vent to prejudices they normally keep in check. As one lesbian's mother said: 'Who can be bothered with "political correctness" when someone's dying?'

When my dad was critically ill in hospital only two visitors who were 'close family' were allowed in. My mother and my brothers made it very clear that my long-term partner wasn't 'close family'. They also indicated that her presence would upset my dad and that if I made a fuss I'd upset my mum. Angela

In this case – in common with many other crisis situations involving dramas of birth, death, prison and lawyers – the lesbian is the problem. It is not uncommon for families to exclude her or her partner from the hospitals, churches and court rooms where these events take place. Unless she complies her actions are seen as almost as bad, if not worse than the crisis itself. This exclusion is a more extreme version of that which takes place on a daily basis throughout the straight life calendar. And while the support which critical events generate cements straights deeper into the family, queers are both excluded and left to deal with their own emotions.

This exclusion has led some queers to say that they don't feel the same kind of biological connection to their birth families as straight people do. One lesbian, articulating a distant and disconnected relationship with her parents, said that she felt more like an in-law than a blood relation. The author Terry Sanderson's well-known phrase 'a stranger in the family' encapsulates something that may be felt on both sides. Indeed it is not uncommon for families to identify homosexuality as something apart from themselves, for example as middle class, white or connected to moving away/living in a big city. The fact that families cannot accept homosexuality as having a connection with their blood/biology may leave us feeling the same, and this is leading to new perspectives on biological ties, some of which are discussed later.

Yet some families really do come to accept their lesbians and gays on an equal basis and the breakthrough often comes when fear of 'other people' is conquered.

Last year I said to my husband, 'From now on we're out to everyone. I'm not having any more of this.' So we came out about our son, we do it all the time as it's nearly as hard for us as it is for gay people themselves, but we do it and we've gained new friends because of it. Helen

My partner's mother had a photo of all her grandchildren done, which she is very proud of and our daughter was in it. Although I'm the biological mother, she definitely now sees her as a granddaughter – and she's really open about it and tells everyone, 'These are my grandchildren.' Lisa Saffron

Don't ask, don't tell: pretend

The 'don't ask, don't tell' argument has ... the intellectual solidarity of a pack of cards. One group is arbitrarily silenced to protect not the rights, but the sensibilities of others. Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal*

Homosexuality is being promoted at the ratepayers' expense, and the traditional family as we know it is under attack. Tory MP David Wiltshire, who proposed Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act. *Guardian* 12 December 1987

Thankfully, being lesbian or gay doesn't involve outright familial rejection as it did in the past, but there is a long way to go before queer lives are considered as important as straight ones. Many of us are sidelined, in a murky hinterland not dissimilar to that created by 'don't ask, don't tell', the infamous formula operated by the US armed forces. According to this, lesbians and gay men can serve in the military; others can know that they are lesbian/gay; but they are not allowed to mention it – if they do they will be discharged. Thus the prohibition isn't against homosexual acts or against homosexuality but against honesty, which is designed to protect the 'morale' of the others. This is clearly what is behind many of the family experiences quoted here: keep quiet or you'll upset the straights. Sometimes families which have a problem when their queers come out already knew they were gay: it's the giving voice to it they don't like. Coming out breaks the cultural pact of silence and the 'don't ask, don't tell' spell. Out queers are harder to tolerate because they are loud.

Underlying this pact of silence is the notion that lesbians and gays are not quite real. Society and the family came together on this one in Britain with Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act. It notoriously forbids local authorities from promoting homosexuality or 'pretended' homosexual family relationships. This means that schools, libraries, art galleries and many other educational and recreational institutions risk prosecution if they carry queer material. Although the section is so badly drafted that it has rarely been invoked, it has certainly curbed and censored work in this area. It is still in operation at the time of writing.

Section 28 was inspired by fear for the 'real' family. Yet if there is one thing queer relationships can't be accused of, it's pretence. Queers may pretend to be straight but there is no significant advantage for them to pretend to be queer. On the contrary, it is straight people who gain the advantage by pretending. They are rewarded by society if their families fit the mould and they have every incentive to pretend that their unit does not involve queer members. No, when lesbians and gays pretend it is generally because of

straight pressure, particularly in the home where silence and lies may be a condition of inclusion. David Wiltshire MP and his Section 28 supporters are wrong. The monolithic traditional family is not under attack, it is on the attack – with all the backing of society.

The tactic of marginalising or denying queer existence says more about straights than it does about queers, and the fact that they make such a meal over what we can do and where we can do it is as astoundingly arrogant as it is ignorant. First, it's already happened anyway – queers have been having kids, getting married and generally participating in the running of society since it began. Secondly, do they honestly think that what they've created is so incredibly good that we're just panting to get in and have a slice?

Community and biology

❧ *Biology is such a stupid system to regulate life, and the notion of families as a biologically related group of people – well, it has been proven time and time again to be a major disaster for most people. Therefore it's about time we started looking for alternatives. People who liked each other would be a start.* ♡ Stephen Whittle

❧ *Some of us find all this hedonism in the community a bit depressing. There are more people looking for alternatives – making spaces for something different.* ♡ Lynn Sutcliffe

Given that the biological family can be hostile to queers – what does this mean for the way we live? Before 1967 lesbians and gays were characterised as sad and lonely individuals with no meaningful bonds or connections, on the fringes of both society and the family. After nearly 30 years of activism and coming out, there is considerable debate about whether such bonds and connections have come to exist between us. Is there such a thing as a queer community? Should there be? These are particularly important questions for queers, as there is often a sense in which community is seen as an alternative to the family.

