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Separation and Post-Separation Parenting within Lesbian and Gay Co-parenting (Guild Parented) Families

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Gay men and lesbian women have a long history of jointly creating families and co-parenting their children together. This qualitative study aims to explore the experiences of separation and post-separation parenting within same-sex parented families. This involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with 22 separated same-sex parents in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, and regional Victoria. An adaptive theory approach was used for the collection and analysis of the data. The paper explores data from a cohort of six participants who came from three different multi-parent families who had experienced a separation – either their own, or that of other parents in their parenting group. The term 'co-parenting families' was found to be confusing due to the different connotations within separation/divorce and same-sex parent literature. Consequently, the term 'guild parented families' was created to describe these families. Participants from these multi-parent families had very different experiences of family formation and separation compared to others within the wider separated same-sex parent study. Separation of one or more of the parent couples within these families complicated their original plans and kinship ideals. Each of the families resolved this differently in their post-separation arrangements. After separation, whole family narratives and/or the role of individual parents, were either questioned or revised as a way of resolving the complexity of their new kinship situation. Following separation, parents often relied on Western kinship norms that privilege biological kinship and the dual-parent family to construct their post-separation kinship arrangements. More awareness of families that begin with more than two parents is needed within separation research and amongst separation services and service providers.

Keywords: separation, same-sex parenting, co-parenting, gay and lesbian, LGBT, rainbow families

Key Points

1. Existing language for lesbian and gay co-parenting families was not compatible with separation and divorce literature. Consequently, the term 'guild parented families' was created to refer to families who are created with more than two parents with the plan to permanently co-parent their children as a family.
2. Lesbian, gay, and bi-sexual parents' values and ideals around biological and non-biological parenthood and kinship are challenged by separation and are often revised or lost. Consequently, non-biological parents often find themselves in precarious positions following a separation.
3. More awareness and knowledge about guild parented families is needed by separation service professionals, family therapists, and family mediators. In particular, they need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to help guild parented families to navigate family formation and later the separation of one or more of the parents.
4. Legal recognition of more than two parents is needed to protect families and non-biological parents. This includes changing birth certificate laws to allow for three or more parents on birth certificates.

Multiple parent families created by gay men and lesbians have emerged, in part, as a result of Australian lesbian women's long history of reliance on gay men to help them create families with children (Dempsey, 2012). This reliance, according to Dempsey

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(2012), came about due to legal restrictions on access to donor sperm, a preference for children to have a known biological father, and from a desire to provide gay male friends with the opportunity to have children. The specificities of these families vary, particularly in terms of the degree of involvement of each parent (Gross, 2006). According to Gross (2006), within multi-parent lesbian and gay families parental involvement 'may vary from very little involvement to the feeling of being a full-time relative' (p. 41):

> At one end we find a family unit made up of the biological parents and their partners living in close residence and organising between them all the parental tasks, rights and duties. On the other end of the spectrum, there will be two distinct family units: a gay male couple and a lesbian couple living in a way similar to separated parents, but without the separation and the conflicts which caused it. Between the two are situations where the biological parents are close to one another and where the involvement of their partners varies. (Gross, 2006, p. 41)

This article presents the findings of an Australian study of separated same-sex parent families. Within this study, there was a cohort of parents who had experienced their separation within the context of a family that had been formed by more than two parents who had begun with a plan to permanently co-parent their children as part of a multi-parent family. These parents either went through a separation from their own partner or were impacted by the separation of two other parents in their family. The care and raising of children within these families is often shared between households from birth and therefore face the unique challenge of deciding how to negotiate post-separation shared care between three or more households. Consequently, these multiple parent families stood apart from the rest of the participants in the study and while their data were included in the overall findings (Gahan, 2017, 2018), their unique separation experiences, family structures, parenting arrangements, and understanding of kinship, warrant a separate analysis.

Guild Parented Families

In English-speaking lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) communities, multi-parent family formations have traditionally been referred to as *co-parenting arrangements* (Dempsey, 2010; Gross, 2006; Kelly, 2014). Gross (2006) describes co-parenting families as those that involve a man and a woman in a non-sexual relationship who conceive and raise a child or children. According to Gross (2006) the partners of these parents are known as the *co-parents* 'because unlike step-parents who arrive after the child's birth, they are ready to commit themselves to the child from his/her conception' (p. 41). However, *co-parenting* in English has also been used to describe female same-sex parenting in general and the role of *co-parent* has often been used to refer to the non-biological mother (Brown & Perlesz, 2008; Muzio, 1993). Furthermore, the term *co-parenting* in English has traditionally been used in separation and divorce literature to describe the post-separation shared parenting between two parents of the opposite-sex (see Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Smyth & Moloney, 2008; Smyth & Weston, 2004).

