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**Work, Love, Play:
Understanding resilience in same-sex parented families
Brief report
2014**

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About the study

The Work, Love, Play study is a project of The Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University and has been run in collaboration with researchers from the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, the School of Counselling and Psychological Health at La Trobe University, The Department of General Practice and North West Academic Centre at the University of Melbourne, The School of Nursing and Midwifery at Deakin University and Relationships Australia Victoria.

The study was originally funded by a small grant from the Faculty of Health Sciences at La Trobe University in 2008. In 2009 further funding was awarded from the Australian Research Council in partnership with VicHealth, Relationships Australia National, Relationships Australia Victoria and ACON. Generous in-kind support was provided by Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria and the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (now the Queensland AIDS Council).

Study overview

The *Work, Love, Play* study is a research project focusing on the health and wellbeing of same-sex attracted and transgender parents living in Australia and New Zealand.

The study includes parents who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, Takatāpui or other non-heterosexual identity as well as people who are transgender. Study participants include people in same-sex relationships, single parents who identify as same-sex attracted or transgender, people in opposite sex relationships who identify as bisexual, other non-heterosexual identities or who are transgender, and transgender people who identify as heterosexual.

All participants were actively parenting at least one child aged under 18 and this included people who were parenting biological or non-biological children including step-parents, foster parents and people parenting grandchildren or other family members. We asked that only one parent per family complete the study so that the data represented 'families' rather than individual parents.

The project ran between 2008 and 2014. There were three aspects to the study:

- **A longitudinal survey of same-sex attracted and transgender parents.** Parents were surveyed three times: in 2008/09, 2011 and 2013. The surveys focused on couple and family formation, household organisation and parental wellbeing along with people's relationships with their extended family, friends and neighbours, parents' experiences of discrimination and general challenges and strengths of family life. Some results from this study have been published already. Data analysis and publication of longitudinal results will continue into 2015.

- **A qualitative study of same-sex attracted parents experiences of the health and welfare sector.** This involved focus groups with same-sex attracted parents and also with mainstream service providers and looked at training and information needs for service providers to enable them to be more inclusive. This aspect of the project led to the development of a set of Guidelines for working with same-sex parented families as well as a training program for health and welfare services.ⁱ
- **A qualitative study of separation experiences among same-sex couples who have children.** A PhD student was engaged to conduct a series of interviews with parents after they have separated from their same-sex partner. Over 20 interviews were conducted with both men and women who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. The interviews focused on the relationship between parents before, during and after separation, including the ways post-separation families manage child-rearing. The results of this study are due in 2015.

Why was there a need for this study?

The 2011 Australian Census estimated that three per cent of gay male couples and 22 per cent of lesbian couples had children living in their household. It is widely acknowledged, however, that this is a significant underestimation of the number of Australian children with same-sex attracted or transgender parents, in part because it excludes single parents.ⁱⁱ The 2011 Private Lives survey of 3835 GLBT Australian indicated that 33 per cent of women and 11 per cent of men had children or step children living with them and close to 40% of participants reported wanting to have children or to have more children.ⁱⁱⁱ

Either way, it is clear that there is a large number of Australian families where one or more parents identify as same-sex attracted or transgender. Despite Australia and New Zealand being more inclusive than they once were, same-sex attracted or gender diverse parents and their children still live in a climate that is often marked by discrimination, heterosexism or heteronormativity. Many social, health or legal organisations or structures with which families have to engage are not inclusive of diverse families.

Most previous research in this area has focused on development and social outcomes of children with lesbian or gay parents. This research has consistently shown that children do equally well being raised by lesbian or gay parents as they do any other parents. It is good family processes, such as communication, warmth and caring within a family, that support positive outcomes for children, not family formation.^{iv} With this in mind, the Work, Love, Play study was designed to explore patterns of family life and look at factors that contribute to the wellbeing of parents and strong family relationships (including post-separation family relationships).

Participants

Wave One (the first survey) of the longitudinal survey was conducted in 2008. There were 466 valid responses to this survey.

Children

The majority of people in the study had one child (n=244, 52%). There were 157 participants (34%) with two children and 60 (13%) with three or more. No-one had more than five children together, this sample of 466 parents were parenting over 750 children. Children's ages ranged from infant to 18.

