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Separated Same-Sex Parents: Troubling the Same-Sex Parented Family

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Abstract

Same-sex parented family research and academic literature has focused primarily on intact families and/or those created after a heterosexual divorce–their family models, methods of family creation and the fertility process, and the health and well-being of their children. Similarly, separation and divorce research and academic literature has focused primarily on opposite-sex parented families. To date, limited research has explored the experiences of same-sex parents who separated after having children within their relationship. This article reports on findings from a qualitative study of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 22 same-sex parents in Australia who had experienced parental separation and aims to contribute to a new phase of same-sex relationship and parenting research that explores divorce and separation. Participants were acutely aware that their separation and post-separation families troubled the social expectations and mores of the same-sex parented family by appearing to break unwritten rules, threatening to disrupt campaigns for social and political acceptance, and falling off an apparent pedestal that their families and relationships had been placed on. Separated same-sex parents were also concerned that their families would disrupt efforts to achieve social and political acceptance–and this created challenges with recruitment and interviewing techniques with male participants in particular. This article will demonstrate the pressure for same-sex parents to present an idyllic image of family. It will also discuss how, as a consequence of being seen as troubling, same-sex parental separation created experiences of isolation and invisibility for parents during and after their separation.

Keywords

divorce, gay, kinship, lesbian, LGBT, same-sex parenting, separation

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Introduction

As increasing numbers of same-sex couples enter into parenthood, a growing body of research has focused on these emerging relationship and family models (see Dempsey, 2013a; Mizielińska et al., 2015; Murphy, 2013). Nevertheless, this body of research has traditionally focused on intact families and/or those created after a heterosexual divorce–providing limited to no specific exploration of the experiences of separation within same-sex relationships or parented families. In their analysis of *queer parenting* at the millennium, Firestone (2000: 49) raised the issue of separating same-sex parents and, in particular, lesbian custody disputes, arguing that because they were 'elephants in the gay parenting community's living room', limited discussion had occurred to date around this. Separation troubles the same-sex parented family by contravening the prevailing definitions and understandings of an ideal, or normal, same-sex parent family. Similarly, failing to present a perfect image of same-sex parenthood is seen to threaten and disrupt campaigns for social and political acceptance by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people (LGBTI). Therefore, this article will not be exploring separation itself as a form of family trouble, but rather it will examine how same-sex parents' separations *troubled* idealized understandings of the same-sex parented family and how this subsequently created troubles for the separating families.

The troubling nature of same-sex parental separation was highlighted by the limited amount of existing literature examining this area. Only four studies were identified that have specifically explored or discussed separating same-sex parents, each of them having contributed to the limited academic knowledge in this area. In an unpublished doctoral thesis, Turteltaub (2002) explored the dissolution process for lesbian parents and their children. In total, 10 mothers and seven children in the USA were interviewed about their or their parents' separation, the impact of legal issues, and the affect of support networks (Turteltaub, 2002). Separation also emerged as a theme in the National Lesbian Families Study, a longitudinal study of 78 lesbian parented families in the USA with children conceived by donor insemination (Gartrell et al., 2006). By the time the children were aged 17 years, 55% ($n=40$) of the couples had separated (Gartrell et al., 2011). Subsequently, data were collected from the 40 separated couples and their children in order to better understand their family characteristics, custody arrangements, and adolescent psychological well-being after separation (Gartrell et al., 2011). Similarly, Goldberg and Allen (2013) interviewed 20 children aged 15–29 years from separated lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parented families in the USA, focusing on the children's relationships with their non-biological parent during same-sex parental separation. Finally, a recent two-wave longitudinal study by Farr (2017) examined the relationship experiences of 27 lesbian couples in the USA who had adopted a child through private domestic adoption. The two waves of the study were 5 years apart and found that lesbian adoptive couples may have a heightened risk of dissolution, with nearly one-third of the couples separating in the 5 years between the two waves (Farr, 2017).

Each of these studies was conducted in the USA and often dealt with the specific legal realities faced by same-sex couples and parents in the various jurisdictions of that country. Similarly, none of these studies explored the experiences of male same-sex parented families or the role of males who have co-parented with female same-sex couples who

have separated. Consequently, this study is the first that we know of to investigate the experiences of separation among same-sex parented families in Australia and the first in the world to include male participants.

