**LESBIAN/QUEER IDENTIFIED GRANDMOTHERING: CREATING VISIBILITY AND ACKNOWLEDGING STRENGTHS THROUGH THE GRANDPARENT – GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIP**

**LESBIAN/QUEER IDENTIFIED GRANDMOTHERING: CREATING VISIBILITY AND ACKNOWLEDGING STRENGTHS THROUGH THE GRANDPARENT – GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIP**

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# ABSTRACT

This research explored the experiences of lesbian and queer-identified women who are actively grandparenting in the context of a same-sex relationship. Most research investigating the experiences of grandparents takes a heteronormative focus and fails to acknowledge the possibility that grandparenting can take place within the context of a queer family structure. Thus, this study attempted to initiate a discussion among feminist, queer, and gerontological researchers to fill a gap in the literature on grandparenting within a same-sex context.

A qualitative study of four lesbian/queer-identified couples was conducted. In semi-structured interviews, couples were interviewed together and asked questions about their involvement in the everyday lives of their grandchildren, how homophobia and heterosexism impacts their relationships with their grandchildren, and how these experiences vary (if at all) with the nature of the grandmothers’ relational ties (e.g., biologically related or non-biologically related). While the sample included some variation in terms of incomes, backgrounds and cultures, all four couples are linked into informal lesbian/ queer community networks and live in large or mid-size urban areas in southern Ontario – a relatively progressive jurisdiction with respect to same sex marriage and human rights legislation.

Findings suggest that there are differences in the experiences of lesbian grandmothers based on varying relational ties and that non-biological women are particularly affected by changes in the socio-legal context and by homophobia and heterosexism within the extended family. Non-biologically related grandmothers consider their role as a grandmother to be ‘chosen;’ that is, they made a conscious decision to identify as a grandmother. Non-biologically related grandmothers also did not anticipate becoming grandmothers because they were not biological mothers; thus, the opportunity to become a grandmother contributed to a life course journey that they did not expect to have. By grandparenting openly and honestly within the context of a same-sex relationships, participants strive to prepare their grandchildren for an increasingly diverse Canadian demographic by modeling a healthy and loving ‘non-traditional’ family and by demonstrating the importance of accepting differences.

With respect to implications, the findings suggest that supporting non-biological parents and grandparents will be a critical step for service providers and policy makers who are working with LGBTQ families. At the level of direct practice, these family experiences underscore the importance of recognizing and affirming these non-traditional family forms. In many settings, social work practitioners have and can seize opportunities to question, confront and revisit organizational and professional practices that fail to acknowledge them.

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# INTRODUCTION

Over the last forty years, and as a result of the gay liberation movement and LGBTQ activism, we have witnessed the progressive unsettling of dominant ideas about sexuality, gender relations, and family forms (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001; Westion, 1991). In particular, the heteronormativity and nuclear structure of families has been challenged. These challenges have occurred amid ongoing contestation and with huge variation across different political jurisdictions and cultural contexts. As a result, legal and institutional changes have opened up spaces for the creation of new family forms. In the Canadian context, (with much variation depending on social and geographical context), queer-identified people currently in their 20s, 30s, 40s and so on have grown up in a political and cultural climate in which marrying, parenting and forming ‘chosen families’ have become possibilities, and at times, even entitlements (Weston, 1991). This is a very different reality than that of previous generations. This research project has specifically focused on the unfolding facet of social and generational change as it relates to the lesbian experience of grandparenting.

My interest in lesbian grandparenting has grown out of my personal and professional experience in the area of mothering and LGBTQ parenting. I am a self-identified lesbian woman, mother, and thus part of the ‘gayby boom’ generation and potential lesbian grandmother (as an expected life event).[[1]](#footnote-1) I also consider the important roles of our chosen lesbian grandmothers in the life of my own daughter and the ways in which many of my

lesbian and queer-identified friends and colleagues are approaching grandparenting within an aging Canadian context that rarely acknowledges the special contributions of non-heteronormative families.

The aim of my research project was to learn more about the experiences of lesbian and/or queer-identified women who are actively grandparenting in the context of a same-sex

couple. This project was initiated from my professional and personal concern with the impact of discrimination on lesbian grandparents and conducted with an interest in exploring the strengths these women bring to their grandparenting. My research was also a response to existing studies, which are illustrative of the heteronormative focus of most published research or investigations of the experiences of grandparents, in failing to acknowledge the possibility that grandparenting can take place within the context of a queer family structure. Therefore, the goal of my research was to better understand the grandmother-grandchild relationship in the context of same-sex grandparents.

As the following literature review demonstrates, there is little research that looks at the experiences of queer grandparents, and consequently, little attention to the role of the non-biological grandmothers.[[2]](#footnote-2) These women are not only absent from academic literature, but also “completely invisible within a heterosexist culture” (Orel and Fruhauf 2006, 60). Further, much of the literature I could locate was based within the experience of participants in the Midwestern United States. I therefore began to wonder how the experiences of women now perhaps differ from those who participated in these initial studies. The Canadian context differs from that of Midwestern United States, as homosexuality was effectively decriminalized in this country more than forty years ago; the same cannot be said of the United States.

I was also inspired by the literature, although scant, that looks at how grandparents transfer skills to their grandchildren by looking at this relationship as it occurs in the context of same-sex grandparents. In particular, I was interested in Patterson’s (2005, 40) work, written within the Canadian context after the passing of Bill C-38 legitimizing same sex marriage, in which the grandmothers interviewed articulated pride in creating families ‘outside the box’, and positive attributes of non-status families are acknowledged. In addition, the study gave attention to the ways in which lesbian grandmothers equip their grandchildren with skills needed to confront and resist homophobia and heterosexism.

Research through a feminist lens aims to contribute to knowledge of discriminatory and oppressive structures as well as the transformation of gender relations. Through this project, I hoped to address a gap in both the LGBTQ and gerontological literature, where the experiences of lesbian grandmothering have been under-documented and under-theorized. I also aimed to build on the knowledge of challenges and opportunities of lesbian grandparenting by sharing this information and thus supporting lesbian grandmothers in better positioning themselves to participate in the development of policies impacting their families. It is my hope that the project will also benefit the participants themselves, by involving them in the research process, providing an outlet for their voices, and potential feelings of empowerment in “creating families outside the box” (Patterson 2005, 40), construing them as potentially both trailblazers and as caregivers in a role that is intrinsically valuable to their entire family. In short, I sought to challenge assumptions about family structure in a way that disrupts sexist assumptions about women’s roles in families.

Looking further into the future, it is possible that a generation of children, influenced by these grandmothers, could greatly influence the way in which gender and sexuality are treated and understood in social contexts. These children may also have the potential to challenge heterosexism and homophobia in their communities and social contexts by virtue of their experiences with their queer grandparents.

The questions guiding my research were layered, beginning with an overarching question about how lesbian/queer-identified women engage in grandparenting, exploring how their engagement and relationships with grandchildren are shaped or influenced by homophobia and heterosexism, and whether and how their grandmother-grandchild relationships differ with varying relational ties (e.g., biological and non-biological grandmothers). To explore these questions, I undertook a small qualitative study of older women actively grandparenting in the context of a same-sex couple.

To situate the study conceptually, I drew on three main theoretical frameworks: (1) Feminist characterizations of the grandparent-grandchild relationship as inherently gendered, which acknowledge the impact of gender on both the biological and non-biological parent, and modeling of non-traditional gender roles; (2) the contributions of queer theory to extending definitions of family beyond the non-biological parent or grandparent to include members of a ‘chosen family’, including non-biological ‘aunts’ and ‘uncles’ who are involved with the lives of the grandchildren; and (3) life course theory, in which the grandparent-grandchild relationship is vital because it not only has potential for affecting the grandchild’s development, but also has value for the entire family system (grandparents, parents and grandchildren). Life course theory also serves as a framework for investigating the effects of sexual orientation on the grandparent-grandchild relationship from the perspective of the grandmother’s life span, as well as exploring intergenerational links, the role of family structure in the grandparent-grandchild relationship, and how the grandmother’s familial experiences change over time, as these relationships are associated with an attachment to one’s family unit.

With this background, I undertook a review of the literature, drawing on mainstream gerontological sources, feminist analyses and queer studies in order to inform and situate my questions.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purpose of the research project, it was helpful to begin the review with gerontological literature, setting the stage for the characterization of different styles of grandparenting, and the place of intergenerational relations. Beginning with the classic 1964 article, “The Changing American Grandparent,” Neugarten and Weinstein explored the extent of grandparents’ involvement in lives of their grandchildren. The authors looked at grandparents’ perception of self as a resource for their grandchildren, grandparents’ sense of achievement as a result of their grandchildren’s accomplishments, and the extent to which grandparents indulged their grandchildren. Neugarten and Weinstein (1964, 199) also conducted the first formal study of grandparenting styles, loosely characterized as formal, fun-seeking and distant. Almost 30 years later, Cherlin and Furtenberg’s (1992) study of 500 grandparents added that grandparenting styles are heavily influenced by two variables: the exchange of services or giving and receiving of benefits among members of different generations, and the degree to which grandparents serve as authority figures for the parents and grandchildren. Their study suggested five grandparenting styles: detached, passive, authoritative, supportive, and influential. This study purposefully looked at grandmothers who are actively involved in grandparenting as a way to better understand how they support and influence their families.

Kemp (2005) also built on the work of Neugarten and Weinstein, discussing contemporary grandparent–grandchild relationships, and as a growing demographic from the perspectives of both generations. Her research provides a nuanced exploration of the meanings of the relationship, experiences of being grandparents, and adult grandchildren in the current social context.

While reviewing this more contemporary gerontological literature on grandparenting, I expected to find mention of shifting family forms but found little. Although helpful in providing a framework for contextualizing and characterizing grandparent-grandchild relationships, Kemp’s research mirrors mainstream literature in its implicitly heteronormative focus. Not only does her study fail to enquire about the sexual identities of participants, it fails to acknowledge the possibility that grandparenting can take place within the context of a same-sex or queer family structure.

I also reviewed literature on queer parenting families. The recent ‘gayby boom’[[3]](#footnote-3) has produced a significant literature on parenting within the context of same-sex couples or lesbian-identified single parent households/families. Reflected in this body of literature is the ongoing shifting, and emergence of new relational forms – intergenerational ties that are not yet scripted. These new familial forms require creativity and improvisation for which the dominant culture as yet has no language. The body of literature about the experiences of non-biological lesbian and gay grandparents remains limited; however, there is an extensive body of literature in the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychotherapy that looks at the ways in which family structures provide support for members. Of most relevance is literature that looks at the ways in which children and grandchildren form bonds with biological and non-biological relations. Nelson (2014), for example, examined more than 600 articles published between 1964 and 2009 that used the term ‘fictive kin’, a term used by social science researchers to describe intense and meaningful relationships of support that extend beyond the traditionally conceived family. Nelson concludes, however, that this term is used predominately in reference to African Americans rather than white populations, suggesting that the notion of fictive kinship is discursively racialized. Nelson’s work also acknowledges the contribution of feminist scholarship to the recognition of the diversity of family forms, by linking the discussion to families of choice and the concept of voluntary kin.

The concept of ‘chosen kin’, or more commonly, ‘chosen family’ is used in both the academic and popular literature to describe families that include members who are not necessarily related to one another by blood. Beginning in the 1980s, authors such as Feigelman and Silverman (1983) began using the term ‘chosen’ to describe children adopted into families as a way of celebrating and highlighting these relationships. The concept of ‘chosen families’ has also been widely used in literature about the experiences of LGBTQ people to draw attention to the ways in which queer people have formed familial bonds with non-biologically related LGBTQ people and allies, often because they have been rejected by their own biologically related family members (see Weston 1991). Although Weston’s 1991 book on chosen family remains the classic text on the subject, the term has been explored in great depth by Oswald (2002), Patterson (2000), and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001). The concept of “chosen family” has also been used to describe families that have used reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) and Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) (see Thompson 2005).

