Queering the kinship story: constructing connection through LGBTQ family narratives

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Abstract
Recent research into LGBTQ kinship has suggested that reproductive technology might stabilise and/or disrupt dominant ideals about the importance of biogenetic relatedness in family formation. This article examines the way adults raised in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) households are interested in tracing queer family histories, rather than solely their biological relations. Data comes from biographical narrative interviews with twenty-two adult children raised by LGBTQ parents. The article examines how participants’ kinship stories relate to parents’ identities and journeys to, and through, LGBTQ parenthood. Knowledge of queer kinship was pivotal in the process of self-making and enabled participants to produce and express connections between themselves and their LGBTQ parents. Furthermore, queer social histories allowed them to articulate their affinity to LGBTQ communities and culture more widely, particularly noting their knowledge and experience of socio-legal discrimination against LGBTQ people. Thus, kinship narratives of people raised by LGBTQ parents highlight that the desire to ‘know where we come from’ is not rooted exclusively in biogenetics. In this case, kinship stories disrupted the established biogenetic narrative, stressing the importance of LGBTQ culture and history for constructing a connection between collective and individual identity.

Keywords
Kinship, LGBTQ families, origins, sexuality, stories

Introduction
Recent work has addressed the importance of families of origin for LGBTQ lives (Almack, 2008; Nordqvist and Smart, 2014a; Pralat, 2016). Studies stress that it is

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vital to examine families of origin to understand how intra-family relationships are negotiated (Heaphy et al., 2013). Although this literature demonstrates that families of origin continue to be relevant within LGBTQ-headed families, it conceptualises ‘families of origin’ as always heterosexual (parents or grandparents). Few studies consider how others within LGBTQ-headed families conceptualise their origins. As such, within this article, I explore the kinship narratives of people raised by LGBTQ parents. For children of LGBTQ parents, the phrase ‘families of origin’ is transformed from an assumption of heterosexuality. In this case, ‘families of origin’ may include non-heterosexual, gender non-conforming or trans parents, and relate to their (donor) conception, queer culture and/or wider LGBTQ histories.

Studies considering LGBTQ families have frequently focused on the way biogenetic discourses are employed or refuted. This article, on the other hand, is interested in how people with LGBTQ parents utilise LGBTQ culture and history when constructing kinship narratives. Stories, particularly kinship stories, are central to the construction of identity (Plummer, 1995). The stories that we tell and re-tell are produced collectively and can be seen as a ‘mechanism’ through which personal and family identities are built (Davies, 2015). This article explores the ways in which many adults raised in LGBTQ households are interested in tracing their queer family histories. This enables a rethinking of our understanding of ‘kinship stories’, highlighting these as not only genetic, but social stories. The narratives highlighted here come from participants with one or more LGBTQ parent, including stories from those who were brought up by LGBTQ parents from birth, as well as those whose parents ‘came out’ during their childhoods. The participants whose parents had provided detailed LGBTQ kinship stories often began their interviews with a description of their parent’s ‘coming out’ process, and stories about their conception and about reactions from their extended kin networks. However, some participants grew up with parents who were quieter or more secretive about their sexualities. In these cases, participants strove to create their own LGBTQ kinship stories in adulthood. This included tracing family memories and histories of their parents’ sexualities and gender identities, and recording these in films, documentaries and memoirs.

It is important to register that the social, legal and political context surrounding LGBTQ people and their families has transformed drastically over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the United Kingdom. Some of the most important changes for LGBTQ families include legislation enabling adoption (UK Adoption and Children Act 2002), broadening conception and parental rights (Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008), allowing LGBTQ education (repeal of Section 28 in 2003) and legalising same-sex marriage (2013). These changes present the legal and political backdrop for the life courses and life narratives of those raised by LGBTQ parents in this period. For instance, most participants were in school while Section 28 was in place, which prevented the discussion of LGBTQ people or families in classrooms. Thus, it is vital to understand the level of legal change that may have occurred within the lifetime of many born to and/or raised by LGBTQ parents within this study, as well as the shifting debates that have accompanied these changes.

This article will firstly look at those who have had consistent knowledge of their family histories and queer kinship stories throughout their lives. These participants
positioned their parents’ LGBTQ histories, reproductive choices and experiences of queer parenthood as central to their own biographies. The discussion then turns to look at the experiences of participants who worked to ‘discover’ and re-construct their queer kinship stories in their later life. These participants were not presented with LGBTQ family histories during childhood and so created and imagined their own queer kinship narratives as adults. In all of these stories, accounts of ‘where we come from’ are framed as vital to understanding or re-framing ‘who we are’, as individuals and kin, in the present.