I do find the concept of the 'gay community' a bit disturbing. The only thing that links us is the silent understanding of our sexuality ... within this 'community' there are men and women from a huge range of backgrounds and lives. The gay community is the same as the straight community – it doesn't exist. It is dangerous to think that we must all like each other because we share a sexuality. Michael as quoted in Lynn Sutcliffe, *There Must be Fifty Ways to Tell Your Mother*

Clearly community doesn't hold significance for everyone. But there are many who, although unsatisfied with what they find, still desire a wider framework of support and connection.

I think there is a basic need for some sort of longevity in relationships ... a need to belong, and I think biological family ties do provide that. It's very difficult to create that sense of long-term commitment with friends. We do need community, but I think it's very hard to make it

happen when there aren't biological ties ... My experience of community is that it's very diffuse and intangible. Lisa Saffron

Much current debate centres on what community means, if indeed there is one, or whether we should assimilate into society instead. There is also discussion about whom such a community should extend to – bisexuals, transgenderists, 'queer' straights? If community is taken to mean a group of people who either live in the same location or are linked by a common purpose, it is clear that there are groups for whom it already has a concrete application. Large numbers of lesbians, for instance, have gone to live and work in Todmorden in the north of England, as they have in Northampton, Massachusetts in the US. Others are linked by a common desire to make life better for themselves and their peers through activism (Lesbian Avengers, OutRage!) or social/support networks (the numerous switchboards, counselling services like Pace, and organisations such as Kenric for isolated lesbians). From the feelings generated by events like Pride and other queer festivals it is clear that many do feel a common bond. The recent glut of literature and media coverage of queer lives also goes to show there are significant areas of shared experience.

The question is, does this constitute a community? Clearly what there is does not meet all needs. For some the process of coming out is almost as desperately lonely as it was 30 years ago, yet for others it is a life-transforming experience through which they find enduring support. But the issue is clouded by the fact that, like 'family', the existing category of 'community' is not appropriate to queer life.

When you compare the lesbian and gay movement to other movements like the campaign for black civil rights, the difference is that they have multi-generational support and we don't. Like – if you go out and are an activist, you come back home for support. That's not the case in our movement; in fact you're more likely to get a hostile response when you come home. And we don't have institutions of permanence like the church, or any buildings or other places either. Sarah Schulman

There are two critical and distinguishing features of lesbian and gay existence. First we don't, as Schulman says, have multi-generational connections. In the past this has been because out queers didn't have significant numbers of children and those they did have were more likely to grow up straight than gay. Thus young lesbians and gays have not grown up listening to tales of the famous gay clubs and the Stonewall riots on their grandma's knee. This is where community and family collide. The usual (straight) understanding of community rests on the bedrock of the family: it is made up of a collection of families linked across and along generations. Hence the frustration of many queers separated from their birth families who go in search of a 'community' instead, only to find that one doesn't exist. But just as family needs an alternative reading for

queer life, so does community. Those looking for a close-knit, idyllic lesbian village will have a long wait.

Given the world's straight ethos, the other distinguishing feature of queer life is the closet, ever present, available and often encouraged by birth families. The fact that it is there can mean there is a positive choice away from it, as discussed previously, but this has its downside. The existence of the closet and the fact that queers are continually ushered or forced inside means that an air of denial constantly flows through us as a group. Thus although there are gay centres, clubs, community buildings and even whole sections within some towns that are earmarked queer, denial is always there. Even today there are plenty of people who visit gay areas praying that they will never be seen by a work colleague; lesbians who hide and disguise themselves for fear their children will be taken away; and those who only dare to call lesbian/gay organisations from a call box. These forces, combined with the very realistic fear of both police raids and homophobic attacks, mean that the proud, open, committed bravery of the standard-bearing minority is not yet the hallmark of the queer 'community'.

I think coming out is the first thing, but it's not the answer many people think it is – like once they've come out that's the end. I think a lot of the use of drugs, drinking, and culture around it has to do with internalised homophobia. The way in which we form relationships with people ... like there's a kind of impermanence there. I don't know about men but for women, it's almost like deep down we don't really think it's a valid choice – so we don't set up things to last, we set them up to self-destruct. Inge Blackman

Given the negativity and exclusion that lesbians and gays face, it would be surprising if some of it didn't rub off in the form of internalised homophobia. Chris Woods discusses this in his *State of the Queer Nation*, and concludes that the whole notion has now become taboo within the queer community. In the early days of the GLF internalised homophobia was a recognised phenomenon, and the gay community outlawed various patterns of behaviour (eg role plays such as butch/femme, top/bottom) that it believed were self-oppressive. Woods suggests that the current popularity of sado-masochism (SM), as well as particular modes of drug and alcohol use, are expressions of self-hatred. Some will find his analysis overcritical, but he is certainly right to point out that currents of negativity are still with us.

As Blackman says, coming out is not the final step but the first. The old joke that we are the people our mothers warned us about has a hollow ring, when on some level we still believe she was right. As long as the closet remains, beckoning with its apparently warm and cosy escape, so we must contend with it and the lies it generates. For some the reality of this negativity is seen in what appears to be the most visible expression of 'community'.

I don't think there is a lesbian and gay community. I think there is a culture and that is very much due to consumerism. It's centred around

bars, clubs, places where you can buy things ... it's largely become culture through commercialism and through the media rather than through something inherent ... black culture didn't come through commercialism, it came through people just getting on with their lives.
Inge Blackman

If this is all there is, there is certainly a feeling that it doesn't represent or cater for lesbians and gays as a whole, and neither does it bring us together or bring us out in a way that challenges or offers a real alternative to the current embodiments of 'family' and 'community'. For those looking for more, this lack tends to reinforce the idea that the strongest bonds are those of biology: if it isn't blood it isn't real. But this is extremely bad news for the many who aren't accepted by their biological families either. Unfortunately, these disappointments tend to reinforce each other. It is hard to challenge the primacy of biology when there are no substantial ties or frameworks to take its place.