Where people lived

The majority of participants in the 2008 survey were Australian residents (n=395, 85%). The rest were New Zealanders (n=71, 15%). We heard from people living in every state and territory of Australia as well as both the North and South Islands of New Zealand. Just over 40% lived in inner metropolitan areas of cities (n=192). However, people living in outer metropolitan areas were well represented (n=162, 35%) as were people who described their area of residence as regional, rural or remote (n=109, 24%).

Couple relationships and single parents

Eighty percent (n=373) of participants who responded to the 2008 survey were currently in a relationship. These included people who were in a relationship with their partner before entering into parenthood together as well as those who had partnered following a separation or divorce.

In 2008, 48 (13% of those in a relationship) had engaged in a public commitment ceremony with their current partner, 13 (3%) had legally registered their relationship with a formal body (such as a city council), 16 (4%) had a legally registered civil partnership and 10 (3%) were married in a country where this was legal.

There were 93 participants who were currently single. This included men who were single 'donor fathers', mothers who had entered into parenthood as a single parent and people who had become single parents post-separation from an opposite-sex or same-sex partner.

Bisexual parents

There were 48 parents in this study who identified as bisexual (13% of the 466 participants in the 2008 survey). Of these:

- 88% were women (n=42), four were men (8%) and two (4%) identified their gender as 'other'.

- Two bisexual parents identified as transgender.
- 11 parents (23%) described their current relationship status as single. The remaining 37 were in a relationship.
- 12 (25%) were raising children in a couple-relationship in which the children had been conceived. This included four (8%) who were currently living with an opposite-sex partner and eight (17%) who were with a same-sex partner
- 21 (57% of those in a relationship) were with a same-sex partner, 11 (30%) were with an opposite sex partner, and five (10%) did not disclose the gender of their partner
- 11(23%) had conceived child/ren in a previous heterosexual relationship but were now living as part of a same-sex couple
- six (13%) had conceived child/ren in a previous heterosexual relationship, but were now in another heterosexual relationship
- eight (17%) had conceived child/ren in a previous heterosexual relationship but were now single.

A large number of the bisexual parents in this study had experienced divorce or separation since having children, but most reported positive aspects to their parenting relationships with ex-partners. Very few people in this study reported that their bisexual identity created difficulties for them as a parent.^v

Transgender parents

In the 2008 survey there were 13 participants who indicated they were transgender. Of these people, four identified as lesbian, one as gay, two as bisexual, one as Takatapui and five as 'other' which included people who identified as queer or who did not want to label their sexuality.

Transgender parents were parenting in a range of contexts. Eleven were parenting post separation or divorce: three of these were single parents while eight had re-partnered and were sharing parenting with their current and ex-partners. One transgender parent was parenting in a co-parenting arrangement with their current partner and with a gay couple, another was parenting just with their current partner.

Becoming parents

There were 445 participants in the 2008 survey who were parenting with a same-sex partner or who were single parents who identified as same-sex attracted (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics of this sample).

Of this group of 445 parents, there were 382 women (86%), 61 men (14%) men and two participants who described their gender as 'other'. Table 2 shows the methods by which respondents' children were conceived. It shows that there were:

- 132 women who conceived at least one child using a known donor (35%) and 83 (22%) who conceived at least one child using an unknown donor.
- 190 (44%) had conceived at least one child through heterosexual sex. This included 151 (34%) respondents who had conceived children within the context of a previous heterosexual relationship as well as those who had conceived children via heterosexual sex while they were single (n=16, 4%).
- 14 men (23% of male respondents) indicated they had a child or children conceived through home insemination – indicative of respondents who had donated sperm to lesbian couples or single women and continue to play an active parenting role in the child's life.
- 11 men (18% of male respondents) who reported they had at least one child conceived through a surrogacy arrangement.

Just over 40% of respondents (n=176) were raising a child or children who had been conceived in the context of their current same-sex relationship. This included cases where one partner in the relationship was the biological parent of all the children (n=148, 35%) as well as cases where both partners in the relationship had at least one biological child (n=28, 7%).

