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Maps of family relationships drawn by women engaged in bisexual motherhood:

Defining family membership

Fiona Tasker\textsuperscript{a} & Marie Delvoye\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Psychological Sciences, Birkbeck University of London, Malet Street, Bloomsbury, London WC1E 7HX United Kingdom

\textsuperscript{b}Métaphore ASBL, Lotissement des Roses 14/21, 4680 Oupeye, Belgium

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fiona Tasker, Department of Psychological Sciences, Birkbeck University of London, Malet Street, Bloomsbury. London WC1E 7HX United Kingdom or via email to f.tasker@bbk.ac.uk
FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS OF BISEXUAL MOTHERS

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Abstract

Family building by bisexual mothers is a neglected area of research, yet this is an important aspect of life course development that may reciprocally influence the sexual identity development of bisexual women and family processes around parenting. Family map drawings (genograms) and interview data were collected from eight cis-gender women from the UK and Republic of Ireland who spoke about their bisexual parenting experience and family relationships. Thematic narrative analysis indicates that participants depict both heteronormative (traditional) extended kinship networks radiating out from a family core centering on them and their children and family of choice network features. Nonetheless certain features appear to be more indirectly presented on some participants’ family maps: namely, complex or marginalized (erased) relationships with additional partners that may sustain sexual identity but contradict both heteronormative and homonormative presentations of family life. Our discussion considers the difficult issues bisexual mothers face in maintaining both their family relationships and a marginalized sexual identity.

Keywords: bisexual; family relationships; family of choice; genogram; kinship; mother
FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS OF BISEXUAL MOTHERS

Introduction

Families headed by an LGBTQ parent or parents may take many different family forms (Goldberg & Allen, 2013). Some LGBTQ-parented families may appear little different in practice from families headed by a different gender couple, either because they present a traditional heteronormative image of a married mother and father bringing up children together (Warner, 1991) or because they replicate this mainstream image with a same-gender couple (Ammaturo, 2014; Duggan, 2003; Garwood, 2016). Other families led by one or more LGBTQ parents may present a more radical departure from heteronormative family configurations and deconstruct or queer the traditional heterosexual family form or the dichotomous basis of monosexuality (Gibson, 2014). A body of scholarship and research has addressed debates related to the extent of assimilation versus challenge that LGBTQ parents present to traditional (heteronormative) families (see for example Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010; Park, 2013).

Related research has found that sexual minority individuals claim a wide variety of family members since non-traditional kinship relationships (not inferred from biological connection or marriage) are often included as family of choice relationships (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991). Thus, these may also be considered as homonormative markers of same-gender intimacies. The current study presented here considers how cisgender bisexual mothers draw upon different heteronormative, homonormative, and unique constructions of family in representing members of their family to researchers.

Bisexual motherhood

Research on the experiences of bisexual men and women engaging in parenthood to date is limited both in terms of the number of studies conducted and the scope of these investigations. In their review entitled “where is the B in LGBTQ parenting?” Ross and
Dobinson (2013) link the lack of research on bisexual parenting to the general invisibility and erasure of bisexual-specific investigations in the social sciences more generally (see for example Barker & Langridge, 2008). Thus it is perhaps no surprise that key features of the wider network of family relationships surrounding bisexual parenting have not been systematically explored or denoted in families led by bisexual adults. Using a family systems perspective (Allen & Henderson, 2016; McGoldrick, Garcia Preto & Carter, 2015) we identify two features in the lives of bisexual mothers that potentially may challenge the formation of family relationships for bisexual mothers and may be reflected in how they represent family relationships to researchers.

The first feature of the family relationships of bisexual mothers that might be challenging to present in research is concerned with the variety of family relationships that could be included in their definition of their family. Research on the family networks formed by lesbians and gay men often highlight family of choice members unconnected by biological connection or partnership (Riggs & Peel, 2016; Weston, 1991; Weeks et al., 2001). Possibly bisexual individuals also develop kinship networks that affirm sexual identity. In contrast, traditional heterosexual family relationships tend to be those formed through biological connection (blood relatives) and marriage, or in wider more inclusive terms child bearing and couple partnership (McGoldrick, Gerson & Petry, 2008). Furthermore, intergenerational relationships shift with the entrance of the next generation of children into the extended family, such that women’s lives as mothers and carers are more closely tied into extended family networks by centripetal systemic forces than they were before (McGoldrick, 2015; Petersen, Kruczek & Shaffner, 2004). It is therefore plausible to suggest that heteronormative pressures from intergenerational family relationships might exert more influence on bisexual woman’s lives when women become mothers within a different gender relationship.
Thus it is unclear where family relationships recognized by bisexual mothers sit within homonormative and heteronormative typologies of family networks. Research surveys that have delineated the family of origin and family of choice relationships of bisexual transgender and cis-gender men and women have hinted at the complexity of monogamous and polyamorous past and present relationships formed by bisexuals both within and across households (Power, Perlesz, Brown, Schoffield, Pitts, McNair & Bickerdike, 2012; Watson, 2014). Other qualitative research studies have described complex experiences and relationships of bisexual women married to men (Moss, 2012) or bisexual parents in non-monogamous poly-families (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006; 2010 a&b; Sheff, 2010).