In this burgeoning body of literature, there are however, still only a few studies that have looked at the experiences of queer grandparents. Orel and Fruhauf (2006) looked at the ways in which lesbian or bisexual grandmothers perceive the grandparent-grandchild relationship. They noted a pronounced difference in the quality of relationship when the grandmother had disclosed her sexual orientation to her adult child (the parent). Grandmothers who were ‘out’ to their adult children reported feeling more satisfaction and closer relationships with their grandchildren than those who were not ‘out’. Fruhauf, Orel and Jenkins (2009) specifically addressed the coming-out process of grandparents to their grandchildren. Guided by the life-course perspective, they examined the coming-out experiences of gay grandfathers to their grandchildren. The grandfathers studied reported that their adult children played a profound role in their coming-out process to grandchildren, and yet coming out to their grandchildren was easier than coming out to their own children. The authors also found that adult children played a significant role in determining the positivity of this process. Patterson (2005a) found that lesbian grandmothers achieved a considerable degree of societal acceptance as active grandparents. Participants in Patterson’s (2005a) research had become mothers within the context of heterosexual relationships and only ‘come out’ in later adulthood. The participants understood this process of ‘coming out’ as an accomplishment of authenticity and as a liberating experience. Thus, they felt a sense of pride knowing they were responsible for creating families ‘outside the box’. None of the women in Patterson’s study believed that their grandchildren would be harmed or disadvantaged by having a lesbian grandmother; in fact, it was felt they had much to offer their grandchildren. This finding corroborates Orel and Fruhauf (2006), who found grandparents who were not ‘out’ experienced greater levels of stress related to their grandparenting roles.

Stelle et. al. (2010) investigated the relevance of sexual orientation for the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Participants reported that grandparents were likely to allow their children to dictate the extent to which the grandchildren were made aware of their grandparents’ sexuality. Maintaining family bonds remained more important than insisting on the disclosure or expression of their own sexual orientations. This finding is consistent with traditional grandparenting literature, as well as with Orel and Fruhauf’s observation (2006) that adult children determined the relationship quality with the grandparents.

According to Orel and Fruhauf (2006), the actual significance of sexual orientation for the grandparent-grandchild bond was related to how a grandparent’s sexual orientation affected the level of honest discourse that took place between the grandmothers and their grandchildren. Confirmed by Orel and Fruhauf, the grandparent-grandchild relationship is vital because it not only has potential for impacting the grandchild’s development, but also supports for the entire family system. In all of the grandparenting literature reviewed above, the experience of grandmothers who were not biological mothers was, for the most part, excluded, a gap acknowledged by Orel and Fruhauf’s (2006,66): “the non-biological grandmother’s role in relation to the grandchild is far less visible than the role of the biological grandmother and the non-biological grandmother’s role is completely invisible within a heterosexist culture.” This inattention in the research thus far has the effect of reinforcing the legitimacy of conventionally approved relationships. Ironically, with this omission the researchers have seemingly repeated exactly what they have set out to deconstruct. To address this omission, my research was pointedly designed to include lesbian/queer couples where both members are actively grandparenting.

It is, of course, critical to situate family and grandparent experiences and relationships in their wider structural contexts and within the shifting political and cultural landscapes. Due to the changing social and legal climate in Canada, more and more people are choosing to parent in the context of same-sex relationships. This will presumably mean that the future will see many more grandparents who identify along the queer spectrum. There are, however, significant gaps in research and existing knowledge about the specific needs and experiences of LGBTQ older adults, particularly in the context of a changing societal demographic (e.g. Baby Boomers approaching later life). Orel (2014) identified seven specific areas of needs and concerns, including, medical/health care, legal, institutional/housing, spiritual, family, mental health, and social. It will be important to understand lesbian/queer grandparenting in the context of the wider realities of these generations, their lifetime experiences of societal stigma and systemic discrimination based on sexual orientation and, potentially, discrimination based on age. Families’ experiences will also be shaped by public policies as they reflect social and political shifts. As a researcher, I wondered about how my experience with same-sex marriage legislation may be experienced by a generation of lesbians who presumably faced extreme homophobia and discrimination when they were raising their families (often complicated by the breakdown of a heterosexual union). Lannutti (2011) examined older same-sex couples’ experience with legally recognized same-sex marriage. For married couples, an increased sense of security was experienced. Both unmarried and married couples described how same-sex marriage added to their sense of being recognized as a legitimate couple.

With this appreciation of the relevant literature and my own knowledge of the shifting landscape of queer family lives, I aimed to increase our understanding of lesbian grandparenting by inviting the accounts of women actively assuming this role and exploring their experiences of its meanings, tensions, and possibilities.

# METHODOLOGY

## Theoretical and Methodological Framework

I approached this project from a feminist critical social science perspective. According to Neuman, (1997) critical social science, often associated with feminist analysis, is a “critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves” (74). As a critical researcher, the intent of the research conducted is to transform social relations. Critical social scientists work to reveal the underlying sources of social relations and empower people, especially people who are marginalized politically, economically, and socially. At the risk of overstating Neuman’s claim, the purpose of critical research is to change the world.

The population at the heart of my research is women who, because of their age, sexuality, and historical marginalization, continue to experience multiple oppressions. As older women, their voices are often silenced in a society that values youth over experience. As lesbians, they have been historically marginalized in a society that has only recently relaxed its social and legal regulation of non-heteronormative sexual and gender expressions.

Critical social science is therefore an appropriate framework for my research because it helps to demonstrate the significance of the lesbian grandmothering experience and the relationships between grandmothers and their grandchildren. By conceptualizing familial bonds as not necessarily based on biology or commonly understood (read: heteronormative and nuclear) family structures, my project sought to expose social structures that both challenge and uphold normative ideas of sexuality and gender. My purposeful inclusion of the experiences of non-biological grandmothers was, in particular, a way to deepen understanding of the gendered experiences of lesbian grandmothers. These women have chosen to grandparent and yet have not necessarily had the experience of becoming birth mothers themselves. Their claims to grandmothering disturb traditional gender roles and relational forms and may thus have the potential to intensify their experiences of heteronomativity and homophobia.

My project also grew out of my background in feminist methods and action. Neuman notes that feminist critical social science “is conducted by people, almost all of them women, who hold a feminist self identity and consciously use a feminist perspective” (80). As a feminist, I apply a feminist lens to all of my work. This perspective is embedded in the design of the study and the decision to include non-biological grandparents reflects my aim to provide a space for women’s voices to be expressed and confront the male-oriented perspective that has dominated the development of social sciences (Neuman, 80).

In addition to literature about ‘chosen family’ and grandparenting, Lasala’s (2003) work on insider knowledge was particularly helpful in framing this study with respect to my own interest and location in the subject. I am not only a lesbian mother, but I am also part of a ‘chosen family’ that includes both biologically and non-biologically related members. My daughter is considered a ‘chosen granddaughter’ by her lesbian grandparents, and it is these women who have also inspired this study. Lasala (2003) asserts that lesbian and gay researchers who study their own community may bring unique knowledge to their research. He draws from his own research, and describes the strengths and potential weaknesses of conducting qualitative research with LGBTQ communities from an insider perspective. He asserts that this special knowledge can offer richer insights of the respondents’ “unique perceptions” (15). Lasala’s analysis developed my understanding of my positioning myself as an ‘insider researcher’ (17) by offering suggestions about how to maximize advantages and avoid potential biases.

A feminist methodological approach involves open acknowledgement of the presence of the researcher, the transparent recognition that no research can be value free or un-positioned (Hoggart, in Becker et al, 2012). It allows me to thus acknowledge that I enter and engage in the research seeking to challenge assumptions about family structure and to upset and reject sexist assumptions about women’s roles in families. Feminist critical social science can be characterized as multi-, trans- or inter-disciplinary. To situate this study, I have pulled from both social work theory and methodologies, as well as from queer theory, gender studies, and anthropology. Queer theory provides a strong foundation for understanding the development of homosexuality as a political identity and the tensions within this construction and reconstruction. Queer theory also provides definitions for important terms such as heteronormativity and homophobia. Contemporary anthropological studies provide a robust literature on kinship and the concept of ‘chosen family.’ I remain cautious, however, of the implications of race and racialization on our concepts of family and ‘chosen family.’

Feminist researchers have become increasingly sensitive to differences among women, including differences in power. As a feminist researcher, I must be tuned in to the complexities of power differentials, even as an ‘insider.’ Thus, for example, the interview guide was designed with sensitivity and awareness of my privilege as a younger ‘out’ lesbian woman, who has benefitted at an early age from human rights protection and social policies such as marriage equality legislation. In contrast, my participants, who were of a different generation than myself, likely faced a greater level of discrimination and marginalization due to their sexual expression and/or sexuality. A feminist critical social science lens helps me to acknowledge and confront these differences in both my interaction with my participants and in my academic work emerging from these engagements.

## 

## The Study Design

Against the epistemological backdrop described above, I carried out a small qualitative study to explore the experiences of lesbian/queer-identified grandmothers. The qualitative design and methods were approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board and allowed me to draw from and explore the texture and significance of grandparenting in participants’ terms.

### Study Sample

I sought a sample of lesbian/queer-identified women who were actively grandparenting in the context of a same-sex couple. By specifying ‘active,’ I wanted to avoid interviewing couples, who did not have consistent or frequent interaction with their grandchildren, but I chose not to define what constitutes active grandparenting so as to avoid restricting or prescribing further than this broad criteria. It was my hope that potential participants would only respond to the recruitment request if they perceived their grandparenting to be an important and ‘active’ part of their lives. My focus on grandmothers in couples stemmed from my interest, described above, in better understanding the positioning of non-biological lesbian/queer-identified grandparents and, drawing on Bjornholt and Farstad’s (2014)work, sought to conduct interviews with couples rather than individuals. Bjornholt and Farstad (2014), elaborate on the specifics and benefits of joint couple interviews, highlighting advantages such as solving ethical problems of anonymity and consent. Joint interviews, the authors claim, produce rich data that may not have been revealed in individual interviews. The article contributes to a justification for my proposed method of interviewing couples together, which may also produce a “cueing phenomenon” (7), which has been found in joint couple interviews. The authors discovered the type of information that this dynamic produces increases the richness of data.

Finally, I focused my recruitment in southern Ontario, partly as this is where I am located and thus it was practical and partly so that potential participants would all be experiencing grandparenting within the same geographic region—with the same access to social services and political infrastructure. While the sample included some variation in terms of incomes, backgrounds and cultures, all four couples were linked into informal lesbian/queer community networks and lived in large or mid-size urban areas in southern Ontario—a relatively progressive jurisdiction with respect to same-sex marriage and human rights legislation. This sample of lesbian/queer-identified grandmothers was, therefore, speaking from experience of relative entitlement as citizens and from the foundation of some community solidarity.