The way gay people, especially men, have responded to the Aids crisis is one of the most compassionate and courageous acts – which hasn't just been for themselves, but for everyone with Aids. And in my experience with the Lesbian Avengers, the level of development is enormous. Women who've never experienced power or authority are taking it, improving their own skills and creating a real group thing – where they really belong. Sarah Schulman

Alongside despondency about the 'community', one of the greatest tragedies of the past 25 years – the onset of HIV/Aids – has revealed tremendous depths of caring and bravery. This disease, which has had profound effects in areas of Britain and wiped out almost an entire generation of gay men in parts of the US, has illustrated just how strong non-biological bonds can be. The stigma of HIV/Aids has meant that numbers of people living with the virus have been abandoned by their natural families. Networks of friends, lovers, ex-lovers and other lesbians and gays (some complete strangers) have provided daily unglamorous, unsexy and unprofitable forms of care and support. They have provided what numbers of biological families have not.

For many touched by HIV/Aids in some way, there is indeed a community. Work in this area has also resulted in coalitions between lesbians and gay men and between queers and straights. It is not that people are only rallied in times of tragedy; much of the community's existing energy has been poured into the crisis, and much more has been generated. Political awareness has been raised through activism. The direct action group the Lesbian Avengers in the US grew in part out of experiences with ACT UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power), while the Polari Housing Association in Britain (discussed in the next section) was built on the success of HIV/Aids campaigning.

Because these expressions of mutuality don't conform to the straight models of community, rooted as it is in the family, it's easy to be disappointed. Further, the usual examples of tight-knit groups not united by blood – religious, political and artistic communities – are held together by strong beliefs. Queers

are not united in this way. Yet there are points of contact. Lesbians and gays tend, on whatever scale, to seek each other out. Indeed one strong motivation for coming out is to come together with other queers, and despite all the associated traumas the overwhelming majority of those who come out are glad they did so. Consciously or not, many associate coming out with moving away from their families – not just out of the house but to another part of the country or even, as with several of those interviewed here, to another country. And the family experience itself is another point of contact. Although there is great variation, there is often an underlying understanding of what the nuclear experience feels like.

In her workshops on lesbian and gay family relationships, writer Lisa Saffron asks participants to illustrate what family means to them by drawing a series of concentric circles – putting partners, biological family and other groups in order of importance. Many of the circles produced include people who are not biologically related, and this perhaps is where community and family collide for lesbians and gays. ‘Community’ can also be a multilayered experience. It is not the same as the straight community because it isn’t built around the family, but the things that people may put in these concentric circles – a sense of belonging to an amorphous wider group, shared experiences, the social scene, political groups, friends, ex-lovers, shared experiences and geographical areas – are an expression of a different type of community. And each element has a queer perspective. Friends and geographical areas, for example, take on a different meaning for a group not united by blood, and under pressure to hide itself. Thus the queer perception of biology and even of place may not be the same as the straight one, and there is a need to free ourselves of straight value judgements in these areas. Given the fact that queer life is distinctive in this way and that the community itself only emerged just over 25 years ago, stories of its death are greatly exaggerated.

Detonation!

“For many people today ‘family’ means something more than biological affinity or the unit created by legally sanctioned marriage. It means something you create for yourself, something that involves interactions, commitments and obligations that are negotiated ... and the language of family is very much alive, not least amongst groups of people, lesbians and gay men particularly, who have been seen in the past as the very antithesis of family life.” Families of Choice research team, ‘Programme Project Report’ for the South Bank University

Increasingly, the new expressions and perspectives outlined in the previous section are becoming a reality. Fresh understandings of community, biology and an array of family patterns come together in some of the current developments in lesbian and gay life. Although there are inevitably difficulties, imperfections and inadequacies, it is important, as the first Gay Liberationists and many current activists will affirm, to point up what is good. And while a number of the experiences outlined in preceding sections are negative, confronting them is the groundwork. It is the positive reactions and developments that take us forward.

Interestingly, these new energies are being generated at a time when straight families and communities are detonating and imploding all around. And while politicians and commentators tell us that we should look backwards to the ‘certainties’ of the past, the real innovations are taking place on the ground. Animal rights activists, road protesters and eco-warriors are building a new DIY politics. They know that if they wait for politicians to come up with an answer they will wait forever. Likewise, lesbians and gays have not been shivering in the wings. We have the advantage in that we know very well what is wrong with the old ‘certainties’, and although this sometimes leads in a number of conflicting directions, it also opens up new territories.

This is something that even the Church of England has recognised. Along with most other ‘great’ religions, it has tended not only to reflect society’s homophobia, but to actively applaud and promote it. Yet it recently took the unprecedented step of acknowledging the depth and validity of queer relations (Statement by the House of Bishops, *Issues in Human Sexuality*, 1991; and Report of the Working Party of the BSR, *Something To Celebrate*, 1995). The church, along with other Christian churches, institutional Judaism and Islam, regards

homosexual sexual practice as basically wrong or sinful. Each of these religions also has a growing fundamentalist wing which is violently opposed to all queers, so the fact that the Church of England has made this acknowledgement indicates that something really must be happening.

New developments in this area were also the inspiration for research currently being done by the Families of Choice project at the South Bank University, led by Professor Jeffrey Weeks. Based on interviews with a wide range of lesbians and gay men, the project looks at both their experience of family and the pattern of their relationships. At the time of writing it is in the early stages and no clear conclusions have been drawn, but it can be said that the work is underpinned by a belief in the new relationship dynamics that are emerging to reinterpret notions of intimacy and commitment. The team picks up on the elements of choice and negotiation inherent in these relationships in an area where 'nothing can be taken for granted ... or assumed'. They suggest that the insights gained here may have implications for heterosexuals who are now facing change and uncertainty. So rather than sitting in judgement, they may have something to learn from those who have already been there.