As both same-sex marriage and same-sex parented families are increasingly becoming legally recognized around the world, it is important that we understand their experiences of parental separation so that policymakers, service providers, and communities can ensure that their needs are being met. This article will explore findings of a landmark Australian study and provide timely insights into the experiences of separated same-sex parented families. The findings will demonstrate how same-sex parental separation is seen as troubling by disrupting idealized understandings of LGBTI kinship. It will begin by discussing how separation troubled the same-sex parented family by traversing social expectations and through the breaking of unwritten rules. The article will then examine participants' experiences of being pedestaled within their communities and how their subsequent separations troubled this status and caused shame, embarrassment, and anxiety. The findings will demonstrate how fear of this embarrassment extended to a fear of political repercussions for their community, causing difficulties in recruitment and interviewing of males while generating eagerness among female participants to challenge the troubling image of their separation and to break the isolation and invisibility of their families.

The Australian legal context

In 2008, the Australian *Family Law Amendment* (*De Facto Financial Matters and Other Measures*) *Act* (Cth) broadened the federal definition of *de facto relationships* to include same-sex couples. *De facto* relationships, also known in some countries as common law relationships or domestic partnerships, are relationships of two people who are not married or related by family and live together as a couple on a genuine domestic basis (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010). The amendment also provided for the recognition of female same-sex parents, so long as the couple were in a *de facto* relationship at the time of their child's conception and the non-biological mother consented to the artificial conception procedure (Rainbow Families Council, 2010). Consequently, the *Family Law Amendment Act* 2008 (Cth) also provided separating same-sex couples with access to the Family Court in order to resolve any custody or property disputes.

In every Australian state and territory, both male and female same-sex couples are legally able to foster children (Sifris, 2014). However, at the time of writing, only six jurisdictions have legislated to allow same-sex parents to legally adopt children. Western Australia (*Acts Amendment (Lesbian and Gay Law Reform) Act 2002*), the Australian Capital Territory (*Parentage Act 2004*), New South Wales (*Adoption Amendment (Same Sex Couples) Act 2010*), Tasmania (A*doption Amendment Act 2013*), Victoria (*Adoption Amendment (Adoption by same-sex couples) Act 2015*), and Queensland (*Adoption and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2016*) have all legalized adoption[1] by same-sex couples.[2] Prior to 2000, many same-sex male couples in Australia became fathers through previous opposite-sex relationships, through co-parenting arrangements with either single females or female same-sex couples, through fostering, or as known sperm donors to lesbian couples or single women (Dempsey,

2010, 2012; Murphy, 2015; Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010). However, since the early 2000s, more Australian same-sex male couples began having children via overseas commercial surrogacy (Dempsey, 2013b; Murphy, 2013; Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010). Commercial surrogacy remains illegal in Australia, and in the states and territories of Queensland, Western Australia, Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory, it is also illegal for residents to undertake commercial surrogacy abroad (Dempsey, 2013b; Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010). Nevertheless, Australian laws permit altruistic surrogacy arrangements, wherein the surrogate cannot receive any financial compensation, other than for reasonable medical expenses (Dempsey, 2013b; Human Rights Law Centre, 2015).

Research aim and method

As identified above, there was a strong need to fill the gap in research on separation within same-sex parented families. The study on which this article was based aimed to explore the experiences of separation by same-sex parented families and to contribute to a new phase of same-sex relationship research that explores divorce and separation. It aimed to answer the following research questions:

(a) What shapes same-sex parents' experiences of separation?
(b) How has the law affected same-sex parents' experiences of separation?
(c) What are separating same-sex parents' perceptions of, and/or experiences with, services and service providers? (Gahan, 2017)
(d) How have participants defined their kinships following separation?