Due to this varied understanding of the terms 'co-parenting' and 'co-parent,' and because this study is located within wider separation and divorce literature, the terms did not work for the multiple-parent families within my research, and I needed a new

term that would not be confused with another type of relationship. In Finland they use the terms *kolmiapilaperheessä* and *neliapilaperheessä* – which in English translates to *Three Leaf Clover Family* and *Four Leaf Clover Family* (Aarnio, 2014).[1] The *kolmiapilaperheessä* is described as a female couple who have a known donor who is also an active father to the child, while the *neliapilaperheessä* is described as a family that consists of a female couple and a male couple who create and raise a child together (Aarnio, 2014). Nevertheless, there is no equivalent term in English and so I have used the term *guild parented families* to refer to all families who are created with more than two parents with the plan to permanently co-parent their children as a family.

I borrowed the term *guild* from the craft and trade guilds that came into prominence in England in the 14th century as associations formed by people practicing the same craft to protect and promote their common interest (Lumsden & Aitken, 1912). The parents within what has until now been referred to as *co-parenting families*, also come together to practice their shared craft – parenting, and like guilds they created their groups with the intent to protect and promote their common interest – their child. The concept of families resembling guilds was first discussed by anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936) who suggested that the Western family was evolving from a primarily biological unit into a social phenomenon that he believed resembled monastic orders or craft guilds. While Linton was referring to wider social changes and had likely never considered LGB families, his description describes accurately the evolution of the family within contemporary lesbian and gay multi-parent families that include both biological and non-biological kinship.

There has been limited research conducted specifically on LGB guild parented families (see Clarke, 2007; Kelly, 2014; Vaccaro, 2010). As with this study, research including LGB guild parented families generally sit within broader studies on same-sex parenting (see Benkov, 1994; Clarke, 2006; Dempsey, 2006, 2010, 2012, 2013; Gross, 2006; Kelly, 2014; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). Vaccaro (2010) argues that research on LGB families has generally been written with a two-parent nuclear family assumption, leaving LGB guild parented family stories invisible in both mainstream family literature and LGB family research. Nevertheless, valuable insights into these multi-parent family forms can be found within the existing research. In their research, Dempsey (2012) found that lesbian and gay guild parented families created a care network which enabled *career-minded* adults to consider larger than average families with children. Creating a guild parented family allowed the gay and lesbian parents in Dempsey (2012) to manage their care and work responsibilities by freeing up more time to spend on recreation, and allowing them a night or day off childcare responsibilities during the working week or on weekends. Likewise, participants in Vaccaro (2010) spoke about the luxury of having time and space to focus on themselves as a result of having multiple parents. Parents in Vaccaro (2010) also highlighted the benefit of having multiple parents who were able to share their various perspectives and solve problems when they arose. Vaccaro (2010) also demonstrated that guild parented families can potentially benefit from having multiple incomes to support their children, allowing them to afford private school tuitions, summer camps, and family vacations.

The existing research also highlights some of the difficulties of forming guild parented families. In particular, having more than two parents often meant that children had more than one home and that parents began with a shared care arrangement

similar to that of separated parents (Gross, 2006). According to Gross (2006) this often created unique difficulties for the biological mother:

> Sometimes it is during the pregnancy, sometimes it is after the birth, or at the moment of breast feeding that the difficulties appear. The mother experiences a physical wrench when she leaves her child with the father. (Gross, 2006, p. 41)

Similarly, parents in Vaccaro (2010) bewailed at having to forego sharing milestones with their children as a consequence of sharing care between multiple households. Nevertheless, Vaccaro (2010) reported that all of the parents in their study believed that the benefits of having a multi-parent family structure outweighed the negatives.