**Kinship stories within LGBTQ families**

Life stories and memories are said to be fundamental to our sense of identity (Misztal, 2003). The stories we tell and memories we repeat and relay come to shape who we are. Plummer contends that through continuously telling stories we are ‘giving sense to ourselves and the world around us’ (1995: 20). It is equally important to consider the stories that go untold, remain secret or get forgotten (Plummer, 2016). Given the importance of stories within our lives, it follows that stories of kinship are ‘particularly potent’ (Smart, 2011: 543). As Mason argues, stories of personal identity are constructed through relationships with others and ‘personal narrative is thus part of a relational more than an individual discourse’ (2004: 178). Families frequently carry stories through generations as a way to ground themselves in a lineage and embed themselves in what came before (Smart, 2011). As Gamson suggests, stories are ‘the stuff from which identities are built’ and ‘creation stories, in particular, are about selfhood’ (2015: 204). Nordqvist’s (2021) recent work explores storytelling through a relational lens, investigating reproductive storytelling in the context of donor conception. She stresses that ‘telling stories is an important dimension of family life’ (Nordqvist, 2021: 679); however, stories of non-normative families, such as same-sex families or those who have used donor conception, often lack established social scripts. For some LGBTQ parents this may mean remaining quiet about their families/sexualities, while for others it involves constructing new types of kinship stories.

There is a growing body of literature in the social sciences on intimacy and kinship beyond the conventional family. Widely cited and important studies into ‘families of choice’ (Weston, 1991; Stacey, 1996; Weeks et al., 2001) have emphasised elective kinship ties over biological links. Paths to LGBTQ parenthood have been investigated, including decision-making around the use of known and anonymous donors (Almack, 2006; Dempsey, 2010; Nordqvist, 2014), the experience of using fertility clinics (Epstein, 2018) and constructing relatedness when children are conceived through donor gametes (Jones, 2005; Nordqvist, 2012). Dunne (2000) has highlighted the radical and egalitarian character of lesbian relationships and the ‘sameness’ of biological and non-biological mothers, while others have demonstrated that biological or ‘birth’ mothers continue to be the primary carers in lesbian families (Gabb, 2005) and argue for the need to consider the relevance and complexity of biogenetic reproductive relationships (Dahl, 2018). While there are a range of views about the significance of biology in LGBTQ families, literature has frequently employed the ideas of biogenetic connection (even when refuting them) for understanding (non-)relationality. In contrast, this research
demonstrates the importance of considering how kinship can be created in ways that are ‘not to do with biology, substance or biogenetics’ (Mason, 2008: 31).

Recent literature points to the importance of LGBTQ culture for children raised in these families. Rivers claims that by being raised in LGBTQ environments, children are ‘bicultural’, belonging to a ‘minority culture’ while having to live within a society that has ‘questioned the viability of their families’ (2015: 153). Others have argued that some raised by LGBTQ parents position themselves as ‘part of queer communities’ and state that their concept of family has been ‘queered’ (Goldberg, 2007). This work claims that some raised by LGBTQ parents are ‘queered by association’ (Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011: 160), meaning they are regarded as queer by others due to their parents’ sexuality. Conversely, some (adult) children may see themselves as dissident, queer or non-conforming in their own right, arguing that their position as a child of an LGBTQ parent has shaped their identity and sense of belonging. Goldberg et al. later expanded on these findings, stating that while some young people ‘disidentify’ with LGBTQ or queer communities as they age, others continue to feel a connection, with some even arguing that their identification increased over time (2012: 71−73).

This context leads me to examine how people with LGBTQ parents can understand their kinship stories, not only with regard to their genetic relations, but in relation to wider issues about how LGBTQ kinship is remembered and narrated. In particular, this article asks: how do LGBTQ kinship stories feature in adult children’s biographies? How do memories of LGBTQ inequality get passed between generations? And how do those raised in silent, silenced or ‘closeted’ LGBTQ families conceptualise, discover and re-construct their kinship stories? Within this article, I highlight the way those born to LGBTQ parents can see their parents’ queer histories as central to their self-comprehension and self-construction.