Foster parents

There were 12 (3%) participants in the 2008 survey who were parenting foster children: six women and six men. Ten foster parents (83%) were currently in a relationship, while two (17%) were single.

Of these 12, six (50%) had just one child, three (25%) had two children and three (25%) had three children. Of the six who had more than one child, four were parenting both their foster children and their own or their partner's biological child. The other two were parents to three foster children.

Fathers

In the 2008 survey, we heard from 67 fathers (see Table One). In 2009, we decided to re-advertise the survey to seek more participants. One of the reasons for this was to see if we could attract more male participants. When we re-advertised the survey we managed to find a further 55 participants, 21 of whom were men. This brought the total number of fathers in our study to 88.

There was a diversity of contexts in which these 88 men had become parents and were currently parenting: 34 (39%) had become parents while in a previous heterosexual relationship, 20 (23%) were parenting child/ren who had been conceived via surrogacy in the context of the respondent's current same-sex relationship, 17 (19%) had become parents through sperm donation and co-parenting arrangements with single women or lesbian couples, while ten (11%) were parents to foster children.

The shift to parenthood generated largely positive outcomes for most men including bringing men closer to their families, although some men who had children from previous heterosexual relationships faced challenges in managing their own parent's or extended families concerns about the impact of their 'coming out' on their children.^{vi}

Parenting

Parenting with a partner from a previous relationship

In the sample of 445 parents described above, there were 110 (25%) respondents who had co-parenting arrangements with their own or their partner's ex-heterosexual partner. This included women who have primary or shared custody of their children, but still actively co-parent with their child's father and in some cases with their current same sex partner as well. It also included men share parenting with their ex female partner, some of whom have re-partnered and share parenting with their current same-sex partner. There were 39 (9%) respondents who were sharing care of children with their, or their partner's, ex-same-sex partner.

Co-parenting

Of the sample of 445 parents, there were 24 (6%) respondents who indicated that they were parenting in families that involved more than two parents by choice (as opposed to through separation or divorce). In these cases all parents played an active role in parenting, either through spending time with children during the days and/or having overnight care. In most cases, co-parenting arrangements involved lesbian couples or single mothers who were raising children with single men or a gay couple.

Division of household labour

One of the original aims of the Work, Love, Play study was to look at how same-sex couples organise household and child-caring tasks and see how this differs to opposite-sex couples. Comparisons of household division of labour were made between a sub-sample of *Work., Love, Play* participants who were currently cohabiting with a same-sex partner (n=317) and 958 cohabiting opposite-sex parents surveyed as part of a major Australian study, *Negotiating the Life Course*.

This comparison showed that both gay (male) and lesbian couples divided household labour significantly more equally than heterosexual couples, and lesbian couples also shared parenting tasks more equally.

The findings also suggest that within same-sex couples, the roles of primary carer and primary 'breadwinner' are less fixed than in heterosexual families, with both partners sharing roles by working part-time or changing roles over time. Our research suggests that having two men or two women parenting in a family undermines some of the gendered assumptions that often determine divisions of labour in a heterosexual couple family.^{vii}

Challenges and rewards of family life

Within the 2008 survey, participants were asked to describe, using open ended questions, the most positive and the most challenging aspects of family life. Very few respondents indicated that issues related to their sexuality rated highly in terms of the challenges of family life. Of more concern to many parents was simply balancing the demands of family and work life.

“Juggling work, child care, community & political responsibilities to create time with my partner.”

“Balancing work, child raising, time with partner and time to do things I want to do.”

Other key challenges were related to negotiating family relationships. This was particularly pertinent for step and blended families who sometimes struggled to manage relationships between parents and step children and between parents where separation had occurred.

“Step parenting is hard - step kids come with a whole range of ways of dealing with the world that feels strange. Your own children understand all the unspoken ways of doing things and being that doesn't come with step children... Outside influence from my partner's son's father who is very threatened by his son's relationship with me and my children”

When asked about the most positive aspects of family life, participants frequently spoke about the unconditional love they share with their children, the joy of watching children grow and develop, and the fun that children had brought to relationships and family life.