The second feature of the family relationships of bisexual mothers that may challenge representation concerns the difficulty of finding a way to present the continued relevance of marginalized intimate relationships that could have been formed over the life course. Qualitative research with British bisexual women has explored the social marginalization that underpins this social process with bisexuals feeling socially marginalized or squeezed out of both heterosexual and lesbian social worlds by negative representations of bisexuality as temporary, sexually greedy and untrustworthy (Hayfield, Clarke & Halliwell, 2014).

Research on the life course narratives told by bisexual mothers also has indicated that bisexual mothers worked hard to accomplish and maintain their identification as bisexual at different points in their lives as they prioritized their children’s well-being over their own identification as bisexual, encountered others who dismissed the existence of a bisexual identity, and questioned society’s definition of relationships (Tasker & Delvoye, 2015; Delvoye & Tasker, 2016).

Mapping family relationships using genogram and ecomap techniques
Previous research has considered how lesbian couples (Basham, 1999; Swainson & Tasker, 2005) or children born to lesbian parents (Tasker & Granville, 2011) present their family relationships to others using either existing or new family mapping techniques to display family relationships in a two-dimensional drawing. However, research mapping family relationships has not considered the relationships formed by individuals identifying with other sexual and/or gender minority groups. Thus, a key aim of the present study was to explore whether drawing family maps was a useful way of collecting data on bisexual mothers' perceptions of family membership.

Mapping family relationships has had a long history in clinical assessment both in relation to interventions aimed at an individual or a family level (McGoldrick et al., 2008). Within the field of systemic family therapy Bowen (1978) is widely credited as having promulgated the drawing of family relationship networks (genograms) in connection with his transgenerational therapy. Bowen's genograms, which were hand drawn by the therapist, encompass family relationships over at least three generations and denote the emotional tone of these relationships (depicted via different types of lines drawn between family members).

Further developments within the field of genograms have been made by McGoldrick and colleagues at the Multicultural Family Institute in New Jersey (http://multiculturalfamily.org). These developments have included a comprehensive range of genogram notations to depict cultural diversity and multiple identities, including symbols for individuals identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (McGoldrick, Gerson & Petry, 2008).

In addition, other family network drawing techniques have been used in conjunction with genograms to depict the multiple systems which contextualize the family. In introducing ecomaps Hartman (1995) drew a distinction between genograms that depicted family relationships over the generations as opposed to ecomaps that represent current family
relationships and the network of social and societal systems (supportive or otherwise) within
which these relationships operate. Thus, ecomaps have tended to emphasize the presence or
absence of different types of resources for a client at a multi-systemic level. In addition, a
social constructionist stance has contended that family systems can be constructed by family
members in a variety of ways, depending upon historical and socio cultural trends, local
contextual pressures, opportunities within particular communities and families, as well as
Milewski-Hertlein suggested that the clinician could enable a client to draw their own
socially constructed genogram by presenting the client with a plain piece of paper, which was
blank except for three rings encircling each other to represent varying degrees of closeness to
the center. Clients could then be encouraged to depict family members on the array of
concentric circles. Clients were told that family members may or may not be the same as
biological relatives and that they should neither feel obliged to fill all the concentric rings
displayed, nor feel inhibited from drawing further rings on the genogram, if they wished to.
While the socially constructed genogram has provided clinicians and researchers with a
welcome alternative to the traditional genogram, we contend that because of the inclusion of
the term genogram it retains an association with genealogy and genetics via a common
linguistic root. Further, the socially constructive genogram may be restrictive in precluding
some means of depicting family other than by circular layers around the client.

Despite their extensive use in clinical work few genograms or ecomaps have been
employed in research studies (Rempel, Neufeld & Kushner 2007). Yet as Rempel and
colleagues demonstrated in their qualitative study of older male family caregivers, family
mapping techniques may be valuable in increasing our understanding of social networks,
giving access to untapped family resources (i.e. a “shadow network” of previously
unrecognized supportive potential), and promoting a collaborative co-construction between
researcher and participant. Furthermore, the researchers suggested that the act of visual
representation may of itself have encouraged participants to self-reflect and then stimulate
further conversations about family supportiveness and living arrangements. Rempel and
colleagues described using augmented genograms to note relevant family features on the
pictorial depiction. Rempel’s team also established project-specific ecomap notation, for
example, the use of broken-line circles to indicate people who were supportive but had
drifted away and “circle out of a circle” notation to indicate friendships that had developed
from formal support. Thus, in the context of an appropriately conducted family research
interview a combination of creatively tailored family mapping techniques appear to be useful
in validating relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Research aim

The present qualitative study explored the unique representations and themes
presented in the family maps of women engaged in experiences of bisexual motherhood. Our
research aims were to first examine whether family maps can adequately reflect the family
relationships of bisexual mothers: for example, would the family maps include traditional
(heteronormative) relationships, family of choice relationships, and/or bisexual mothers own
particular relationship configurations? Our second research aim was to explore whether the
family maps of bisexual mothers would reflect the issues encountered during the ongoing
identity accomplishment of bisexual mothers: prioritizing children, contending with others’
dismissal of bisexual identity, and questioning traditional relationship definitions.