**Methods**

This study was based on biographical interviews with twenty-two adults who identified as being raised by at least one LGBTQ parent. Participants had a variety of family configurations. Five participants were conceived via donor insemination and had one biological mother and one non-biological mother. One participant had three co-parents from birth, two lesbian mothers and a heterosexual father. Sixteen participants were born to cisgender heterosexual parents. Within eleven families, their mothers had come out as lesbian; one participant’s mother had come out as bisexual; one person’s father had come out as gay; and three participants’ parents had come out as trans. Participants were between nineteen and fifty-nine years old. Fourteen participants identified as female, five as male and one as genderqueer. When asked about their sexuality, seventeen identified as heterosexual, two as bisexual, two as queer and one as gay.

Interviews were conducted in England and Scotland in 2017–2018 and 2020–2021. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways, with online recruitment proving most effective. Online recruitment consisted of using community organisations, LGBTQ social groups, LGBTQ-specific Facebook pages and Twitter. Some participants were also recruited through personal acquaintances and snowball sampling.
Biographical interviews were used, encouraging participants to narrate their life stories (Roberts, 2002). The biographical interview technique allows for a free-form open interview, where participants are able to discuss their lives, experiences, pasts, presents and futures from their own self-understanding. The flexibility of biographic interviews allows for a focus on participants’ stories rather than on preconceived notions of what counts as an important issue, transition or turning point in their lives. Furthermore, biography does not simply focus on the individual, but ‘bridges the theoretically constructed gap between inner and outer sphere’ (Fischer-Rosenthal 1995: 259). Therefore, this approach enables an exploration of how participants’ narratives are shaped by wider socio-political changes, examining how personal stories relate to shifting cultural norms surrounding sexuality, kinship and family formation.

The interview schedule was loosely based around three sections: asking participants about their past, their present and their ideas or aspirations for their future. These were the only three questions every participant was asked, with other questions and prompts asked in relation to the content of each interview. All interviews were conducted on an individual basis, rather than with parents or other family members. Current research suggests (Goldberg, 2007) that (adult) children with LGBTQ parents may have had negative or conflicting feelings and experiences surrounding their parents. Participants in my study discussed feelings of confusion, secrecy, embarrassment and fear, as well as incidents of bullying. It was important to allow privacy and space to speak about these issues without other family members present. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All names, places and identifying information have been altered.

The study was approved by the University of Southampton Research Ethics committee. Once a participant expressed an interest in being part of the study, they were sent a copy of the participant information sheet and consent form. This included details about the study, anonymity, confidentiality, data management and withdrawal. Furthermore, in conjunction with the outlook of narrative inquiry, it was important that I understood my position and my interpretations reflexively. Within my work, I position myself as an adult child of lesbian parents and thus a partial ‘insider’ in my research. I chose to disclose this to all of my participants because of the history of homophobia in relation to LGBTQ parents and potential fear from participants that I would portray their families negatively. However, my position is more complex than just a child of lesbian parents and my similarities to and differences from my participants varied greatly. This variety is limited not only to family structure and identity, but also to experience, involvement in LGBTQ cultures and communities, location, profession, age, gender and social/political views.

The transcripts were analysed using a combination of thematic and narrative analysis. Narrative analysis was used to understand how individual life stories were told, constructed and embedded within social and relational structures (Riessman, 1993; Phoenix and Brannen, 2014). Thematic analysis allowed me to explore the spread of certain topics across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These two types of analysis were used in conjunction, informing one another throughout the analytical process. Interviews were examined for stories of intrapersonal emotions, thoughts and feelings; experiences involving other people; stories referring to cultural norms or conventions;
and the impact of social systems, legislation or public policy. Transcripts were then examined thematically. Braun and Clarke describe thematic analysis as a ‘method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (2006: 79). Thus, I analysed the data for codes, which were used to identify the commonalities and differences between the stories told by participants. This included comparing the content, style and tone of participants, as well as examining the intersection of codes. By combining thematic and narrative analysis, I aimed to maintain a sense of context and personal life stories, while also developing some overall themes about the lives of people raised by LGBTQ parents.