Another barrier for guild parented families is the way that their kinship structures are challenged by traditional legal systems that delegitimise their relationships and existence (Vaccaro, 2010). Vaccaro (2010) found that parents were forced to create detailed legal contracts to protect the rights of multiple parents as well as their children's wellbeing, often at great financial expense and time loss to the family. In December 2013, the Family Law Council of Australia advised the Australian Government to reform parenting laws to allow for the legal recognition of more than two legal parents of a child (Bita, 2014). The *Report on Parentage and The Family Law Act* stated that a large number of children were growing up without any secure legal relationship to the parents who were raising them (Family Law Council, 2014). Consequently, the Family Law Council (2014) argued that the law needed to 'provide scope for the recognition of more than two people to have parental responsibility for a child where that reflects the social reality of that family' (p. 34). This recommendation followed legislative changes to permit a child to have more than two legal parents in both the US state of California (Grossman, 2013; McGreevy & Mason, 2013) and the Canadian province of British Columbia (Kelly, 2014; Rolfsen, 2014). While there are alternative legal options in Australia such as court parenting orders by consent that can legally recognise and protect guild parented families (Rainbow Families Council, 2010), at the time of writing, no Australian jurisdiction allows for more than two legal parents, or for more than two parents to appear on the birth certificate.

The unique formation and structures of guild parented families cause distinctly different challenges when one or more of the parents experience a separation. Given there is often more than one parenting couple within the family, parents may go through separation from their own partner, or be impacted by the separation of other parents in the family. Similarly, the care and raising of children in these families is often shared between households from birth; consequently, these families may face the unique challenge of deciding how to negotiate post-separation shared care between three or more parents and households. Guild parented families may also come in contact with structures, formal processes, and agencies that have been set up, not only within a heteronormative framework, but also with a dual-parent understanding. While research has explored guild parented families, I was unable to locate any previous literature examining the experiences of separation within this family type. Consequently, this cohort of participants required a particular exploration as their stories provide a valuable insight into how families with these unique structures navigate and experience separation and post-separation parenting.

Methodology

The data in this paper come from a study of separated same-sex parents in Australia. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with same-sex parents who had either experienced separation within their own same-sex relationship, or who had experienced the separation of another parent within a guild parented family. Interviews took place in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, and in rural and regional Victoria. The 22 participants – 18 female and four male – came from 19 separated same-sex parented families. This paper explores data from a cohort of six participants who came from three different guild parented families who had experienced a separation – either their own, or that of other parents in their parenting group. Within this cohort of six participants, three of the participants were men and three were women. In each of the families, all of the men and women identified as being same-sex attracted. Pseudonyms have been applied.

The semi-structured in-depth interviews and subsequent data analysis followed an adaptive theory (Layder, 1998) methodological approach. By using this approach, researchers can base their interviews on literature consulted before, during, and after data collection, and then compare their data to extant theory by testing their emerging data using hypotheses from prior theory (Bergin, Wells, & Owen, 2014; Colmer, Waniganayake, & Field, 2014; Van Gramberg, 2006). Similarly, it provides the flexibility to adjust analysis of data as it emerges, and allows for theory generation to occur throughout the project, from the planning of data collection to the actual collection and analyses of the data (Layder, 1998). As I transcribed interviews I searched for and responded to emergent themes, reviewed interviews continuously, and performed reflexive coding that involved consideration of the subjective position of both the participant and the researcher while also making sense of data in the context of existing theory (Layder, 1997; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012). Consequently, the emergent theory was both shaped, and was shaped by, the empirical data as they emerged (Layder, 1998).

Coming Together: Family Ideals

Participants from guild parent families had very different experiences of family formation and having children compared to the other parents in the wider study. Unlike the other participants, children in these families were conceived with the intention to be raised by both of the genetic contributors (not donors) and with the involvement of each of their partners. Before they came together to create their families, the prospective parents initially got to know each other over time. They were not just having children with their own partner, they were having children with a person or couple with whom they were not in an intimate or romantic relationship. Lexy explained that before she and her former partner Megan conceived their child with Jack, the group got to know each other over a period of three years – a process Lexy referred to as 'dating.' Jack explained:

> We spent time trying to get to know each other. You know, we went through everyone's health history, talked about styles of parenting, and our dreams and all that type of stuff.

Likewise, before they had their first child, Matthew, Diana, and Kate spent five years working out whether they would work as a group. Matthew explained:

> So we got to know each other for five years. I was really worried about making a mistake. So we spent five years getting to know each other.

Similarly, while Lillian, Erika, and Paul spent time getting to know each other before they conceived their children, they did so over a shorter period of time than the other two families. Lillian explained:

> My recollection is that we spent some weeks getting to know Paul, but it wasn't really long before we decided that he was right … It definitely wasn't as long as six months after meeting him, and it wasn't exactly immediately either; although after we met him we were instantly hopeful as he seemed great and we talked a lot about what we each wanted out of the arrangement and we seemed to be in agreement in the main.