Method

Participants
Adverts for the UK Bisexuality Parenting Project were posted on internet websites, social network groups and a mailing list. In order to be eligible to participate in the current study women had to be over 18 years old, to be a parent of at least one child of any age, and either to identify as a bisexual parent or to have experience of parenting in a bisexual context. In their review of existing research on bisexual parenting Ross and Dobinson (2013) also commented on the advantages of employing broad criteria to define bisexual identity and experience in researching this underexplored research area. In total eight cis-gender mothers (seven identifying as bisexual and one who identified as lesbian) from the across the U.K. and the Republic of Ireland met the criteria above and completed a face-to-face individual research interview (or in one case a SkypeR interview). Details of each participant’s family composition and the pseudonym used for each participant are listed in Table 1. Seven of our participants self-identified as bisexual and had various current partnership and living arrangements. One of our participants regarded herself as having a bisexual parenting experience, while she self-identified as lesbian she also had an intimate relationship with the father of her children.

Insert Table 1 about here

The eight white British or Irish women who participated in the study were aged between 28 to 56 years old. All were middle class college-educated professionals who had completed undergraduate and in some cases postgraduate courses. Participants were birth mothers to children of various ages (ranging from less than one year old through to 28 years old). Thus, we gained “snapshot” representations both of bisexual mothers’ family composition and of participants’ parenting experience with children of different ages.

Procedure
Upon contacting the authors and expressing an interest in the project potential participants were provided with further information about the study. Then consent for the audio recording of the interview was obtained and a single individual interview arranged (usually at the participant’s home). Interviews lasted between 1 and 2.5 hours and took place between November 2012 and February 2013. Ethical approval for the study was given by an Institutional Review Board.

Individual interview session and family map exercise

The information emailed to each participant prior to arranging an interview session included information about the interview questions that were going to be asked and the activity participants would be asked to do (i.e. the family map). Sharing our interview schedule made an important contribution, not only to obtaining informed consent, but also in enabling participants to reflect upon their life course and their family membership prior to interview.

The first part of the interview session had a life course focus and asked participants to tell us how they came to identify their sexual identity and their pathway to motherhood (see Tasker & Delvoye, 2015; Delvoye & Tasker, 2016 for details). The family map activity was always conducted in the second part of the single session. Here participants were asked to tell the interviewer who they included and did not include in their family currently and to draw on a blank white sheet of A4 paper a map of their family using symbols for family members and their relationships. Mostly participants gave verbal descriptions of their family members and network as they were drawing the family map and gave an indication of why members were included and placed where they were. However, when necessary the interviewer prompted for information about family map inclusion and placement decisions. When the participant stopped drawing their map, the interviewer asked if they were satisfied with the
map they had drawn. The interviewer also asked if there was anyone they had not included on
the family map and explored the reasons for this, again offering the participant the
opportunity to re-draw their map if appropriate. Further information on the family map
interview and drawing exercise is available from Tasker, Malley & Costa (in press).

The hand-drawn family maps and the section of the interview transcript associated
with this activity provided the majority of the participant data that were considered in the
present paper. However, on a few occasions when drawing their family maps participants
referred back to something they had said at an earlier point in the interview session when
discussing their life course history. When this happened, we also considered data from the
previous section of the interview session in conjunction with the information the participant
provided on their family map.

All participants were given the opportunity to check the transcript of their interview,
to make any changes or clarifications they thought appropriate, before data analysis
proceeded. Additionally, participants were invited to consider their own transcript extracts
and narratives within a preliminary report of findings from the project. Only minor
clarifications were made by participants, e.g. words misheard and a chronology that we had
not interpreted correctly. The verbatim interview transcript extracts presented in this paper
use the following notation: an incomplete sentence —, text added or removed for clarity or
confidentiality [clarification], short pause … and longer [pause]. Hand drawn family maps
were transposed into a WORD document on a single A4 sized page to protect participant
anonymity. The orientation of the page was either portrait or landscape depending upon the
original drawing. The size and spacing of the symbols, objects and lines depicted in the
original production was retained in the electronic version.

Analysis plan
Notable features from the family maps and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts were considered together in the following manner, with the initial emphasize on idiographic accounts of family. First, each author conducted her own initial analyses of each interview (reading the interview transcript and viewing the family map multiple times to explore each participant’s individual understanding of their family). In each transcript analysis, themes were summarized initially by highlighting the information laden content phrases used by the participant and then the underlying sense of meaning behind a chunk of text was noted (Riessman, 2008, p.54-63). Second, the authors met together to discuss each interview and reached an agreed version of the analyses for a participant, which was then considered alongside the participant’s family map. Third, further discussions between the authors compared and contrasted similarities and divergences in the themes presented across different participants’ transcripts in conjunction with the set of family maps. The thematic descriptions presented below contain elements summarized across different participants’ accounts.