**Queer kinship stories from childhood**

With more children being raised in LGBTQ households (HFEA, 2019), research has begun to consider how parents are constructing family narratives for their children (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014b). Current research suggests that creating an LGBTQ family narrative is not always simple or straightforward, particularly once children grow up and take this information on as their own (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014b). The participants’ stories in this study suggest that as children grow up, parents, children and other family members are involved in co-constructing narratives of family creation and kinship ties. For example, every participant who was conceived through insemination or reproductive technology (either in a clinic or at home) knew the details of their conception, including number of ‘tries’, where it was carried out, who was there, how decisions were made and the emotions of those involved. For instance, Fran, born to two lesbian mothers through sperm donation, knew that she was conceived on her parents tenth attempt. Likewise, Rachel, who was also born into a similar family set-up, stated that she was: ‘their fourth time trying’. Teddy, born to two lesbian parents and two gay known donors, recounted how his conception story was told repeatedly:

> The whole turkey baster story has been told to me many times and I love telling other people about it because I find it hilarious, it’s just really funny […] It’s just simply that Adam and Ben [donors] would come over, they would do their thing. They would get a turkey baster and use the turkey baster. Done. I don’t remember when I first heard that story, it’s always been there as far as I’m concerned. It’s just the way I was conceived.

This intimate knowledge sits in contrast to studies examining relationships between (aspiring) lesbian parents and their own heterosexual parents. Both Pralat (2016) and Nordqvist and Smart (2014a) found that conversations about how they were going to conceive were challenging, with heterosexual parents often not wanting to know details. In these studies, the parents of these people understood reproduction as equating to sex. However, when examining children of LGBTQ parents, it seems that the traditional ‘rules of privacy’ that exist between different generations of a family are subverted (Pralat, 2016: 59).

These ‘scientific’ stories may be easier to share with children than conversations about ‘sex’. That said, while parents may be reluctant to share stories about sex with their
children, even young children often ‘know that men and women make babies’ (Gabb, 2004: 679). The heterosexual stories of conception are often ‘silent but assumed’ (Nordqvist, 2021: 679), reinforced by familial norms around genetic relatedness and (hetero)sexuality, thus needing no further explanation. Through discussing their own non-normative conceptions, Gabb (2004) contends that children of lesbian mothers separate the notions of sex, reproduction, family and love. Participants in Gabb’s study suggest that the stories their parents told them as children (and they continued to tell in adulthood) disrupted ‘the binary logic’ which positions “‘the family’ [as] two parents who “make a baby”’ (2004: 31). These kinship narratives not only constructed the idea that participants were wanted by their parents, but worked to create more complex understandings of sex, sexuality, reproduction and kinship. This was also seen in Fran’s interview, as she discussed being raised as a ‘donor baby’:

I was brought up knowing that I was a sperm donor baby and that was really lovely. It was different and it was interesting. I don’t remember having the conversation about sex or this is how babies are made. I don’t remember that. We clearly had it; I don’t really remember it. But, maybe that’s because that’s not how I was conceived.

Fran’s connection between her lack of memory and the fact that this was because ‘that’s not how [she] was conceived’ highlights that for people conceived through donor insemination (or other reproductive technology), reproduction is not always automatically associated with heterosexual sex, or vice versa.

Within this study, LGBTQ parents were described as presenting positive kinship narratives to their children. However, often these positive, affirming and legitimating narratives were accompanied by stories of oppression and rejection. It is important to note that most participants discussed were born and raised in the 1980s and 1990s. While the 1980s and 1990s saw an increasing number of LGBTQ people becoming parents, particularly through donor insemination (Rivers, 2015; Golombok, 2020), LGBTQ people continued to face opposition and discrimination, both within their everyday lives and through anti-LGBTQ legislation. For participants, these narratives came from inside and outside their kinship network, including from heterosexual parents, grandparents and other relatives, as well as from those outside their families including neighbours, schools and the state.

The grandparents of participants were highlighted as one such source of rejection. Olivia, born to two lesbian parents by donor insemination in the mid-1980s, discussed her grandparents’ reactions when her parents announced their pregnancy: ‘They had issues, like I imagine a lot of people would have back then. My mum’s dad said, “oh just say you had a boyfriend who was killed in a car accident” and they were like “no we are not doing that”. Umm, they always told us the truth’. Teddy, similarly, recounts his knowledge of his grandparents’ disapproval and suggestion that his parents lied about conception:

They said, ‘oh, can we tell our family that you got drunk and accidentally slept with a man?’, because they didn’t approve or like how she got pregnant but apparently getting drunk and cheating on Val [non-biological mother] and sleeping with a man and getting pregnant is
somehow better. Obviously, Beth [biological mother] was like, ‘no, you can’t say that’. They didn’t speak to her for seven months of the pregnancy. I think it was only until – obviously the birth was coming up they suddenly realised, ‘hang on we are going to miss out on our grandchild here if we don’t fix this’. So, I think they resolved it and came to terms with it.

