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Qualitative Research on LGBTQ-Parent Families

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Abstract

Qualitative research on LGBTQ-parent families and queer individuals and families of all kinds has burgeoned, to include narratives, interviews, diaries, emotion maps, participatory action research, and visual and performative methods—individually or in combination. In this chapter, we examine a range of qualitative methods, particularly from the lens of a qualitative multiple methods approach developed by Jacqui Gabb. We also address conceptual, theoretical, intersectional, and methodological tensions that remain or have emerged regarding how qualitative LGBTQ-parent family research is conducted, to what ends, and how it should be represented in publication, for researchers, for practitioners, and for participants themselves. Our goal is to show that qualitative LGBTQ-parent family research has come of age: a great deal of exciting research is appearing around the globe, and yet this area also faces numerous challenges to retaining its cutting edge nature. Finally, we combine new conceptual areas with empirical exemplars on topics highly relevant to studying family relationships in the context of sexuality and other intersections: (a) era, age, and generation; (b) social class, sociocultural capital, and the economies of reproductive labor; (c) listening to children; and (d) situating sexual-maternal identities at home.

Keywords: autoethnography, diaries, emotion maps, interviews, LGBTQ-parent families, participant observation, qualitative methods, sexuality, visual methods

Qualitative Research on LGBTQ-Parent Families

The wide ranging networks of intimacy that constitute LGBTQ-parent family life are, akin to the feminist maxim, personal and political. Indeed, the study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)-parent families grew out of feminist activism and scholarship on families that did not fit the heteronormative mainstream of a two generational (parent and child) structure, headed by a male breadwinner and his emotionally sensitive, homemaking wife. Qualitative analyses of LGBTQ-parent families are grounded in a critical feminist perspective where sexuality is overtly considered in the mix, and thus not assumed, tamed, muted, or denied. Furthermore, qualitative investigations of LGBTQ-parent families in general owe their legacy to the reflexive methodologies of memoir, personal narrative, and autoethnography, where individuals who have lived in families apart from the mainstream have first charted the way to describe and account for their own experiences. Over the past decade, qualitative research on LGBTQ-parent families and queer individuals and families of all kinds has burgeoned, to include not just narratives, interviews, and ethnographies, but a variety of strategies, such as diaries, emotion maps, participatory action research, and visual and performative methods—individually or in combination. As we argue in this chapter, qualitative methods in LGBTQ-parent family research has come of age. A great deal of exciting research is being conducted around the globe, making forays into previously uncharted territory.

As queer feminist researchers, we are keenly aware of the need to foreground issues of epistemology within our discussion of methodology, to be ever mindful of the personal, social, and political contexts impacting queer family life. Qualitative research enables us to use our academic voices to evidence the material impact of contemporary precarities (Butler, 2015) and the ways that they are shaping lived experiences and intimacies. Methods, queer or otherwise,

are not objective tools that we take into the field to reveal hitherto unknown facts about social life. Methods are dynamic instruments which convey meanings and generate knowledge steeped in the research context. The researcher's standpoint (e.g., identity, race, and social class status; political beliefs; personal biography) and local and global political contexts are all crucial (Allen, 2016; Gabb, 2011a). Therefore, we situate our "inside-out" status (Fuss, 1991) as academic researchers who have been living and researching LGBTQ-parenthood, family life, and relational dissolution over the past 30 years.

Contemporary studies of families can be characterized as a dynamic interdisciplinary engagement with shifting trends in the patterning of family and intimate networks of care that create and consolidate diverse intra-and inter-generational relationships (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015; Gabb & Fink, 2015a; Jamieson, Morgan, Crow, & Allan, 2006). In this chapter, we join our respective disciplinary (sociology and family science) and locational (United Kingdom and United States) perspectives in order to examine the nature of qualitative family research on LGBTQ-parent families, and address knowledge gaps and potentials as well.

In the U.K., sociologists tend to employ predominantly qualitative research methodologies that allow them to focus on how families as interacting entities are made and remade through "family practices" (Morgan, 1996). In the U.S., the growth of research on LGBTQ family issues over the life course can be found in the past decade to complement the rich foundation of qualitative work that has characterized the early years of LGBTQ family research (Allen & Demo, 1995; Biblarz & Savci, 2010). This growth corresponds with the increasingly sophisticated use of quantitative research methods, including meta-analysis (Cao et al., 2017) and large scale demographic surveys (Fish & Russell, 2018; Gates, 2015; Potter & Potter, this volume; Russell, Bishop, Mallory, & Muraco, this volume) as well as the ability of

researchers to now distinguish among various sexual orientation and gender identities (e.g., bisexual individuals: Pollitt, Muraco, Grossman, & Russell, 2017; Scherrer, Kazyak, & Schmitz, 2015; and transgender individuals: Liu & Wilkinson, 2017), thereby separating out the components of who is encapsulated under the LGBTQ acronym. U.S. scholars are building on much of the critical and queer theoretical framing found in international settings (e.g., Europe, Australia), attempting to queer family research methods by problematizing the heteronormative foundation that has characterized much of LGBTQ family research (Acosta, 2018; Fish & Russell, 2018; Goldberg, Allen, Ellawalla, & Ross, 2018; Mizielińska, Gabb, & Stasińska, 2018; Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume, & Berkowitz, 2009) and warning about the establishment of “a new gay norm” (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013).

Another change is that the majority of research is no longer focused mainly on lesbian mother families, as was observed by Biblarz and Savci (2010) in their review of LGBTQ family research in the first decade of the 21st century. Extending beyond the parent-child or partnership tie, a great deal of LGBTQ family research now focuses on youth and families with diverse identities and experiences, including new ways of examining the challenges associated with coming out, for LGBTQ homeless youth (Robinson, 2018) and for young adults who are the second sexual minority sibling in their family of origin to come out (Barrow & Allen, this volume). Qualitative LGBTQ-parent family research is also addressing wider social contexts, including school choice for same-sex couples with transracially adopted children (Goldberg, Allen, Black, Frost, & Manley, 2018) and social support networks among Black lesbian couples (Glass, 2014). The qualitative literature has also extended its reach beyond primarily English speaking countries, with research appearing on other international samples, including South Africa (Breshears & Lubbe-De Beer, 2016), Japan (Ishii, 2018), and Poland (Mizielińska &

Stasińska, 2018) for example.