As the use of family maps in research interviews is a relatively new technique an independent audit of the analyses was conducted by an experienced qualitative researcher unconnected with the research project. The auditor noted the type of family map members present, partially represented, or absent in the family maps and associated narratives of three participants. Subsequently, the auditor’s ratings were compared to those previously agreed upon by the authors. Across all audited ratings the auditor’s assessment was only different to that of the authors on one case (see Table 1 for inter-rater agreement).

Findings

The themes generated at interview and visually depicted on the family maps reflected family definition and the representation of those relationships to others. Generally the themes
generated coincided with discussion of different types of family membership and we have
highlighted different types of family membership below under each theme.

Family Core: Caring connections and the ongoing parenting of grown up offspring

Family members whose lives currently intertwined with each participant’s life were
always the first family members to be drawn on the family map and often were identified as
core family members. Core family members seemed to be easy to place on the map, verbally
described quickly and without hesitation, and appeared to be at the heart of their family for
participants. All participants placed their children within this family core, even when the
children had grown up and were no longer living at home. As Carrie initially said when the
family map task was introduced: “my sort of core family is me and the three kids because
even when I was married to their dad, it was always me and the three kids as family”. On her
family map Carrie drew a Christmas table around her core family (herself, her cohabiting
same-gender partner, and her children) who were all central to her family celebration of
Christmas (see Figure 1 Carrie’s Family Map). Core connections emphasized caring
connections. For example, when asked who and what comes to mind when you think about
your family, Barbara replied: “I suppose the people I feel most responsible for are these
people [Barbara shows her children and their father]. So these are the people that, mmm, if
they ask me for help I’ll jump to it.”

Insert Figure 1 about here

Thinking within and beyond heteronormative boundaries: the challenge of finding a
way to include new partners in family networks

New partners appeared to need to merit inclusion on the family map and not be
blocked by other family members, namely participants’ children or the fathers of these
children. For instance, after drawing a little more of her family map Carrie spoke of her
partner gradually starting to feel like family and said: “now that she’s moved in with me [she]
is beginning to start to feel like family". Carrie also mentioned how they were: "now talking
about finances, and shared finances, and a shared future, beginning to make plans for writing
wills and all the sort of things that partners do." Nevertheless, a particular marker of family
inclusion for Carrie was the growth in connection between her partner and her children. For
instance, during her life course history interview Carrie mentioned a conversation between
herself and her grown up daughter about what were they going to call Carrie’s partner if
Carrie’s daughter had children. Carrie said:

[My daughter] went: “Well, of course she’s going to be called Gran or something like
that! ‘Cause she’s been... she’s been in my life since I was about 12 and that’s six
years now so... She’s an important person.” And she was... almost telling me off at
thinking it might be different. And for me that was a real measure of how much it
changed over that five years in terms of... her acceptance of my partner as a --, ... as
an established family member, in that she became something more than an
acquaintance and was now a family member. So it kind of shifted from acquaintance
to friend to... family.

Thus Carrie’s definition of core family emphasized on-going nurturing and caring
relationships between her and her children and the inclusion of her partner in Carrie’s family
as she and her partner increasingly shared their life together. Carrie’s definition also
highlighted the importance to participants of a shared or reflected definition of family since
Carrie referred back to the conversation quoted above when including her partner on her
family map in saying: “but actually it was when my -- that thing that I told you about my
daughter and the grandparent’s names -- it was that which made me realize that my daughter
felt she was more family than I did”.

When asked whether her lover who she had mentioned in her life course history
interview was included on her family map, Barbara said that her lover was included within a
group that Barbara called family friends. Barbara clarified this by saying: "That person is a family friend. But because the children's father finds that relationship upsetting I don't bring that person into this household. And that person is absolutely fine about that because they see themselves as single as well. Yes. I would include that in this group of friends." Laura also indicated the difficulties of managing and negotiating new additional partnerships. On her family map Laura drew a house around her core family defined as herself, her partner who was the children's father, and their children. Previously in her life course history interview Laura had said about her partner:

"He feels a lot more guarded about having other people in our house. So our rule is that we don’t have anyone--. we don’t sleep with other partners here. [Interviewer: Ok.] [Pause] Which is ok. It's alright. It's quite a nice division really. I mean, it's a bit of a pain sometimes. But it's --, it's alright. But that's --, that's definitely his preference."