Participants were also aware of the discrimination and ostracism their parents faced in places outside their homes and families. Two participants told comparable stories of the rejection and conflict their mothers faced from their churches when coming out as lesbians. One of these narratives came from Bella, a thirty-year-old woman who was born into a heterosexual marriage between her biological mother and father. Her mother came out as a lesbian when she was two years old and began a relationship with her stepmother. Bella describes how, despite being the foundation of Bella’s mother’s social circle and support system, the church rejected her mother and stepmother when they made their relationship public:

She had a lot of good friends in the church. When all of this then happened, and they got together, the backlash from the church was, like, horrendous. They got kicked out, friends wouldn’t speak to them. Weren’t allowed to go back to the church, weren’t allowed to be involved in any of the meetings, people stopped talking to them, which was obviously a really difficult experience for them. I think from that point they kind of just went back under their shell and hid. Sometimes I think they haven’t quite come out again because of how horrible a situation it was.

While Bella would have had no memory of this as it transpired during her early childhood, the stories of hurt, rejection and abandonment by the church were stories that were passed down and had a lasting impact on her family. Bella used her mother’s coming out story and experience of discrimination from her church group to explain why her parents now kept their relationship and sexualities ‘very quiet’. Kellas and Trees contend that ‘family stories draw people in, teach them lessons, and stay with them long after they’ve been told. They are at once entertaining and horrifying, sad and hopeful, everyday and far-reaching’ (2013: 391).

These examples demonstrate how LGBTQ family narratives often highlight the ways that LGBTQ people are discriminated against. Children learn, from an early age, the history and origins of LGBTQ oppression and become aware of living in a heteronormative and cisnormative society. LGBTQ parents, through their social positions as non-heterosexual or gender non-conforming minorities, often have an understanding and awareness of past and continuing discrimination that affects their everyday lives. Although few participants spoke of direct homophobic bullying, most dealt with invasive questions, homophobic language and heteronormativity throughout their lives. Participants claimed that their tactics to handle these situations varied, from challenging attitudes to ‘choosing their battles’ in order to protect their own physical or emotional wellbeing. Many participants highlighted that their parents’ experiences and personal stories offered ‘lessons … such as how to deal with obstacles’ (Kellas, 2005: 367) including everyday homophobia or discrimination. For these families, stories such as these are
not necessarily exceptions to the rule or isolated incidents, but part of their family and community history and the ongoing position of their family in a heteronormative system.

(Re)constructing queer family narratives

As shown, some people raised by LGBTQ parents will have been raised in households characterised by a level of openness around issues of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, not everyone raised in an LGBTQ-headed family will have been told their family’s/parent’s LGBTQ history. In contrast to the last section, I will now move on to explore the lives of those whose kinship stories were shrouded in secrecy and (at times) shame.

Kramer suggests that those living in non-normative families, particularly those conceived through donor insemination or adopted, may feel that their identity is ‘fractured, partial and/or inauthentic’, prompting an ‘identity crisis’ (2011a: 382). However, those in non-normative families may also feel this ‘fractured’ identity when they are unaware of their social, cultural and historical origins. To explore the significance of kinship stories where family narratives have been hidden or concealed, it is valuable to look towards genealogy scholarship and family history literature (see: Fortier, 2000; Hackstaff, 2010; Kramer, 2011a, 2011b; Bottero, 2015; Bennett, 2018).