The participants were recruited with a snowballing approach through a mix of both formal and informal community networks. A recruitment flier (see Appendix D) was distributed to potential participants by two formal community programs, the LGBTQ Parenting Network and The LGBTQ Wellness Centre of Hamilton (hereafter the Well). The LGBTQ Parenting Network is a program of the Sherbourne Health Centre, located in Toronto, Ontario that brings together more than 2,000 LGBTQ families across the Greater Toronto Area by offering parenting courses and workshops, organized activities for LGBTQ families, and distributing a monthly e-newsletter with additional information about parenting within the context of a queer family (see LGBTQ Parenting Network). The Well is a non-profit community-led organization that offers a variety of programs and services for LGBTQ people living in Hamilton and the surrounding areas, including a monthly e-newsletter. Both the LGBTQ Parenting Network and the Well distributed the recruitment flyer for this study through their e-newsletters. In addition, I recruited through various less formally organized networks and channels. The McMaster University SWQT (Social Work Queer and Trans) network, disseminated the recruitment flyer to queer, trans, and allied social work professionals throughout the Hamilton region. I also distributed the flyer through professional and community networks and channels, asking people to pass it along to others and with appropriate attention to ensuring that no potential participant would feel pressured to respond because of personal connections (see Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer and Appendix B: Letter of Information/Consent Form). Included in these informal channels of distribution were collegial and professional networks and a queer community Facebook page to which I belong that links donor siblings who share genetic ties.

Through this recruitment process, I located a sample of four (4) couples. Significantly, the recruitment process itself raised issues and questions that were important for me to reflect on and that open up some important questions for future research in this area. Firstly, the four participating couples were all located through informal channels: two via community and personal networks; two via Facebook. That none of the participants took-up the invitation to participate via formal organizational channels may indicate the importance of trust or some advance knowledge that increases confidence in the research and the researcher. Two of the couples, recruited through a Facebook connection, agreed to participate in part because they were interested in the research, but also because we shared a mutual trustworthy contact. It is possible that the formal networks did not produce any participants because they are, by their very nature, impersonal. There was no opportunity for me to be known at all or to build trust with potential participants when the recruitment flyer was distributed through a formal e-newsletter and, necessarily, formatted in a very formal way. It was only when the formal recruitment information was paired with an informal discussion, including some informal knowledge of myself, that the recruitment process was productive.

Another possible inhibitor to participation was my request that women be ‘actively’ grandparenting. As a result, some grandmothers who might be involved in the lives of their grandchildren might not have perceived this involvement as ‘active’ and therefore did not self-identify as eligible for the study. Finally, I also designed the study in a way that grandparents be interviewed together as a couple. Partners or spouses of lesbian women who are actively grandparenting might not see themselves as grandmothers. For example, on two separate occasions, I had identified prospective participants; however, after discussing the study with these women and the interview methods, neither couple felt eligible to participate because only the biological grandmothers identified as grandmothers. The non-biological grandmothers did not see themselves as grandmothers, even though I could glean from our conversations that they participated in the lives of the grandchildren to some extent. Thus, this study cannot account for the experiences of lesbian and/or queer-identified grandmothers who have same-sex partners, but do not perceive that they actively grandparent together. In future, it will be important to enhance our understanding of the contexts and dynamics of such couples where, in effect, non-biological partners do not claim or are not interested in assuming the role and identity of grandmother.

### 

### Interviews

In total, four interviews with eight participants were conducted. In each case, couples were interviewed with both participants together and followed a semi-structured format to elicit comparable data across the sample, but also allow to flexibility in the interview questions. Interviews were 60-90 minutes in length and took place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and in a neutral environment to allow for an acceptable amount of privacy and comfort. Three couples elected to meet in their own homes and one couple chose to come to my home to take part in the study. All participants reviewed and signed a letter of information/consent before the interview began, and any additional questions were addressed at this time (see Appendix B: Letter of Information/Consent).

I conducted the interviews using an interview guide (see Appendix C: Interview Guide) designed to explore the couples’ pathways into grandparenting, their experiences of it, their senses of its possibilities and its tensions.

Qualitative interviewing is understood as a co-production, involving interviewee(s) and researcher, where meanings and understanding are created in an interaction. This approach to research involves the construction or reconstruction of knowledge more than the excavation of it (Mason, 2002). For my research project, these interviews were intended to draw out the nuanced appreciation of experiences of homophobia and the complexities in everyday lives and relationships. This method then, requires, as Mason (2002) states, “An understanding of depth and complexity in, say, people’s situated or contextual accounts and experiences, rather than a more superficial analysis of surface comparability between accounts of large numbers of people” (65). Also according to Mason, decisions regarding sampling must be based on the wider universe of social explanation in relation to which a researcher has constructed the research questions. For my project, homophobia and heterosexism form the context of social explanation, positing participants as experts in their experience. This interview guide was designed in order to explore these experiences on their terms (see Appendix C: Interview Guide).

I am also interested in what Mason calls a “universe of gender relations”(123). Lesbian, and/or queer-identified grandmothers have a particular place in the structures of power that differs from gay men, for example, as well as distinctive attributes that will inform the study. For this reason, my study does not account for the experiences of trans-identified grandmothers, who will bring to their grandparenting relationships different and additional skills, desires, and experiences that are not necessarily comparable to those explored here. My sampling approach will then provide access to enough data, with the right focus, to enable me to answer my research questions in a realistic nature relative to the limited scope of study.

### Analysis

Interviews were recorded digitally with permission obtained by participants via a consent form, with the option to provide verbal consent. The four interviews were transcribed, and ‘read’ literally for the words and language used, the sequence of interaction, the form and structure of the dialogue and literal content (Mason, 2002). Nevertheless, as a qualitative researcher, I recognize that participants interpret the interview questions based on their social world and previous experiences. As well, I interpret and understand the data collected based on my own social location and past experiences. According to Mason, “An interpretive reading will involve you in constructing or documenting a version of what you think the data mean or represent, or what you think you can infer from them” (149).

Following Ristock’s (2002) approach to analyzing accounts, my first reading of the transcripts, focused on the material content of the narrative by asking, “What are they telling me? (37). The second reading of the transcripts also reflected Ristock’s (2002) approach. This involved listening to the participant’s voices and treating their responses as authoritative accounts or “constructions that reveal their subjectivities as a way of understanding the participants sense of self and their ways of understanding their relation to the world” (38). Particular attention was paid to who was speaking (e.g., was one member of the couple participating more than the other?; did responses from the non-biologically related grandparent differ significantly from the biologically related grandparent?). I also examined the ways in which participants invoked historical or cultural contexts to describe their current experiences and how they positioned themselves socially among their neighbors, other family members, and among their larger community. Finally, I paid attention to the language that they used to answer each question. According to Ristock: “Language is seen as something that not only describes experience, but is also something that constructs it”(39).

As a feminist social worker and critical researcher, I also took a reflexive reading of the interviews, which locates me within the data I have generated. I explored my own role and perspectives in the process of the generation and interpretation of data. Reflexivity is a component of feminist research, requiring the researcher to remain aware of and make visible their own experiences and presence in the research process, (Hoggart in Becker et al, 2012) this approach further encourages the researcher to openly reflect on the significance of their own identities and how they may influence behavior in the field. The commitment is to incorporate reflexivity as a component at every stage of the research design: pre-research, data collection, and data analysis. Findley (2002) cautions us to strike a balance between privileging the researcher’s emotion and experience with the risk of blocking out the participant’s voice, the very issue I intend to address. Therefore, the reflexive process must be done well, understood as a challenge, yet ultimately beneficial to both researcher and participant(s). According to Ristock (2002,43), a deep reflexive approach is crucial in bringing forward a personal subjectivity for our own self-awareness, and to reveal a meaning-making process in order to remain accountable to participants’ stories. With respect to my own self-awareness, I tried to be observant of how my own queerness impacts the success of the project. As noted in the previous chapter, I am both a mother and a parent in the context of a same-sex relationship. I experienced this factor in a way that improved my ability to access a population of lesbian grandmothers who might not agree to be studied by a non-queer researcher and to build trust between us. According to Lasala (2003), “Gay and lesbian respondents may be more likely to participate in research conducted by a lesbian or gay man because they believe the researcher is committed to deconstructing societal misperceptions about who they are” (18).

In the final stage of data analysis, participants were provided with a transcription of their interviews and invited to review and respond to the data they provided. This process, known as member checking (Mason, 2002), affords participants an opportunity to clarify or add to the interview, but also engenders an additional layer of trust between the researcher and participants, as they renew their engagement with the study (see Becker et. al. 2012). I hoped that the final review would also provide a ‘door-knob’ opportunity for participants—just as the study is ending and they are ‘walking out the door,’ they might feel less restricted by the research process and speak more freely about anything we have heretofore missed.

# FINDINGS

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### Participants

Four same-sex couples (thus a total of eight lesbian/queer-identified women) were interviewed for this study. Three out of four of these couples were legally married and the fourth would be considered common law partners under the *Ontario Family Law Act*.[[4]](#footnote-4) One couple identified as interracial and within this family, the adult child is Afro-Caribbean and the grandchild is mixed race. In another couple, one woman identifies as Jewish and prefers the Yiddish title ‘Bubie,’ reflecting this cultural background. The two other couples did not discuss their ethnic backgrounds, but could be identified as Caucasian.

All women interviewed identified as grandmothers who are actively involved with their grandchildren. They described their activities together to include ‘Sunday dinners,’ birthday parties, swimming, and other indoor and outdoor leisure activities, as well as homework help and cultural activities. One couple also discussed how they provide financial support for their grandchildren. Specific activities and levels of involvement will be discussed further in this chapter. All couples lived in urban areas located in southern Ontario and have access to city parks and recreation facilities, community centers, and other municipal services.

Each couple consisted of one partner who is biologically related to her adult child and, in all cases, this adult child was born in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship. In two of the cases, the children were adults prior to their mothers beginning a relationship with their current partners. Due to changing societal norms and demographics, it is worthwhile noting this will not likely be the case for the next generations of LGBTQ families, which are being created within a queer context. For the purposes of this study, partners who are biologically related to their grandchildren will be identified as ‘biologically related grandmothers’ and partners who are not biologically related will be identified as ‘ non-biologically related grandmothers.’ Although these terms remain inadequate to describe the rich and nuanced familial relationships that exist regardless of genetic relationships, they are helpful when investigating any real or perceived differences in the grandmother-grandchild relationships among those women who are biologically or genetically related to their grandchildren and those who are not.

All four couples indicated that they became grandparents together. All expressed a desire to be part of their grandchildren’s lives and see this as an extension of their relationships to the adult children in their families. The couples interviewed for this study, (identified by pseudonyms) were:

**\*Eva “Bubie” & \*Karen “Grandma”**

Eva (Biologically related) and Karen (Non-biologically related) met just over ten years ago and live together in a large city. Eva has one biological daughter from a previous heterosexual relationship and this child is also in a same-sex relationship. Karen has no biological children. Eva and Karen have one granddaughter, 6-year-old \*N, and one grandson, 3-year-old E\*.

**\*Ruby “Grandma” & \*Margaret “Nanna”**

Ruby (Biologically related) and Margaret (Non-biologically related) have been together for more than a decade. The couple was legally married in 2013, and lives in a medium-size suburban city. Ruby has one son from a previous heterosexual relationship. Margaret has no biological children. Ruby’s son has two children, a girl and a boy, but does not have contact with his daughter. Ruby and Margaret are actively involved as grandmothers to 2-year-old \*T.

**\*Lisa “Grandma L” & \*Sunni “Grandma S”**

Lisa (Biologically related) and Sunni (Non-biologically related) have been in a relationship for more than 12 years and are legally married. Lisa has two children from a previously heterosexual relationship. Although Sunni does not name herself as a mother to these children, she has taken on the roles and activities in the family associated with being a step-parent. They are grandmothers of 2-year-old \*J. Lisa and Sunni live in a medium size city.

**\*Dar & \*Kitt, “The Mommas”**

Dar (Biologically related) and Kitt (Non-biologically related) have been in a relationship for more than 25 years and are legally married. Dar has three children from a previous heterosexual relationship. Although Kitt, like Sunni, does not name herself as a mother to these children, she has taken on the roles and activities in the family associated with being a step-parent. They are grandmothers of \*R, and \*K (with one more on the way). Dar and Kitt live in a medium size city.