The men and women in these families wanted to ensure that they were compatible with each other, in particular, how they would resolve difficulties. However, while potential conflict was discussed by each of the families before having their children, none of the families discussed what they would do if one of the couples separated.

While participants created these families at a time when it was either the only or the most convenient[2] option, each of the families were nevertheless motivated by desires to have both male and female parents. Despite their radical nature, each family ultimately reproduced heteronormative kinship practices in some way or another. While the very structure of a guild parented family challenges traditional heteronormative family forms, it was often traditional family ideals that brought the families together and drove decisions about how they would parent. For example, each of the female participants explained that they had chosen to create a guild parented family over other methods because it ensured that their children would have a father who was actively involved in their lives. Lillian explained:

> I think they should have a male role model. I really want them to have a dad … I want them to have a proper dad not a sperm donor, I want him to be a dad … I really wanted the kids to know who their father was.

Likewise, Erika explained that she had gone onto the internet to search for a man who would not just donate his sperm but who also wanted to be a 'father' who was 'active' and 'involved' in their children's lives. Erika explained:

> Did I just want to have a sperm donor and just have children that would never know their father? I worked out pretty quickly that I didn't want that. I wanted my kids to have a father that was present and active in their lives.

As with Erika and Lillian, Lexy had specifically chosen to create a guild parented family because of her desire to provide a father for her future child. Lexy did not just want a male parent, she wanted an 'active' dad who was fully part of the child's and her family and was prepared to not have children if she was unable to find the right man. Lexy recalled:

> It wouldn't have gone ahead if Jack said (he didn't) want to be an active father; that was not an option for me. I wanted an active dad.

One of the guild parent families also made the decision to maintain a distinctly heteronormative *one mother one father binary* despite having more than two parents. Significantly, the parents decided that the mother and father labels would be given only to the biological parents and the other parents in the family would take on different titles and statuses. Erika, the *mother*, explained this decision:

> They were never going to have two mummies. Other people do that, but my kids have a mum and a dad … I carried them so they call me mum. I am their mother. It is quite clear-cut for me and then it makes it clear-cut for everyone else.

The decision was not just that of Erika. Her former partner and non-biological female parent, Lillian, informed me that she was happy to not be a mother and instead she had wanted the children to have 'a mummy, a daddy, and a Lilly':

> A lot of lesbians want to do the donor and do the two mummies, we wanted to do the mummy, the Lilly, and the daddy … I didn't want them to have a two mummies, I wanted them to have a mummy, a daddy, and a Lilly and I am their Lilly.

For Lillian and Erika, having more than one mother, or more than one father, was never an option and was something that they thought made no sense. While theirs, and the other guild parented families, had in many ways radical post-modern kinship structures, they each nonetheless drew on heteronormative family scripts and ideals when creating their families. In the next two sections, I will explore their unique experience of separation, and examine how these blended kinship ideals were challenged or transformed as a consequence of separation.

Separation: Changes and Transformations

Separation within guild parented families complicated their original plans and initial ideals. Each of the families resolved this differently in their post-separation arrangements. The most significant issue they encountered was how to continue to share care between the parents. As with many of the families in the wider study, the separating couple within the guild parented families generally wanted to find a way to successfully share care their child(ren) after separation. However, unlike the dual parent families, guild parented families had already been sharing their child(ren) between two homes prior to separation. After a separation, guild parented families had to renegotiate the terms of their family and some ended up sharing care over three or four homes. For example, before Lillian and Erika separated, their children were spending two nights a week at their father Paul's home and had done this from when they were six weeks old. Erika and Lillian separated when their oldest child was four years old and their youngest was two years old. When the two women separated the children began living between three houses. Paul continued to have the children two days a week and Lillian and Erika split up the five remaining days. The adults all live close to each other and are very flexible with their arrangements and Erika's house became known as the children's primary home. Lillian explained:

> I have the children two nights per week, their father (Paul) and his partner (Phil) have them two nights per week and my ex, their birth mother, has them three nights a week. … My nights are Wednesday and Thursday, and then we negotiate any other nights if Erika wants some time off … And (Erika's house) is kind of their main house, their main home … They call (it) home and then Daddie's place and Lillie's place. [Erika's house] is where they see their home. Which is fine. We want that, we are encouraging that so that they feel that they have some sort of anchor.