Bottero argues that ‘genealogists not only trace ancestors but also find out about their lives and generate “storied” narratives of connections through time’ (2015: 537). Likewise, Kramer suggests that genealogy ‘plays a central role in identity-projects and the forging of individuality within a collective context’ (2011a: 383). Furthermore, she claims that the notion that we must know our family histories implies that ‘development of the self does not begin at birth, but with having adequate and robust memories and knowledge of one’s ancestors’ (Kramer, 2011b: 430). In other words, popular conceptions of origins and genealogy suggest that to know who we are, we must know where we come from. Most genealogy scholarship focuses on tracing ancestral connections and family lineage beyond immediate kin. However, when parental histories are unknown, this work becomes helpful for understanding how and why people trace the lives of their more immediate family. Thus, while much of this work relates to ancestors who have died, the focus on discovering or tracing can connect to families in which histories are concealed or hidden. Adult children may experience a re-evaluation of family when uncovering their parents’ pasts that is similar to individuals re-evaluating their identities and (re-)constructing kinship because of a genealogical discovery. Thus, scholarship examining genealogical practices can show how the practice of tracing and documenting family history constructs and ‘reworks self-identity’ and is important for self-understanding (Bottero, 2015: 535).

Tracing family histories and constructing kinship

Many participants engaged in practices of ‘looking back’ and re-evaluating kinship stories. Two participants discussed within this section, Abby and Elliot, engaged in tracing their parents ‘queer’ histories. Abby is a twenty-four-year-old white bisexual
woman, born into a heterosexual marriage between her biological parents. When Abby was sixteen years old her parent, who was assigned male at birth, told her they were a trans woman. During her university years she made a book, chronicling her parent’s life, and a film documenting her parent’s transition process, which included her own and her mother’s experiences. Elliot is a thirty-six-year-old white queer man, who was born within a heterosexual relationship between his biological mother and father. His mother and father got divorced when he was in his early childhood and soon after his mother ‘came out’ as a lesbian and began a relationship with a woman. Since then, he has made two documentaries, the first about growing up with lesbian and gay parents and the second about Section 28 and lesbian and gay activism in the 1980s. Both participants were driven by a desire to understand their parents’ histories and experiences of being LGBTQ (and LGBTQ parents).

Abby and Elliot spoke about how their parents did not offer them ‘queer’ family narratives or alternative kinship stories. Elliot described his past understanding of his mother’s sexuality, and the relationship between his mother and her partner Nicky, as unclear and vague. Although there was not total silence around their lesbian identities, from his memory, it was not something that was discussed openly. Elliot commented that:

My mum is really private [...] she has always said this thing and she still says it, ‘on a need-to-know basis’ [...] and I remember thinking that they held hands in certain parts of town and not in other parts and they would kiss in front of some people and not other people. I knew there was a lot of what I thought was shame around that identity.

He then went on to talk about how there was what he called an ‘if you do ask we will tell policy’; however by the time he was old enough to want to ask questions, their identity and relationship was so rarely discussed that he felt unable to ask. This silence led to Elliot inheriting feelings of shame and fear.

Abby described her childhood as being very ‘normal’ and ‘heteronormative’. Before her parent came out to her, she was unaware that they did not identify as cisgender. In contrast to some other participants, Abby experienced a specific ‘coming out’ moment with her parent. However, she goes on to discuss how it was not until a few years later that she was able to start questioning her family’s past:

I had time to process and I was like, well what happened before that. There must be a history there, like ‘when did you tell mum? And what was your life like?’ and all of this kind of stuff. So, I started doing this project at uni finding out about all of their back story. Umm and yeah it was all very weird and interesting. The lengths that they went to to keep it a secret.

Despite family histories being hidden or masked for most of their childhood, Abby and Elliot’s interviews suggest that the story of their parents’ gender/sexuality was important to their sense of self, family and belonging. This has resonance in the literature; for example, Suter et al. claim that ‘family stories provide a blueprint for family life’ (2016: 303). They argue that family stories offer ‘rules of behaviour’ which in turn influence relationships, norms and family values, along with ‘offering legacies to current and
future generations’. Similarly, Bennett contends that family histories are used to ‘make sense of changes in the present’ (2018: 451). She argues that the practice of constructing and telling a ‘family story’ offers a way to ‘create [the] social identity’ (Bennett, 2018: 454) of individuals, families and communities.

In tracing, reconstructing and documenting their queer family histories, both Abby and Elliot engaged in identity and kinship building practices, using their reconstructed kinship stories to develop personal relationships. Kramer understands tracing family history as a ‘creative and imaginative memory and kinship practice’ which is used to ‘map affinities and connectedness’ (2011a: 379). For Abby, this meant building closer relationships, not only with her trans parent, but also with her mother and sister:

We spoke about it a lot, myself and my parent, but my sister didn’t talk about it a lot. Around the film my sister started to talk to me a lot more about it and tried to have some conversations with my parent.