Conceptual and Methodological Tensions in Qualitative LGBTQ-Parent Research

Despite the richness of this interdisciplinary, international, and increasingly intersectional body of qualitative research, several conceptual and methodological tensions are evident. These tensions reveal that LGBTQ-parent family researchers are continually challenged to not merely produce research that reinforces the heteronormative status quo but to retain a critical perspective on normalizing processes.

Tensions with Conceptualizing Sexuality, Intimacy, and Family

We know very little about the ordinary experiences of sexuality practices in families per se, while the sexual identities of LGBTQ parents are afforded greater significance. In this chapter, we try to address this schism between sexuality studies and studies of family life by demonstrating how a qualitative multiple methods approach can shed new light on everyday practices of “family sexuality” (Gabb, 2001), enabling us to better understand the multidimensional identities of LGBTQ parents and the absence–presence of sexuality in queer family living. We use the terms “family sexuality” and “family intimacy” to simultaneously locate sexuality and intimacy in the context of everyday family relationships. We recognize the need to tread carefully around issues of sexuality in the context of parent-child relationships and LGBTQ-parent families in particular. Given the taboo nature of even considering sexuality, children, and family, much of social science research tends to “desex” families, with some rare exceptions (e.g., Allen, Gary, Lavender-Stott, & Kaestle, 2018; Fineman, 1995; Gabb, 2004; Malone & Cleary, 2002). We resituate sexuality as part of family life by deploying “families” as interactional units that are created and maintained through sets of relationship practices. This focus on everyday practice facilitates insight on the ways that partner and parenting dynamics are

materialized in LGBTQ-parent families. We hope to nudge forward debate on how we can make sense of sexuality in the context of LGBTQ-parent families in light of these conceptual tensions.

Tensions with Heteronormativity in LGBTQ-Parent Family Research

The recent advances in socio-legal queer partnership and parenthood rights in many parts of the world have helped to break down the homo–hetero binary and distinctions between LGBTQ and hetero parent–families. These rights, however hard won and welcome, have not come without a cost. While cultural studies and queer theorizing has started to critically engage with and critique socio-legal advances, much of the empirical research on LGBTQ parenthood has glossed over the problematic of contemporary equality rights which reinforces the heteronorm and focuses instead on the opportunities presented. Queer parenthood research all too often instantiates gender and sexuality through insufficient attention to everyday experience and the ways in which this queers kinship. Geo-political (e.g., location of fieldwork) and sociocultural contexts (e.g., demographic sample variables) are used as scene-setting rather than being operationalized to pry apart the intersections of public–private intimacies. Parenthood and blood lines are once again defining families, albeit queer practices of conception now fix the boundaries rather than hegemonic norms associated with how families should function. All of these factors have generated rich insights into contemporary LGBTQ-parent families but they have also occluded more diverse forms of kinship and the residual inequalities that persist within and across regions and nation states. We engage with these issues of how LGBTQ-parent family research is structured because they inform the qualitative research process; they call attention to the ways in which sexuality and family are interwoven with questions of methodology (Boyce, 2018).

Tensions in Theorizing Qualitative LGBTQ-Parent Family Research

Tensions are present in how theory is used to guide qualitative LGBTQ-parent research, particularly in terms of mainstream theories (e.g., ecological, life course), which tend to reinstate heteronormativity, in comparison to more critical or postmodern theories (e.g., feminist, minority stress, queer), which may speak to a much smaller audience of scholars and practitioners. A promising direction is to borrow from and integrate mainstream and critical approaches, as in Glass and Few-Demo's (2013) use of symbolic interactionism and Black feminist theories, as well as the development of transfamily theory (McGuire, Kivalanka, Catalpa, & Toomey, 2016). While analyses may incorporate a strong theoretical perspective, another tension is the lack of explicit theoretical grounding in many studies of sexual minority parent families, as Farr, Tasker, and Goldberg (2017) found in their analysis of highly cited studies in LGBTQ family research.

Tensions in the Scholarship of Intersectionality

Scholarship on intersectionality has demonstrated that there are many crucial factors which shape the lives of LGBTQ-parents which typically fall outside the analytical frame of reference (Brainer, Moore, & Panerjee, this volume; N. Goldberg, Badgett, Schneebaum, & Durso, this volume; Moore, 2011). Race, ethnicity, religiosity, socioeconomic and educational disadvantage, for example, inform experience and the data that are generated—even when they are declared absent from the predominantly White, well-educated, professional sample. Issues surrounding race, class, and gender disparities are delimited to just one type of family formation. Surrogacy, for example, seldom falls within the imagination of a working class man; likewise in vitro fertilization (IVF) and even donor insemination are out of the reach for many socially disadvantaged lesbians. Queer divorce proceedings, which invoke pronatalist rhetoric to advantage the biological mother and write the social mother out of the parenting equation, are rarely integrated into LGBTQ-parent family research (Allen, 2019). Although 15-20% of

pregnancies end in miscarriage, loss and bereavement are seldom mentioned as part of family formation (Allen & Craven, this volume; Craven & Peel, 2014). Qualitative research has the capacity to be inclusive in its scope and to engage with the complexities and unpalatable dimensions of queer lived experience.

Tensions with Standardizing Qualitative Research in the Publication Process

As the literature on qualitative research in general, and qualitative LGBTQ family research in particular, has come of age, expectations to formalize how qualitative research is reported have increased. On the one hand, having guidelines for best practices in writing up findings is an aid for journal editors, reviewers, and authors to ensure transparency and clearly convey how the research was conducted. Guidelines can be found in most of the major mainstream journals that publish qualitative family research, for example, in family science (Goldberg & Allen, 2015), psychology (Levitt et al., 2018), and gender studies (Chatfield, 2018), to name just a few. These guidelines provide practical suggestions on topics ranging from when to include frequency counts, how to identify the social locations of the researcher, and when to provide graphic or visual portrayals of the linkages among research questions, key themes, and conclusions drawn. For example, most qualitative family research utilizes some variation of grounded theory or thematic analysis. The basic analytic process is to work through the stages of data reduction from open to focused to theoretical coding, in order to produce a storyline that offers a coherent explanation of the nuances and patterns the researchers found in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Daly, 2007), and it is important to reveal and provide exemplars of how the study was conducted and results found (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Humble & Radina; 2019).