Similarly, prior to separation, Lexy, Megan, Jack, and Tony's daughter would spend 50 per cent of her time at the women's house and 50 per cent at the men's home. When the women separated, the three parents went to mediation to decide on a shared parenting plan. Eventually they came to the agreement that their daughter

would live in each of the parents' homes – 50 per cent of her time with Jack, and 25 per cent of her time with each of the women. This maintained their original values and ideals with the father keeping half of the child's shared care and the women the other half. Jack explained:

> We went through mediation and painfully through that process the end result of that was that I had her for half of the time and they split the other half of the time between them and really neither of them were particularly happy with that.

Unlike these two families who initially found a way to restructure their family life after separation to maintain their original ideals, Kate, Diana, Matthew, and Kent departed from their original values and desires as a consequence of separation. Prior to separation, the parents shared the children over their two homes; the women had the children on weekdays and the men on weekends. While Diana was pregnant with their third child, she and Kate separated. Following the separation, the two women agreed to have an equal shared care arrangement between each other but the men were not allocated any formal time with the children. Kent and Matthew described this change to their family ideals and structure:

> **Kent:** [After their separation] the women wanted to have equal time but one of the mums refused to let us take them out of her time so it had to be taken out of the other mum's time. . . . So whatever arrangement we wanted to have . . . whether it be two hours or a day, it would be taken out of (just one of the mother's) time . . . And so we thought no, given the circumstances we thought we would just leave it because we didn't want to take the kids more away from (that one mother) because we thought it wasn't fair . . . As it turned out we lost all our time with the kids and it ended up with where it stands now a couple of hours every Tuesday night and that stemmed from their separation.
>
> **Matthew:** I don't think (their separation) has been good for us. I think it has been good for the family; however, it made our time just disappear. But at the same time the kids are in better environments because of them not being together and that is the main thing.

While continuing to share the children between the women and men was consistent with each of the families' original ideals and plans, sharing over three homes was not and this caused concern for parents. For example, Lillian was very unhappy with the idea of her children having three houses and this was the one time during the interview where she cried and the interview had to be stopped while she gathered herself. While she was not happy with the children having three houses, she nevertheless wanted them to keep spending time with each of the three parents and was unsure how to solve the issue. Separation had disrupted their understanding of guild parented family principles and was not simply resolved by sharing over three homes. Lillian explained:

> It's not what I wanted for them. Three houses? I think it is harsh. Sorry I have to get a tissue. Yeah (my crying) is just guilt . . . I really don't know how it is going to pan out or how it is affecting them or whatever. I think it is different for them and they have got three households to kind of manipulate and manage and they've kind of worked that out and we have to talk a lot just so that we can keep on our toes. I think that it has affected them – I don't think sort of long term, just developmentally, just longer toilet training and stuff like that because I think that really for Genevieve in particular it was interrupted when the move – 'cause she was only two and it took her longer and they probably had dummies a bit longer. Just things like that. So yeah there's just a lot of – there's huge positives and huge negatives.

Like Lillian, Erika was concerned for their children and believed it would be better if they at least lived in a house with two of their parents. Erika explained:

> It would probably be better for the kids if they were living in a house with two of their parents. You know, with Lillian and me, given that they are never going to live with their mother and their father in the same house it would be better for them just emotionally and stability wise. They essentially live in three different houses . . . I think they would be better off without that in their lives.

Another unique challenge that parents in these families faced was the prospect of experiencing the separation of another couple in their family. A separation of one couple within the group can have a major impact on other parent members. However, despite the impact on their own life, because it is not their own personal separation, the parent may have little control over the situation and the threat to their personal family ideals. Matthew explained his experience when the female parents in his family, Kate and Diana, separated:

> It was just completely traumatic for everybody and my relationship with Kate has never recovered . . . We just stood back and watched what was going on and waited to see what we were going to do.

Similarly, when Lexy and Megan separated, Jack (and Tony) was forced to go through the separation with them and had his original family ideals and plans threatened. While it was not his own separation, Jack believed that he still experienced many of the same ups and downs that are associated with a separation. In their separate interviews, both Jack and Lexy discussed how Jack experienced the women's separation and how he attempted to resolve the challenges:

> **Jack:** I think, when all this stuff went wrong in the beginning, I think that I felt a bit betrayed for want of a better word . . . In the beginning I think we had this rosy idea of how we would be a lovely family together. But when all of this stuff went down the two mums ended up not liking each other . . . And I was really angry with [them]. I was kind of like just keeping [the family] together.
>
> **Lexy:** Things were very, very nasty between myself and my ex as you can imagine and the dad was thrown in there and he was trying to sort stuff out.