She [Abby’s mother] didn’t talk to anyone about it until I started doing my project, so that was like thirty-five years she ended up not speaking to anyone about it and just having to deal with all of these issues and not understanding.

There has been some acknowledgment of the ways that gender transitions can impact partnering and parenting relationships (Hines, 2006). Nevertheless, Abby’s narrative demonstrates that the gender transition of one member of a family can impact the intimate relationships between others. In this instance, Abby notes that her efforts to document her family history provided purpose and opportunity for open dialogue between family members. Furthermore, reminiscent of genealogical practices which offer opportunities to ‘work through grief and loss’ (Kramer, 2011a: 382), Abby used the practice of tracing and documenting her family history as a way to deal with emotions relating to the changes in her family, including her parent’s transition and gender identity. It allowed her to negotiate, ‘talk through’ and re-connect with her family (including her mother, trans parent and her sister) over something that had caused a lot of emotional pain in her family: her parent’s gender identity. These genealogical practices of ‘discovery’ enabled her to build stronger kinship relationships, opening a topic for discussion that had long been restricted, or even at times completely off limits.

Like Abby, Elliot talked in detail about how making these films altered his perception of his mother. For Elliot, learning about the history of lesbian custody disputes in the 1970s and 1980s helped him understand his mother’s decisions:

Talking to […] the lawyer […] in my film […] I got a sense of how hard it was for my mum and what she was going through at that time. They ask you if you make noises when you have sex, you know all those things. The kind of things women were put through at that point. It was just unthinkable.

Through an exploration of the precarity and discrimination his mother faced both within the lesbian community and wider society, he was able to empathise with her secrecy and
fear. This process led Elliot to recognise the way that his own identity was shaped by the experience of being raised in that socio-political context:

She came out when she must have been like my age now, like thirty-five or thirty-six, so I just think about how much life she wanted to live when she had these three kids. She was, there was a real separation of, I don’t think we were part of that, at that point people were deciding between giving up their male children and joining feminist, lesbian feminist communes so like, that was the reality for my mum. She couldn’t take us to events because there were no men allowed. I was five years old, my brother was seven, she was having to think through those decisions while also having to go to parents’ evening explaining what was going on. I think she was just doing the best she could, and I don’t begrudge her that.

Elliot’s narrative indicates that through his research, he has been able to imagine what life would have been like for his mother. He engages in what Kramer describes as ‘the genealogical imaginary’, part of which includes ‘putting oneself in the shoes of another, as well as [...] assessing one’s own life in the present through the experience of others in the past’ (2011c: 23). Elliot’s mother was parenting in the 1980s and 1990s, when lesbian separatist rhetoric was circulating, and ‘lesbian mothers with sons were regularly denied access to women’s events’ (Gabb, 2018: 1007). Elliot develops an understanding that, for his mother, there was an enforced division between motherhood, feminism and her lesbian sexuality, particularly because she had male children. Through positioning or imagining himself within his mother’s life experience and socio-cultural context, he is more able to empathise with her feelings and decisions.

Within these cases, we can see how participants are able to ‘trace the continuing influence of the past in the present’ (Bottero, 2015: 547). Similarly, participants’ narratives suggest that, by investigating their parents’ LGBTQ histories, ‘borders between then and now [are] porous and unfixed’ and that past events, even when these are silenced, can still ‘permeate the present’ (Horvat, 2020: 402). These narratives of ‘family stories’ demonstrate the ways that ‘information from the past and the present’ can be ‘nuanced in different ways at different times, for different purposes’ (Kramer 2011c: 24). In this case, information about parental LGBTQ experiences was used to build kinship connections across generations.

**Connecting to LGBTQ history**

The family histories in this research are situated within the broader context of LGBTQ socio-cultural and legal changes. This article demonstrates how constructing an LGBTQ kinship story enables those with LGBTQ parents to connect their own family memories with broader histories of LGBTQ lives. For instance, when discussing his film about *Section 28*, Elliot argued that through gaining knowledge of LGBTQ history he can more fully comprehend the way that this has shaped his childhood, adult life and ongoing identity:
I’m a product of lesbian history because of the way I was bought up […] because of Section 28 and because of my lesbian mum. To have a lesbian mum and to be queer growing up in the time of Section 28, your identity and your family are erased and invisible or misrepresented. So, I’m a product of that. The way I talk and behave is definitely because of an understanding of that history as well as my personal history. When I think about my family, I feel like my identity is shaped by them.