Suzie had brought partners home in the past and indicated on her family map that she felt that it was possible to accommodate additional partners being involved with the whole family rather just being in a relationship with Suzie (see Figure 2 Suzie’s Family Map). As Suzie drew her core family, and then added further circles on her family map, Suzie said:

"I suppose in the central core... So you got... essentially me and my husband and my son. Then you've got another circle with a girlfriend I might have at the time and... if she's got a partner then as well... because it's all... everybody is involved. I don't believe in keeping secrets."

Insert Figure 2 about here

In summary, our family map data indicated the complexity of including new partnerships in existing family networks. Inclusion was clearly not simply dependent upon each participant’s feelings about their new partner but also dependent upon acceptance, in
particular acceptance by core family members. Both participants and existing family
members clearly had an eye to normative representations of family centred on two parents
and adding a new partner into the family network seemed to involve careful psychosocial
negotiations around this.

Traditional extended family relatives included because they are good enough to be
counted upon and share a common allegiance

All participants included some traditional extended family relatives (related by blood
or by marriage or even long-term partnership) in the second or third sets of people added to
their family map. All participants included members of their immediate family of origin,
either their parents and/or a sister, who were usually positioned after and at a greater distance
from the participant than were core family members. Subsequent to the placement of
immediate family of origin more distant traditional extended family members (for example,
grandparents, aunts, cousins) were included by seven participants. Even deceased relatives
were included as a reflection of their importance to particular participants.

The family map had been introduced in an open way to each participant and
membership was not prompted until after the person had finished drawing and including
family members spontaneously. Nonetheless, participants expressed a sense of inevitability
about the inclusion of traditional extended family relatives on the map, both in terms of blood
relatives on the participant’s side of the family and blood relatives on their partner’s side of
the family. As Lynn said: “with family: you’ve got them. Even when you like them or you
don’t like them, whatever happens to your relationship, you have those people. There’s
nothing you can do about it. All you might do is get along with them as best as you can and...
support each other.” Laura also said in relation to including on her family map her partner’s
family (her children’s paternal grandparents): “you know, I didn’t choose his parents (laughs)
but you know, they’ll do, they’ll do!” Sometimes traditional extended family relatives would
be individually depicted, while others would be included in a group, because of a common or
shared commitment to caring. For example, Carrie said: "... and then all loads of cousins --
that's not an accurate drawing of them, I just put 'more cousins'. I'm not very close to them
but there are still parts of my extended family, people I keep in touch with... if only because
we share responsibilities for looking after my auntie as she gets older..."

In two cases blood relatives were included on the family map despite participants
feeling displeased with them. For example, Suzie included her mother on her family map,
with a direct connecting line, even though she was not on speaking terms with her mother at
that time. Elizabeth also had distanced herself from her family of origin given her parents'
reluctance to accept her non-monogamous relationship with her children's father, yet like
Suzie she still included these estranged family members on her family map. However,
Elizabeth drew hearts round her immediate family members and her siblings and parents (and
her partner's siblings and parents) were listed outside of the hearts on Elizabeth's family map
(see Figure 3 Elizabeth). Elizabeth said:

I think that my siblings and parents have felt much more of my immediate family
until quite recently. I think that's because, with the kind of conflicts that emerged with
their disapproval of my relationship, has meant that... hum... (laughs) they're kind of
pushed out of my definition of who is family, you know (laughs). They kind of are...
but it doesn't feel as meaningful as [my] immediate family.

Insert Figure 3 about here

A web of family of origin and extended family relationships that centered on
heteronormative motherhood was particularly evident in some interviews and this seemed to
crowd out recollections of bisexuality. As Elena talked about her traditional family relatives
she described how relationships with her immediate family of origin had become closer as
her parents and sisters gathered round Elena as a new mother: "I definitely feel a lot closer to
my family since [my son] was born ... to my parents... and my sisters as well. They're all
really good... about him and... (laughs) and... Yeah... I identify... I have a lot more sympathy
for my mother now! (laughs) I think it's a very common thing (laughs).” Previously in her
life course history interview Elena had mentioned hazy recollections of being a teenager and
coming out to her family, adding that it was not something that featured further in everyday
conversations. Further, Elena’s speculation that her parents dismissed her bisexuality as an
earlier phase perhaps reflected a re-appraisal of sexual identity upon the pulling in and
shifting of family relationships in line with heteronormative intergenerational expectations
that likely took place upon Elena’s marriage to her husband and the birth of their child. Elena
said about coming out as bisexual to her family of origin and extended family previously:
A good few of them know. [short pause] I’m not really sure of who because I don’t
even know --, [or] remember who I’ve came out to and then who they’ve told so...
[laughs]. [Interviewer: Even within your close family? ] Oh yeah, my close family,
yeah. I came out to them. I don’t know--, it's not something that comes up in
conversations much. I guess they probably... my parents probably assume it was a
phase or something (laughs). Hum... yeah... hum... I don’t know...
In her family map interview Elena then went on to talk about her ongoing
relationships with members of her extended family. Elena described her cousins as quite
close based upon her feelings of an underlying shared understanding and similarity. Even
though they did not see each other frequently there was a strong recognition of a shared
family way of doing things through having been brought up in a similar way. Perhaps Elena’s
evident satisfaction with this recognition served to pull family relationships further into line
with traditional (heterosexual) norms.