“Times with the children that are really contented – telling jokes and telling stories at the dinner table, listening to the kids play together in the bath, or make potions in the garden. Going on holiday is rare but lovely – walking along the beach, building castles, writing stories together, reading aloud, all that kind of thing.”

“We absolutely love having a baby. We feel we have joined the human race.”

Healthcare workers working with same-sex parented families

Practice Guidelines

As part of this study we have developed a set of Practice Guidelines for health and welfare providers working with same-sex parented families. The guidelines are designed to assist healthcare, welfare and counselling practitioners working in the community, clinical, hospital and counselling settings provide inclusive and sensitive care to same-sex attracted parents and their children, and to prospective parents.

There has been strong interest in the guidelines from both LGBT and mainstream communities. Approximately 5000 guidelines have been distributed to a range of health and welfare organisations across Australia. The Guidelines can be downloaded from the VicHealth or the Bouverie Centre website.

Service Provider Training

To complement the guidelines, a three-hour training package for service providers has been developed. The training package offers mainstream services a chance to explore the needs of same-sex parented families at different stages of the parenting journey. In particular, the training explores the barriers to inclusive service provision and offers service providers the opportunity to work through a range of fictional scenarios that reflect the health and welfare service use experiences of the parents who participated in the Work, Love, Play study. Since the first training session was conducted in July 2012, approximately 190 service providers, representing 106 organisations, have participated in the training.

Publications and presentations arising from the Work, Love, Play Project

Journal publications

- Power, J., Brown, R., Schofield, M., Pitts, M., McNair, R., Perlesz, A., Bickerdike, A. (2014). Social connectedness among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents living in metropolitan and regional/rural areas of Australia and New Zealand, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 42(7): 869–889
- Power, J., Perlesz, A., McNair, R., Schofield, M., Pitts, M., Brown, R., Bickerdike, A. (2012). Gay and bisexual dads and diversity: fathers in the Work, Love, Play study, *Journal of Family Studies*, v18(2-3), pp143-154 (IF 1.14)
- Power, J., Perlesz, A., Brown, R., Schofield, M., Pitts, M., McNair, R., Bickerdike, A. (2012). Bisexual parents and family diversity: findings from the Work, Love, Play study, *Journal of Bisexuality*, 12(4), pp519-538
- Perlesz, A., Power, J., Brown, R., McNair, R., Schofield, M., Pitts, M., Barrett, A., Bickerdike, A. (2010). Organising work and home in same-sex parented families: findings from the Work Love Play study, *Australian New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, v31(4), pp374-391
- Power, J., Perlesz, A., Brown, R., Schofield, M., Pitts, M., McNair, R. and Bickerdike, A. (2010). Diversity, Tradition and Family: Australian Same-sex Attracted Parents and Their Families, *Gay & Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, v6(2), p 66-81
- Power, J., Perlesz, A., Schofield, M., Pitts, M., Brown, R., McNair, R., Barrett, A. and Bickerdike, A. (2010). **Understanding resilience in same-sex parented families: the work, love, play study**, *BMC Public Health*, v10(115):<http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/10/115>

Conference papers

- Power, J. (2010) Gender, housework and family roles: the experience of same-sex couples, *The Australian Sociological Association Annual Conference*, Sydney, December 6-9
- Power, J., Perlesz, A., Bickerdike, A., Brown, R., Schofield, M., Pitts, M. and McNair, R. (2010) Community and Family Support: differences for same-sex attracted parents compared to heterosexual parents, *Family Relationship Services Australia, National Conference*, 3-5 December 2010
- Power, J., Perlesz, A., Bickerdike, A., Brown, R., Schofield, M., Pitts, M. and McNair, R. (2010) Balancing Work, Home and Family in Same-Sex Parented Families, *Family Relationship Services Australia, National Conference*, 3-5 December 2010
- Power, J., Perlesz, A., Brown, R., Bickerdike, A., Schofield, M., Pitts, M. and McNair, R. (2010) Gay and lesbian parents 'do work/family balance', *27th International Congress on Psychology*, 11-16 July, Melbourne
- Power, J. (2010) 'Same-sex attracted parents' experiences of family and community support', *Health in Difference*, April 29- May 2, Sydney
- Power, J., Perlesz, A., Brown, R., Bickerdike, A., Schofield, M., Pitts, M. and McNair, R. (2009) Work, Love, Play: Understanding resilience in same-sex parented families, *Rainbow families conference*, 13 February, Melbourne

Perlesz, A. (2009) The Chains of Gender Continue to Rattle in Our Homes: How Gay, Lesbian and Heterosexual Parents Divvy up the Load, Invited Keynote Address, *30th Australian Family Therapy Conference*, Sydney.