On the other hand, standardization in the mainstream journals can leave some of the more innovative and groundbreaking projects relegated to book chapters or non-ranked journals, venues that may be more willing to take a chance on publishing experimental or experiential methods. Before the groundbreaking ethnographies of gay and lesbian family life were published, such as Krieger's (1983) study of a lesbian community and Weston's (1991) study of chosen kinship, those wanting to study or learn about lesbian and gay families turned to anthologies of personal stories written by and about lesbian parents (Alpert, 1988; Hanscombe & Forster, 1981), for example.

We see the benefits of standardization, but only if they take the form of guidelines that are not prescriptive or designed to iron out the creativity that can come with a critical analysis of lived experience. There are at least two ways in which qualitative family researchers can resist the straightjacket approach of standardization. The first is in heeding advice to insert the researcher's reflexivity throughout the research report. Both Charmaz (2014) and Daly (2007) claim that too often, qualitative researchers leave out their own commitments to the work, or how their values, theories, and choices overtly or covertly structured the process of doing the research and writing up the manuscript. A second is to encourage researchers to put their own lives to the test by engaging in autoethnography, whereby in some reports they grapple with how their own lived experience has led them to their research interests (Adams & Manning, 2015; Allen, 2019; Gabb, 2018). The embodied vantage point of autoethnography has been a powerful tool for breaking new ground on topics, such as mental illness, abuse, violence, death, and the impact of various forms of xenophobia (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia) that have, at least in the past, been deemed too sensitive, traumatic, or distasteful to research (Allen & Craven, this volume). For example, in his recent account of the diverse and novel forms of kinship that

characterize contemporary LGBTQ-parent families, Gamson (2015) combines observation, memoir, and ethnographic storytelling techniques to bring the field to life.

Qualitative Multiple Methods (QMM)

We now turn to a way of framing qualitative family research through the use of qualitative multiple methods (QMM), drawing primarily from Gabb's¹ research on lesbian parenthood and sexuality², intimacy in same-sex and heterosexual-parent households³, and long-term couple relationships⁴. QMM is framed by the theoretical approach of family practices (Morgan, 1996). There may be tensions between the "families we live by" and the "families we live with" (Gillis, 1996), but the routinization of daily practices means that social roles and identities become embedded into the rhythm of family life (Phoenix & Brannen, 2014). Habitual practices are rendered meaningful through wider social structures which in turn shift over time (Smart, 2007). Family practices engage the materiality of sociocultural change by linking together biography and history (Morgan, 2011) and thus serve as a site for both family change and the reproduction of dominant heteronormative myths and sexual scripts (Plummer, 1995).

Next, we illustrate some of the kinds of data that are generated by using different qualitative methods under the conceptual rubric of family practices: diaries, emotion maps, participant observation, autoethnography, semi-structured interviews, and photo elicitation. The methods that we detail here are not exhaustive. Indeed, over the past 10 years there has been a methodological explosion in many fields of social research as qualitative researchers develop dynamic tools to probe the lives and experience of people whose voices are ordinarily silenced and/or are pushed to the margins of academic study. Some of these extend interview-based researcher-participant approaches while others have pushed at the boundaries of participatory action research (PAR) around the co-production of data and use of an array of participatory

methods from theatre and dance workshops to creative arts and installations (Fine, 2018). PAR techniques offer an exciting potential for future research on LGBTQ-parent families.

Diaries

Diary data add a temporal dimension to qualitative research, generating information on everydayness and routine family processes (Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). Diaries can elucidate the personal meanings of relating practices. They highlight the “affective currencies” (Gabb, 2008, p. 141), using symbolic phrases, such as “hugs and kisses” and “I love you”, as affective shorthand to stand in for more complex emotion work and/or ambivalent feelings. They can facilitate research in that they introduce the research topic to participants at a pace and pitch that feels comfortable to them and provide background information which enables the researcher to tailor subsequent interview questions around the individual family situation. Diaries can include photos, pictures, and mementos of activities completed over the course of the diary period.

Emotion Maps

Emotion maps use emoticon stickers to situate emotions at the center of research rather than as descriptors of experience (Gabb, 2008). The researcher is taken on a guided tour of the family home and a household floor plan is produced, which is then reproduced using a paint or word processing or paint package. Several days later a copy of the floor plan is given out to each participant with a set of colored emoticon stickers, denoting happiness, sadness, anger, and love/affection. Family members are individually assigned a color. To spatially locate relational encounters, participants then place these different colored emoticon stickers on their household floor plan to indicate where an interaction occurs and between whom. The emotion map method is not reliant on language skills and so it helps to flatten out intergenerational competencies among parents and children, and because children are familiar with sticker charts they tend to be

extremely adept in completing this method. Emotion maps are particularly useful for practitioners in clinical practice and assessment (Gabb & Singh, 2015).

Participant Observation

Grounded in the principles of ethnography, observation provides a glimpse of everyday practices of intimacy that are usually recorded in researcher field notes, in audio or written format, and accompanying photographs. Observation data can take many forms including the researcher's personal reflections on their own experience (autoethnography), diary writing, photo albums, children's drawings, scrapbooks, memory, and conversations. The researcher's immersion in the field can shed light on the texture of intimate family life which highlights how the absence–presence of sexuality becomes enacted and the performances of relationships and family that participants chose to make public. Ethnographic research requires entry into private relationships, where researchers often live within the family unit for a sustained period of time. This level of researcher intervention is costly and can be seen to intrude upon people's privacy, hence, ethnographic observations are uncommon in LGBTQ-parent research. Notable exceptions are Mizielińska and Stasińska's (2018) mixed methods study of queer kinship and chosen families in Poland, in which participant observation was a major focus, and Carrington's (2002) ethnography of the day-to-day life of gay and lesbian couples.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography explicitly engages the researcher's personal experience, whereby "our authorial position remains on the page and writing *through* this situated position places us in dynamic relation to the others whose stories we recount" (Gabb, 2018, p. 1004). Gabb (2018) used her personal experience, as a child who was adopted in the 1960s, to challenge the presupposition of birth motherhood and explore what happens when you start research from the

margins, outside the embodied experience of bio-discourses. Allen (2007) used critical reflection to chronicle the unresolved grief that accompanies the ambiguous loss (e.g., psychological presence but physical absence) of losing all contact with her nonbiological child when her former partner “unimaginably” left their family. In writing as a lesbian mother, Gabb (2018) used autoethnography to focus attention on everyday moments that may otherwise pass by unnoticed. This inclusion of everyday experience is part of a wider political project as it renders the experience of marginalised groups as epistemologically valid (Craven & Davis, 2013, p. 27). Everyday moments divert attention away from “fateful” events (Giddens, 1991) onto “ordinary affects” (Steward, 2007) which can provoke us to double take and think again (Baraitser, 2009).