A total of 23 interviews with 24 people[3] took place in the major metropolitan cities of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, and Adelaide, as well as in rural and regional areas of the State of Victoria. The average interview went for approximately 80 minutes. Of the 24 people interviewed, 2 were not included in the final study: one was excluded because he or she did not fit the parameters of the study and one participant withdrew from the study. The 21 participants who were included in the study came from 19 different separated same-sex parented families; 18 were female and 4 were male. Of the 18 female participants, 11 were biological mothers, 6 were non-biological, and 1 was both a biological and a non-biological mother. Of the four male participants, two were biological fathers and two were non-biological fathers. Three of the male parents were co-parenting with lesbian couples in multi-parent families. Only one of the male parents had been parenting as part of a couple relationship without female co-parents involved. A further three female participants had also parented as part of a multi-parent family. The remaining 16 female participants had parented as part of a couple relationship without male co-parents involved.

The youngest participant was 23 years old, the oldest participant was 57 years old, and the average age of participants was 43 years old. The majority of participants had postgraduate qualifications (68%), and half of the participants (50%) had an annual household income of over AUD$150,000. Two participants identified as Aboriginal Australian. All participants reported that English was the main language spoken at home and that they were totally fluent. Half of the participants (50%) lived in an inner-metropolitan

area, eight in the outer-metropolitan (36%), and three (14%) in a rural or regional location. Finally, more than half of the participants (64%) had parents who were married and never divorced, six participants (27%) had parents who were divorced, one participant had parents who were *de facto*, and one participant had a widowed parent.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and used Layder's (1998) adaptive theory as a methodological approach. In doing so, I acknowledged the dual influence of extant theory as well as those that unfold from the research. While theoretical models exist and are acknowledged prior to and alongside the collection of data, they are also subject to adaptive responses as a result of newly emerged data and their interpretations (Layder, 1998). Similarly, because adaptive theory both shapes and is shaped by the emerging empirical data, with each interview the questions were adapted reflexively in order to test and confirm any emerging theories (Dickson-Swift, 2007; Layder, 1998). This constructivist approach followed the assumption that there are no pregiven aspects of social reality that are fully independent of human agency (Layder, 1998). In order to obtain participants' tacit meanings about their reality, we need to delve deeper by looking for views and values as well as for acts and facts (Charmaz, 2003). Consequently, in line with the adaptive theory approach, the qualitative data analysis was a gradual process of identifying and refining codes and categories paying attention to what sat between the text–actions, emotions, emphasis, uncertainty, or hesitation (Colmer et al., 2014).

The population being sampled was incredibly diverse and was also a minority within a minority for which there was no available sampling frame. Sampling in qualitative research does not work on the basis of trying to achieve a representative sample. Instead, this study relied on advertising and opt-in participation in which I targeted specific groups. Consequently, I utilized purposive sampling in order to gain an understanding of how separation occurred within a range of same-sex parented families. I wanted to include in the study various types of family models as well as those who used different family creation methods–surrogacy, fostering, known donors, and unknown donors. After the initial recruitment provided only female participants who conceived their children via known or unknown donors, I focused on locating participants who were parents via fostering or surrogacy, parents from multi-parent families, and participants who were male.

Recruitment began by contacting the existing participants from the *Work, Love, Play* study–a longitudinal study undertaken by my colleagues on Australian lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) parents caring for any children under the age of 18 years (Power et al., 2010). Self-selected sampling (Tranter, 2013) was then adopted by utilizing the media to call for potential participants to contact me if they wished to participate in the study. As a consequence of both the media coverage and communication with the existing *Work, Love, Play* participants, the call for participants began to spread throughout LGBTI communities around Australia. Unlike snowballing, which involves the researcher starting out with several participants from their target population and requesting them to put the researcher in touch with others (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994), the word-of-mouth recruitment in this study was initiated instead by members of the broader LGBTI community who had heard about the study and subsequently contacted someone they knew who was a part of my target population.

Word-of-mouth was often initiated by an LGBTI community leader or respected elder. These intermediaries were not necessarily members of my target population; however, they were the key to gaining access to it. Using this method is advantageous when researching vulnerable communities such as same-sex parented families, or LGBTI people more generally. Lee (1993) suggests that by being trusted by the target population, intermediaries form the links in the referral chain, providing security to the potential participants through their endorsement of the researcher's bona fides. Intermediaries in the form of LGBTI community leaders contacted me to let me know that they knew of potential participants and would contact them for me. Pseudonyms have been randomly applied to all names used in this article to anonymize participants' identities.