There are various common relationship features which have been pointed up by the project findings, as well as by some of the new literature chronicling lesbian and gay lives. First is the existence of particularly strong friendships. Often cold-shouldered by the biological inner circle, we tend to appreciate and build on the value of liking each other rather than putting up with those we are related to. Secondly, as community response to HIV/Aids has shown, lesbians and gays tend to do things for each other because they genuinely want to rather than because duty or role expectations say they have to. The project team has also picked up on the ability to create. Without ready-made families and communities, queers have to make their own. Something else that many of us affirm is the importance of ex-lovers. Although these relationships are often painful at some point, queers do seem to be able to come to count ex-lovers as close friends/family more readily than straights do.

A downside of impermanence and inadequacy run through these elements – but the same is true in the straight world. And heterosexuals struggle with imposed standards, expectations and double standards as well. At least the elements of choice and creation mean that there is always the possibility of movement and adaptation. And we do not, of course, have to judge ourselves by straight standards either.

The following are a selection of projects and developments which focus on what is distinctive about lesbian and gay life, showing that many of the features which have been previously deemed to be weaknesses can be transformed into strengths. The reference pages and bibliography at the end give an indication of the groups and networks which offer information and support. For reasons of space, most of these are British.

Young lesbians and gays

I've always known I was a lesbian, and I was able to say it to myself when I started secondary school. I was 100 per cent sure and I am 100 per cent sure; even though my parents and the school – no one believed me. Young lesbian from Lesbian and Gay Youth, Manchester

I feel it's very important for me to be a good role model. To be out and give a positive image to young lesbians. Alice, a teacher

In the past there was virtually no recognition of lesbian and gay youth. They were either disbelieved or shunned. Today many continue to face familial hostility, while schools and social services generally refuse to acknowledge their existence. Taboos about homosexuality and the under age are rife, and have kept many queers who work with young people firmly in the closet. This has been further reinforced by Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act. Although largely unworkable in practice, it has been effective in the amount of fear it has generated among professionals. The result is that many young people grow up in homophobic environments, without any knowledge of other lesbians and gays.

Yet recognition is growing within the queer community. Some, like Alice quoted above, feel a general responsibility to come out and present a positive image. Indeed for a long time the act of coming out itself has also been seen in terms of its value for the wider and emerging community. In other cases, as with the Albert Kennedy Trust (AKT), there is an opportunity to express this feeling more formally.

People are starting to understand that young lesbians and gays need a different sort of provision. By the time they come to me many of them have really negative feelings about themselves. But working through it with them has been very liberating for me as well. I wasn't fully out before, but now I am. And there is growing pressure from lesbians and gays in social work for change to occur throughout the system. Lesbian social worker from the Albert Kennedy Trust

The AKT is named after Albert Kennedy, a tragic gay 16-year-old who absconded from local authority care and killed himself. It was set up to address the significant problem of queer teenagers thrown out of the family home because of their sexuality. On a practical level they need somewhere to live, and the straight ethos of most care facilities tends to add to their problems. The AKT (which believes young people *do* know their sexuality) arranges homes for them with lesbian and gay singles and couples to provide positive assurances about who they are. This works because it addresses another need – that of adults wishing to connect with and pass on their experiences to an emerging generation.

Some of the adults involved with the AKT have children of their own. Thus the desire is not simply to form contact with young people, but with lesbian

and gay young people. Often they want to help others avoid the negative experiences and isolation they went through. Many adults wish they had been able to come out earlier, and there is certainly a desire to improve things, both for individuals and by creating an environment in which the closet ceases to exist.

This work crosses many boundaries. Like the HIV/Aids care networks, the AKT bridges the gap left by the traditional family, showing once more that non-biological ties can be really effective. It works for the adults as well as the young people, giving them a deeper connection to their own identity. The AKT also seeks to raise consciousness in the straight world and has impacted on the wider social service structure. It is one of a growing number of youth groups, from the Harvey Milk School for Lesbian and Gay Youth in New York to Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester, run by adults who want to make the process of growing up gay less painful than it was for them.

Tying the knot

We want to get married for the same reasons straight people do. It doesn't matter what gender or sexuality you are it's about feelings ... and about showing the world that this is not a pretend relationship.
Traci, who married in the Metropolitan Community Church

Marriage is ... the highest public recognition of personal integrity. Denying it to homosexuals is the most public affront possible to their public equality. Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal*

I've had one lover for almost five years and she's accepted into the family but they don't expect it to last. Della Grace

Despondency about the transient, insecure nature of queer relationships has been reflected by some of the interviewees quoted in this book. As straight society has amply demonstrated, the idea of settling down with one partner for life doesn't suit everyone, so it is not necessarily the dearth of golden anniversaries that's the issue. It is the prevalence of what Inge Blackman previously referred to as 'a kind of impermanence ... it's almost like ... we set [relationships] up to self-destruct.'

It's hard to avoid reflecting society's negativity in our personal lives, because we are in a double bind. Society says we can't formalise our partnerships because our feelings and commitments aren't as important as those of straight people – and, hey presto, society is proved right by the insubstantial arrangements we are therefore forced into. One of the main issues is that queer relationships aren't set within a wider, more solid framework. The institution of marriage provides that framework for heterosexuals, which is possibly the most significant meeting of family and society. It is not simply about love between two people. It cements the participants into their families; it earns them the recognition and approval of society; it brings social and economic benefits; and on a very deep level it is a ritual of affirmation.

My girlfriend and I started living together three years ago. She came round with a bin bag full of clothes and books and that was it. Miranda

When we did our mock OutRage! weddings in Trafalgar Square we wrote all the things that legal partnerships provide on paper plates – inheritance, next of kin, housing and pension rights – and threw them out to the crowd.