The table below summarizes some of these four couples’ identifying characteristics for easy referencing as the reader moves through the presentation of themes emerging from the interviews.

**Figure 1. Participants’ Key Characteristics**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Biological grandmother** | Eva | Ruby | Lisa | Dar |
| **Non- Biological grandmother** | Karen | Margaret | Sunni | Kitt |
| **Number of years together as a couple** | 10 | 10 | 12 | 25 |
| **Legally married?** | N | Y | Y | Y |
| **Adult children** | 1 (daughter) | 1 (son) | 2 (daughters) | 3 (1 daughter, 2 sons) |
| **Grandchildren** | 2 (6yrs, 3yrs) | 1 (2 years) | 1 (2 years) | 2 (4 years, 2 years) |

### “We Bought a (Bigger) Car:” What is a Grandmother for? Celebrating Traditional Grandmothering Roles

Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) concluded that grandparenting styles could be loosely characterized as ‘formal’, ‘fun-seeking’, or ‘distant’. Although their groundbreaking article is now four decades old, the descriptions of various approaches to grandparenting continue to resonate with this study. The four couples that informed this study expressed a certain level of respect for their grandchildren’s parents they also expressed a reluctance to refrain from intruding on the parental decision making/roles. I would not characterize these grandparents as ‘formal’ in Neugarten and Weinstein’s terms. Rather, they corresponded with the description of grandparents who were ‘fun-loving;’ they were all actively involved with their grandchildren and engaged in activities, both enriching and supporting their development and maturation, as well as expose them to additional cultural traditions and histories.

In many ways, participants felt that their roles as grandmothers aligned with traditional understandings about what grandmothers do for families. For example, several women mentioned that they take on caregiving roles that ‘spoil’ the grandchildren; one woman noted that her grandchild knows that she has a “candy jar” (Karen). The caregiving that these women provide not only enriches the lives of the grandchildren, but also provides the parents with respite and support. One woman described a situation at her grandchild’s cooperative pre-school whereby each parent is expected to perform “duty days” during which they serve as a caregiver at the school (Karen). Because both of the parents work full-time, one of the grandmothers stepped into this role and does “duty days” on their behalf. Karen spoke also about the financial contributions that she has provided for her two grandchildren. She said, “We bought a car that not only [enables] us to access the kids, but we knew perfectly well that because the parents couldn’t afford to buy a car that big… So that’s to me that’s that old fashioned that you buy stuff and you do stuff in certain ways.” Eva went on to explain that she believes that they are “very traditional grandparents…. We don’t raise the kids, they are really raised by their parents, but we’re definitely right in there and so it’s more of the old fashioned grandparent role, more traditional.” Eva and Karen also described how they went out of their way to provide a “natural family gathering” place, by purchasing a family cottage and establishing a tradition of gathering there together as an extended family (Karen).

The role of the grandmothers in the transference and teaching of family and cultural customs was also emphasized by some of the women in the study. Ruby and Margaret discussed the importance of cooking traditional West Indies cuisine in the house and how they plan to teach their grandson how to cook this food on his own when he is old enough. Eva also spoke about how she infuses secular Jewish customs into family celebrations and holiday customs. She explained that both she and her daughter want the grandchildren to learn what it means to take on a Jewish identity. She described how, when she bought the grandchildren their first kippahs, it dawned on her that the responsibility for transferring knowledge about their Jewish culture had fallen to her; this is a significant responsibility for the family.

### “It’s Just Joy, Unspeakable:” Becoming Grandmothers: Emotions, Identities, and Choice

As Kemp (2005) notes, the grandparent-grandchild relationship is generally identified as a source of unconditional love and support. All of the women interviewed for this study expressed great joy in describing their roles as grandparents and the relationships that they have with their grandchildren. More than one participant wept during our interview when discussing the immense love they have for their grandchild(ren). One woman explained, “I wasn’t in the birthing room, but holding him for the first time in my arms… It’s something I can’t explain, except to say that it’s just joy, unspeakable” (Margaret).

One woman also described a great feeling of pride that grows out of her relationship with her grandson. When I asked her to talk freely about her grandson, she replied:

Really? You want to hear about [my grandson]? How much tape do you have? He’s the love of my life. He is definitely the best thing, one of the best things that ever happened to me. He brings shared joy, you know just the thought of him makes my heart happy. When I see him come through that door, even though he has his attitude when his dad is around, it still blesses my heart to know that my love is here (Ruby).

Two of the non-biologically related grandparents also expressed incredible joy because they did not think that they would ever be able to experience being grandparents; neither had biological children of their own (Karen and Margaret). When their grandchildren were born, they were both overtaken by emotion.

Another non-biologically related grandmother also discussed how she did not consider herself a mother and hence, she had not fully considered any possible role as a grandmother, even though she assumed that her partner’s children would one day have children of their own. She explained:

I never once thought about being a grandmother. And not that I didn’t think the kids would have kids, but I just never put any thought into it… I never really had a role because their dad is still alive and so they had a mom, they had a dad and then there was me (Kitt).

Becoming a grandmother has nevertheless made her feel as though she is part of a complete family. She went on to say, “So my whole life no one called me mom, but with [my grandchildren], I’m their grandma. They call us the Mommas” (Kitt).

In fact, all women discussed how becoming grandparents impacted their personal identities, but there was a noticeable difference in the way that non-biologically related grandmothers described this shift. Karen, for example, described how becoming a grandmother helped her solidify her relationships to her partner and her partner’s daughter. She explained, “From my perspective, [becoming a grandmother] really solidified the family relationships because Eva can look at me one way and [her daughter and her daughter’s partner] can look at me differently. But these grandkids don’t. They look at me as grandma” (Karen). She described this experience as significantly impacting her personal identity and changing her sense of self. Margaret stated, “Having the grandson gives me a sense of complete family. That’s how I see myself, too” (Margaret). For non-biologically related grandmothers, the presence of grandchildren not only reinforced their sense of belonging in their own families, but also helped them achieve a meaningful identity that they did not previously consider possible because they did not have biological children of their own.

Becoming a grandmother can also produce negative feelings and new burdens on women as they shift into caregiving roles. Eva discussed how becoming a grandmother translated into a loss of identity. She explained:

My identity did change in that you put yourself second and you put the needs of the grandchild first so that whole shift that was reminiscent of when I was a mom. Of putting the kid first and sort of setting aside your own physical and emotional interests and needs and wants. So your whole identity becomes as a grandmother rather than who you are. You lose your name. People don’t even call you your name. I’m Bubie (Eva).

Eva’s partner Karen retired from a successful career to become a full-time caregiver for her grandchildren, a decision that she acknowledges as a significant part of how her role as grandmother was and remains central to her life. She described her role as full-time caregiver as part of her new post-career identity and equates her passion for her grandchildren with the passion she once held for her job in the school system.

One woman described the difficulty she had throughout her transition from parent to grandparent. Grandparenting, she explained, is something that she associated with the aging process and she was not ready to admit that she was aging. She explained, “I associate [becoming a grandmother] with this change of life and change of identity and so I could not identify myself as a grandma or a nana or a nanny. I [thought I was] young and vibrant and I just don’t want that name attached” (Linda). Another woman doubted her capacity to take on the grandparent role because she had never been a mother and had limited experience with caring for infants. She questioned the entire notion of ‘motherly instinct’ because this was something she never had (Margaret). One woman described how her initial reaction to learning that she was going to be a grandmother was one of disbelief. She described her first thoughts as, “No way man, I can’t believe I’m going to be a frigging grandmother. Like grandmother?! No. Grandmothers have white hair and [they are] chubby and round and bake” (Linda). Without images of contemporary grandmothers, however, these women were left with stereotypical assumptions, deeply ageist cultural assumptions about how we age and what grandmothers look like. For most of the women in this study, the very idea of becoming a grandmother was something to be resisted because with this role comes the assumption of conventional, heterosexist or desexualized lifestyles and traditional values. Margaret explained that the experience of becoming a grandmother has actually provided her with an opportunity to learn what it means to be a grandmother, and this is not always what one might expect from our common culture. She said, “I’m teaching him, he’s also teaching me” (Margaret).

Women also discussed how they made conscious decisions to be actively involved in the lives of their grandchildren, a choice that has had implications for them in terms of their commitment to careers, their financial investment in their family, and their leisure time. For non-biologically related grandmothers, the very act of becoming a grandmother is also a condition of choice. Whereas the biologically related grandmothers interviewed perceived the transition to grandparenting as a natural extension of their motherhood, non-biologically related grandmothers were afforded the option of taking on this role or deciding to leave this to their partners. When asked about her decision to take on the grandmother role, Karen emphasized the fact that she gave up her career to become a full-time grandmother and that this choice was never assumed. She said, “Not only did I choose to be a grandma, but I chose to be a thoroughly involved one” (Karen). Once the decision was made, she became so integrated into the role of grandmother that she feels that her grandchildren perceive her as no less a part of the family than her partner. In fact, Karen is the one grandmother who serves on school council, walks the grandchildren to and from school, and participates more often in sports and leisure activities than her partner. She is, however, aware that her decision to grandparent is a choice and one that she had to make. She explained:

When it’s not a birth situation you have more choice to do it or not, and I think that you can be just a grandma or a good grandma, depending on your definition. I don’t feel I’m any less of a grandma or more of a grandma than if [my partner’s daughter] were my daughter, my birth daughter, I don’t feel that way. I just feel, I’m their grandmother and they think so too (Karen).

The decision of the non-biologically related grandmother does nevertheless have some impact on and is shaped by other family relationships. As Dar explained, she encouraged her partner to “claim” her role as a grandmother because, despite serving in a stepmother role for 25 years, Kitt had not ever felt able to claim her role as a parent. She gestured to Kitt in the interview, “I said to Kitt… I really hope that you’ll own it and not shy away like it’s not your right… We talked, remember?” (Dar). Kitt and Dar had been together as a couple for more than 25 years and had parented “against the grain” in a different socio-political time. Throughout the 1980s, Dar noted, lesbian couples often lost custody of their children or had their children removed from them on the basis of sexual orientation.

In this study, all four non-biologically related partners chose to take on the grandparenting role and do so with little attention to the distinctions between biological and non-biological relationships. As Margaret explained, “I take [my grandson] to work and show him off. I’m showing of my grandson, not my wife’s grandson. He’s my grandson even though I’m not biological. I wouldn’t introduce him as my non-biological grandson. He’s my grandson” (Margaret). Several women, however, reflected on the ways in which social and legal shifts in Canada have made it easier for two women to parent together in the context of a same-sex relationship. Kitt and Dar discussed, for example, the difficulties they faced 25 years ago when they were raising Dar’s children together. Kitt also noted that her siblings often give her the feeling like they are observing her to see how she is or is not perceived as a “real” grandmother. The grandchildren, however, seemingly treat Kitt as a “real” grandma, as described by how they interact with her, using great affection and naming her relation to them clearly. Karen noted that her mother’s generation would not have been so comfortable with the concept of adopting another person’s grandchild, even in the context of a heterosexual relationship. The relationships between these women and their grandchildren appeared to be challenging members of their extended families to confront their own homophobia and acknowledge the grandchildren as ‘legitimate,’ regardless of biological ties. By confronting homophobia, or resisting continual heterosexism—‘everyday sexism’—these women are indeed breaking new ground within their grandmothering roles and identities.