Jack believed that he had worked very hard to ensure that the differences between the two women during their separation did not impact on him, his time with the child, or his relationship with either of the women. He explained:

> I sort of kept reminding them, and still do, that whatever is going on between them is between them and it shouldn't affect my time. Because they had to sort themselves out. And you know, now after 14 years they do that. But even up until the last few years I have sometimes had to remind them about that.

Well-orchestrated communication and planning between the parents was pivotal to maintaining their original family hopes and ideals. Following a separation within the family, this became even more imperative both between the separated couple, and among the entire parenting group. Lillian explained that when things were 'going a bit wrong' the parents would call a 'family meeting' and sit down and work things out as a group. Lillian believed that their success as a guild parented family after the women's separation was as a result of good communication. While the father Paul was generally a

part of the discussions, Lillian believed that because the two women were separated, the most important thing was for the two of them to maintain good communication:

> It's about communication I think . . . It's about making sure you talk through stuff and . . . remembering it's about the kids so keep on bringing it back to the kids. Really it's particularly about Erika's and my relationship because we can bring Paul in and out where necessary and Paul's fine.

Similarly, communication was key to Jack, Tony, Lexy, and Megan's multi-parent family after the women separated. Jack explained:

> We speak or text or whatever about the child . . . I think we're really good at negotiating stuff around Tegan. So I think we've just over the years got better at recognising what's the best thing for her . . . We've got this roster which people think is rigid but in fact it is very flexible . . . That was how we had to do it in the beginning to get around two mums just constantly bickering about it and that was the main result that came out of mediation . . . We negotiate that stuff really well, we are good at checking in with our daughter all the time about 'is everything all right?'

Separation created challenges to the guild parented families' original principles and desires. Parents' beliefs around kinships, parenting, and family were brought into question as a consequence of unavoidable obstacles created by separation. Families needed to renegotiate their complex affinities and to find ways to either continue with their original ideals or to reconfigure them altogether.

Family Narratives and Biology after Separation

After separation, whole family narratives and/or the role of individual parents, were either questioned or revised as a way of resolving the complexity of their new kinship situation. This process often allowed the families to better explain their family to themselves and/or with the outside world. As explained previously, the guild parented families were formed out of a desire for both male and female parents – in particular a mother and a father. After separation, these ideals remained unchanged; however, families' ideals about what constituted a mother, father, or parent, and their values of parenting as a group, were brought into question. Unlike dual same-sex parent households where there is generally one biological and one non-biological parent, in guild parented families both biological parents actively parent the child alongside one or two non-biological parents. Consequently, following a separation, the roles and statuses of the non-biological parents are challenged or questioned and often result in a revisioning of the families' initial ideals.

These challenges were particularly evident in the experience of Lexy, Megan, Jack, and Tony, the only guild parented family in this study to experience two separations – that of the women and the men. While the family, as outlined above, continued to share care between the men and women after the separation of Lexy and Megan, when the men separated the family's original family ideals were further challenged. Eventually they resolved this by completely ending the guild parented family and transforming into a dual-parent family of just Lexy and Jack – the biological parents. Consequently, at the time of the interview, Tegan lived half the time with Jack and the other half with Lexy – only occasionally seeing Tony and Megan who were no longer seen as parents. Jack explained:

> [We] were always concerned about how [our daughter was] really coping with this three-way split and that's really why we eventually made the decision . . . It wasn't easy and I think we were all conscious that you know it was like she didn't get a chance to settle anywhere . . . So [our daughter] is a week with me, a week with mum, and then she sees Megan. So, for example, we have got a roster and she sees Megan for five days in Christmas holidays, a week in July holidays, something in the other holidays . . . She sees her a weekend before Christmas for their Christmas [and] every second Easter . . . Megan was sad at having to give up that time and you know she'd been the main parent for the first couple of years and she was attached rather strongly to our daughter and didn't want to give up that time.