“Hmm... Yeah, I’m quite close to... even if they... a lot of my extended family lives
[abroad] but I’m quite close to them and even... like I see them on and off but we get
FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS OF BISEXUAL MOTHERS

along pretty well. Yeah ... I think we're all very similar and we've been brought up
similarly so even if we don't see each other all the time we ..., we get along very
well."

Four participants (Barbara, Carrie, Suzie and Lynn) had mentioned questioning of the
causes and origins of sexual orientation during their life course history interviews and in
doing so had alluded to other bisexual or non-heterosexual members within their families’
history (mainly parents, aunts and uncles). In relation to this, participants felt that "not being
the only one" in their family had been in some way helpful. A relative with a non-
heterosexual identity gave a shared point of reference with a similar person, a sense of
understanding and belonging within their own family, or perhaps a sense of how wider family
members might respond. Carrie said:

I've got an elderly auntie who's around 80, who... has always lived on her own... has
had one long term relationship with a man that I can think of... but [she] had quite a
funny reaction to me telling her that I got a female partner. And I actually wonder if
she... might be... either lesbian or bisexual but had never really... partly because of her
age etcetera... never fully been able of... accepting herself or be out. [ ] I have just
wondered... if maybe I'm not the only one in the family.

Interviewer: Would that change something for you?

Carrie: Hum... yeah, quite... it would be quite nice in a way... just to think... to think
there was someone else.

In summary, extended family members were rarely important in terms of every day
family life but they provided a deeper bedrock of shared commonality and allegiance and a
perhaps reference point in terms of what was expected or could be done in each participant’s
own life. Depending up on the extended family, this could exert a heteronormative pull, or it
could help a participant to identify as bisexual because someone else in the family had blazed
the trail to identify, or be identified, as non-heterosexual.

Ex-partners mostly warranting inclusion as the children’s other parent

Only two participants (Andrea and Laura) listed ex-partners (both men and women)
who only ever had been significant to them but who were not also their children’s father. Ex-
partners were generally included on the family map after both core family and some family of
origin members had been placed and only three participants (who were still partnered to the
father of their children) did not include any ex-partners on their family map. In four cases a
particular ex-partner was mainly included on the family map because the ex-partner was the
child(ren)’s father (Carrie, Barbara, Lynn and Andrea). As Barbara said: “He’s been a good
father to the children. He hasn’t been always a good partner to me.” When asked if there was
anyone else that she wanted to include on her family map, Elizabeth thought about including
an ex-partner (a woman) because her son might have done, but then Elizabeth decided not to:

“there was a time perhaps when [my son] might have chosen to include my former
partner, who I was with when I had him. But I don’t think he would now. That has
been… enormously acrimonious… So I certainly wouldn’t include her [continues
drawing in silence]. But I don’t think [my son] would anymore either. So no… I don’t
think there are other people [to include]”

In summary, participants sometimes represented ex-partners on their family map and
sometimes did not. One aspect that seemed to influence their decision to include an ex-
partner was whether they had parented together and whether the ex-partner could be
considered as a “good enough parent” to their shared children.

Affirming bisexuality through choosing family

Family of choice members were included in some but not all participants’ definition of family
as five of our eight participants placed family of choice members on their family maps
Sometimes family of choice membership and sexual-emotional partnership coincided and were related to the participant’s sense of self as having attractions to another person irrespective of gender. For example, Andrea included some named friends as chosen intimates and her relationship with one of her woman-friends was undefinable in traditional terms as the relationship crossed the friendship-relationship divide as this person was listed as Andrea’s snogging (kissing and cuddling) partner (see Figure 4 Andrea’s Family Map).

Sometimes the way in which family of choice members were chosen seemed to indicate how significant these individuals or indeed groups were for a participant’s identity. For example, Suzie named only one family of choice member on her genogram, her transgender friend who had adopted a mentoring role in relation to Suzie: “My best friends are in there [points]. One of my friends, a girl I met, a trans girl, she has decided that she’s going to be my stepmom (laughs). [draws in silence] and I suppose that’s really it”.