Interviews

In qualitative studies of LGBTQ-parent families, semi-structured interviews that are derived from guiding research questions have been the method of choice, comprising most of the research cited in this chapter. Individual interviews enable participants to give their version of their own experiences and their interpersonal relationships in a family context. The use of dyadic and multiple family member interviews is a valuable yet still underdeveloped avenue for interview studies (Beitin, 2008; Daly, 2007; Reczek, 2014). Another avenue for further development is the use of open-ended interviews, especially to situate experiences of intimacy and sexuality across the life course, within the participants’ own frame of reference and through events they define as significant (Gabb, 2008).

Visual Methods

The use of visual methods has grown exponentially, leading to journals (e.g., *Visual Methodologies*), information guides (Rose, 2016), and handbooks (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011). This interest parallels the rise of “the visual” in culture and society, promoted through the digital

mode of production and dissemination of images more widely. Visual methods are now an ordinary part of the qualitative researcher's toolkit, especially when children's lives and experience are being investigated (Lomax, 2012). Task-centered activities are particularly effective because they avoid the need for eye contact which can reduce imbalances of power (Mauthner, 1997) and are useful for working with adults and children whose first language is not English or with limited language skills.

These creative visual methods can access the more hidden aspects of family experience and have been used in LGBTQ research to explore diverse sexuality and gender identities and experiences (Barker, Richards, & Bowes-Catton, 2012). Visual methods have also been used as an elicitation tool or photo-prompt technique. Discussion of photographs can enable the researcher to approach highly sensitive topics that might otherwise be deemed too risky if tackled through personal experience. Gabb (2008) used photo methods to talk directly about the management of boundaries around children and sexuality and adult-child intimacy more widely. Using an image taken from a parenting handbook depicting a man sharing a bath with a child, she initiated conversation on how men, as fathers, negotiate issues of nudity and bodily contact. This opened up wider discussion on "family rules" and the normative judgments that are invoked to manage perceptions of risk associated with different practices of intimacy.

Analyzing QMM Research Methods: A Moment's Approach

Qualitative multiple research methods produce a richly textured account of *where*, *when*, *how*, and *why* intimacy is experienced in LGBTQ-parent families, thereby using "complex methodological hybridity and elasticity" (Green & Preston, 2005, p. 171). Yet, the sheer volume and complexity of data required a novel approach to analysis. Building upon the everyday practices which underpin a QMM research design, Gabb developed a "moments approach" to

analyze such multidimensional data (Gabb & Fink, 2015b). This attends to the ways in which micro and macro networks of relations intersect and overlap through “emotional scenarios” (Burkitt, 2014, p. 20). The approach integrates data by treating materials generated through different methods as “facets” which can be configured to build up a holistic picture of phenomena (Mason, 2011), while simultaneously retaining the paradigmatic nature of each method (Gabb & Fink, 2015b; Moran-Ellis et al., 2006). The moments approach focuses on the ways in which everyday practices, individual experience and the patterning of social phenomena are constitutive and iterative, and it is this *doing* of relationships which informs all aspects of the research design and analysis. For example, in their research on couple relationships, Gabb and Fink (2015a) have shown how partnerships are sustained through ordinary gestures rather than big shows of affection and/or momentous celebrations. The relationship practice of bringing a partner a regular cup of tea in bed speaks volumes; it is deeply meaningful because of its regularity and the thoughtfulness of the ‘gift’. In interview-only research such gestures might slip under the analytic radar, precisely because of their ordinariness.

Conceptualizing and Conducting Qualitative Research on LGBTQ-Parent Families

We now engage with empirical illustrations primarily from Gabb’s research on LGBTQ-parent families to reveal how methodological creativity continues to enrich knowledge. These integrative thematic exemplars serve as both provocation and encouragement to be alive to the dynamic contexts of conducting queer research on queer families.

Era, Age, and Generation

Qualitative studies of LGBTQ-parenthood that attend to the social-historical *era* in which research is completed, the specificity of experience in terms of the *age* of participants, and the *generational* vantage points from which participants speak, reveal how era, age, and generation

intersect. For example, lesbian motherhood during the 1970s and 1980s was characterized by women's experience of divorce narratives and custody disputes (Hanscombe & Forster, 1981) resulting in 90% of lesbians in the U.K. losing their children (Rights of Women, 1986). Gabb's *Perverting Motherhood* study was completed when the pain and distress of earlier socio-legal contexts still impacted their experience, as Vicky, a lesbian mother who lost custody of her children, explains:

I wanted to take them with me but I didn't have anywhere to take them to...and my partner convinced me that if we took them they would be tormented at school and taunted about it and all sorts of things like that. And my husband begged me not to take them. And the other thing was, I couldn't face going into a court and fighting for them and being told that I was a bad mother.

The past trauma and present-day emotional scars of Vicky's experience emerged through the face-to-face interview. Qualitative research has the capacity to not simply describe events, it can also foreground feelings; as such Vicky's story drew attention to the pain and precariousness that shaped experiences of lesbian motherhood at this time. Today, partnership and parenting rights may have increased but the experience of same-sex relationship dissolution and LGBTQ divorce rates remain relatively high (Office for National Statistics, 2013, 2018). While some former couples manage to reach an amicable settlement, cases of contested custody are increasing, and in such instances the "biological rights" of the birth mother are all too often recognized formally (in law) and informally (in extended families) above and beyond emotional attachments forged over time between children and the social mother. Allen (2007) also reflected this confluence of era, age, and generation at a time in the U.S. prior to legal protections for LGBTQ-parent families, charting the emotional devastation and disempowerment of losing her intentional family of "a

carefully constructed, deliberate mix of chosen and biological ties” when her partner left and “took her biological son with her” (p. 178).