### “In Every Situation, We’re Very Open:” Visibility, Connectedness, and Confronting Everyday Homophobia/Heterosexism

All the study participants were actively in the lives of their grandchildren. That is, they offered regular care for their grandchildren, they took them to leisure activities such as sports games and swimming lessons, and they picked them up from day care or school when necessary. Participation in these kinds of activities makes these women visible to others in their local communities. In this section, I will examine some of the implications of this visibility and the extent to which this visibility has included experiences of homophobia or heterosexism. For the purpose of this study, I consider homophobia to encompass a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward people who are identified or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This can include hostility, contempt, or prejudice, and may be based in irrational fear or related religious beliefs. As a corollary, heterosexism is a system of attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favour of heterosexual sexual expression and different-sex relationships. It can also include the presumption that people are heterosexual or that different-sex relationships are the only ‘normal’ expression of human affection. Not all of my participants made the distinction between homophobia and heterosexism, as they are often closely intertwined; however, it is worthwhile pointing out that the two concepts are distinct and will be treated as such in this paper. The primary reason for making this distinction is to point out that homophobia tends to be an active expression—people do or say things that are homophobic, whereas heterosexism is a more passive and often hidden form of discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual people. For example, a lesbian woman might experience homophobia if she is told that she cannot hold her partner’s hand in a restaurant; she will experience heterosexism when filling out an application form that asks for the name of her husband.

Participants were quick to reject the notion that they experienced homophobia on a regular basis or even at all within their local communities. Two common responses were given when women were asked if they had ever encountered homophobia in their daily lives. Some women perceived their local communities as accepting of their same-sex relationships and of their grandparenting roles and asserted that homophobia was not something that they had ever encountered. Others acknowledged that they simply avoided situations in which they might anticipate homophobia. Eva, for example, explained that she had been raised in a liberal community and had sought out this kind of community her whole life. She “doesn’t encounter any negative situations” and if she did, she would view these as “educational moments” in which she could talk about the impact of homophobia. Several women also spoke about the importance of their visibility in the community and how they are “out” and open about their sexuality as a way to pre-empt any potential homophobic experience.

Karen, a former public school administrator, is very involved with her school-aged grandchild’s school council. Although she only steps in when their parents are not available or do not want to take part in a particular activity, Karen is a consistent figure in the school. As she explained, she is the only grandparent on school council and recognized by most of the teachers and administrative staff as a grandparent. Karen did not describe any overt homophobia or heterosexism stemming from this experience, but she admits that she was prepared to confront negativity if it did occur. Karen and Eva also take their grandkids to doctors’ appointments and expressed some initial concern that these would produce a homophobic or heterosexist experience, which could make everyone feel uncomfortable. They worried, for example, that a physician might question how they were related to their grandchildren. Karen stated, “The two of us are strong enough, confident enough that we just bypassed that.” That is, the two grandmothers were aware of a potentially uncomfortable experience, but did not let this concern prohibit them from engaging in the activity. Eva explained, “In every situation we’re very open about us being from a gay family, the kids being from a gay family, and so I don’t think anybody whatever their personal views would dare to say a word.” Eva notes, however, that she is less visible as a lesbian because she does not “read” as one. Karen, on the other hand, is more visible because she has short hair and dresses in a manner that is perceived as “queer:” “I don’t announce it or have a placard or a thing in my wallet, but I’m a lot more visible.”

Margaret pointed out that her grandchild is still in daycare and that she has not yet had a lot of experience being with him in the larger community. She speculated that she would be more actively involved with community events when her grandchild is old enough to participate in team sports and other leisure activities, such as soccer or baseball games. Right now, she is comfortable taking him into her workplace and introducing him to her work colleagues as her grandson. She also described how she holds his hand as they walk through the grocery store: “He wants to hold Nana and Grandma’s hand on each side and that’s the way we go.” Lisa also discussed how she brings her grandson into her work environment. She acknowledged that this is a conscious decision to be out and proud about her life and to confront any potential homophobia before it can even be expressed. She said, “I go in and tell them when I start a new job, just so you know you’re going to be hearing about my wife and my life… I want to educate the general public and my workmates… And I want to get the conversation started.”

Lisa also underscored the importance of showing affection with her partner in front of her grandson so that he understands their behavior as unremarkable and normal. She discussed the importance of being out and considers this an important part of her relationship to both her partner and her grandson. Being out, she explained, was the only way to make social change. Lisa said, “I like to kind of see how people react to it and if there’s any kind of physiognomy change, and if anything happens. I want to push the envelope because, if you don’t push it out there, nothing changes. And so I’m really open about it.” She went on to explain that she purposefully refers to her partner as her “wife” and not “spouse” to really press the point that she is in a same-sex relationship. She stated, “I like to push the envelope, I like to push the conversation. I want to be able to live my life freely and feel comfortable doing so. And you know what, I will be a little in-your-face, and I’m ok with that” (Lisa).

The experience of homophobia among extended families, however, was something that several participants noted as a current or past concern for their families. One couple explained that their grandchild’s paternal grandparents were initially hesitant about exposing their grandchild to lesbians. There was a custody agreement in place that not only endorsed the lesbian grandmothers’ relationship, but also ensured they would have access to their grandson, and so this homophobia was not immediately disruptive. It is nevertheless unclear what kind of long-term impact these paternal grandparents will have on their grandchild. In another situation, the grandchildren also have two moms, and their other set of grandparents had almost completely distanced themselves from the family because of their daughter’s sexuality, as well as the role of the lesbian grandmothers in the lives of the grandchildren.

What was key for all couples was to combat potential negative perceptions about their same-sex relationships by maintaining open and honest relationships with each other and with their family members. Lisa described her relationship with her grandson as “very close” and emphasized the importance of trust and feeling safe within a family. She also expressed the importance of “living authentically, being comfortable within our own skin and out environment.” Sunni described this as being warm, compassionate and fun, which Lisa attributes to their capacity to live “totally free” and not “clamped down by any extraneous negative energy.” They are, she explained, “captains of our own life ship and living true to that, not allowing outside influences to change who we want to be and how we want to live.” This notion supports Orel and Fruhauf’s (2006) findings that the level of outness impacts the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

Karen wonders if her grandchildren are simply not old enough to question their grandparents’ relationship, but just see them as a family unit. She explained that her grandson asks for “BubieGrandma” with one word. Clearly, these grandmothers model such a loving and honest relationship to their grandson that he perceives them as a couple to be called upon equally at all times.

With these loving and open relationship established, much hope and confidence could be felt during the interviews, that the quality of these relationships will be sustained in years to come. That is, with successive generations of queer grandparents involved in children’s upbringing, and/or daily lives, a generation of children will be impacted. Within institutions, such as day care/child care facilities, and elementary schools it will be important, in future studies to see if this hope and confidence is confirmed.

### “Every Time the Line is Moved, I Get More Freedom:” The Impact of Marriage Equality and Bill C-38

As noted above, three out of four of the couples interviewed were legally married; the fourth couple lives in a common-law partnership recognized by the Province of Ontario. The pursuit of marriage equality has a long history in Canada, beginning in 1980 with the introduction of Bill C-242, an act to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of orientation, then in 1990, Bill C-23, ‘The Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act,’ issued same-sex couples the same benefits and obligations as common-law heterosexual couples (Wilkinson, 2004). With this bill, in effect, the definition of ‘common-law relationship’ was expanded to include same-sex relationships. Subsequent bills and further legal action brought the issue of same-sex marriage to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1999, when it ruled that same-sex couples should have the same benefits and obligations as different-sex common-law couples and equal access to social programs. The first legal same-sex marriage registered in Ontario was that of Paula Barrero and Blanca Mejias, married on September 29, 2001, by Rev. Dr. Cheri DiNovo. As of 2011, an estimated 8,370 same-sex couples have been legally married in the Province of Ontario (Smith, 2012). This section presents findings from the study related to the impact of same-sex marriage and Bill C-38, the *Civil Marriage Act*, which legalized same-sex marriage across Canada. Bill C-38 was introduced in February 2005, and became law when it received Royal Assent on July 20, 2005.

I asked couples to comment on any implications that marriage equality legislation and incremental cultural and/or attitudinal changes have had on their relationships with each other and among family, as well as the impact they have had on their status within and outside of their local communities. One woman reminded me that throughout the 1970s, the bonds of marriage were a frequent source of complaint for feminist and lesbian feminist-identified women (Eva). Another woman explained that many women of her generation were involved with men prior to coming out as lesbian, and many of these were involved with ‘failed marriages’ (Sunni). There was also a tremendous amount of political activism aimed at shifting the ways in which marriage reinforced the notion that women were the property of men. Yet, the introduction of legislation to recognize same-sex relationships as legal equivalent of different-sex marriages has been instrumental in legitimizing and validating lesbian and gay relationships. As Eva stated, “[Bill C-38] forces the issue out and that all the other people have to shut up their opinions. It used to be ok to say, I don’t think they should get married, well now it’s the law in Canada so move on to another whatever you call it…” Although Eva and Karen are not married, they see the value in the legislative changes. Karen explained, “I really believe that every time the line is moved, I get more freedom. By the mere definition that we’re allowed to marry, I can now have more rights. I don’t have to get married to have them.”

Sunni and Lisa decided to get married after the legislation was changed because they felt that it was a way to “exercise their rights” (Sunni). Sunni described how she was initially ambivalent about marriage, but then became invested in the right to marry after the law changed. She stated:

When we were first together, I said to Lisa, I’ve been married twice to men, failed marriages, and I said it doesn’t really matter. We don’t need to get married; we’re both very committed to each other. But then when the bill changed and people were fighting to get this. I gradually evolved into a mini activist, if you will. So it’s become really important to me… We’re allowed to get married, we should get married and we should be furthering the cause (Sunni).

Besides providing for the exercise of legal rights, Lisa and Sunni also attributed other changes in their social status and the way that they are regarded within the broader Canadian context and among extended family to the passage of Bill C-38. Sunni explained that this impact is not just about legislation:

I have a lot of family in the States that are really right wing Christian, very religious but I think that the movement, sort of the discussion of same-sex marriage has shifted their opinions and they’re much less critical and therefore more accepting even of me even though it’s really only Facebook connections because the issue has been raised so publicly (Sunni).

Sunni noted that family members sent messages of support after their marriage announcement using social media. A quick note of ‘Like’ on Facebook showed the couple that their marriage was accepted.

Margaret and Ruby also agreed that same-sex marriage laws have had a positive impact because they have legitimized their relationship in a way that common-law partnership had not. Margaret said, “I try and say it every time I get the opportunity, this is my wife Ruby, and I notice the impact.” Ruby explained, “I feel more confident, like I got a boost to openly say that I have a same-sex partner.” Before they were married, Ruby acknowledged that she often kept this to herself and chose only a few people to tell about her relationship with Margaret. Now that their marriage is recognized under the law, she feels that she has rights and is more confident to speak openly about her family structure.

Marriage equality has also had a positive impact on the relationships that these women have with their grandchildren and the legal rights that tie everyone together, regardless of background or culture. Ruby described how she perceived her grandson would respond to learning about his family and beginning to understand the differences between same-sex and different-sex relationships. She believed that he would only see the positive aspects of their family relationships because his grandmothers are legally married and he has been witness to the positive aspects of this relationship. Margaret explained, “All he can see and feel is love and he sees love between Ruby and I and he’ll see us kissing and hugging appropriately. There’s no wrong reaction from it.” Ruby also mentioned that she believes that being part of a non-traditional family would also give her grandson an unfolding flexibility about relationships outside of his family. That is, she anticipates that he will be more accepting of all types of relationships.