Lynn Sutcliffe

In some of my pictures, especially The Ceremony there is a longing. I'm having a cultural envy for the recognition and validity that marriage bestows on relationships and how our relationships are seen as completely invalid. Della Grace

I always feel a bit hopeless when I hear of lesbians wanting to marry each other. It's taken so much for so many of us to get away from all that, I just can't understand it. Mary

Although feelings about the institution itself are mixed, the fact that we are excluded from it can only be interpreted as an extraordinary insult. Many aspects of homophobia come together here, as any hetero – even a murderer, rapist or child molester – is more entitled to the affirmation and benefits the union bestows, than any queer is.

In the past there has been a strong feeling against marriage among lesbians and gays. This is because it has been understandably seen as irredeemably unequal and patriarchal. There is also a body of straight liberals who have chosen not to marry for similar reasons, who are very disparaging about the desire some of us have. However, the difference is that they have the choice and we don't, and it is this choice that growing numbers feel should be available to us.

Marriage and/or registered partnerships are now high on the queer agenda, and this is partly to do with a broader understanding of the institution (from social benefits to ritual affirmation), and partly due to the recognition that queer unions will not necessarily be the same as straight ones. Marriage is also a high priority because it says something about the enduring, real and important nature of queer life and community, and is one of the reforms that would go towards achieving equality.

Small but increasing numbers of lesbians and gays are tying the knot as far as they can at present. The lesbian and gay Metropolitan Community Church conducts queer weddings, and a number of ordinary churches bless queer partnerships (one church in Britain does more of these than it does straight weddings). Recently there has been some legal recognition of the partners of lesbian mothers as co-parents, and in Britain and the US there have been a number of legal challenges to employers who do not extend partnership benefits to queer staff. In 1995 a record number of European countries made the registration of queer partnerships in civil ceremonies possible. This is an issue some of the most radical activists and moderate campaigners agree on.

Parenting

That rootedness is what I think we're after when we have children – biologically or adopted – and also a connection to the next generation.

Lisa Saffron

Children belong to the quality of my life, but the rest of the quality is in danger if I have one seven days a week ... I wanted to be a part-time parent.

Robertine Romeny

While there is a wave of interest in parenting among queers, within society as a whole there is concern about the increasing numbers of (particularly middle-class) women who choose to be childless. The straight world has driven itself into a dead end. The pressures and uncertainties of modern life, coupled with the tremendous expectations heaped on parents, has led them to close down their options. Being a parent was never easy and for those who go ahead today, particularly those locked into a straight nuclear structure, the choice is often between money (if both partners work) or time (if one stays at home).

We felt that our responsibility to the children was to give them a space in which to grow up to be themselves, that we were only caretakers for a period of time until they developed independence ... We also felt that we wanted to provide an environment where they weren't faced with people who were constantly negative and exhausted because they were either tired or they didn't have enough money. Stephen Whittle

Whittle and his partner bypassed the money/time choice by creating a new pattern. They and their children live with four adult friends who act as aunts and uncles. They all have a say in the children's welfare, although Whittle and his partner have a distinct parental role. They live communally and the ideas of parental ownership and expectation fostered by the nuclear set-up are relaxed in this genuinely alternative structure.

But there is a downside to queer parenting. Those not lucky enough to have a partner, let alone four willing friends, can find homophobia mixed with the pressures of bringing up children overpowering. However, people are experimenting with ways to make parenting quite different, particularly to lessen its all-engulfing nature.

I look after the three-and-a-half-year-old boy of a straight couple one day a week and I've been involved since his birth. There's no real name for this arrangement – first I had him on a Wednesday, so I was his Wednesday mother; now I'm the Friday mother. We have a very strong bond and I don't consider this to be an alternative to 'having' children. This is one of the many ways to create a bond with a child.

Robertine Romeny

This arrangement gives Robertine the opportunity to bring up a child without being swamped and lets the biological parents take a break. It also has real advantages for the boy.

Before he was born I went to dinner with the couple. They knew I was a lesbian, but it was one of the things I wanted to talk about and they said: 'That's exactly what we like about it. We don't want our child to only grow up with our lives, we want him to see other people – from the inside.' Robertine Romeny

Yet some lesbians believe there is no way round the power of biology.

I don't think it's easy to value the non-biological connections as much as the biological, even if you really believe it ideologically ... I think that the biological mother probably does most in lesbian couples.

Lisa Saffron

This is an important point. In the quest to look beyond blood ties it would be foolish to pretend they don't exist. This is why many lesbians who want to be mothers, want to be biological mothers. Questions about how to do it and who the father should be are crucial. Blood ties are also the reason why lesbian couples planning a baby sometimes think of ways in which the child could be related to both. They may do it by using the sperm of a brother or uncle of one partner to fertilise the other. It is rather the tyranny of biology and all its baggage that is the issue.

My girlfriend wants my baby and I'd like her to have my baby. I'm not that interested in having a child myself, but I want her to have a baby that's related to me biologically. What I'd really like to be is the father.

Della Grace

Although it is not of course possible for Grace to be a father, the sort of biological connection she is after might be approached if her eggs are fertilised by a male relation of her girlfriend, and implanted in her girlfriend, who then gives birth. This female desire to be a parent but not a mother is a radical challenge to the conventional understanding of family roles.

Queer parenting patterns are very diverse. Lisa Saffron, who has researched this area, says that the most effective arrangements are those which involve the most open and ongoing negotiations. Given all the possible permutations of roles and understandings, this is vital, and it is the very opposite of what happened in the past. Lesbians and gays have always been parents but were often in the closet, something which was very damaging for the whole family. Although out lesbian and gay parents today face many difficulties, but at least they do so from a starting point of honesty.

Adult children of lesbians

What really pisses me off is when people have these massive homophobic generalisations, that lesbians and gay men can't bring up

their kids and will pervert the minds of those children. They need to look at the reality of the situation – all the dysfunctional and unhealthy children who have been damaged by mad heterosexual environments.