Gabb (2018) similarly reflected upon her experience of lesbian motherhood over the past 25 years, noting the shifting political and personal landscape that characterizes this period of time. She highlights how lesbians raising sons were previously sometimes challenged by other lesbians who espoused separatism, and children were not always welcome or included in LGBTQ community events. The normalcy of LGBTQ-parenthood today means that “the scene” and personal experiences of parents have effectively changed beyond all recognition. In contrast to a generation ago, young couples (aged 18-34) in the recent *Enduring Love?* study structured their imagined futures together around family plans, with children regularly featuring on their relationship horizon (Gabb & Fink, 2015a). LGBTQ young people spoke about the reproductive and socio-legal options that were available to them and through which ideas of futurity and the couple norm become embedded.

Stella: I’m excited about parenting with [Partner]. I cannot imagine doing this with anybody else and I think, again, the differences that we bring to our relationship will really complement each other in parenting as well...I know categorically that if I was single I would probably not end up parenting on my own, because I wouldn't want that just for...for myself. It’s um...you know, it’s because I feel that we can do this together...we want to be mums.

In these interviews with contemporary young couples, then, parenthood is seen as something which is a shared venture and that will consolidate the couple relationship. While earlier iterations of lesbian motherhood were premised on children conceived in former heterosexual relationships and subsequent families of choice studies explored diverse arrangements of kinship

that often eschewed pronatalist discourse and the rhetoric of “compulsory coupledness” (Wilkinson, 2012), these young lesbians freely imagined parenting options and assumed “natural” feelings associated with natal family-making (see also: Lev & Sennott, this volume). In the U.K., they grew up knowing that they could form legally sanctioned partnerships (and now marriage), give birth to children and adopt; notwithstanding the financial burden, from this vantage point they presented a trouble-free account of LGBTQ-parent family futures.

The other factor that distinguishes the generational narratives presented above are the material circumstances that surround LGBTQ-parent families and the “options” that are available to same-sex couples. Vicky’s earlier account of childless motherhood is important because it calls attention to both the emotional range of experience that constitutes LGBTQ-parent families and also the structural factors beyond sexuality that impact upon LGBTQ-parent family-making. Because of her limited social capital and lack of financial freedom, for women like Vicky the “choices” available were overwhelmingly punitive: she could neither afford nor imagine keeping her children. Today, advances in sexuality rights have dramatically changed the queer family landscape, but the ways in which cultural capital and socioeconomic circumstances adversely shape contemporary experiences of LGBTQ parenthood persist. Thus, qualitative research has the capacity to call attention to the lasting and constitutive significance of era, age, and generation in LGBTQ-parent families so that novelty does not overwrite sexuality histories and obfuscate the complexity of lived lives.

Social Class, Socio-Cultural Capital, and the Economies of Reproductive Labor

In LGBTQ-parent family research, research remains predominantly middle class (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). Widening the scope of the academic research lens to incorporate socioeconomic diversity is crucial in opening up understandings of LGBTQ-parent families. Working-class

parents lack the financial resources and cultural capital to fully achieve the status of respectability (Skeggs, 1997), revealing that family practices are shaped by sets of circumstances and choices (e.g., personal privacy, owning one's own home) that are not always of parents' own making. Accounting for the ways that class positioning, educational advantage, and cultural capital shape perceptions and experiences of parenthood adds a much needed perspective in the otherwise partial LGBTQ-parent family narrative. The inclusion of socioeconomic diversity within the study sample ensures that findings are not steeped in privilege, thereby furthering the marginalization of traditionally stigmatized families. In Gabb and Fink's (2015a) study of couple relationships, the material impact of limited resources shaped young people's imaginations of family and the reality of options that were open to them. The process and practicalities of becoming pregnant as a lesbian were entangled with concerns around money rather than emotional investment in maternal roles and future imaginings of family, as revealed in Fiona's narrative:

Fiona: It makes me so angry when people just have kids whenever they want. You know, and you see people just, like, popping them out and stuff....I've got to really work hard and save up a lot of money, this is...that's really expensive....It's like, £400, like, to start with, and then it's £200 a year. Well, it's not bad. It's not a lot, but look at IVF and stuff, that's horrendously expensive, and I know people that have gone through, kind of, five, six cycles and got nowhere.

Imagining lesbian parenthood and a future together as a family was similarly troublesome for Chloe and Leanne. In their couple interview they repeatedly return to financial costs required by planned parenthood. Money and the need to start building up savings appear to be a source of consternation, leading to a somewhat terse exchange on the topic.

Chloe: I think it will be good to look at it, sort of, logically and go, right, what are the options if we want to have kids? Like, what the different options are, so like adoption or,

Leanne: I'm not adopting.

Chloe: I'm just saying we look at all the options.

Leanne: Yeah, I don't see the point in looking at that, because I'm not doing that....What worries me about having a child is the financial burden of it. It's one of the main things that makes me go "ha ha no thank you".

Chloe: I think it's the initial outlay, because that would be –

Leanne: No, it's the continued outlay.

Chloe: Yes, and also I mean the continued outlay, you can absorb it, and people do, but the initial outlay is what I think, because it's going to cost a lot of money to get some sperm or to get a baby, isn't it? Um, and it's a lot of money, it's a deposit on a house.

Rather than working towards consensus as typical in dyadic interviews, Leanne firmly lays out her boundaries around LGBTQ-parent family planning. Pressures around money are adversely impacting on the options available to these women and their relationship dynamics. This couple demonstrate that equality of rights is not experienced equally. In contemporary studies of LGBTQ parenthood, the de-contextualization of research from diverse socioeconomic circumstances can all too easily result in the characterization of an able neo-liberal citizen who can pick from a smorgasbord of choices that have been afforded through advances in legal rights. But choices are not free-floating signifiers of opportunity and agency; they are political and they are defined by context. Demographic factors are not simply variables; they define the research sample and thus the scope of research. Socioeconomic and educational disadvantage (class) remains fundamental in the experience of queer kinship and LGBTQ parenthood.

Listening to Children

While some queer research has pointed to the incompleteness of LGBTQ-parent family studies when intergenerational perspectives are omitted (Gabb, 2008; Perlesz et al., 2006; Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003), children's perspectives typically remain excluded (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Gabb's (2018) research bucks this trend, interweaving empirical data on LGBTQ-parent families with (auto)ethnographic observation of her own life as a lesbian mother and that of her son, as he grew up and experienced LGBTQ-parenthood. For example, Liam (Gabb's son) formed attachments to parents, partners, friends and his surroundings in ways that challenge heteronormative understandings of "family"; his emotional life-world was constituted through "relating practices" which connected him to other people and things, breaking down distinctions between family, kin, humans, animals and objects that occupy meaningful places in our family existence (Gabb, 2011a). These insights and the extracts below demonstrate why it is crucial to listen to children's voices if we are to fully understand LGBTQ-parent families. They not only provide another piece of the family jigsaw but also add a missing intergenerational perspective. Research with children does not require specialized skills (Harden, Scott, Backett-Milburn, & Jackson, 2000), only a creative methodological imagination.