Although none of the women interviewed had a clear understanding of their legal rights as grandparents, they did perceive marriage equality as a way to invoke any rights they do have with regard to their grandchildren. This is especially beneficial for non-biologically related grandmothers, who do not always have clear custody rights if their partnerships with the biologically related grandmothers should end. Karen worried that, should the parents not be able to care for the grandchildren, she would have to provide some kind of legal or guardianship agreement that would give her legal rights to serve as guardian of the grandchildren, but she quickly dismissed this as realistic possibility. Her legal status is, however, an ongoing source of worry. She said:

I would have if [the parents] were to die, and Eva were too sick to take care of them. Where would my role be? I don’t know? I mean I think that there’d be enough people around to say *phfuff*, are you out of your mind? You lived 10 years at that house, you know, piss off. And that’s the thing, I could call the school reps and ok here’s a picture, here are 10 people in their lives, who’s the main contact—Grandma (Karen).

Margaret and Ruby also speculated about the importance of legal marriage for their relationship, in particular, because they are a mixed-race couple. Margaret described the complicated relationships among her family. Ruby’s son is no longer partnered with nor was he ever legally married to the mother of his child and this has implications for custody and access for all of her son’s family members. The family is also racially mixed—Ruby and her son identify as black Caribbean Canadian and Margaret and the mother of her grandson are white/Caucasian Canadian. Margaret strives to build a loving and respectful environment for all of the family members so that the grandson can grow up in a loving home. Marriage has given Ruby and Margaret a sense of stability and validation that they can model for their grandson, and also assured Margaret some rights if either Ruby’s son or the mother of her grandson were to prohibit access.

### “You Can Overcome Anything, Nothing is Insurmountable, There are Solutions:” The Prospect of Future Change.

When asked questions about experiences with homophobia or heterosexism, couples noted that they anticipated that their grandchildren would experience homophobia and heterosexism at some point in their lives. Several of the women spoke openly about how they saw themselves as somehow responsible for creating a safe place for their grandchildren to explore their own questions around sexuality and sexual identity. Karen pointed out that homophobic experiences can occur in any number of places, such as when engaging with law professionals, at the doctor’s office, or in schools. All four couples noted that they also perceived their responsibilities as grandmothers to help prepare their grandchildren to confront homophobia when they are confronted by it and resist heterosexism in their daily lives. Lisa spoke at length about how she felt that it were her duty as a grandmother to instill in her grandchild a sense of self-confidence and assuredness, to help him become “strong people.” She also noted that her grandson is still too young to fully understand sexuality, but that she was attempting to teach him that it was important to “be authentic.” This teaching was accomplished by modeling the behavior of confidence and self-assuredness that she hopes he will develop. She stated:

I think what’s going to really become very clear to him is that we are two very strong people and we will influence him in that way. That you can overcome anything, nothing is insurmountable, there are solutions, you need to be authentic, you need to be true to yourself, you need to follow your heart. And that’s not to say that there aren’t going to be difficult times and we read about these difficult times that people have coming out and the oppression there. But we’ve not experienced that. I don’t know how we’ve navigated around that for us or maybe you we’ve got a lot of life experience under our belt (Lisa).

Lisa also noted that this kind of teaching that she does for her grandchildren is something that may not take place in a formal school curriculum, and hence it was her duty to take this on. She said:

I don’t know what kind of education they do in schools these days. Like is there any education? Is there any component at any point that talks about the ways that families look? Mixed or same-sex? I don’t think so, I don’t know. So you know unless something changes there systemically from an early age of course he’s going to experience it and it’s going to happen. So we will have to, it will be our role to support him through that. And based on our life experience (Lisa).

All couples were asked to reflect on what makes their approach to grandparenting different from other grandparents. This question was designed to prompt women to discuss how they perceive themselves to be different from different-sex couples and what special qualities they might have because they grandmother in the context of a same-sex relationship. Sunni called their approach to grandparenting “double the fun” because her grandchildren get to spend time with two fun-loving and engaged grandmothers instead. Her partner Lisa explained:

I look at some of the other grandparents, I think we’re better. And I’ll tell you why I think we’re better. I work at [a museum] and I see grandparents coming in with their grandchildren all the time. And usually the male, the grandfather, sits back and he’s on his phone and he’s doing this and the grandmother is down on the ground and engaged -- The grandmother is engaged playing. That’s not the case with us at all… It’s double the fun (Lisa).

She went on to explain that she believed women to be more “nurturing” and “emotional creatures.” On the other hand, she believed that men behaved differently in both parenting and grandparenting roles, but recognized that the differences reflect the socialization process that encourages and reinforces certain behaviors based on gender identity. She explained:

Based on my experience watching my husband’s parents, what their reaction, how they behaved as grandparents with my kids, and my mom and dad, it’s just those typical those roles those gender roles that are so definable. And so I think we’re way better…we’re double the fun. [Our grandson has] got double duty nurturing, loving, emotional, physical, it’s just so I think its so completely different experience. Just way better (Lisa).

Dar spoke about the how she works really hard to expose her grandson to new experiences and give him a “little glimpse at some of the things that are important in our lives.” As she explained, “It’s so pure with the grandkids. Because they don’t know anything different.” The lack of pretention or assumptions allows her and her partner to speak openly with him about things that they love to do and then share these with him. All of the couples discussed the ways in which the freedom to maintain an open discourse with their children and grandchildren about their love for family and each other has produced wonderful opportunities to be playful and have fun with one another. This playfulness allows them to model a loving relationship for their grandchildren that is both healthy and positive. Eva and Karen also open their homes for play dates and celebrations with other children and these experiences are not only fun but also help integrate their family into the neighbourhood. Karen explained:

One more point on that I think that we have opened our home to a lot of different kids in a variety of different ways. So we’re actually seen as fun places for a lot of kids to go to. We do emergency drop off and pick up for neighborhood kids and for other, so for nannies and families. So what happens is their children, like for example there were five kids who went to day care from [our granddaughter’s] kindergarten class, so they go in the morning to junior kindergarten then they go upstairs to day care for the afternoon. All of those five kids had at least two play dates at our house. So I would go pick them up with permission and the whole sign them all out. They would come to our house and play, so they would get an afternoon off from day care and a fun play date so I think there’s a whole group of parents out there that see a benefit to us being grandparents to these kids (Karen).

All of the women interviewed anticipated that their grandchildren would experience homophobia and heterosexism as a result of their grandparents’ relationship. Nevertheless, they felt that their authenticity, security and steadfast “outness” was key to preparing their grandchildren for confronting this homophobia and heterosexism. Dar explained:

It will be interesting when it comes to school and as he gets older that we hope that he has a good solid foundation now. That when and if (unfortunately) other school children start teasing him, bullying him because he has same sex grandparents then he will have that foundation behind him, and that love to stand up to that bullying, to say that this is normal, you know (Dar).

Dar went on to describe how she felt that the unfolding flexibility, coping skills, and love that she could transfer to her grandson would provide him with the life skills needed to challenge homophobia and heterosexism for himself and for others.

# DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of lesbian and queer-identified women who are actively grandparenting in the context of a same-sex relationship. In interviews with the participating couples, I asked questions about the level of their involvement in the everyday lives of their grandchildren, how homophobia and heterosexism impact their relationships with grandchildren, and how these experiences vary (if at all) with the nature of the grandmothers’ relational ties (e.g., biologically related or non-biologically related). In addition, I explored the kinds of strategies lesbian grandmothers have developed to grandparent within and against heteronormative environments.

As noted in the methodology chapter, it is important to interpret the study findings with recognition of the particular character of the small sample studied. While the sample included some variation in terms of incomes, backgrounds and cultures, all four couples were linked into informal lesbian/queer community networks and lived in large or mid-size urban areas in southern Ontario—a relatively progressive jurisdiction with respect to same sex marriage and human rights legislation (when considered in global context and even in comparison with neighbouring US states). This sample of lesbian/queer-identified grandmothers was, therefore, speaking from experience of relative entitlement as citizens and from the foundation of some community solidarity. A sample less well supported in these ways may have communicated less ease at being out and at asserting claims to grandparenting. What the findings do offer however, is a glimpse at the character of lesbian/queer grandmothering in relatively favourable conditions; a conceptual contribution to our understanding of the possibilities and aspirations of this little named and rarely explored type of family relationship.

What emerged from the study was the sense that participants experienced grandmothering in both traditional and non-traditional ways, which will be discussed further below. Also, I learned that there were noticeable differences in the experiences of non-biologically related and biologically related grandmothers. Findings both affirm and challenge existing literature on grandparenting. All women, for example, could be described categorically as ‘fun-loving,’ but they also inculcate grandchildren with skills and attributes that are distinctly ‘queer’—an aspect that Neugarten and Weinstein could not have anticipated. For example, couples anticipated that their grandchildren would experience homophobia or heterosexism throughout their lives and worked consciously to transfer skills to them that would help with coping and confronting this kind of discrimination. In this final chapter and with these provisos, I discuss some key study findings in the context of existing literature and consider their implications for social work practice.

### Affirming the Importance of Outness

At the beginning of the project, I was influenced by Orel and Fruhauf’s (2006) work, which explored the ways in which lesbian or bisexual grandmothers perceive the grandparent-grandchild relationship. For example, Orel and Fruhauf note a pronounced difference in the quality of relationship when the grandmother had disclosed her sexual orientation to her adult child (the parent). Grandmothers who were ‘out’ to their adult children reported feeling more satisfaction and closer relationships with their grandchildren than those who were not ‘out.’ My study affirmed these findings, but also looked more closely at the experiences of non-biologically related grandmothers. In each interview, participants discussed how they were open and ‘out’ with their adult children and that there did not appear to be tension between their adult children and either grandmother. Neither biologically related nor non-biologically related grandmothers expressed any concern that grandchildren would not accept them, unequivocally, as grandmothers, many noting that it was important for them to be honest and open with their grandchildren as a way to expose them to healthy models of family relationships and love. It is unlikely that these women could exert such influence if they were not ‘out’ and open with their adult children and with their local communities. Thus, this study confirms what Orel and Fruhauf claim about the correlation between ‘outness’ and satisfaction in the grandmother-grandchild relationship; the participants in this study all identified as ‘out’ and many expressed just how important this was to their capacity to actively grandparent.

Of note in the findings, however, is that non-biologically related grandmothers did experience different feelings about becoming a grandmother and that the role as grandmother was challenged from time to time. In each case, having an open and honest relationship to their partner and immediate families helped mitigate any discomfort or reserve in assuming the role. Significantly, challenges to their grandparenting roles came not from adult children but from extended family, such as sisters, aunts, and uncles, as well as the grandchildren’s other set of grandparents.

Participants’ willingness to be ‘out’ and open in their communities also had wide-ranging impact, as grandmothers navigated social institutions such as daycares, public schools, medical offices, and work places. Margaret’s enthusiasm for introducing her grandson to her work colleagues suggests that her comfort within her immediate family can pre-empt any overt homophobia by making visible her relational ties and avoiding secrecy. Lisa also underscored the importance of showing affection for her partner in front of her grandson as a way to normalize this behavior. She discussed the importance of being out and considered this an important part of her relationship with both her partner and her grandson.

### Claiming the Grandmother Role

Although legal rights are now in place in the southern Ontario context to both acknowledge and protect the position of non-biologically related grandmothers, study participants also discussed the importance of consciously claiming the act of grandparenting for those women who do not share genetic ties with the adult children. None of the non-biologically related grandmothers, for example, anticipated becoming grandmothers, an expected life event, because they did not identify as mothers. The role of grandmother was something that they took on consciously because, unlike their partners, they had the capacity to deny this role.

Following Mason (2002), I was interested in learning how participants interpret, reaffirm, and challenge social norms regarding the construction of family. The participants in this study all embraced and celebrated the new family role of lesbian/queer-identified grandmother, effectively claiming for themselves the family status normative in heterosexual families and acting in keeping with the traditional association of women with caring. As noted elsewhere in the thesis, it will be interesting to explore the experiences of lesbian/queer-identified women who choose not to claim the roles of grandmothers. The diversity of experiences of this older lesbian generation raises questions parallel to those debated in feminist and queer literatures on LGBTQ struggles for legal equality: most notably, whether the security and affirmation achieved by legal recognition may generate or thwart or mutually reinforce more far-reaching social and institutional changes and more fluid possibilities in human relationships and collective welfare (Herman, 1994; Onishenko and Caragata, 2010; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001).