Findings

Breaking the rules

Participants described a diverse range of reactions to their separation from their friends and the people within their communities. Many participants reported not getting positive reactions or support from their communities and linked it to a perception that they had somehow broken the rules of the same-sex parented family. For example, Tanya suggested that while society had got to a point where it could embrace same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage, it was on the condition that the couple were middle class, 'well behaved', and remained intact. Tanya believed that society, including lesbian and gay people, were not yet able to understand and support 'divorced lesbians'. She explained,

> People have embraced diversity and same-sex couples if you are a really well behaved nice middle class same-sex couple. And if you are not, they absolutely have no framework in which to be the same people that they were with you when you were well behaved. That was a very big learning curve for me during that time because what I realized as a divorced lesbian is that people just don't get divorced lesbians, you know they can just about get married lesbians, they can just about compute the nice stuff and the happy stuff and when it is all good. And so I did get treated quite differently than I had ever been treated by my family and by my friends, including my lesbian and gay friends.

Tanya believed that the increasing social acceptance and legal recognition of same-sex relationships were accompanied by unmentioned rules that included remaining intact. According to Tanya, when same-sex couples separated, people concluded that same-sex relationships were dysfunctional. She shared,

> I think that when you buy into something that is heteronormative then somehow there is a set of rules …. Societally we have a kind of structure and loosely speaking if (same-sex couples) stick to that you're alright but if you don't … it's almost like it returns to a default position of 'of course actually gay equals dysfunctional' and you know 'not quite right'.

Like Tanya, Tara believed that while people in her 'straight suburb' were accepting of same-sex parenting, they were not ready for separated single lesbian mothers. She explained,

> It is pretty hilarious when you live out in, you know, in such a straight suburb, because people can almost handle same-sex parents, but then to add that additional layer of being and identifying, not just as a single parent, but being a single parent whose ex is same-sex–it's complicated.

Falling off the pedestal

Several participants in this study felt that their previous relationships had been perceived to be a model for the LGBTI communities, and they believed that their families had been on display to the world as examples of why same-sex couples should have equal rights. Whether participants or potential participants had in fact been seen in this regard is not relevant. The feelings that they experienced of being on a pedestal created expectations and pressures that were very real to them and often led to them feeling that they were unable to discuss their relationship difficulties or reach out to friends within their LGBTI communities, both during and after their separation. Ruth described this as the most stressful thing during her separation:

> (It was) not being really able to talk about those intimate reasons in my friendship group. I mean why would I expose that to a whole lot other lezzos? It was difficult because I think people saw us as this great couple. I think people enjoyed us as a couple before when we were—when we didn't have the child. And people thought our relationship was really strong–and it was. So you know I think dealing with that shock of other people.

Similarly, Tara who referred to herself as a *trailblazer* within the LGBTI communities for being a same-sex parent found it difficult to reach out to the donor dad of her child after her separation as she felt that he had looked up to her relationship and she was embarrassed to let him down. Tara explained,

> He and his partner had kind of had us on a bit of a pedestal in terms of parenting, so I think that was a bit challenging when stuff happened.

Like Tara, Tanya explained that she and her former partner were seen as pioneers within the LGBTI communities and that her family was seen as an example of what people were fighting for the right to have. Consequently, Tanya believed that her separation had embarrassed her 'gay friends' and caused them to realize that their own relationships were similarly fallible. Tanya explained,

> We are going back now sort of ten years or something … we were sort of looked upon as a kind of you know pioneering, shining example of what could be done and strived for. And I felt like that too in some ways at the time. I did feel like I was breaking new ground and I was the first lesbian to have a baby, which was absolute nonsense. But I think our gay friends felt embarrassed and also nervous that if that relationship that looked so good and lovely and shiny could break up then maybe theirs could too.

Believing that her separation had caused embarrassment and anxiety among her LGBTI friends added to the guilt that Tanya felt at the time of her separation. Like

many of the participants, Tanya experienced guilt from falling off a pedestal. Tanya described this:

> I felt terribly guilty that I had fought for something so hard and then was you know flaunting it or something, that it was somehow proving the State's point that gay people should not get married. So yes I felt awful about that for quite a long time.