Furthermore, it is important to state that although Elliot identifies as queer, when discussing his films he referred to his position as a child of lesbian parents rather than referencing his own sexuality:

I realised how little lesbians are written into history […] With Section 28 it was like, this shaped my identity and I want to understand it more and I want to talk to people who were working around it and so that was – and I’m really interested in how family history cuts across political and social history. For me, Section 28, lesbian custody battles, I am the way I am because of things that have happened in public.

Children of LGBTQ parents, regardless of their personal sexual orientation, may therefore develop a distinct sense of citizenship based on the state’s stance towards their families and their own sense of social justice (Ryan-Flood, 2009). Since there is a history of public debate over the recognition of LGBTQ-parent families, children in those families may feel compelled to claim space within political discussions that concern them (Welsh, 2011). Elliot’s discussions suggest that, although repealed, Section 28 and its subsequent impact on his upbringing continue to shape his subjectivity. Moreover, Elliot’s analysis of lesbian history, both specific to his family and more broadly, indicates that the experiences he had in the everyday spaces of his home and school were connected to the generationally specific dominant discourses of sexual and intimate citizenship. Consequently, when looking at the memories and kinship stories of participants, personal histories and political histories were consistently entangled.

**Conclusion**

This article argues that kinship narratives and family histories should not be assumed to be heterosexual or cisgender, as children have long grown up in LGBTQ families and within queer contexts. Furthermore, despite the rise of ‘genetic thinking’ surrounding heritage, as shown in programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* (BBC) or websites such as *Genes Reunited* (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014b: 24), within this study most participants placed at least as much emphasis on the significance their cultural and social heritage as on their genetic lineage. Family stories produce emotion and connection, playing a crucial role in creating an identity and distinctiveness for each family. Therefore, this article demonstrates the way that LGBTQ kinship stories and family histories become significant to adult children of LGBTQ parents across their lives.

The first section of discussion in this article examined the kinship narratives of people with LGBTQ parents who have always known their queer kinship stories. Many of these
findings resonated with current LGBTQ kinship literature (Nordqvist and Smart, 2014b; Suter et al., 2016) which highlights the way that LGBTQ parents often construct alternative family stories, diverging from dominant heterosexual understandings of ‘the family’. In these contexts, people with LGBTQ parents are often told their non-normative stories of conception and understand their parents’ ‘processes’ of coming out. They are aware of their family’s histories of discrimination and exclusion, both within and outside their kinship networks. These histories work to link families across generations, building a sense of connection between parents, LGBTQ communities and histories more broadly.

The second part of this article argued that adult children can also (re)create and adapt kinship narratives within adulthood. Abby began her life seeing her family as a ‘normal’ heterosexual nuclear unit, but through discovery and in building her own family archive, with photos, letters and notes, she remade her own family narrative. Likewise, for much of Elliot’s childhood he did not understand his mother’s lesbian relationships or identity; however, through examining his parents’ experiences and the socio-political context in which he was raised, he came to identify through a queer family narrative. Thus, children of LGBTQ parents who have lived in homes characterised by levels of silence, fear and shame can also re-evaluate their childhoods within adulthood. Although this does exemplify a classic shame-to-pride progress narrative, these stories also highlight the difficulty in reconstructing a queer kinship story. Participants demonstrated the complex shifting back and forth between past and present, revisiting the pain in their parents’ (and their own) past, taking the time to reflect and rework their own conceptions of ‘where they come from’ and ‘who they are’. Here, temporality is queered, with family life and relationships being remembered differently, as participants rediscovered and reconceptualised their family history. For some, this enabled a new understanding of their parents’ family practices, and of their own comfort levels around, pride in and understanding of LGBTQ struggles.

Overall, I suggest that kinship stories that diverge from traditional heterosexual scripts may have the potential to transform the relationships between individuals, be it a member of our family [...] or of a different social group (Horvat, 2020: 409). In this sense, queer kinship stories, whether actively constructed by parents or re-constructed later in life by adult children, may function as a resource to build bonds within LGBTQ families, as well as to connect people to queer history and politics more broadly.

**Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/J500161/1).

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Note
1. Section 28 stated that a local authority shall not ‘intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality’ (Local Government Act 1988: section 28)

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