Sometimes participants thought about including a group of LGBTQ people on their family map as the group specifically supported their identity but then did not necessarily go on to include them as family. These deliberations about whether to include people on the family map usually denoted a difference between the role of family and friends in the participant’s life. For example, Laura referred to community membership in a thoughtful pause as she was finishing her family map:

“... there’s not really my old dykey community there. [Interviewer: No?] Not really, no. Not if I’m --, I don’t really think of them as family. [pause]. And I did used to have a strong sense of family as --, as LGBT community. Actually, and I do have some, I do have a big connection there, and an affection and a comfort, and an identity there. But I, now I have this sense of family, it, that feels... family in this picture are people who I can really pull on, if I need their help.”
In contrast in Andrea’s interview, family of choice relationships were personally significant in terms of affirming a bisexual identity and place in a group on Andrea’s family map (see Figure 4). Andrea’s bisexual family of choice members were clearly committed to supporting each other through challenging times, although this was caveated and set aside by a reference to geographical relocation. Andrea said:

“I suppose with the bisexual community... it’s not as if I could consider all these people to be family. But I think that there is a core of people within the bi community, mmm, who we do support each other with activism and stuff like that. And I think that there is a certain understanding that goes with that about the difficulties, you know being bisexual is a quite difficult identity to manage successfully. And because emotionally it’s quite challenging because there is all this fluidity and complexity and we have to manage all the stigma from the heterosexual and lesbian and gay communities as well. [ ] And so those people are -, you know none of them are lovers (well actually one of them was briefly) but mmm it’s kind of the sense of having a long term commitment to people. Maybe that’s what I mean by family, maybe that’s the difference between family and just friends: With the people I consider to be family I know I’m going to know these people for the rest of my life basically unless they move to Australia. You know... I know that as long as it’s practically possible my life and those people’s lives”

In summary, chosen relationships with others who identify as bisexual, or as part of the wider gender and sexual minority community, played an important role in affirming a sense of self as bisexual. Nevertheless, these relationships need to continue to be personally significant and currently dependable to be integrated into participants’ family maps.

Discussion
Diverse representations of family membership were depicted on the family maps and spoken of during interviews with mothers who had children within a bisexual relationship context. Participants revealed a complex array of both traditional kinship elements in their portrayals of both immediate and extended family relationships and also highlighted radical kinship concepts. On the one hand, participants' family maps and their spoken thoughts about family were clearly informed by traditional heteronormative boundaries of family membership. Sometimes glimpses were observed of cis-gender bisexual women being trapped behind traditional boundaries of family in terms of heteronormative expectations surrounding motherhood, such as keeping other partners excluded from home or family life.

On the other hand, cis-gender bisexual women were crossing, or attempting to cross, new frontiers of family by including additional partners on their family maps or by redefining family in terms of boundaries both sexual and affectionate.

Participants' primary or initial definition of family was of a heteronormative or homonormative family core including them and their children and often just one partner as a coparent. This central definition mostly reflected the composition of each participant's household whose members shared in their everyday life and experience. These core family connections were displayed albeit in different ways on each participant's family map. Grown-up children who had left home also were included in this first tier representation of family and were regarded as central in making an event a family celebration. The priority given to children as central to defining family converged with findings from the narrative analyses of the life course history interviews conducted with the same sample of mothers (Tasker & Delvoye, 2015; Delvoye & Tasker, 2016). Prioritizing children also concurred with Riggs and Peel's (2016) conceptualization of the elevation (or taken for granted naturalization) of parenthood by biological linkage as being at the centre of family definition and intergenerational linkage in western societies (see also Bartholomaeus & Riggs, in press).
Particularly for participants who had conceived their children in a relationship with a man, who had been their husband or cohabiting partner at the time, a web of heteronormative kinship relationships spread out from children to the child’s father and his extended family too. As such the family maps of these bisexual mothers highlighted not only a privileged position of being able to pass as heterosexual, but also the sense of bisexuality being marginalized or erased in heteronormative family life (Ross & Dobinson, 2013). In our study unless bisexual mothers took active disclosure steps, bisexuality was unlikely to come up in family conversations as assumptions of heterosexuality were made by others. Possibly this was particularly the case if the bisexual mother appeared to be currently partnered only to the father of their child.

Current intimate partners not involved in the everyday family life, were not included within the representation of the core family grouping. Only one participant attempted an open polyamorous family map and then this was presented as a wished for solution rather than as a current representation. Other participants presented additional partners on their family maps in a more indirect way by drawing boundaries between core family and additional partners or by placing a partner within a group of friends. Participants also distinguished ex-partners with whom they no longer had an intimate relationship as they were no longer placed within the family core and most ex-partners were placed on the family map only because they were the father of the participant’s children. Thus, the networks depicted by the sample of bisexual mothers in the current study were probably very different from those that might be drawn by the communal polyamorous parenting families considered by Pallotta-Chiariolli (2006) and Sheff (2010).

Beyond the core representation of family, participants included different ranges of people in their family maps. Traditional extended family relatives who were related by birth and marriage to the participant were often the next category beyond core family members to
be listed in the interview and placed on the family map. In most cases the family maps drawn
by the bisexual mothers in our study have confirmed the reports in other studies of lesbian
and gay parents who upon parenthood experience greater connection with their own parents
and siblings (Bergman, Rubio, Green & Padrón, 2010; DeMino, Appleby & Fisk, 2007;
Gianino, 2008). All participants included at least some members of their family of origin and
only traditional relatives who had not lived up to expectations of caring commitment had
been pushed out and then only to the margins of the family map.