Judy also experienced guilt and stress as a result of not being able to live up to the expectations of LGBTI people. She believed that her relationship had been put on a pedestal because she and her former partner Pauline were one of the 'longest lasting couples' within their 'queer world'. Consequently, according to Judy, people shared with her their disappointment that she and Pauline had separated–making her separation even more stressful:

> When Pauline and I broke up, in terms of our broader friendship group, the kind of queer world, we were one of the longest lasting couples. There's one other but they were a year younger than us. There was a lot of people who thought we would be together forever, that we were just an institution and there were a lot of people who were very sad by that–which I kind of found an unexpected response because they don't have to be in the relationship!

Judy believed that her relationship had not just been put on a pedestal by LGBTI people, but by non-LGBTI people as well. Judy said that 'straight couples' saw same-sex parented families as an egalitarian 'alternative ideal'. According to Judy, when she separated, opposite-sex couples she knew were also devastated and let her know:

> (They said) 'you can't break up you guys are the model of the families that work, the relationships that work, you guys do everything, you share everything, you are equal partners on everything, you make all the decisions together, it is totally not an unfair relationship, like if you guys can't hold it together than who can?'

Some participants believed that because their separated families were troubling to community expectations, they were not given the same support that they believed an opposite-sex couple would get after a separation. According to Tanya, people inside and outside of the LGBTI communities openly expressed their disappointment with her when she separated. She explained,

> I would say I got a lot more vitriol and a lot more damning behaviour than a (separating) heterosexual couple would get; very much so. People turned (on us) which, as well as the break up, (led to) a very difficult time. That was in a way as difficult to manage as the break up itself because people were saying things to me that just didn't resemble my reality …. There was this assumption that I was smashing something and shattering something which just in my view wasn't true.

While the support from one's community and friends is crucial during separation, many participants felt unable to seek it or felt that it had been denied as a consequence of failing to live up to their communities' and friend's expectations.

Isolation and invisibility

Participants believed that the lack of discussion about same-sex parental separation in society caused them to experience feelings of isolation during and after their separation. For many, when they were going through their separation, they had believed that they were the only person to have ever experienced a same-sex parent separation. During their interviews, participants often asked how many other participants were there in the study, whether other participants were like themselves, or how their own separation compared to those of the others. This curiosity was spurred by their lack of knowledge of many other separated same-sex parents, and several participants remarked that this study was the first time that they had seen the phrase *separated same-sex parents* mentioned within the LGBTI media. When I informed participants how many interviews I had scheduled, they frequently responded with excitement, both at knowing that their experiences were not so unique and that the study may lead to greater visibility of their family practices.

While female participants were certainly more eager to share their stories, both male and female participants expressed their desire for the separation of same-sex parented families to be more visible. For example, Lillian stated that she had chosen to be a part of this study because of a belief in the need for more visibility of separated same-sex parented families:

> That's why I was interested in your study–because you are actually talking to people who are same-sex parents that are separated.

Similarly, Audrey believed that, unlike same-sex parents, when opposite-sex parents separate, they have the comfort of knowing that there are many others like themselves, that they are not alone, and that it was something frequently discussed in society. Consequently, Audrey felt very isolated during her separation and believed that she was the 'only person in the world'. She explained,

> When I separated, I didn't know any other lesbians who had kids who were separated. Like, I felt like the only person in the world. And when you're straight–everyone knows the divorce rate is nearly 50% so there's a whole bunch of other people you could connect with. Yeah I have straight friends who have separated, but I really only knew one (separated lesbian) and wasn't that good friends with them. But I really started to become good friends with them because you want to know like 'who are you?' …. At that time you are thinking 'what's going to happen to me? Am I going to be single forever?'

Participants not only wanted to know of other separated same-sex parented families in order to feel less isolated, they also wanted to know of them to gain reassurance and support in creating their post-separation family. Judy believed that while separated opposite-sex parented families had plenty of examples in their lives of how to do separation, same-sex parents generally had to create their post-separation families without the aid of examples. While Judy knew that it was possible to create a successful separated same-sex parented family, she explained that knowing of others and how they achieved it would have been a great support when she was going through the process herself. She explained,

> If I had have been able to see that other families had negotiated this, and that they were happy at the other end, that would have been incredibly inspiring. I didn't need it to know that it was possible, but it would have been really supportive. Really encouraging, you know.