Son of a lesbian, *My Mother is an Alien*, Dyke TV, 23 September 1995

There are many myths about what happens to children brought up by lesbians and gays. Unfortunately, these are not merely giggled about in playground corners, they are used as 'evidence' in child custody cases and as a basis for deciding about other parenting rights. In recent years the pioneering work of Professor Susan Golombok of the City University in London (referred to previously) has challenged this. Her studies, started in the mid-1970s, follow the children of lesbian parents into adulthood. They are compared to a group of families headed by heterosexual single women, and 20 years on she is able to draw some conclusions about the long-term effects.*

There are good, bad and indifferent lesbian mothers, but the problem is that they are all subject to the same 'massive homophobic generalisations'. Golombok debunks many of them. For instance, judges have long held that children of lesbians will grow up in gender confusion and almost certainly turn out to be queer. However, none of the adult children in the study showed any such confusion, and the only one who identified as homosexual had a straight mother. The majority of children of lesbian mothers grow up into heterosexuals; however, they do display a far less rigid attitude towards sexuality than those from straight families. Because of this it does seem likely that a more than average proportion will grow up queer. Golombok's study indicates that this is not necessarily the case, but it is important not to drive the argument into a hole by saying that lesbian mothers are OK because their children don't turn out queer. It is surely the children's attitudes, general health and well-being that are important, and these were not affected by their mothers' sexuality.

Lesbian mothers, like all lesbians, have also been thought of as being prone to psychiatric disorder and even to sexually abuse their children. Needless to say, Golombok found no evidence of this, and no corresponding disturbances were found in the adult children. Judges are also keen to point out the damaging effect of homophobia on children. But while it is true that they may be exposed to teasing, this does not mean that they are ostracised by their peers. Golombok found that they are still able to form rewarding relationships with them.

As well as working through these most basic prejudices, it is also important to say something about the liberating effects of parents coming out to their children – for both parties. Breaking through one layer of pretence can break through other layers as well.

* This area is very much dominated by lesbians, as far fewer gay men have been involved in parenting, and those that are tend to keep very quiet about it. Fear that they will have their children taken away is even greater for them than it is for lesbians.

The fact that my parents were sorting out their own sexuality, that they had doubts and questions, made them much more sensitive to me when I was growing up, much more generous in their feelings. There weren't the barriers that I saw with my friends' parents, they didn't pretend they had all the answers ... and I know now that I'm a lot more supportive of them than probably many of my contemporaries are with their parents – because they've always treated me like another person rather than as the child. Sherry, daughter of a lesbian and a gay man

It's much more important for me to be out to my children than to my parents. The sense of relief when I told them was wonderful; it really opened things up. Alice

The work of Golombok and others demonstrates that there is no reason why lesbians should necessarily be bad parents. The generation of adults raised by them is living proof, and that they are now at an age to have their own children is very hopeful for the future. This is particularly true for the future of relationships between the sexes. Men brought up by lesbians are given an alternative to society's misogyny and often have far fewer negative feelings about women.

Older lesbians and gays

One of the worst nightmares I can think of is to be an old dyke in an old peoples home and not being able to talk about myself. I got a letter from an old lady in a home and it was like that; everyone had pictures of their family all over the place, all the mementos of heterosexual life, and she couldn't celebrate hers in any way. Sarah Timewell

The Polari Housing Association, started by Timewell and friends, grew out of the successes they and others achieved in campaigning around HIV and housing issues. The Association was formed to address the housing needs of another important group – older lesbians and gay men. Sidelined by the usual family/community structures, and often without children of their own, the needs of this group are pressing. Many suffer isolation in addition to having practical housing needs.

I was first sent to see a psychiatrist in 1925 when I was 17 years old. I remained under treatment for 25 years, receiving aversion therapy and drug treatment. This includes two periods as an inpatient. In 1950 I was discharged and told I was incurable. It is only in the last 5 years that I have felt good about myself and my sexuality. Arthur (aged 86), quoted in Hubbard and Rossington, *As We Grow Older*

As hardly any work had been done in this area, Polari commissioned some research. The ensuing study, based on an extensive collection of interviews (three are quoted above and below), uncovered the awful legacy of the closet – years of lost hopes, rejection and loneliness. However, there are also some

interesting insights. One is the evidence that lesbians and gays are better at ageing.

The usual ideas of ageing are very much about de-sexing and de-skilling, especially for women who are meant to grow into this graceful, silent victim. We've come across some really stropky older people – very active, very sexually active. Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that older lesbians and gay men get less ill than their straight counterparts. Sarah Timewell

The Polari study makes reference to some US social research findings which point to a number of positive factors associated with queer ageing. There is also evidence from Holland and anecdotal evidence from Britain which suggests that older lesbians and gays suffer fewer mental infirmities and have fewer specialist medical needs than their straight counterparts. These findings may be partly due to the fact that queers have often had to be independent and develop their own inner resources. Also, not being dependent on the family for their identity, they don't fall apart when their usefulness as a family member begins to wane.

Lesbians and gay men must recognise the importance of our older citizens to our community. They represent our past ... many of the rights we now enjoy were achieved by them. They also represent our future. As such, they should be treasured. Hubbard and Rossington, *As We Grow Older*

These words echo the feelings of those involved in the project, and many of the other groups and networks which lesbians and gays have built to improve the quality of life of themselves and others in the community. Here again is a project which is filling the gap left by the straight community/family, and here again is a place where different generations can interact and work for a better future.