This was a significant departure from their family's original plans and values; not only did two parents lose their shared care, they lost their parenthood. While biology appeared to play little part in the decisions made around the formation of this guild parented family, when the family began to separate, the two biological parents chose to fall back onto a heteronormative nuclear family model based on both biology and a one mother one father binary.

Not only did the roles of the non-biological parents, Megan and Tony, change significantly as a consequence of the separations and the ending of the guild parented family, their titles did also. Megan's role and title changed to that of a *grandmother*. According to both Lexy and Jack, had Megan and Lexy remained a couple, Megan would have continued to be both parent and mother to Tegan rather than changing to grandmother. The changing of Megan's status after the separations was a move that both Jack and Lexy believed was better for the family as a whole. Jack suggested that this change had made things easier during their separations and that it made sense given both Megan's age and her non-biological status. He explained:

> As time went on Megan had less and less time and she is much older than the biological mum so we decided that she would become like a grandmother figure . . . Her mum and I agreed that we were the parents and that Tegan was going to live half time there and half time here [with me].

Similarly, Lexy believed that the change from mother to grandmother had made things easier for everyone and she believed that everyone was happy with this:

> My daughter sees Megan more now in a grandparent role. And she is quite happy about that. Both of them are happy about that. My ex actually acknowledges that that's more the role that she is now in her life and she is quite happy to do that.

As with Megan, Tony's role changed from that of a parent to one which Jack described as an 'older brother.' Jack referenced his former partner's age when explaining the decision:

> Tegan thinks of him as a big brother because he is younger [than me]. He is young in his outlook and behaviour – immature . . . (Lexy and I) agreed that he wouldn't have any sort of formal time.

Both Jack and Lexy suggested that the re-visioning of their kinship after their two separations from a guild parented family to a dual-parent biological family was a unanimous decision that benefited the whole family. However, Megan and Tony were not interviewed and we do not know whether this was how they experienced or perceived the radical change to their initial family ideals.

Lexy and Jack have biological privilege, and this carries great value within Western understandings of kinship. Consequently, regardless of the outcome of their kinship

revisioning, both Lexy and Jack came to the discussion holding more power and social legitimacy as parents than that of Megan and Tony. Similarly, the family's revised narrative allowed their kinships to more easily fit within dominant Western kinship norms. Therefore, whether or not Tony and Megan agreed to the final decision, the revisioning of their family ultimately took place within a world of social structures and constructions that de-legitimised their roles as non-biological kin and legitimised the dual biological parent model that the family became.

Similarly, when Kate and Diana separated, biological parenthood became central to the dispute between the four parents, although Matthew and Kent believed that only one parent in their family questioned the family's original ideals. In the creation of their family, both of the women conceived a child with Matthew. Consequently, Matthew and Kent suggested that when the women separated, Kate wanted to dissolve the guild parented family along biological lines with each of the women taking their own biological child(ren) to form their own separate family. Kent explained that when the women separated, Kate set up a specific bedroom in her new house for her biological son Benjamin, but not for the other two children within their family. Kent recalled:

> Kate ignored Indira . . . She made a deep distinction that Ben was her son and Indira was not hers.

Matthew and Kent stated that during the separation of the women, they had been committed to maintaining their original guild parented family ideals and therefore wanted to keep the children together after the two mothers separated. According to the men, when disputes arose between the mothers, and Kate suggested that the children should live with their respective biological mothers, the men fought against this and prevented the children from being divided along maternal biological lines. The men explained the predicament that they faced:

> **Matthew:** It got harder because Kate was trying to separate (the children) and Diana was trying to keep everyone together and luckily Diana won out.
>
> **Kent:** We got stuck or caught up in the middle of that. When Kate decided that she wanted (one child) and not the other two, what we had decided to do was, if they were going to split the kids, which we didn't agree with, we were going to go to court.

Matthew and Kent believed that the challenge to their family's original ideals and values were directly framed around the ideas of biological parenthood. While the family did not ultimately revise their kinships around biology, separation had led to the questioning of family ideals and resulted in the men being left without any formal share of the children's care.

In contrast, when Lillian and Erika separated, it was only the non-biological mother Lillian who questioned their original family ideals and ultimately her own role as a parent. After separation, Lillian's immediate thought was that her role as a parent, and their guild parented family, would likely come to an end. While the other parents did not question her role, Lillian questioned it herself and wondered whether she should leave the family given that the children had two biological parents – a mother and a father. Lillian explained:

> I was like "what the fuck do I do now, do I step out of their lives?" I didn't know what to do. But really it was the kids that kept it going because they wanted to see me.