Whereas participants appeared only to hesitate or think about whether to include
traditional extended family relatives in their family representations, relationships with friends
and communities were described as chosen, developed, and needing to be maintained. In this
respect the family maps of participants differed: some participants neither mentioned nor
drew family of choice members; some nominated particular chosen individuals as family
members and excluded community; others included community as part of their family of
choice definition. Rust (1996) proposed that finding a sexual identity and a bisexual
community to identify with were interlinked. Similarly, for the majority of mothers in the
current sample connection with community was important for identity (Tasker & Delvoye,
2015); nonetheless community was regarded for the most part as distinct from and sometimes
unconnected to family.

In this study, family map drawing has provided a picture of family networks of
bisexual mothers and helped to elucidate the explanations of how participants managed often
complex relationships. Participants’ creative drawings of their own family networks, with the
addition of their own personal psychosocial symbols such as houses and hearts, emphasized
meanings of family in terms of definition and exclusivity beyond the spoken word. Our
findings indicated how existing family relationships may support bisexual identity
development, or more often directly or indirectly endorse heteronormativity, exclude new
family members, or silence further possible bisexual identity development. Nevertheless, our study was essentially a small exploratory research project with a homogenous sample of white cis-gender middle class mothers who spoke about parenting in a bisexual context and as such can only begin to describe family relationships within those contexts. Furthermore, women in our sample had various relationship histories and one did not self-identify as bisexual, although she herself said she parented within a bisexual context in an intimate relationship with the child’s father (see Tasker & Delvoye [2015] and Delvoye & Tasker [2016] for further sample details). Clearly the present study would benefit from replication, preferably with a larger sample that was more diverse in ethnic, socioeconomic, and ability-disability backgrounds. Moreover, our findings may be very specific to cis-gender bisexual mothers who experience pro-natalist heteronormative family pressures in particular ways (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, in press). The family relationship networks of cis-gender bisexual fathers, or trans or gender nonconforming bisexual parents would be useful to consider. As indeed would the family relationship networks of other individuals with non-bisexual sexual identities who have more than one intimate partnership.

The family maps drawn by mothers who talked about bisexual experience contained more than just genogram or ecomap information and indicated that family map drawing might be a useful technique and psychotherapeutic tool for use when family relationships are being discussed at interview. Milewski-Hertlein (2001) argued that allowing clients to socially construct their own genograms enabled the clarification of intergenerational patterns and facilitated the disclosure and discussion of wider patterns of family experiences. Findings from our current study have pointed to further gains from participants being able to draw their own family map, including their own additional psychosocial symbols. Family map drawing facilitated the sharing of information about family without constraints on who constitutes family or how relationships should be depicted. The family maps in this study
identified some of the resources that participants drew upon within their core family and
beyond it: namely, traditional extended family, family of choice, and bisexual community.
Non-family resources available to participants, such as links to schools, recreational or
employment connections, were not documented on the family maps as they would have been
on ecomaps (Hartman, 1995). Nevertheless, the perceptions of family resources, such as
LGBTQ relatives in the extended family, might well have been lost if an ecomap perspective
had been sought instead of a family map and interview that focused on family definition.

Conclusion

The family maps of bisexual mothers indicated both normative and radical positions
with respect to family relationships in their kinship networks, suggesting that bisexuality may
query the conceptualization of family relationships based on the assumption of
monosexuality. The innovative research technique of free-style hand drawn family mapping
enabled family relationship features to be highlighted visually as well as verbally, indicating
that family mapping is a useful tool for exploring family relationship networks in complex
non-traditional and/or new family forms.
References


FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS OF BISEXUAL MOTHERS


FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS OF BISEXUAL MOTHERS


Sen-Chowdry, S., Jacoby, D., & McKenna, W. J. (2012) A clinical approach to common cardiovascular disorders when there is a family history: The implications of inheritance for clinical management. Circulatory Cardiovascular Genetics, 5, 467-476. DOI: 10.1161/CIRCGENETICS.110.959361


FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS OF BISEXUAL MOTHERS


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Children &amp; current relationship status</th>
<th>Core family &amp; traditional extended family relatives</th>
<th>Additional current partnerships</th>
<th>Family of choice</th>
<th>Special features drawn</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Elena</td>
<td>Child under ten years, Married to a man (child’s father)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
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<td>Lynn</td>
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*Note. Authors’ agreed rating: $0 =$ Members not presented; $1 =$ Members obscurely presented; $2 =$ Members presented. Numbers with subscripts within rows represent independent auditor’s rating.*
Figure 1. Carrie’s Family Map
Family groups for blood relatives as all relationships are not traditional.

Figure 2. Suzie's Family Map
Figure 3. Elizabeth’s Family Map

- P____ - B____’s Dad
- A____ - B____’s Mum
- D____ & Husband & Daughter
- J____ & Son
- [P____, M____]

- H____ - My Mum
- J____ - My Dad
- O____ & Partner & 2 Children
- Z____ & Partner & 2 Children
- R____
- Y____ & Son
Figure 4. Andrea’s Family Map