The youngest children that actively contributed to Gabb's family research were 6 years old. Individual informed consent from all children was achieved by talking each child through the research, in a way that was age-appropriate and comprehensible. This consent was subject to ongoing negotiation throughout the duration of the fieldwork, following ethical procedures that have been developed for research with children (Gabb, 2010). Younger children, up to adolescence, often want to speak about their families, and Gabb found that this includes an openness to talk about the impact of their mothers' sexual orientation on their lives. Asking

children to describe their families can yield unexpected rewards and generate immensely rich data. For example, children from Gabb's *Perverting Motherhood* study were largely adamant that their families are indistinguishable from any other, as Reece revealed:

Reece (age 10): We're just like a normal family really but with two women in it instead of a woman and a man really.

Interviewer: Can you think of any differences between you and other kids?

Reece: Only that I'm vegetarian and my friends aren't!

While some parents in their 30s-50s used "normal" as a pejorative term, many children used it to describe the ordinariness of families. Some children did, however, appear to perceive their families as different in some ways. What constituted this difference was typically unclear although explanations tended to focus on difficulties in *fitting* the non-birth mother into traditional understandings of family. That is, the presence of the other mother was an identifiable source of family difference which required explanation, and it was this which made children susceptible to being teased.

Children were not directly asked about similarities and differences between heterosexual-parent and lesbian-parent families; instead, only words and concepts that were familiar to them were used. Questions focusing on their mother(s)' lesbian sexuality were asked only when and if they ventured onto this subject. Taking the cue from them (i.e., listening to the words they used to describe their mothers, their families, etc.), and only referring to lesbianism at their instigation, ensured that anxieties were not created where none previously existed (Gabb, 2005). Asking young children to talk about such sensitive issues would have been hard to approach head-on, but sitting down with these children, usually on their bedroom floor, and unpacking a bag full of drawing paper and sets of pencils and colored crayons, eased the awkwardness of the

situation. Schools and playgroups often focus teaching on stories and pictures of home and family life because these experiences feature centrally in children's worlds; thus, the research topic was familiar to young children. Researcher-participant/adult-child imbalances of power were lessened because the activity was completed in their space and on their terms.

To begin, younger children were usually asked to draw a picture of their family which could feature anyone they wanted to include. Some children's pictures were figurative; one child drew vehicles, because he "couldn't draw people" (see Gabb, 2005). Drawing enabled children to focus on something that captured their imagination while facilitating conversation on the topic. Thus, both researcher and child got something out of the encounter. Once copies of the pictures were made, the originals were all returned to the children, as promised.

[Insert Figure 1 here: James (aged 7) "My Family"]

Children's silences can speak volumes. A qualitative approach that advances critical discourse analysis is able to incorporate pauses, diversions, and associations as part of children's data, paying careful attention to what is said and unsaid and the way that descriptions are articulated. For example, when James drew his family (see Figure 1) he did not explicitly identify Jill (his social mother) as the source of difference, but his *train of thought* suggests this may be the case.

Interviewer: Are you going to draw Jill [other mother] in this picture?

James (age 7): I'm not really sure about that [Interviewer: Why aren't you sure?] I don't know.

Interviewer: Is your family the same as all your friends' families?

James: A bit different [Interviewer: In what ways different?] I don't know, just a bit different.

Interviewer: So can you think of any things that make your family different?

James: I can try and draw Jill, but she's just dyed her hair.

Using “draw and talk” techniques can thus be helpful in focusing analytical attention on children’s struggle to publicly account for their families within the heteronormative discourse that is readily available to them and which remains the mainstay of much direct and indirect school curriculum. While creative methods can thus be highly successful with young children (aged 6-12 years old), research encounters with adolescents are typically most successful when framed as gentle conversations. This is, in part, because young people largely feel unheard or marginalized within society and the opportunity of getting their viewpoint listened to and valued is welcomed. For example, Jeffrey spoke eloquently about the politics of sexuality. He was keen to question the distinction between the homo/hetero-sexual divide and expressed dissatisfaction with the categorization process of sexual identity-based politics.

Jeffrey (age 19): I don't know why anybody makes a big deal about anything. I mean Gay Pride, why are you proud to be gay. It's nothing to be proud or ashamed of it just is and if everybody thought like that then there would be no bigotry in the world. It's not “oh you're a lesbian we'll treat you different”. It's not. Or “we're lesbians so we have to treat you the same” it's just you're you. So what, who cares! It just doesn't make a difference, or at least it shouldn't.

Gabb's findings suggest that Jeffrey is perceptive in seeing the differentiation between homo– and hetero–sexual families as more discursive than experiential. A child-centred approach to LGBTQ-parent research adds more than an intergenerational dimension to queer kinship; listening to children refocuses the analytical lens onto lived experience rather than sexual identity politics. From a child's point of view all parents, kin, and significant friendships,

may constitute family (Allen & Demo, 1995). The shift in emphasis—from adult to children, discursive to experiential—portrays the emotional investments and materiality of what families do. This does not contest the particularities that comprise same-sex families, nor occlude the queering of parental categories in LGBT-parent families (Gabb, 2005), but it does shift the emphasis away from sexuality as *the* defining criterion of these particularities.

Situating Sexual–Maternal Identities at Home

Locating practices of sexuality and identity formations in the household reveals how these vital data are enmeshed in wider household interactions which constitute the everyday realities of family living. Qualitative data on routine and ordinary interactions reflect the dynamic of LGBTQ-parent families rather than highlights or empirical snapshots. They also shed light on parents' strategies to manage their sexual and maternal identities inside the family home (Malone & Cleary, 2002). Gabb's (2001, 2005) research demonstrates how parents' parental–sexual selves are not experienced as mutually exclusive; they are experienced through sets of circumstances with sexuality and parental responsibility being negotiated around the absence–presence of others, especially children. In the *Perverting Motherhood?* project, this was articulated in open and explicit terms:

Michelle: Obviously...you don't shag in front of your kids, anyone will tell you that hopefully, but we're quite openly affectionate in front of Rob [son, aged 7].