Media

- “Rainbow Families”. *Catalyst, ABC Television*, Interview with Jennifer Power, 18 July 2013, <http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/3805051.htm>
- Joy FM, *Interview with Jennifer Power about Work, Love, Play study*, 27 March 2012
- Power, Jennifer, “Keeping it clean: housework’s gender divide”, *The National Times*, February 21, online (opinion piece citing Work, Love, Play study findings).
- “Gay couples at home on the range”, MCV, 19 July 2010 (Work, Love, Play study cited)
- Obrien, Susie, “Time for gay marriage to get the nod in Australia”, *Herald Sun*, 16 November 2010, Work, Love, Play study cited.
- Radio National Summer Edition, *Interview with Jennifer Power about Work, Love, Play study findings on household division of labour and same-sex couples*, 29 December 2010.
- Horin, Adele, “Gay couples egalitarian in parenting, housework”, *Canberra Times*, 29 December 2010, page 1, report on Work, Love, Play study findings about household division of labour and same-sex couples.
- Horin, Adele, “Gay parents more equal than others”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 December 2010, Page 1, report on Work, Love, Play study findings about household division of labour and same-sex couples.
- Noonan, Andie, “Family in Focus”, *bnews*, 24 July 2008, page 4

More information about the study

As noted, findings from the project will continue to be published over the next few years. There are a few ways to keep track of what has been published:

- The Bouverie Centre website: www.bouverie.org.au
- The Work,Love,Play blog: www.work-love-play.blogspot.com

Table One: Demographics of respondents to the 2008 Work, Love, Play survey *

Gender	Women (n= 382/86%)	Men (n= 61/14%)	“Other” (n=2, <1%)	Total (n=445)
Lesbian	334 (75%)			334 (75%)
Gay	6 (1%)	59 (14%)		65 (15%)
Bisexual	33 (8%)	1 (<1%)	2 (<1%)	36 (8%)
Takatapui	3 (<1%)			3 (<1%)
Other	6 (1%)	1 (<1%)		7 (2%)
Transgender	5 (1%)	2 (<1%)	1(>1%)	8 (2%)
Relationship status (<i>Missing =4</i>)				
Single	67 (15%)	22 (5%)	2 (<1%)	91 (20%)
Relationship length <12months	22 (5%)	3 (<1%)		25 (5%)
Relationship 1 to 5 years	103 (24%)	10 (2%)		113 (26%)
Relationship 6 to 10 years	96 (22%)	11(3%)		107 (25%)
Relationship >10 years	91 (21%)	14 (3%)		105 (24%)
Age				
Range (SD)	20-67 (6.7)	31-55 (4.9)	n/a	20-67 (6.5)
Mean (median)	38.7 (39)	40.3 (40)	n/a	38.9(39)
Partners' age: range (SD)	21-41 (7.4)	20-50(7.1)	n/a	20-62(7.4)
Partners' age: mean (median)	38.7 (38)	36.9 (37)	n/a	38.5 (38)
Place of birth (<i>Missing = 1</i>)				
Australia	261 (59%)	44(10%)	2(<1%)	307(69%)
New Zealand	64 (14%)	2(<1%)		66(15%)
United Kingdom	27 (6%)	4 (<1%)		31(7%)
Other	29 (7%)	11 (2%)		40(9%)
Primary language spoken at home (<i>Missing =13</i>)				
English only	348 (81%)	53 (12%)	2 (<1%)	403(93%)
Language other than English	23(6%)	6(1%)		29(7%)
No of children (<i>Missing =9</i>)				
1	204(47%)	26(6%)	1(<1%)	231(53%)
2	122(28%)	26(6%)	1(<1%)	149(34%)
3+	48(11%)	8(2%)		56(13%)
Place of residence (<i>Missing/invalid = 3</i>)				
Inner metropolitan	146 (33%)	39(9%)	1(<1%)	186(42%)
Outer metropolitan	137(31%)	16(4%)	1(<1%)	154(35%)
Regional	67(15%)	4(1%)		71(16%)
Rural/remote	29(6%)	2(<1%)		31(7%)
Annual income per household				
<\$30,000	30(7%)	5(1%)	1(<1%)	36(8%)
\$30,000 - \$59,000	72(17%)	6(1%)	1(<1%)	79(19%)
\$60,000 - \$89,000	101(24%)	15(4%)		116(28%)
=> \$90,000	151(37%)	32(8%)		183(45%)
<i>Missing=31</i>				
Education (<i>Missing =12</i>)				
Up to four years high school	15 (4%)	3 (1%)		18(5%)
Completed high school	25 (6%)	5 (1%)		30 (7%)
Diploma or certificate (eg. Trade certificate)	77(18%)	6(1%)	1(<1%)	84 (19%)
Undergraduate university degree	105(24%)	17(4%)	1(<1%)	123(28%)
Postgraduate university degree	149(34%)	29(7%)		178(41%)