I worry about what I would do if and when I get frail ... It would be so much more relaxing (and therefore better for one's health) not to have to hide one's past – or indeed one's present, friends and relationships. Rosa (aged 64), quoted in Hubbard and Rossington, *As We Grow Older*

I dream of having a friend nearby who can acknowledge me without being nervous. I would like to see at least a third of the village gay. Rachel (aged 71), quoted in Hubbard and Rossington, *As We Grow Older*

Written on the T-shirt

I wore my T-shirt to Pride and I'm so glad I did. It said, 'I love my gay son'. A 16-year old girl came up to me and said 'Do you really mean that?' It was very, very moving. People were coming up to us all the time and hugging us. At the end of the day an elderly man came up in tears and said, 'Thank you for wearing that T-shirt.' Helen

Helen works hard for Fflag – Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. It is run largely by the parents of lesbians and gays to provide information and support to the families and friends of others. The necessity of this work is literally written on their T-shirts. The sight of them at gay marches and events always provokes a strong, positive and often emotional response and this is significant in two respects. First, as it is not unusual for a mother to love her child, it is slightly shocking that it should cause such a reaction. But the fact that she is prepared to face the world's homophobia and declare it publicly is also extremely moving, especially for a body of people who are more used to rejection and attack. There is a sense in which this love between parent and child is also one that dare not speak its name.

But Pride isn't the only place the T-shirts provoked a reaction. It happened within Fflag itself too.

Some of the parents objected to the words. How could they object? Don't they love their children? And these parents who take the trouble to come to the group are halfway there. I dread to think what some of the others are like. Helen

Helen and her colleagues have an enormous job, because their aim is not simply to get other families and friends to tolerate their queers (she suggested they might approve 'I quite like my gay son' as a T-shirt slogan), but to accept them as equals. This means learning to love them openly, learning to come out, and learning to learn.

Having a gay son is a really enriching experience. If you set about learning, open up your heart and try and see things from their point of view, you gain enormously and you learn there's this wonderful gay community. Helen

This thinking is too much of a turnaround for some parents, who come to Fflag more in the hopes of sympathy. Certainly the Fflag counsellors take their time – they don't expect parents to wear the T-shirt the first time they call – but what is important is the fact that they start from a very positive and affirming base. Ignorance is often a major problem, so they talk through fears and offer information. They also provide assurance, presenting themselves as examples of living, breathing, OK families. The fact that they are families undoubtedly gives them credibility with other families. Yet it is also radical in that they insist that they and their queer members do constitute a 'real' family: their lesbians and gays are not strangers. Fflag also campaigns on issues involved with health and social services and is trying to improve information and support in schools.

Interestingly, Fflag members can be more positive than some lesbians and gays – even out ones. They have been through the turnaround process some queers experience after coming out. Further, it is hard to see how they can accept us as equals if we don't accept ourselves as equals, and a positive byproduct of Fflag's work is the way it can contribute to lesbian and gay pride.

The families which take such a positive attitude have in common the fact that they are also prepared to look at themselves. For Helen, a 'traditional'

mother of four, her son's coming out coincided with her own kind of coming out. She took a university degree which led to a new career, a process that she sees as very much linked to her son's. Others also find that a son or daughter coming out can open their eyes; it offers the opportunity to look beyond what is routine and expected. There are examples of parents for whom it has been something of a breakthrough leading to travel or a change of lifestyle. Others move away from an oppressive religion or family structure.

The other side of all this negative feeling towards lesbians and gays is that for heterosexuals, especially parents, it's the opposite. We're supposed to know everything, which is also a burden. Michael Crompton

Crompton is a straight writer whose excellent play *The Natural Parent* is about a gay man who wins a child custody case. His perspective that straight people also have to deal with presumptions, restrictions and prejudices about themselves is echoed by some in Fflag. This is an illustration of how intertwined the liberation of sexuality might be. Fflag is run by straight people and has links with the Albert Kennedy Trust, which was started by Kath Hall, a straight woman with a gay foster son. The fact that there are such good examples of gay and straight working together to their mutual benefit shows how that liberation can take effect.

My commitment to Alice is much more vibrant than my commitment to my marriage was. At that time I would have thought about being unfaithful, I would have weighed it up and thought – is it worth it? But this is much more of a real emotional bond; it has a different quality. Sarah

Lesbians and gays are a very diverse group and there will always be disagreements about the extent, direction and usefulness of any new developments. Although this may be true on one level, on another level lesbians and gays are coming together and finding love and happiness everyday. The fact that this is becoming ever more possible can only be good news. And while some argue that queer relationships are exactly the same as straight ones – for many of us who had a go at being heterosexual – they aren't. What Sarah is talking about above is not primarily about monogamy or faithfulness, but about the affirming new quality she has found.

It should also be said that although some of the discussion here has involved children, for many lesbians the road to being a dyke is also about getting away from motherhood. Given society's negativity towards women in general, it is important for all lesbians to affirm the choice of women who don't have children, and the fact that we can create families without them. Motherhood can certainly make lesbians more socially acceptable. Women without children are a taboo; the question is always there: what are they for? This is especially true as we get older. The freeing up of biological connections referred to here is bringing about a change. Everyone has a stake in future generations, and you don't have to give birth to make a difference.

Fallout: atomic seeds

6 *We are the families of the future.* 9 Lynn Sutcliffe

Although it will probably never be possible to get rid of injustice and inequality, it is possible to challenge edifices and attitudes built on systematic discrimination and prejudice. The traditional nuclear family tends to do society's dirty work and, like any enthusiastic lackey, sometimes it does it too well. The resulting pain and low self-esteem suffered by many lesbians and gays, not to mention the shockingly high rate of attempted suicides among young people and the largely uncovered problem of isolation and loneliness endured by the elderly, are urgent issues. The family and society are inextricably linked, and cleaning up one necessitates cleaning up the other.