Fearful males and eager females

The troubling nature of same-sex parental separation became evident in both the recruitment and later the interviewing of participants. While male participants and potential participants were often hesitant to share experiences that may trouble the *normal* same-sex parented family, female participants showed eagerness to share their stories in order to overcome the taboo nature of their experiences and to normalize the *trouble* of same-sex parental separation.

Consequently, this study includes only a small sample of male participants, and this was a clear limitation of the research. Males were difficult to recruit–in particular males who created their family via overseas surrogacy. One of the gatekeepers utilized to access this group of men informed me that the fathers whom he contacted were fearful that their separation would contribute to the negative image of surrogacy and gay fatherhood in Australia, and as a consequence, they did not want to participate in the study. The sensitivities and fear of the male participants were highlighted when I received a signed withdrawal of consent form from a participant after his interview. I emailed the participant and explained that I had received his withdrawal of consent form but asked whether he may like to read the transcript of the interview and suggest changes that would make him more comfortable. Nevertheless, the participant still wanted to withdraw from the study and explained that he was concerned about how the outside world would view gay fatherhood.

The same sensitivities that prevented men from participating in this study also appeared to cause trepidation among all but one of the men whom I interviewed. The one male who appeared at ease throughout the interview was someone who I had met previously and who I had already developed a rapport with. In contrast, the men who did not know me began the interview appearing shielded, and the interviews on a whole were shorter than those with the female participants. Unlike the female participants, all but one of the male participants read through the plain language statement and consent form slowly before beginning the interview. Likewise, before we began the interview, the male participants were more likely to ask me questions about myself, the aim of the research, and what I would be doing with their data. The male participants would also begin the interviews by only providing short or one-word responses to questions, and I would have to prompt them to elaborate. Nevertheless, while their interviews began with hesitation, as they progressed, the male participants appeared to become more relaxed and disclosed their stories more freely. In one of the interviews, a male participant, Matthew, brought along his current partner, Kent, and asked whether it was okay for him to sit in on the interview because it would make him feel more at ease. I explained that I did not normally interview people together but agreed that if it made him feel more comfortable, I would be happy to oblige. The addition of Kent in the interview proved to be advantageous to obtaining quality data. The two men appeared to provide each other with confidence, and ultimately, it appeared to allow them to open up and share their stories.

In contrast, an awareness of the troubling nature of same-sex parent separation had a different impact on the female participants. Rather than causing hesitation and fear toward the research, because same-sex separation was generally not discussed within their communities, the female participants were eager to share their stories and indicated that they hoped that their stories could lead to greater awareness within both the LGBTI and wider communities that same-sex parents can and do separate. For many, it was the first time that they had been given the opportunity to talk about their separation to someone other than a family member, therapist, or lawyer.

Discussion and conclusion

Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2013) suggest that while family changes that are perceived to be inevitable and expectable are not troubling, family changes that are seen to be avoidable, contestable, and to be struggled against are perceived as troubling. The findings presented in this article suggest that while having children has become a change that is perhaps expected or inevitable of same-sex couples, separation and post-separation parenting are seen as something that can and should be avoided and are therefore perceived to be troubling. The findings also highlighted themes of shame and embarrassment in the experiences of separated same-sex parents. Even within the LGBTI communities where we have seen a detraditionalization of kinship relationships and the rise of strong families of choice values (Mizielińska and Stasińska, 2017; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991), separated same-sex parents still experienced shame and embarrassment associated with a belief that their family practices troubled idealized understandings of the same-sex parented family. The pedestaling of parents' relationships and families created added expectations and pressures and often led to parents feeling unable to acknowledge or reveal their 'troubling' separation to their communities. Ultimately, shame, embarrassment, and failure were associated with an awareness that their separation had troubled the same-sex parented family, and for some, these emotions and experiences were heightened by occupying an already marginalized and troubling identity as an LGBTI person.