The complexity of ‘claiming’ was especially apparent in the interview with one couple, Dar and Kitt. They had been together for 25 years, longer than the other three couples, and had raised Dar’s children together. They had, thus, navigated a socio-historical context that not only invalidated lesbian relationships, but also produced a climate in which children were forcibly removed from lesbian mothers on the basis of sexual orientation. As Dar explained, they had functioned as a family for more than a generation, during which time institutional and legal systems were unkind. As a result, Kitt had never felt entirely able to claim a parenting role openly. As the environment has shifted, however, and as Kitt’s role in the family has been validated through legal and cultural changes, being a grandmother had become a claim she could now make—noting in the interview that doing so made her feel as though she was now, finally, had a solidified role within the family. This couple’s experience likely mirrored that of many others in their generation and historical experience and is a moving reminder of the penetration of legal and structural arrangements into an individual’s senses of identity and possibility.

### The Connectedness of Public Structure to Personal Experiences, Creating New Relational Patterns

Patterson (2005a) identified the passage of Bill C-38 to legalize same-sex marriage as a watershed moment for the lesbian grandmothers she interviewed. After years of facing overt and disruptive homophobia while raising their own children, they were relieved and elated to discover the benefits of stability and public validation that they have now received in the wake of the 2003 decision. As Patterson notes, “Being married allows them both to feel secure with one another, and to proudly claim their relationship in terms of the broader society, and their extended families, understand” (46). In this study, I anticipated and found a similar response from the grandmothers interviewed (though their responses went further) who illuminating how the implications of this legislation have improved the wider social and political environment. Indeed, some participants noted that it was not necessary to actually be legally married to reap the rippling social benefits of this legal change. One couple felt that the law validated them as a couple in ways not previously thought possible and gave them a new sense of confidence in their relationship. This confidence had a cascading impact on their grandchildren because it meant that they can live openly and proudly together, and that their grandparenting is also acknowledged vis-à-vis their legal right to marry. The couples that chose to marry legally also acknowledged the powerful symbolism of the right to marry as well as the socio-economic and political advantages of the legal marriage bond.

I was interested to learn more about how participants felt about marriage in light of the fact that many lesbian women of their generation had either experienced and left heterosexual marriages or rejected marriage as a heterosexist and patriarchal institution—a critique reflected in the sizeable literature contesting the merits of same sex marriage (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001). An emerging and perhaps more nuanced literature resists a binary (for or against) analysis of the right to same-sex marriage. For example, Onishenko and Caragata (2010) found in their study that same-sex marriage legislation has been interpreted by and incorporated into the lives of LGBTQ people and that, without clear, pre-scripted models of same-sex marriage or associated meanings of marriage, LGBTQ couples have been able to create new patterns of relationships that both affirm and confront the norms of heterosexist marriage. Although interviews were not focused on participants’ experiences with marriage directly, responses to questions about Bill C-38 suggest that the couples felt that marriage had been a positive change for their families because of the recognition it brought to their relationships, but they did not appear to uphold any of the traditional gender roles or duties associated with marriage due to expectation alone. Relationships and the expression of these relationships remain ‘queer’ in the sense that they challenge our assumptions about what constitutes a ‘normal’ marriage—and further, what constitutes a ‘normal’ grandparent relationship.

### Resiliency and Skills Transference: Grandparenting Within a Same-Sex Relationship

In many ways, the participating lesbian grandmothers engaged in activities common to heterosexual grandparents in the contemporary context and well-described in the mainstream literature (Kemp 2005). They supported adult children by caring for their grandchildren and participating in community activities on their behalf, showing their grandchildren that parents also need to be nurtured and provided with care. They assisted their grandchildren with homework or sports. Significantly, too, they helped grandchildren learn cultural customs and traditions, ensured that they know about their extended family and family history. One couple helped their grandson learn about his mixed racial heritage in an environment that was safe and non-judgmental so that he would be better equipped to understand the implications of this heritage. In short, it is clearly not specific to lesbian grandmothers that they should hope that their involvement in the lives of their grandchildren will have a positive impact and that their participation in their grandchildren’s local community will engender a sense of trust and belonging in their grandchildren.

What did emerge as specific to the experiences of the lesbian grandmothers in this study was that they model a loving and healthy family that does not comply with traditional heterosexist and patriarchal norms. They voiced optimism that this early exposure and normalizing of same-sex relationships for young grandchildren will have lasting impact on their level of comfort with LGBTQ people and the expression of sexuality that is non-heteronormative. Participants hoped that this exposure will instill in their grandchildren a more accepting attitude toward all people who differ from what is normative in society. They were also hopeful that this exposure will have direct influence on grandchildren because it creates a space for these young people to explore their own sexualities and gender expressions. By remaining honest and open with their grandchildren about their same-sex relationships, they hoped the grandchildren would be able to ask questions and explore identities in ways that they might not be able to do with their own parents. While strongly asserting these hopes and aspirations, participants also recognized that their grandchildren will encounter homophobia and heterosexism in their wider social orbits. Creating a safe space for grandchildren would, they hoped to give them a resource to turn to if they are bullied in school or experience homophobia or any other form of discrimination, something that, given the young ages of the participants’ grandchildren had not yet emerged. Participants’ qualified optimism about the changes they hope to see and the freer and safer pathways they hope their grandchildren will travel remind us that, while much has changed in the last 40 years, challenging the marginalization of queer experience and relationships remains a work in progress. In the next section, I consider the potential of social work to contribute to this ongoing project of change.

### Implications of the Research Project for Social Work Practices & Policy

The grandmother-grandchild relationship can have many positive benefits for grandchildren as they develop. As shown in this study, lesbian grandmothers can model healthy, loving relationships, they can transfer knowledge and skills to their grandchildren, and they can prepare their grandchildren for an increasingly diverse Canadian demographic. They may also be a resource for grandchildren as they mature and develop their own sense of self. The benefits of this relationship are, however, compromised if the lesbian grandmothers are not able to be open or ‘out’ about their relationship. Thus, it is a potentially enriching and valuable bond for both lesbian grandmothers and their families if they feel comfortable and confident enough to be ‘out’ and open about their same-sex relationships. As the Canadian demographic changes due to the impact of progressive legislation, in turn, more and more lesbian women are to become grandmothers in Canada’s aging population. Clearly, this research demonstrates the important role that lesbian grandmothers can have in the lives on their grandchildren, children, extended families and communities. For social work service providers and policy makers, specifically, it is crucial to examine how these women could be supported in their ‘outness’ and to consider the implications of experiencing everyday homophobia.

This study shows that grandmothers who are non-biologically related to their grandchildren feel that they need to consciously choose to step into the grandparenting role. Becoming a grandmother has allowed them to participate in a life event that they might not otherwise have experienced because they are not the biological mothers of the adult children. This is important to note because it also suggests that there are non-biologically related grandmothers who have chosen not to grandparent in the context of their same-sex relationship. I speculate that women might choose not to grandparent if they have experienced overt homophobia and heterosexism from the adult children or have been actively excluded from grandparenting because they identify as lesbian or queer. It is also possible that they do participate in grandparenting, but do not consider themselves a grandmother because they perceive their role as such to be impossible due to these strained family dynamics and the absence of a genetic tie to their would be grandchildren. Conversely, some non-biological grandparents are choosing not to claim roles traditionally confined within a heterosexual, gendered model of caring. This study is limited by the fact that the non-biologically related grandmother participants all identify as grandmothers and do so without hesitation; future research is needed to better understand the experiences of those women who are in a same-sex relationship with a lesbian grandmother but do not identify as one themselves. Developing social support programs and/or policies related to grandmothering within the context of a same-sex relationships would need to consider the experiences of those partners who do not identify as grandmother. Future research might ask, for example, whether homophobia and heterosexism has prevented partners from openly claiming this title. In addition, social work practice would benefit from better understanding other kinds of relational ties that lesbian women have with young children. For example, whether or not older lesbian couples act as great aunts or chosen grandmothers to young children, and how these kinds of relationships unfold.

This study also affirms the importance of legislation that validates same-sex relationships and upholds human rights for those who do not align with traditional, heteronormative understandings of sexuality and sexual expression. This builds on Patterson’s 2005 study of lesbian grandmothers who have witnessed the introduction and passage of anti-discrimination legislation and the amendments to the *Marriage Act* that have legalized same-sex marriage. Policy makers and service providers might consider the importance of public recognition when developing new programs to support lesbian women. The publicness of legislation, as shown in this study, provides lesbian women with a sense that they can also be open and honest about their relationships, which in turn benefits their families and their communities. Encouraging lesbian women to be open about their relationships with family and providing additional support for women who have experienced homophobia and heterosexism from within their own families will be key to engendering more confidence about making the decision to be honest and open with their grandchildren. Therefore, social workers have a role to play in advocating for inclusive policy changes in the institutions that grandmothers and grandmothers access and are impacted by, so that lesbian women feel comfortable and supported within these institutions. These might include, for example, school, daycares, community centres, and sport and recreation programs, where lesbian grandmothers might interact with service providers and other kinds of caregivers on behalf of their grandchildren. This might also include Children’s Aid Societies, where children’s advocates need to better understand and support the role of lesbian grandmothers in kinship placements. Social workers might work to influence others who work within these institutions to promote a better understanding of the benefits of having open and honest relationships between and among lesbian grandmothers and their grandchildren. Social workers can help recognize and frame these relationships and intrinsically valuable family forms.

Lesbian grandmothers who do not share genetic ties to their grandchildren appear to be particularly vulnerable to discrimination from external family members who question their decision to grandparent grandchildren who are not biologically related to them. Their participation in the lives of their grandchildren needs to be celebrated and honoured as a way to encourage others to feel more comfortable taking on the same role if they choose to do so. As more and more lesbian and queer-identified women choose to parent within the context of a same-sex relationship, the status of the non-biologically related mother may become less distinct from that of the biologically related mother; however, being in a position in which one is not genetically tied to a child can be precarious for women and force a distance between her and he children and/or grandchildren. Thus, supporting non-biological parents and grandparents appears to be a critical step for service providers and policy makers who are working with LGBTQ families. Grandmothers need to be supporters no matter what their genetic ties, but especially when their relationships to their grandchildren are chosen and not assumed. At the level of direct practice, these family experiences underscore the importance of recognizing and affirming these non-traditional family forms. Social work practitioners can learn from this study to question, confront and revisit organizational and professional practices that fail to acknowledge the roles of non-biologically related grandmothers. Hospitals, for example, need to recognize the agency of these women and their capacity to make decisions for next-of-kin, or at the very least not dismiss non-biologically related grandmothers as non-family.

This study also suggests that lesbian women, particularly those who have matured during a period of time when their rights as same-sex partners or as lesbian or queer-identified women were not respected, feel that they have earned their right to grandparent. For the women in this study, becoming a grandmother was a hard-fought privilege and an honour. Participants also acknowledged the responsibilities and duties that active grandparenting requires; they felt the need to give their grandchildren a place to have fun and enjoy their time, to convey knowledge about their culture and heritage, and to model healthy and lovely relationships. As I noted above, some of these responsibilities are common to all grandparents who are actively involved with their grandchildren and this suggests a real benefit to grandchildren to have enriching relationships with their grandparents. As Eva said, “We should all have more grandmothers; everyone should have as many as possible.”