Janis: [Bedrooms] become baby-feeding spaces actually! Oh yeah, that's definitely true....So in a way the bedroom has always kind of a cross between sort of where you go to sleep and where you go and do 'it' or whatever, or have a cuddle.

Data such as these substantiate the truism that having a child changes your life, but they do not position maternal and familial identities beyond sexuality; instead, lived experiences of

lesbian motherhood illustrate intersections between sexual–maternal feelings and expressions of intimacy (Gabb, 2004) and the need for linguistic management of these shifting identities (Gabb, 2005). Parents talked about sharing their beds with young children and/or opening out intimate/sexual embraces to include them in “a family hug” (Matilda). The presence of the child in these scenarios can be seen to consolidate the synergy of lesbianism and motherhood; conversely it sanitizes and desexualizes the lesbian relationship by tightly focusing the lens on ideas of responsible and respectable parenthood.

Gabb (2005) found that data generated through semi-structured interviews with mothers talking about the significance of their sexuality on everyday family life, produced on one level broadly conflicting accounts. Whether lesbian sexuality was manifestly *on display* (e.g., in their homes) fell into two camps: “It’s everywhere!” (Michelle) and “It’s not really noticeable!” (Matilda). However, mothers’ polarized assertions often belied the commonality of experience that was evident when QMM data were combined together. Observations detailed how “subtle signifiers of lesbian identity” (Valentine, 1996, p. 150) revealed the presence of lesbian sexuality. Coded signs, such as lesbian iconography and media aimed at the queer market, were visible in all homes, here and there, if one knew where to look and what to look for. Images of favorite celebrities, snapshots of family and friends, and iconic pictures of women predominately adorned the walls and shelves of rooms. These observations, documented in field notes, add a deeper layer to interview data on how maternal and sexual identities are experienced.

Visual data shed further light on the opaqueness of LGBTQ-parent family living. In the *Perverting Motherhood?* project parents and children were asked to take pictures representing their lesbian families. The images that were produced and discussion over why pictures were not taken by some households illustrated the uncertainty about what constitutes lesbian parent family

life. Images of people reinforced ideas of “the couple”, valorizing normative ideals of the dyadic two-parent family model. Other images were either concerned with household chores or with showing loving relationships—closeness and embodied intimacy that was captured in family embraces. Sexuality was notably absent and the “family displays” (Finch, 2007) that were depicted revealed normative ideals of family rather than understandings of the particularities of lesbian parent family living (Gabb, 2011b). Perhaps the most insightful depiction was of a bathroom shelf which included three toothbrushes in a pot, two adult, colored blue and green, the third a child’s toothbrush depicting a superhero. Simply stated, this signified the “lesbian family”—ordinary, like any other, concerned with mundane everyday life.

Dairies and emotion maps were also and especially useful in generating data on how parents experienced and managed intimacy and sexuality at home. Diary data are typically steeped in temporal referents—clock time, age and generation, personal time, family time, precious time for the self, the time needed to maintain and manage relationships. Emotion map data chart the emotional geographies of the family household and can be further probed in follow up interviews. Together, these methods generated significant insight on the spatial–temporal patterning of family sexuality and intimacy. For example, furtive embraces and brief moments of intimacy were fitted into the spatial and temporal cracks of family living, while the immediacy of sexual intimacy and desire was contained by the presence of children, pets, and lodgers.

Stella (diary): Slowly woke up and we made the time to go back to bed to be intimate which is usually passionate as well as involving laughter. Sometimes its [cat] who makes us laugh as he thinks its family time so joins us on the bed but then realizes he’s not going to get attention so plonks himself right in the middle of the bed and we end up moving around. We had a shower together which is a practical thing but a nice treat.

Stella and her partner are one of the younger couples who took part in the *Enduring Love?* Study (Gabb & Fink, 2015a). They spoke at length about their plans to become parents. Children were identified as the marker of permanency, something that was shored up with the bricks and mortar of a soon-to-be purchased family home. For the moment, however, it is their pet cat who generates “family time” and who occupies the (physical and emotional) space of their imagined child. Pets have featured in many of the participating households in Gabb’s research projects illustrating the capacity of qualitative research to respond to the messiness of lived lives rather than being overly determined by the unit of analysis (Gabb, 2011a).

The parents’ bedroom, a cultural sign of sexuality that personifies “the sexual family” (Fineman, 1995), is a potent yet difficult site to investigate. As the place of parental sex it marks the child’s separation from the mother and signifies the hierarchical difference between parent and child. The double bed thus signifies the real and cultural difference between generationally-defined adult (sexual) relations and parent/child (nurturing) relationships (Holloway, 1997, p. 55). It is not surprising that when participants in Gabb’s (2004) research talked about their emotion maps and the experiences of intimacy and sex which these depicted, that they worked hard to establish categorical boundaries around codes of conduct “just in case”.

[Insert Figure 2 here: Claire’s emotion map]

Interviewer: Right, so on the bed in your room, there’s kind of stickers at one end and stickers at the other end. Is that significant?

Claire: [Partner] stayed over one night and this [points to emotion map] is because I’ve got a hug [from son] – but it wasn’t sort of a sexual nature or anything like that...it has changed, it does change over the years...things have changed and I think that’s the noticeable thing for me is that [teenage son] often comes into my bedroom and has a chat.

Claire identifies the children's freedom to come into her bedroom on demand as a factor that has delimited sex when they were younger. In many ways, then, the maternal bed/room remains a family space rather than a site of adult–sexual intimacy. In discussing her emotion map, she also works hard to differentiate person-specific forms of intimacy, such as how a hug with a partner felt different to one with a child. She points to age as a factor which impacted on the nature, time, and place for parent–child embraces. Talking in the third person, the defensiveness that marked earlier responses is replaced with flexibility including pragmatism around bed-sharing with both pets and children. Later on, in her discussion of photographs which depict parent-child nudity such as those published in parenting handbooks, Claire talked about her experience in comparison. Methods which use third party scenarios can thus advance understanding of people's beliefs and opinions and how these translate in everyday family experience, adding another layer of meaning as to how the participant's experience as an individual intersects with socio-cultural factors. By combining methods, a dynamic picture emerges, providing multidimensional knowledge to understandings of LGBTQ-parent family lives and how sexual-parental identities are negotiated in everyday practices of intimacy at home.