While Lillian and the family did not alter their family ideals and narrative after the women's separation, the presence of two biological parents within their kinship structure ultimately led to Lillian questioning whether a guild parented family and her role as a non-biological parent remained tenable post-separation.

Discussion

These findings suggest that while the guild parented families formed around the idea of both biological and non-biological parents raising a child, after a separation these values and ideals are challenged and often revised. The re-visioning of their families and parenting roles occurred both as a way to resolve the complexities of guild parented family separation and shared care, but also as a consequence of Western kinship norms that privilege biology and a dual-parent family model. Consequently, the findings above demonstrate how these values are both pervasive and enduring, and may emerge or re-emerge during separation despite the level of influence it had within the intact family.

Separated guild parented families highlight the tension between radical new family forms and traditional kinship ideals. Guild parented families not only came about because it was a pragmatic way for lesbians and gay men to have children, they often also exist as a consequence of an affinity with hegemonic, and heteronormative, family forms. The families frequently formed though a replication, albeit remodelling of, the need for a father, the mother/father binary, and the privileging of biological kinships. These findings are similar to Dempsey (2010) where participants' standard donor and co-parenting agreements drew on normative notions of Western kinship and family relationships. According to Dempsey (2010), the goal of these donor agreements were to 'affirm the child's social place in a reformulated same-sex couple-based nuclear family' (p. 1154). Similarly, they demonstrated that co-parenting agreements frequently privilege biology by following a hegemonic assumption that biological motherhood and fatherhood were grounds for parental rights. Nevertheless, the adherence to normative kinship and biological understandings, both for Dempsey (2010) and this study, are to be expected given the current lack of social scripts and role models for these emerging family formations. As with Vaccaro's (2010) research on multi-parented families, the current guild parented families only had hegemonic familial narratives of traditional gender roles and heterosexuality to guide them through their kinship formation and maintenance.

Another insight from this study is that the language of divorce and separation was not always easily applied to the unique circumstances of guild parented families. Referring to guild parented families as separated can give the wrong impression of the separation experiences and configuration of these families. While one or more of the parenting couples within the families may have separated, the guild parented family itself may not have. Only one of the guild parented families in this study eventually experienced a full family separation – that is, the guild model itself ended and the guild parented family transformed into a new dual-parent family. In this sense, while each of the families *experienced* separation, only one of the guild parented families – Lexy, Megan, Jack, and Tony – completely separated.

Conclusion

The findings in this study not only demonstrate the unique separation experiences of guild parented families, they also support the call by Vaccaro (2010) for more

awareness of guild parented families, both within LGB research and amongst separation service professionals. Training for family therapists and mediators needs to include specific information on how to work with guild parented families. In particular, family therapists and mediators need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to help guild parented families to navigate family formation and later the separation of one or more of the parents. Similarly, the findings highlight the need for greater awareness by law makers of the existence of guild parented families, their kinship structures, and their separation experiences. In particular, the complexities of their post-separation parenting arrangements support the call by the Family Law Council (2014) for legal recognition of more than two parents. Changes should also be made to birth certificate laws in Australian states and territories to provide for more than two parents on a child's birth certificate and record.

The stories of these three families have provided a unique insight into how guild parented families navigate unique family structures, parenting arrangements, and kinship ideals following the separation of one or more of the parenting couples. Guild parented families came together with shared kinship desires, ideals, and values. Despite their radical structures, parents held traditional heteronormative kinship ideals of having both male and female parents and it was these values that brought parents together and fuelled their desire to create a family in this manner. These values and ideals also tended to shape the way the family reformed following separation where parents often relied on Western kinship norms of biology and dual-parent families when resolving the complexity of their situations. Consequently, non-biological parents within guild parented families often found themselves in a precarious position following a separation, and either had their roles questioned, reframed, or completely revised.

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Endnotes

[1] These terms were first introduced to me by Annukka Lahti from the University of Jyväskylä. I have been unable to find any reference to these words in English literature and have relied on translation from the referenced Finnish article.

[2] Two of the families had their children prior to the availability of assisted reproductive technologies for single women or lesbians (Matthew, Kent, Kate, and Diana, and Lexy, Megan, Jack, and Tony) and all three of these families were created at a time when same-sex parents could not legally adopt anywhere in Australia, and overseas commercial surrogacy was either unavailable or prohibitive due to the cost.

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