These are critical times in which Western society faces massive and rapid change. While the straight family has backed itself into a corner, lesbians and gays are heading the field in exploring flexible and imaginative forms. Meanwhile, politicians and commentators of all persuasions are declaring that we should return to the security of the old 'traditions', backing the outrageous anti-gay ballots in the US which block or withdraw lesbian and gay rights, and moving to introduce marriage/family benefits and incentives in Britain. Vehemently homophobic fundamentalist sects are also on the increase. At the same time, more than a quarter of a century since its inception the queer community – whatever it may be – has made a difference. Lesbians and gays are more out and visible than ever before and are winning legal, social and economic recognition in small, but progressive stages.

Given the diversity of the community, ideas and plans for the way ahead are also diverse, and as part of the queer platform is about affirming difference this is probably just as well. However, many would agree that there is no single way to achieve change. It has to be tackled on a variety of levels.

I believe that what we do in our personal lives is crucial. I believe in serial monogamy because it recognises changing needs. I also think that the family is whatever you want it to be, and that children should be brought up to value non-blood ties. Traci

The future lies in breaking out of the restrictions of the nuclear family, with everyone in their own cell. It needs to be opened up so that we can develop new approaches and understandings. Robertine Romeny

I think you make progress by giving children information. The family tends to close it off, but children should be brought up to challenge and search for new understandings, instead of just looking inside the family. Otherwise it's not just that they don't know anything else – they grow up homophobic even when they're gay. Sue

As has been seen, the meeting of family and community is critical for lesbians and gays, and there is certainly a desire to open individual units out to friends, ex-lovers and the wider society. The personal and political impact on each other in a similar way.

I feel myself moving towards a more radical position as I get older. I want less and less to do with straight people in my private life; I want to devote my energy to other dykes. And as far as my birth family is concerned – I'm divorcing them. Mary

I'm frustrated with my family, but I still love them and I suppose there's a level on which we tolerate each other. I feel it's more important for me to be out and positive at work, and I do this with the support of my partner and friends. Angela

The linking of personal life to the broad agenda for change was very much the hallmark of the early work of the GLF and the women's movement. This is something which was, and continues to be, expressed through activism.

Some people are too easily satisfied with legal reforms. They are important, but they are just the surface. You have to transform people, you have to really involve individuals in actions. People have to feel they are part of something. This is the way to achieve long-term change in the community ... Activism is a great purge, a great way of dealing with negative feelings about yourself. It helps you get in touch with that hurt and anger, and you can channel it in a challenging and cathartic way. Lynn Sutcliffe

Coming to terms with your homosexuality often results in a more critical attitude towards social traditions and conventions. Peter Tatchell

We have to work towards dismantling homophobia; we need a cultural agreement that homophobia is wrong. Sarah Schulman

When you look at people having a rough time with their families, you look back and see their parents had a rough time as well, and on it goes. There is a real need to do something different – to break the cycle. Della Grace

While many do find personal development through activism, and are able to tackle the broad issue of homophobia while also breaking their own familial cycles, the issue of why the family has not been high on the lesbian and gay agenda remains. A number interviewed here suggest it is because for many the family is in fact too close, private and painful. Thus, as Sarah Schulman pointed out in the Introduction to this book, it has not been approached polit-

ically. Although there are many ways in which the personal and private do come together, it seems that this is not one of them. Yet as activism and campaigning are increasingly focused on issues of equality, so the personal/political divide looks like becoming less important. Equality in society is intimately linked with equality at home. And as increasing numbers of us learn to love ourselves equally, so others will learn to love us equally as well.

Meanwhile, as long as coming out is necessary, it will also represent a coming together. It can, too, be the start of a journey, with a declaration of sexuality the first of many breakthroughs. For those wondering where this leaves biological ties – pulling the family out of the closet is an opportunity for everyone who wants to take it. Some continue to reject their queer members, while others operate varying levels of toleration. Some, as Inge Blackman said earlier, love their lesbians and gays as individuals but cannot love their sexuality. In the same way, increased understanding may help lesbians and gays to love their families as individuals, while working to change what they represent as members of the hetero-patriarchal unit. Others will see their lesbians and gays as an invitation to go and experience new equalities and possibilities for themselves.

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Contacts

The Albert Kennedy Trust (AKT), 23 New Mount Street, Manchester M4 4DE; tel. 0161-953 4059

Fflag (Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

PO Box 153, Manchester M60 1LP; tel. 0161-748 3452

Friend (helpline, information, groups); tel. 0171-837 3337/0171-837 2782

Kenric (social group for isolated lesbians)

BM Kenric, London WC1N 3XX

Lesbian and Gay Youth Manchester, PO Box 153, Manchester M60 1LP; tel. 0161-274 3814

Lesbian and Gay Youth Movement, BM/GYM, London WC1N 3XX; tel. 0181-317 9690

Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (National, 24 hours advice, information and support); tel. 0171-837 7324

The Metropolitan Community Churches, BM/MCC, London WC1N 3XX; tel. 0171-485 6756

Pace (Project for Advice, Counselling and Education), 34 Hartan Road, London N7 6LD; tel. 0171-700 1323

Polari Housing Association, c/o The Soho Housing Association, 8-10 Denman Street, London W1V 7AF; tel. 0171-437 9141

Stonewall, 16 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1R 0AA; tel. 0171-336 8860

Stonewall Parenting Group (for lesbian and gay parents. Contact Stonewall – above)

For up-to-date information about the **Lesbian Avengers**, **OutRage!**, **ACTUP** and other activist groups see the gay press, particularly *Gay Times* and *The Pink Paper*.

Contacts and organisations outside the UK are too numerous to list here, but the following serve as a starting point:

Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International, PO Box 50360, Washington, DC 20091, USA

International Association of Gay Men and Lesbian Women, 81 Rue du Marché au Charbon, 1000 Brussels, Belgium; tel. 02-502 2471

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1734 14th Street North West, Washington, DC 20009; tel. 202-332 6483

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