Despite a culture of non-traditional family construction among lesbians and gay men (Weston, 1991), as a consequence of negative reactions by LGBTI people toward their decision to separate, participants were acutely aware that their status as separated same-sex parents troubled LGBTI community expectations toward their families. After becoming parents, some participants were bestowed with a higher status within their LGBTI communities due to being trailblazers and/or role models as same-sex parents or as long-term couples. However, when their relationship had ended so did this status, leaving them feeling as though they had fallen short of their communities' standards. Consequently, participants' interaction and connection with the LGBTI communities often became more complex and more difficult. These experiences of judgment from within their own communities are incredibly significant as previous research has demonstrated that positive interaction with the LGBTI community is associated with a positive gay identity, high self-esteem, high well-being, and low distress (Frable et al., 1997), while falling short of community standards has been shown to predict both depression and anxiety (Boyle and Omoto, 2014). Consequently, the findings in this study suggest that in addition to the negative impact that separation can have on any

parents' well-being (see Amato, 2000; Gove and Shin, 1989; Stack and Scourfield, 2015), separated same-sex parents may encounter the additional negative impact of troubling their communities' idealized standards.

Another factor contributing to the troubling nature of separation for same-sex parents is the continuing need for greater social and legal acceptance of LGBTI people and their families in Australia. LGBTI people in Australia are acutely aware of their need for greater social and legal acceptance (see Hillier et al., 2010), and research has shown that this often leads to a desire to present an image of their lives that is acceptable to wider society and lawmakers (see Inner City Legal Centre, 2011; Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010; Turteltaub, 2002). Morton (1998) argues that as a consequence of the considerable resistance by society toward legal same-sex relationships, there is political and social pressure on lesbian and gay people to act in a way that enhances the image and status of their families. According to Morton (1998: 415), some separating lesbian parents have been labeled as 'traitors in the battle to legitimize gay and lesbian families' and face immense political and social pressure to behave for the sake of the same-sex parented family image. This was recently demonstrated in Australia when as a consequence of appearing on the television show *Married at First Sight*, gay men Andy John and Craig Roach came under attack from the gay community for trivializing marriage and potentially setting back the marriage equality campaign (see Quinn, 2016; Anderson, 2016). Parents in this study were acutely aware that their families were often in the spotlight and that their validity as parents and couples was consistently being judged by lawmakers and the wider society. They were sensitive to criticism and understood that their separation was often seen as a broader threat within the context of LGBTI politics. These findings were consistent with Turteltaub's (2002) study of separating lesbian parents, which highlighted parents' concerns that their separation may lead to same-sex parented families being portrayed as unstable or less than perfect. This perceived need to present a perfect image points to the existence of not only a stigma within the LGBTI communities toward separation of same-sex relationships but also a wider stigma of LGBTI people and relationships that do not fit normative and/or idealized discourses of the family. Consequently, separated same-sex parents can feel as though they have let down the LGBTI communities by troubling the social expectations of same-sex parenting and relationships.

In their analysis of changes and challenges in the family lives of children and young people, McCarthy et al. (2013) suggest that idealized notions of childhood sometimes undermined the ability to acknowledge their troubles and subsequently to equip them to deal with them. Likewise, the findings in this study suggest that idealized notions of the same-sex parented family frequently leave same-sex parents unprepared for 'troubles' such as separation, and as a consequence, the impact of the 'trouble' is exacerbated. Indeed, it is this idealized image that makes their separation troubling to their communities and has subsequently led to their experiences being largely unacknowledged and unexplored until now.

The idealized image of the same-sex parented family has been fueled by the depictions of same-sex parented families on television and more recently within marriage equality campaigns. In a recent discourse analysis by Drew (2016) of television advertising featuring same-sex parented families, it was shown that while same-sex parented families have become more visible, they are also being discursively constructed in terms