Implications and Recommendations

Human sexuality is part of ordinary life but we need to know more about how the boundaries of intimacy are routinely established and maintained in LGBTQ-parent family households and how these navigate the particularity of circumstances. Race, ethnicity, religiosity, socioeconomic, and educational disadvantage feature to various degrees in LGBTQ-parent study samples but the ways in which these demographic variables intersect and impact experience is often marginal in LGBTQ-parent family research. The sample size and/or focus on research questions on family formation foreclose in-depth analysis of the structural factors which

shape experience. Empirical investigations are providing much needed insight into everyday life in LGBTQ-parent households. Queer theorizing is simultaneously advancing a critique of the heteronormative natal discourses which underpin LGBTQ parenthood. Rigorous development and theory-building in empirical research is not yet embedded.

The rise of parental and partnership rights around the globe presents new opportunities for LGBTQ people through the capacity to legitimize hitherto precarious kinship ties, for example. The ways in which these opportunities obfuscate queer alternatives and instantiate heteronormative coupledness and dyadic parenthood needs further investigation. We also need to acknowledge into the differences that are obscured under the LGBTQ umbrella. Gender diverse households, trans-parent families and bisexual parenthood, for example, are likely to share some experiences with lesbian and gay counterparts, but their location on the sexual margins mean that they are also likely to experience different challenges in day-to-day life within their families and outside the household. The burgeoning field of LGBTQ-parent family studies has been accompanied by an expectation to formalize and standardize the reporting of qualitative findings leading to a lessening in researcher creativity. Method is a slow, uncertain, and troubling process (Law, 2004). As queer researchers we should be mindful of any individual and/or external impetus to neaten the research picture: “life experience is messy, we may do well, in our portrayals of that experience, to hold onto some of that messiness in our writings” (Daly, 2007, pp. 259-260). Social phenomena can be captured only fleetingly in momentary stability because the qualitative research process aims to open space for the indefinite. Leaving in methodological and emotional uncertainties is not analytical sloppiness; rather it reflects the ephemera and flux of LGBTQ relationships across the life course (Gabb, 2009).

The integrative themes that we use to frame our analysis in this chapter—generation and

era, class and socioeconomic circumstances, listening to children, and sexual and parental identities—reflect some of the key vectors that cut across LGBTQ-parent family research. More than this, collectively, they also point to the need to situate studies of LGBTQ-parenthood in the materiality of everyday life. These issues return us to the feminist maxim that we highlighted at the outset of this chapter and which has shaped the work that we have completed over the course of our careers: the personal is political; research is political. Qualitative research on LGBTQ-parenthood has the capacity to engage with and advance knowledge which has lasting reach and also celebrates and exploits the research imagination.

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Footnotes

¹ All studies were completed in the U.K. The content and scope of these projects were discussed in full with all participants including children living in the household. Children's age and maturity are important factors in making sense of family practices; the age of children is therefore included when citing extracts from their data. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

²*Perverting Motherhood? Sexuality and Lesbian Motherhood* (1998-2002) was ESRC-funded doctoral research completed in 1999-2000. Lesbian mothers ($n = 18$) and children ($n = 13$).

³*Behind Closed Doors* was an ESRC-funded project (RES-000-22-0854), completed in 2004-2005. Mothers ($n = 9$), fathers ($n = 5$) and children ($n = 10$).

⁴*Enduring Love?* was an ESRC-funded project (ESRC RES-062-23-3056), completed in 2011-2014. Women ($n=54$), men ($n=43$) and gender queer ($n=3$). Seventeen of these couples identify as LGBTQ and in 4 couples one partner is trans. Due to the focus of this chapter, we will not refer to survey data ($n=5445$), only qualitative data from couples ($n=50$).

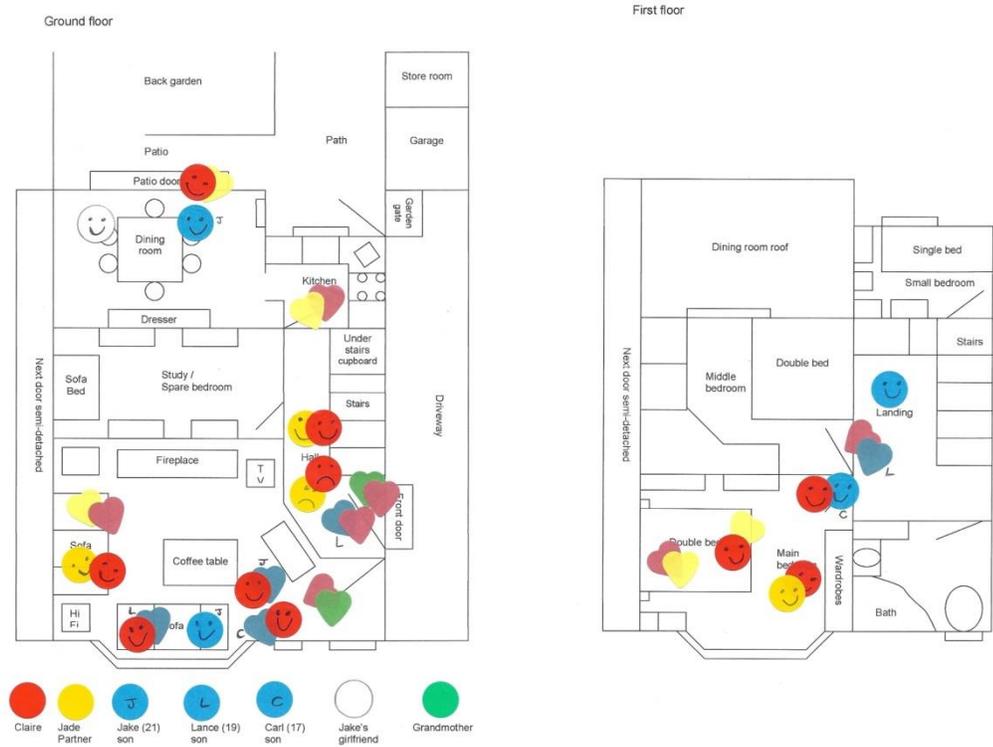


Figure 2. Claire's emotion map