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# APPENDIX A

**Email Recruitment Script**

**Jessie Chabot BA, BSW, RSW**

**Masters Candidate in Social Work**

Lesbian/Queer Identified Grandmothering: Creating Visibility and Acknowledging Strengths through the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**E-mail Subject line:** McMaster Research Study – Lesbian/Queer Identified Grandmothering

My name is Jessie Chabot and I am a Masters of Social Work student at Mcmaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. I am writing a thesis on the experience of Lesbian/Queer Identified Grandmothers and the relationship with their grandchildren. I am looking for self- identified lesbian/queer identified couples who are actively grandparenting in the context of a same-sex couple who would be willing to share their experiences.

Your participation would involve a face-to-face interview, at a mutually acceptable time, at a location of your choice. There would be one interview, with both members of the couple, interviewed together, lasting from 60-90 minutes. All interviews will be confidential.

The questions I might ask will be:

* When did you become a Grandparent?
* What is your relationship like with your grandchildren?
* People come to be grandmothers in different ways (through birth, adoption, chosen family). What do you think about this?
* How do your grandchildren understand your relationship to each other?
* Have changing societal attitudes played a role/influenced your relationships with your children and grandchildren?
* Do you see similarities or differences in traditional grandparent roles as opposed to your roles?

The risks involved in participating in this research are minimal. The interview may raise issues that you feel strongly about. Some participants may experience emotional upset when discussing the potentially traumatic experiences of homophobia and heterosexism. In addition, some participants might experience worry/anxiety about the effect of loss of confidentiality and privacy as they share their thoughts and experiences in this study. You can stop at any time. I have attached a copy of a letter of information about the study that gives you full details. This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you any have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

c/o Research Office for Administration, Development and Support

E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

If you are interested, or for more information about this study, please contact me at your earliest convenience. Thank you,

**Jessie Chabot**, BA, BSW, RSW

Masters Candidate in Social Work

Department of Social Work

McMaster University, Hamilton Ontario

**Tel: 289-244-0474**

[**chabotj@mcmaster.ca**](mailto:chabotj@mcmaster.ca)

# APPENDIX B

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT**

**Lesbian/Queer Identified Grandmothering: Creating Visibility and Acknowledging Strengths through the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship**

**Investigators:**

**Student Investigator:**

Jessie Chabot

Department of Social Work

McMaster University

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

McMaster University

**(289) 244-0474**

E-mail: chabotj@mcmaster.ca

**Faculty Supervisor:**

Dr. Jane Aronson

Department of Social Work

McMaster University

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

McMaster University

**(905) 525-9140 ext. 24596**

E-mail: aronsonj@mcmaster.ca

**Purpose of the Study**

You are invited to participate in this research study because you are self-identified lesbian/queer grandmothers who have an active relationship with your grandchild/grandchildren.

I want to hear from lesbian/queer identified couples about their experiences of being a grandmother in the context of a same sex relationship. I would also like to find out if experiences of homophobia/hetersosexism have impacted the relationships with your grandchildren. I also hope to find out about the impact of changing societal attitudes on these relationships.

**What will happen during the study?**

If you decided to participate in the study, you will be interviewed together by me. The interview should take 60-90 minutes, and will take place at a location of your choosing. I will ask you questions about your experiences as lesbian/queer identified grandmothers. The questions might look like this:

* When did you become a Grandparent?
* What is your relationship like with your grandchildren?
* People come to be grandmothers in different ways (through birth, adoption, chosen family). What do you think about this?
* How do your grandchildren understand your relationship to each other?
* Have changing societal attitudes played a role/influenced your relationships with your children and grandchildren?
* Do you see similarities or differences in traditional grandparent roles as opposed to your roles?

I will take notes during the interview and with your permission, I will audio record the interview. If you change your mind about being recorded during the interview, I will stop the recording and erase what has been taped. I would like to follow up with you after the interview if any questions arise, but will do so only with your permission. I will be generating a transcript from our interview which I will send to you. You will be free to remove any part of the transcript or make any changes you see fit.

**Are there any risks to doing this study?**

The risks involved in participating in this research are minimal. The interview may raise memories, situations or issues that you feel strongly about or worry about. You are free to skip any question you would prefer not to answer and can stop the interview at any time. You may also worry about how others will react to what you say. The steps I am taking to maintain your confidentiality are described below.

**Are there any benefits to doing this study?**

The research will not benefit you directly. I hope to learn more about the experiences of lesbian/queer identified grandmothers and their relationships with their grandchildren. However, the findings at some point may enter in knowledge sharing within the broader community, particularly the strengths related to your grandparenting, such as the positive impact of grandparenting outside cultural norms.

**Who will know what I said or did in the study?**

Your participation in this study is confidential. Only I will know whether you participated unless you choose to tell them. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. However, sometimes we are identifiable through the stories we tell, references we make or opinions we express. Please keep this in mind through the interview.

The information/data you provide will be kept in a locked desk/cabinet in my home office where only I will have access to it. Electronic information kept on a computer will be protected by a password on my computer, which is on a secure, private network. . Once the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed within 6 months.

**Legally Required Disclosure**

Although I will protect your privacy as outlined above, there are instances that, if the law requires it, I will have to reveal certain personal information. Those instances are:

* If you tell me that you are intending to harm yourself
* If you tell me of your intent to harm another person
* If you tell me about a child under the age of 16 who is at risk of abuse or neglect.

**What if I change my mind about being in the study?**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to be part of the study, you can withdraw for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study or up until approximately ***July 15, 2014***, at which point I will have started writing up my findings.If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

**How do I find out what was learned in this study?**

I expect to have this study completed by approximately August 2014*.* If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

Jessie Chabot (289) 244-0474 or, chabotj@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance.

If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support

E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

**CONSENT**

* I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Jessie Chabot, of McMaster University.
* I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
* I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately ***July 15, 2014***
* I have been given a copy of this form.
* I agree to participate in the study.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

[ ] Yes.

[ ] No.

2.

[ ] Yes.

I would like to receive a summary of the study’s results.

Please send them to this email address \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Or to this mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study’s results.

3. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request.

[ ] Yes. Please contact me at: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

[ ] No.

# Appendix C

Interview Guide

**Lesbian/Queer Identified Grandmothering: Creating Visibility and Acknowledging Strengths through the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship**

Jessie Chabot, Masters of Social Work Student

Department of Social Work, McMaster University

Information about these interview questions:

As is typical of qualitative social research, the questions in this guide map out the semi-structured character of the interview components. Open-ended questions will be posed and participants invited to respond. For each area of questioning, probes are listed and will be used as needed to stimulate and elaboration and detail.

1. When did you become a grandparent?

* What did you hope for when you became a grandparent?
* Did your identity change when you became a grandparent, if so in what way(s)?
* How many grandchildren do you have? Can you tell me about (them)?

1. How would you characterize your relationship with your grandchild(ren)?

* How would you describe your involvement with your grandchild(ren)?
* What kinds of activities, if any, do you participate in together?
* What responsibilities do you have, if any, as a grandparent? Do you interact with any of the organizations/ professionals in your grandchildren’s lives, such as: daycare, school, doctor? How so? In what ways, if any, do you interact with you grandchildren(s) other extended family members?

1. People come to be grandmothers in different ways (through birth, adoption, chosen family). What do you think about this?

* Do you see these varying relational ties as shaping your experiences as grandmothers? If so, can you tell me about this?
* How do you think others; the adult children (parents), grandchild(ren), extended family, outsiders view your relational ties?”

1. How do(es) your grand(ren) understand your relationship to each other?

* How do you think your grandchild(ren) understand your sexuality? How do their parents represent/ interpret it to them?
* How do societal attitudes such as homophobia & heterosexism as a factor in shaping your relationship with your grandchildren?
* Has homophobia shaped your self-identity in relation to your identity as a grandmother? If so, in what way(s)?
* Has heterosexism shaped your self-identity in relation to your identity as a grandmother? If so, in what way(s)?
* Do you consider yourself visible as a lesbian/queer grandmother in the community and other societal institutions?

1. Have changing societal attitudes played a role/influenced your relationships with your children and grandchildren?

* Specifically, Canadian same sex marriage legislation (Bill C-38). Has it marked a change in the way you perceive yourselves with regard to family? Within communities and societal institutions?
* Do you feel that legislation such as Bill C-38 has had an impact on your experience in everyday experiences?
* Do you feel that increased social acceptance will offer a particular experience for your grandchildren?

1. Do you see similarities or differences in traditional grandparent roles as opposed to your roles?

* What qualities do you feel you have to offer your grandchildren?
* What are your hopes for your grandchildren?
* Do you believe your grandchildren will have any unique qualities or advantages as a result of their relationship with you? If so, could you describe these qualities or advantages?

7. Is there anything further you would like to add that I may have forgotten? Is there anything else you think I need to know about the lesbian/queer identified grandmothering experience and relationship with grandchildren?

# Appendix D

**Recruitment Flyer**

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH IN LESBIAN/QUEER IDENTIFIED GRANDMOTHERING**

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study of   
the experiences of lesbian/queer identified grandmothers and the relationship with their grandchildren.

You, together as a couple would be asked to participate in face-to-face qualitative interviews

Your participation would involve one session,   
each session will be about 60-90minutes long.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,   
please contact:   
Jessie Chabot  
Department of Social Work  
289-244-0474  
Email: chabotj@mcmaster.ca

**This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance   
by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.**

# Appendix E

**Email Recruitment Invitation**

**Jessie Chabot BA, BSW, RSW**

**Masters Candidate in Social Work**

Lesbian/Queer Identified Grandmothering: Creating Visibility and Acknowledging Strengths through the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**E-mail Subject line:** McMaster Research Study – Lesbian/Queer Identified Grandmothering

Dear (LGBTQ community organization program coordinator),

My name is Jessie Chabot and I am a Masters of Social Work student at Mcmaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. I am writing a thesis on the experience of Lesbian/Queer Identified Grandmothers and the relationship with their grandchildren. I am looking for self- identified lesbian/queer identified couples who are actively grandparenting in the context of a same-sex couple who would be willing to share their experiences.

I'm hoping that you and the (LGBTQ community organization) would be interested in helping me disseminate a recruitment flyer to potential participants? Ideally, I am looking for 5-10 couples who are actively involved in grandparenting. Thier participation would involve a face-to-face interview, at a mutually acceptable time, at a location of their choice. There would be one interview, with both members of the couple (interviewed together), lasting from 60-90 minutes. All interviews will be confidential.

I have attached a copy of a letter of information about the study that gives you full details. This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you any have concerns or questions about the way the study is being conducted you can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

c/o Research Office for Administration, Development and Support

E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

If you are interested in assisting with recruitment, or for more information about this study, please contact me at your earliest convenience. Thank you,

**Jessie Chabot**, BA, BSW, RSW

Masters Candidate in Social Work

Department of Social Work

McMaster University, Hamilton Ontario

**Tel: 289-244-0474**

[**chabotj@mcmaster.ca**](mailto:chabotj@mcmaster.ca)

1. The term ‘gayby boom’ refers to the increasing number of children born within the context of same-sex relationships since the introduction of assisted reproductive technologies in the 1980s and changes to family law that make it easier for gay men and lesbians to start families. See Hari, J. (2009). Welcome to the Gayby Boom. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/welcome-to-the-gayby-boom\_b\_230933.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The term ‘non-biological’ refers to the participants who did not have genetic ties or legally recognized ties to their grandchildren. Conversely, the ‘biological’ grandmothers had (now adult) children through a previous heterosexual relationship (through birth or adoption). In this study, all the ‘biological’ grandmothers had their children through birth (Orel and Fruhauf 2006, 48). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (R.S.O. 1990, c. F.3) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)