of the traditional ideals of family, gender, and social class. These discursive constructions occur at a time in which same-sex parented family rights and recognition remain contested, and as a consequence, 'everyday advertising discourses have a role to play in the normalization of particular ideals around same-sex family units' (Drew, 2016: 10). These traditional ideals of family, gender, and social class have also emerged as a common discourse among marriage equality advocates in Australia and abroad (see Brooks, 2003; Channel 4 News, 2013; Nettleton, 2011). In the campaign to achieve same-sex marriage in Australia, national lobby group Australian Marriage Equality has utilized a family values discourse and called on advocates for marriage equality to focus less on inequality and rights and more on commitment, family, and love (Gahan, 2013). Similarly, American marriage equality campaigns have been criticized for portraying traditional White family values and deliberately using images of White same-sex parented families because of the perception of the wider community that Black families are dysfunctional (Farrow, 2010; Kaufman and Miles, 2010). Writing as children from same-sex parented families, Kaufman and Miles (2010) criticize what they call the *family values politic* used by American marriage equality campaigns and, like Drew (2016), argued that these idealized discourses are hurting rather than helping same-sex parented families. As a researcher undertaking this study, I encountered many people both within academia and in the wider community, who suggested that I should withhold the research findings until after marriage equality had been achieved in Australia. This tendency to privilege idealized same-sex relationships and families impacts societal views and expectations of same-sex couples and their families and ultimately stigmatizes those who do not, or cannot, live up to this standard by labeling them as troubling.

As the findings in this study demonstrated, male separated same-sex parents are particularly concerned that they may trouble the image of same-sex parenting. This heightened sensitivity among males is not surprising given that gay male parenting in general continues to be stigmatized–a belief that Mallon (2004) suggests is derived 'from the larger cultural myth that men in general, and gay men in particular, are sexual predators, unable to control themselves sexually or apt to sexualise all situations' (p. 10). While these sensitivities are faced by all male same-sex parents, those who have children via surrogacy are subject to further stigma and are more vulnerable. In addition to the discourse within the Australian media on commercial surrogacy tending to be one of scandal, abhorrence, and outrage (see Berkovic, 2014; Landy, 2014; Maiden, 2014; News Corp Australia, 2014; Peatling, 2014), commercial surrogacy is illegal within Australia, and in several states, it is illegal for couples to travel abroad to access surrogacy services (Dempsey, 2013b; Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010). Same-sex male parents are acutely aware of this stigma and are likely to fear how research on their separation may be used against them politically or to fear the possible sanctions from within the LGBTI community as a consequence of potentially damaging the conservative family values image of marriage equality campaigns. The limitation of gaining access to male separated same-sex parents highlights a need for future research of the experiences of separation of this group and, in particular, those who conceived their children via surrogacy. These difficulties may become less problematic in the future as the stigmatization of male same-sex parenting is reduced and if laws in Australia criminalizing or preventing forms of surrogacy are relaxed or removed.

The findings also speak to the power of being able to connect one's experiences with those of others. Knowing someone with the shared experiences of parenting and same-sex separation helped remove the wall of isolation that participants experienced and provided them with people who could support them and ultimately sympathize with what they were going through. Participants expressed their desire for greater relationship supports—both socially and structurally, more understanding of their experiences as separated same-sex parents, less isolation, and more resources for the children of separated same-sex parents.

As I write this article, Australia is undergoing a national postal survey on whether or not to legalize same-sex marriage.[4] During the survey, same-sex relationships have faced nationwide scrutiny and debate, and LGBTI people have faced high levels of abuse (Brender, 2017). This has only heightened the pressure to demonstrate the worthiness of same-sex parented families by presenting idealized images of LGBTI people. Nevertheless, LGBTI communities should commit to finding ways to combat the pressure on same-sex parents to present a perfect image, as well as to find ways to prevent the pedestaling, and later de-pedestaling, of trailblazers. Similarly, LGBTI community leaders and lobbyists need to be aware of how their public discourse–in particular those fighting for same-sex marriage–can inadvertently frame separating parents, their children, and their wider families as troubling. Ultimately, separated same-sex parents will continue to trouble the same-sex parent family while threats to the social and political acceptance of LGBTI people continue to exist.

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Notes

1. Each of these jurisdictions allows both known child adoptions (adoption of a partner's child) and unknown child adoptions (adoption of a child who is neither of the partner's existing child).
2. In the state of Tasmania, the couple is required to have a state-registered relationship.
3. In one of the interviews, two participants asked to be interviewed together.
4. In December 2017, after this article was written, Same-sex Marriage was legalized throughout Australia after a majority of Australian's voted yes to marriage equality in the national marriage survey.

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