*Excludes participants who were parenting in an opposite sex relationship, please see information within this report about bisexual and transgender participants, many of whom were parenting with an opposite sex partner

Table 2: Methods of conception by gender

	Female (% of gender)	Male (%of gender)	“Other” (% of gender)	Total (% of total)
At least one child conceived through heterosexual sex	154 (41%)	34 (57%)	2 (100%)	190 (44%)
At least one child conceived through home insemination with a known donor/ or for which respondent was the donor	116 (31%)	14 (23%)	0	130 (30%)
At least one child conceived through home insemination with an unknown donor	7 (2%)	0	0	7 (2%)
At least one child conceived through assisted insemination at a clinic with a known donor/ or for which respondent was the donor	16 (4%)	0	0	16 (4%)
At least one child conceived through assisted insemination at a clinic with an unknown donor	83 (22%)	0	0	83 (19%)
At least one child conceived through a surrogacy arrangement using respondent’s or partner’s sperm/egg	1 (<1%)	9 (15%)	0	10 (2%)
At least one child conceived through a surrogacy arrangement using a known donor’s sperm/egg	1 (<1%)	2 (3%)	0	3(1%)
Other ***	20 (5%)	3 (5%)	0	23 (5%)
Total	372	60	2	434**

*multiple responses permitted **Missing cases = 11

*** Those grouped in ‘other’ were largely cases where the method of conception was unknown or not considered relevant to this study by participants, as is the case with many foster children.

Endnotes

ⁱPower, J., A. Perlesz, B. Rhonda, J. S. Margot, K. P. Marian, M. Ruth and B. Andrew (2012). Guidelines for healthcare providers working with same-sex parented families. The Bouverie Centre. Melbourne, Australia, La Trobe University.

ⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) 2071.0 – "Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census", 201-2013, ABS, Canberra

ⁱⁱⁱ Leonard, W., M. Pitts, A. Mitchell, A. Lyons, A. Smith and S. Patel (2012). Private lives 2: The second national survey of the health and wellbeing of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) Australians. Melbourne, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

^{iv} Biblarz, T. J. and J. Stacey (2010). "How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?" Journal of Marriage and Family 72(1): 3-22.

^v Power, J., A. Perlesz, R. Brown, M. Schofield, M. K. Pitts, R. McNair and A. Bickerdike (2012). "Bisexual Parents and Family Diversity: Findings From the Work, Love, Play Study." Journal of Bisexuality 12(4): 519.

^{vi} Power, J., A. Perlesz, R. McNair, M. Schofield, M. Pitts, R. Brown and A. Bickerdike (2012). "Gay and bisexual dads and diversity: Fathers in the work, love, play study." Journal of Family Studies 18(2/3): 143-154.

^{vii} Perlesz, A., J. Power, R. Brown, R. McNair, M. Schofield, M. Pitts, A. Barrett and A. Bickerdike (2010). "Organising Work and Home in Same-sex Parented Families: Findings from the Work Love Play Study." Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy, The 31(4): 374-391.